

THE CRYOPOD TO HELL

The Cryopod to Hell (Refresh)

by Klokinator

Volume 1 of 3 — Parts 001-292

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Part 001: Entering the Labyrinth

Author Note: This is the second iteration of The Cryopod to Hell (TCTH). It is more refined and edited compared to the original version, but will likely also end up being longer too. The goal of this refresh is to eliminate as many plot holes from the original work as possible, and refine characters/places/interactions/etc until it's as polished as possible. I've already planned a third iteration where the goal is to chop the story down to be much smaller and more accessible.

Confused? Check out this topic for [returning readers](#), and this topic for [new readers](#).
Thanks!

"Just one last signature to confirm, Jason." A scientist named Rebecca smiles at me and tugs on her long, curly black hair.

She hands me a clipboard with a legal form clamped onto it. I barely glance at the paper before writing my name down. My body feels a little numb; it's hard to believe I'm finally committing.

"You'll be awake in less than the snap of a finger!" She smiles cheerfully, then steps back and presses a button on the side of my cryopod. A hatch closes in front of me, and a large glass window slides down, barring me from the outside world. It's my last chance to quit, back out, and leave... but I won't. I'm not going anywhere.

I stare out the transparent plexiglass around me as the pod closes. Nine other pods are here; their lids clamp down simultaneously. Each of their occupants' faces has a range of emotions, from nervousness, to fear, to even a bit of curiosity. The general atmosphere is intense, as this is only the third clinical trial the doctors have performed.

Compared to the others, my mind works a little differently. A calmness overtakes me, making me feel as if I'm about to land softly in a field of butterflies. My eyes lazily take in the scene around me. When I next wake up, it will be a thousand years in the future. Humanity won't look anything like they do now. They'll probably all transform themselves into sci-fi robots, or they'll live in a massive virtual reality simulation, spinning around the sun in a Dyson sphere.

Gas hisses into the small enclosed space around me. First I'll be put to sleep, then I'll be frozen, and later the auto-warmup routine will run, waking me up. This machine is supposed to have enough power attached to its battery that it won't run out before the designated time, and it will still wake me up if the battery runs low early.

If it fails... I don't even care. Maybe I'll die, frozen like an icicle. My eyes suddenly need to shut. I'm so sleepy... it's time to have no regrets...

* * *

An instant passes.

Oh shit, I'm awake!

My thoughts scream in my mind, like a drunken man in a bar. I jerk forward and bash my face on the plexiglass. The glass is fogged up. Didn't the gas knock me out? I was deathly calm a second ago, but now I'm a bucket of nerves. My hands are shaking, and my body is stiff, what just happened? Did I even go to sleep? Rebecca wasn't joking. That was insanely fast. I don't remember dreaming. Or maybe I'm still asleep?

I pinch my thigh, only to realize my grip is almost nonexistent. I'm weaker than a wet piece of paper, and my sense of touch is barely present, since most of my body is numb.

Another hissing sound. Is that more sleeping gas? No wait, the hatch is opening. I can't see anything, the glass is still fogged up, and there's no room for my hands to move so I can wipe the fog away. Might as well wait.

The hatch starts moving slowly. *Very slowly*. It must be crawling at a fraction of an inch per minute. Why is it so sluggish? By the time it's moved several inches, I'm ready to kill myself out of boredom. I can only see past the cracks of the hatch as it lifts up, but there's no mistake, darkness shrouds the room. The only visible light source emanates from atop my cryopod.

A shiver goes down my spine as the glass slowly inches away from my face. I can't see more than a foot forward, not even to the floor. The light is dim, and it seems to be getting fainter every second. Is the battery failing? *Not good*. It had better have enough juice to release me. The generator should easily last a thousand years.

Luckily it does. After the door stops moving after reaching the top, the light brightens dramatically. It must have dimmed since they share the same power source.

The problem is what I see next. My skin crawls at the emptiness surrounding me. There are no other pods here. The shiny metallic floor that I remember, the towering roof, all of it is gone. I'm not in the laboratory anymore. Hell, maybe I am and a thousand years has done a number on the place.

I cautiously stagger forward, using the door frame to prop my body up. I reach my bare foot out, and as it touches the floor, I feel a curious sensation. My heel and toes are still somewhat numb, but the flat of my feet register that the ground is warm. And it's *smooth*. The land is earthen, but it isn't a layer of dirt covering the floor of the Cryotek facility.

I take in the room around me. Everything including the walls, floor, and ceiling are made of that same smooth dirt. The walls are much closer than I remember. The whole space is maybe twenty feet wide and deep, and about fourteen feet tall. I have no memory of this place. Someone must have moved my pod, but to what end?

My eyes roam around the bare room until I spot a giant stone door to the right.

I need to get out of this room. The cryo-preserved storage cases the scientists left me with aren't here, and I'm weak with hunger. God, what if I'm not even in the future? What if I've woken up ten days later

and this is all some elaborate prank? The researchers could have set up all kinds of crazy experiments, and I wouldn't know. I should have read the small print!

The thought this is all a prank is comforting but unlikely, given what I know about CryoTek. There must've been an accident.

I stumble over to the door. It's massive, standing nearly the full height of the wall. It appears to be a double door, with the center being what I have to push on to open it. I shove it with all my might and hear a hissing sound as it opens. I'm reminded of when Indiana Jones opened a sarcophagus and oxygen sucked inside. Suddenly, strength returns to my body, and I realize I was taking shallow breaths until just now. The room was nearly devoid of fresh air. I'm lucky I survived.

With a new surge of energy, I heave the door open.

I don't know what I expected.

The door opens, and I see nothing. There's a room somewhere in the darkness, but my eyes are useless at piercing the veil of shadow. Maybe if I could cast magic missile, that would change. Why can't humanity of The Year 3000 pay the goddamn electric bill?

A *humming* noise fills the air around me. My bones rattle under my skin, though the sensation is faint and indistinct. It's everywhere, yet nowhere. The air itself seems to quiver in fear.

Oh, damn, maybe being frozen for a thousand years made me evolve ESP or something. That would be awesome, but unlikely.

My hopes dash against the rocks. *Let's be realistic about this, Jason, and consider what we know.*

The floor is comfortably warm, like sitting a few feet away from a fire, while also covered in smooth dirt. The air itself is trembling in fear. Everyone I've ever known and loved is probably dead.

I'm at least somewhat sure that I'm not in the original CryoTek lab where I started out, and I may have evolved a spider-sense.

Yeah, this isn't helping. The future makes no sense at all.

I wander back over to the pod. What once required a small feat of endurance is now just a few light steps away. It's amazing how my life can change so quickly!

Examining the pod, I find a small hatch on its rear. When I pop it out, a little compartment appears, with some items inside.

There's a ten-foot nylon rope, a badly rusted handgun of some sort, a knife that's corroded and flaking apart, and what I assume is a flashlight. Also a few cans of *'food'*? They aren't labeled, and while food preservation might be a precise science, I'm terrified of what the contents will reveal. I'll skip the chow for right now.

I pull the stuff out of the compartment and find a small knapsack made from nylon at the bottom, with straps for wearing it like a backpack. It's stiff as hell, but after yanking and beating it around a bit, I'm able to give it new life.

Well, that's handy. At least I have some tools. I don't think a rusted dull knife will be much use, the flashlight might not work, the gun is toast, and god only knows what Satan himself put in the cans of food, but at least I have supplies even if they're meager.

I stick everything into the knapsack and click the flashlight. Nothing happens. *Great, that's just wonderful.* I figured this was a waste of time! But wait, there's a crank on the top? Oh, that's right, this looks like one of those flashlights from the as-seen-on-TV ads, where I can spin the lever and power it. *But surely it won't work, right?*

After grinding the gears around inside the device, the light flickers on. Hallelujah, I'm saved! I crank it with all my strength and get a dim light that shines forward ten or so feet. The illumination is weak at best, but at least I won't be falling into any bottomless chasms or spike pits now that I have a light source.

[Recommended Listening](#)

Walking towards the still-open door, I crank the flashlight and light up the next room.

In the middle of the chamber, there's a goddamn terrifying statue there. My knees shake and teeth chatter as I walk toward it. If I had to describe the thing, I'd call it a- well, a Gargoyle, I suppose, though unlike any I've seen in my life. It looks fucking *demonic*.

It's a two-headed monster. The right head has a long beak sticking out with hundreds of tiny teeth lining the inside. The left one looks more humanoid, with nasty hair hanging down and a third eye on its forehead. On the outside of each one's skull, a horn sticks up into the air, with an overlapping bony pattern visible. Four 'arms' with five crocodilian talons at the ends protrude from the sides of its body.

The thing's chest has several eyes all over, each of them facing different directions. Each one is small and beady, and they appear to follow me as I move around the room. When I shine my flashlight on the statue, the eyes flicker and glow red, startling me, so I quickly aim the light away. The marble construct might be twice my size, but I'm not ballsy enough to pull out a tape measure and check.

What's up with this terrifying sculpture? Why is it facing my door, like a warning or a threat to me when I exit? I swear, if this is some elaborate ruse to screw with me, I'm going to murder whoever did it. I'd also rather it be a prank at this point because the unease wracking my heart is making my life expectancy drop several years.

Carefully, I shimmy my way past the monstrous effigy. On the opposite side of the room is yet another door. A thought occurs to me as I touch it to push it open. *How am I breathing oxygen?* Pulling away, I glance upward, above the statue. A small, square hole, barely big enough for a cat to fit through, catches my eye. I shine my flashlight up at it and sigh, realizing there's no point trying to climb up inside of it. Not only wouldn't I fit, but I'd also have to climb on top of the statue to reach, and *no way* is that happening, no sir. I get the creeps knowing the thing is in the same room as me.

Turning my attention back to the door, I start shoving it with all my might, but I'm surprised when the massive slab of stone easily flings open as if it were gliding on ice. I trip and fall forward, slamming on the

ground and dropping my flashlight. In a panic, I grab my only source of light and shine it back at the statue, but the thing is in the same place as it was before. Damn my irrational paranoia.

Cautiously, I pull myself to my feet and aim the light into the new room. Well, it isn't actually a room, it's a hallway. The walls expand outward, widening dramatically to almost three times the width of the chamber I'm in now, and the ceiling is so high that the flashlight's beam can't reach it.

Slowing my breath to abnormal levels, I mutter to nobody in particular, "No need to be afraid. There's nothing here but your nerves, Jason," and slowly I tiptoe out into the corridor, glancing around nervously as I patter forward.

Darkness stretches out all around me. I can just barely see the walls on each side, and cranking the light doesn't give it much more juice. "H-hello?" My words are but a whisper, and the ether sucks them from my lips, absorbing them into the faint humming of the background noise that permeates this place.

No response greets me, as I walk further into the darkness. All at once, I feel a faint breeze on my back, and my body stiffens. Before I can spin around, a thunderous *BOOM* from behind nearly makes me piss myself in terror.

The door from the Cryopod room. *It just closed.*

Oh my god, oh my god...

It's no big deal! The door must have had a spring on it or something!

My mind screams irrationally at me as I slowly turn around and shine my flashlight at the source of the noise.

What I see next chills me to my very core.

The statue. *It's gone.*

For a moment, I lose the ability to control my body. My legs give out, and I fall to the floor as I stare at the spot where that goddamned statue was standing only a few seconds before. I don't feel like a human right now. My eyes leap from one crevice of the room to another, frantically scanning for threats. My mind invents a thousand possibilities for where the statue went, even thinking of crazy shit, like *maybe it's just invisible to the human eye suddenly, haha!*

No matter where I look, one thing is evident: the room that once held the statue is now empty.

It's hard to calm my mind down and reason. My hands shake as I carefully pull myself off the ground. I take a few steps back, as one very obvious thought crosses my mind. *What if that wasn't a statue after all?*

Everything about this creepy, dark dungeon makes my skin crawl. If someone is trying to pull a practical joke on me, they've won. I give up.

Jesus Christ! What if the statue monster is sitting behind the door, waiting for me to turn my back so it can pounce on me and devour my insides?! I'm thinking of opening the door to my Cryopod's chamber for some dumb reason *but that would be suicidal haha why would anyone do that?!*

Quickly, and stealthily, I rush over to the second door and push it shut as quietly as possible, then break into a dead run in the opposite direction, making sure to only run on my tiptoes. *You bet your sweet ass I don't want that thing to hear me! Please tell me the statue demon isn't hungry. Please!*

Even as I run for minutes, putting distance between myself and the room behind me, my breath starts to come in ragged gasps, and I have to slow to a stop, doubling over and gasping as sweat pours off my forehead. I was never a particularly athletic young man in school, and I sat around playing video games and Chess to pass the time before my appointment with Cryotek came up. I'm surprised I made it this far.

To make matters worse, I have no food or water. If the abomination doesn't eat me, I'll die of hunger and dehydration. I need to catch a break!

As I plop down on the ground, finally deciding to catch my breath, my heart slams against my chest. I hear something, something from very far behind me in the direction I fled.

Footsteps. Distinct, loud, and very very slow.

Thud. One, two, three, *Thud.* One, two, three, *thud.*

Oh god. *It's coming.*

[Recommended Listening](#)

My eyes nearly pop out of my skull, and my knees rattle in terror as I stare into the darkness behind me. The monster is in the distance, and it's coming this way. I'm going to die. I can hear the bells tolling in the back of my mind.

This is no time to rest, you lazy sack of shit, get your ass up and MOVE, my conscience and inner ego scream at me. My limbs moan in pain but I somehow manage to leap to my feet thanks to a surge of adrenaline.

I don't have the strength to run, but if that thing is coming as slowly as it sounds like it is, a power-walk will hopefully keep me ahead of it.

Ahead of it? The realization that a monster is coming to eat me makes me quicken my pace. What is going on? What kind of purgatory am I in? Did I die? Am I in Hell? Yeah Satan, you're hilarious, you goddamn piece of garbage! Just throw everything you've got at me all at once!

I do my best to walk-jog and stay ahead of the plodding footsteps behind me, but I pause for a moment and listen intently. Something is off about their tempo.

Thud... one, two, *Thud...* one, two, *Thud.*

The monster is quickening its pace. It's speeding up, and I'm still thoroughly exhausted. At this rate, I'm going to die from my heart imploding before the damn thing can catch me. What if the statue monster is toying with me? Maybe it's like a bird teaching its babies to feed.

Hold on... babies? Haha, that's- *NO!* What about the hole in the ceiling? That can't be- nope, I must purge the thought.

Just as I turn around and start jogging, a new sight greets my eyes. The opposite wall. I've finally reached it.

A colossal double-door looms before me, stretching all the way up to the ceiling a hundred feet above. I can't see the top of it with my flashlight, but one thing is for sure: it's much too big for me to open. I'm trapped.

Wait! On both sides of it, to the left and right, much smaller doors sit. Each one is about the same size as the stone slabs from before.

The footsteps that once sounded distant are growing steadily closer. Not much longer and that fucking dinosaur reject is going to emerge from the darkness and tear me to ribbons. Which way do I go?!

My gut tells me 'left is right,' so without any reason whatsoever, I charge into the left one, shoving with all my might until it groans open. Quickly, I slam the door behind me and lean against it, breathing like my lungs are on fire. Before me is a narrow hallway that curves slightly to the side. Wherever this leads, I have to follow it.

I'm *not* going back out there.

The adrenaline rush as my body trembles in terror eventually winds down once the footsteps grow silent behind me. Slowing to a tentative walk, I stare ahead into the corridor, always shining my flashlight forward, aside from when I check behind myself for jump-scares.

The first thing I begin to realize is that I'm very subtly descending downward. Indeed, conventional logic would imply that to escape this place, I must head upward, to the outside sky, but I don't have much choice in the matter. In fact, not only is the floor gently sloping down, but it's also curving to the left, though I wasn't sure at first as the change was somewhat gradual.

After I gather my bearings, I continue walking down the sloping corridor, wondering all the while if I will ever see anything besides these dark, earthen walls. I pause eventually, as I notice that the humming sound has grown more noticeable, but I still don't hear the monster following me.

My flashlight sputters slightly, and I sigh as I reach for the crank. Just as it goes out, I pause, noticing a faint light up ahead. Squinting, I take a few steps forward and confirm that yes, in fact, there is a light somewhere at the end of this damned corridor. This realization fills me with hope, as well as dread. One does not merely illuminate the darkness in a place like this without disturbing some ancient horror.

Despite the lack of light around me, I press on, creeping forward slowly. My flashlight would probably reveal my presence if there's *something* up ahead. I'd prefer not to expose myself to a different monster, especially after I narrowly escaped the first.

The light brightens. I carefully tiptoe down the hallway, and soon it's intense enough that I can easily see all around myself. My body is coated in fluid from the cryo-chamber, but it's begun to dry and harden into millions of sticky white flakes. I'll be lucky if I ever feel clean again.

The room where the light is pouring from is just through the doorway up ahead. I lean around the corner and peek with one eye, and what I see takes my breath away.

Three colossal statues, standing at least a hundred feet tall, tower over everything else in the room. I almost cry when I realize they aren't representations of monsters, but of human men.

Each statue is against a different wall, and all three of them are unique, holding different poses.

The first is a man with a long beard. A crown rests atop his head, and while the crown may be the same drab grey as the person it rests upon, bumps and dots line it, indicating it was a crown with many jewels studded inside. The man wears many layers of robes, each piled atop the other, and a long staff with a jewel is in his grasp, held proudly, as if he were going to cast a spell with it. To describe him, I would say he was a wise leader, someone who was fair and just. No evil escaped his gaze, but no righteousness went unrewarded either.

The next statue is of a man holding a mighty sword, both hands grasping its handle, the sword pointed out from his body, as if at any moment he could leap into action and cut his foes down. His expression is grim. He has seen many battles in his lifetime, and I can tell from the way the statue was carved that he was a feared warrior among his people. Some kings order their men from the rear flanks, while others lead the charge.

The final person is different. His arms hang limply at his sides, and his head is bowed, eyes closed. Tears, or perhaps drops of blood, roll down his cheeks. This man gave everything he had and fought to the end, but it wasn't enough. A closer glance reveals a necklace hanging from one of his hands, barely wrapped around one of his fingers. He died before his time was right, and now his likeness is frozen forever in memory of his final thoughts, *I wish I had done more.*

The statues aren't the only thing in the room. Gold coins are piled in the center of the room, mounds and heaps as far as I can see. If I weren't in a dark, festering hell, I might be tempted to call it the wealth of El Dorado. Amidst the gold, I spot weapons, armor, and even jewels.

But despite the incredible sights to behold, all of it pales in comparison to the final object that catches my gaze. The incredibly brilliant source of light that illuminates the entire room.

An orb rests atop a small, nondescript altar. A light not unlike that of the sun shines forth from it, reflecting off the gold and creating a dazzling display to draw my eyes to it.

The light isn't a static thing, like a lightbulb, but *alive*, coursing with energy. The humming that I've been feeling, without a doubt, emanates from it.

Slowly, I step toward it, my eyes darting around, looking for enemies and threats. None appear. I stare at the orb silently for a moment, and a sudden chill rushes down my back. Behind me, just around the bend I came from, a scratching sound, like a foot scuffing pavement, makes my breath catch in my throat.

Something *did* follow me.

My bones click together violently as I hear the *thing* creeping around the bend behind me. *You're dead! It's going to eat you,* my mind screams in alarm. Tears pour down my face, but I dare not wipe them away. I don't have time.

Suddenly my shaking stops. An idea forms in my mind. Instinct takes over. *That orb. I need it. I must have it! It has to be significant!*

I go from a shaking mess about to be devoured, to an animal fleeing to the only possible refuge, the one thing in this room that I know must mean *something*. As I rush toward the glowing orb of spirituality, a sudden scrambling noise behind me makes my skin crawl as the *thing* races around the corner after me. The last thing I hear before I grab the orb is a terrifying, unearthly scream, like that of a woman being torn apart by an abomination.

Serenity. Peace.

My hand rests on the orb, and the panic in my body melts away. *There's nothing to be afraid of now*, someone unknown says to me. Perhaps it's my mind playing tricks.

Calmly, I look back over my shoulder. The statue monster isn't there, but something else is. A shadow. I don't mean the sort of shadow made when something blocks the light, but a creature comprised entirely of blackness. I can barely even see it thanks to the brilliance of the orb and how it illuminates every corner of the room all at once, but it's there.

For a moment, it seems that the Shadow isn't moving, but after a few seconds of staring, I realize it is. Time has slowed to a crawl. It's as if I'm in the Matrix, and touching the orb has transformed me into an awakened Neo. I cock my head and stare at the creature for a moment, realizing that I'm not panicking, and yet I should be. My mind warns me that the monster is dangerous, but my body hasn't a care in the world. A sensation of power flows through my body, making me feel as if I could crush a rock with my mind.

How strange. Perhaps it isn't that time has slowed down, but that I have sped up. I'm no longer exhausted, and in fact, I could run a triathlon this very instant. Why am I so full of energy? Before, my breath was ragged and my legs scarcely even worked, but now, my body is as ready for action as if I had napped for a year straight.

After gazing at the Shadow for a moment, my eye catches the glint of something behind it. This may sound strange, but an object is glowing in the distance, and it isn't in my room. Instead, I *will* my eyes to pierce through the walls, spotting a sword elsewhere in this accursed maze. In another direction, a crown glows, as if it's a beacon designed to draw my attention. I quickly look around, spotting even more glowing objects. A set of chest armor, a belt, a pair of boots, all of them drawing my eyes like a moth to a flame.

When I lower my eyes to look below me, my happiness fades. Something roils in the deep, frightening and disturbing, and the longer I gaze at it, the more my newfound calmness transforms into abject horror.

A glowing sea of green, rapidly flowing from east to west, but inside the water is-

No. I don't- I can't believe it. This is too much! I don't want to be here anymore! I want to go back to the past!!

Humans fill the river, or rather, their souls do. Bubbling up from the deep, millions, perhaps billions of faces rise and fall, screaming in pain and agony. They rise out of the hellish river, their skin begins to grow back, but they fall back in, only for that cycle to continuously repeat, over and over again. Their eternal suffering won't end, for they are cursed to wallow in misery, until the end of time.

I'm not in the future. I think I died and went to Hell.

Turning back to the Shadow, I narrow my eyes. Instinctively, I raise my palm up and spread my fingers out in a 'stop' gesture. The Shadow, unable to halt its snail-worthy momentum, continues to leap at me, but a single word escapes my lips. "**Light.**"

A ray of energy shoots out of my hand, enveloping the Shadow's entire side of the room in a luminous warmth, almost as bright as gazing at the sun during the heat of the midday. The shadow opens its mouth, but no sound comes out, as it melts away, devoured by the power of a single word.

A moment later, all is still.

Why did I do that? How and why did I know that I could shoot magical light rays out of my hand? Am I in some form of virtual reality? Of course not, that would be ludicrous! Besides, the floor beneath me still feels quite warm, and my sense of touch can't easily be fooled like my eyes and ears can.

But then, if I *were* in the future, especially a thousand years or so, perhaps VR might have evolved? Who knows what futuristic humans might come up with? A primitive human like me probably couldn't imagine the reality of the future.

Time returns to normal, and the orb dulls somewhat, no longer acting like a miniature sun in the palm of my hands. While it doesn't illuminate as much of the room, my eyes hurt much less, so it's an improvement compared to before.

In any case, I'm not going to figure out where I am or understand my predicament by randomly guessing. This orb has given me the ability to shoot holy rays of light, so it's a suitable weapon. I'm useless with a sword, and the armor laying around is way too big for me, so I doubt I'll need anything else. I'd better leave.

Sloshing my way through the piles of gold, I almost trip a few times but manage to keep myself together. I consider taking some of the gold with me, but I doubt it'll be any use. It'll slow me down. I can come back later if I find a use for it.

After wading through the gold, I evaluate the three statues. To the right of each one, on all three walls opposite the door I entered from, passages lead to various other hallways. I can go right, left, or forward, and there are no indicators which way is the correct path to take. Hell, with my luck, they're *all* the wrong path.

I don't know where the passages lead, but one thing is for sure; I do *not* want to head down. It may be miles and miles below, but that river of souls is the last place I want to be.

When I was fleeing the statue monster, I used the left door, and it paid off for me. Since the left passage seems to head back up, in the opposite direction as the river of souls, I trudge past the piles of coin and step inside the hallway, and am pleasantly surprised to see rocks embedded in the walls, every ten feet or so, that glow. While they don't illuminate much, they don't need to, either. That's what my new orb is for, after all!

With a pep in my step, I force the thoughts of the statue monster to the back of my mind and head down the passage, praying to whatever gods may still exist to watch over me.

As the puny human leaves the room, the Three Great Kings turn their heads to look at one another.

The Knowledge-Seeker: Is that boy a candidate?

The One Who Weeps: Difficult to say. I saw no rejection. Anything is possible.

The Greatest Sinner: He is part of the great cycle. In the direst times of need, a champion will rise. The time is right.

The One Who Weeps: It doesn't matter. The boy cannot redeem our failures. All hope is lost.

The Greatest Sinner: As long as one draws breath, there is always hope. You have forgotten the ancient struggles.

The Knowledge Seeker: You speak the truth, Arthur. As long as the boy has the Power of the Kings, he can right the wrongs we've wrought.

The One Who Weeps: He will break, just as we did, just as all heroes do. Man cannot overcome his weakness.

The Knowledge Seeker: Ye of little faith. That is why you fail.

Author note: To get to the next part, see the bot comment below. The bot will also link to the index list for the Refresh (What you are currently reading) as well as Cryopod Classic (The original version).

Other useful links include a link to my Patreon, in case you wish to support the story and read blogs about improving a person's writing skills, a link to the Discord server (The most up-to-date link is always on the subreddit's sidebar.) and so on.

This is Jason Hiro, the protagonist of Cryopod.



Welcome to the Hypersuit Legion.

Part 002: The Secret House

The soles of my feet slap on the floor as I walk along a narrow, lightly illuminated corridor. The sanded dirt path beneath me begins to feel less like soft dirt, and more like coarse limestone. The orb in my right-hand illuminates the way forward, but also seems redundant, given the walls have glowing rocks embedded all over the place. Where were those when I fled that damn statue monster?

Within a few minutes of walking, I head right, then left, following nothing but my intuition as I make my way down one hallway and another. To my surprise, I end up standing before a metallic frame wrapping around the entirety of the corridor. The square slabs of metal give off an impression of being unlike any metal I've seen before. I take a moment to evaluate them, only to raise my eyes and stare into a pitch-black room; one illuminated only by my glowing orb. The rocks that led me here no longer provide any light.

Stepping inside, I sweep my eyes in a wide arc and frown. The place looks like an abandoned storehouse. Piles of scrap metal lay scattered about here and there. The metallic floor exposes itself only after I leave footprints in the thick layer of dust shrouding it. The ceiling, too, almost reminds me of the Cryotek facility, in that it too has a slight metallic sheen to it. Rising nearly forty feet above me, it towers imposingly, making the storage facility seem far bigger than I might normally expect.

"Hello?"

I whisper into the void, but my voice travels only a few feet forward before the neverending darkness swallows it whole.

Slowly, I make my way forward, taking care not to step on any metal shards. The last thing I need is to hobble myself and catch an infection. Each movement of my feet brings me further into the depths of the storage. Eventually, I reach the opposite wall, nearly two hundred feet from where I entered.

The facility is quite large. Who built it? What is it doing in a place like this, where freaky statue and shadow monsters roam freely? What is its purpose?

As I conjure questions one after the other, I lower my gaze and freeze in place as one particular chunk of metal catches my eye. Unlike the others, this one has a certain shape to it, almost as if someone crafted it intentionally.

Leaning down, I bend over to pick it up. A jolt of awe shoots through my back as I quickly recognize its purpose.

"It's a gun!"

Indeed. Unlike any weapon I've seen or imagined, this weapon has a slender, circular handle, allowing me to wrap my hand around it. It contours to my hand perfectly, making me wonder if someone custom-built it, knowing I would come here. The most surprising thing is that it doesn't appear to have anywhere to insert bullets or ammunition.

It appears to be... a laser gun? A space-age weapon?

No matter how I try to explain its appearance, the fact remains that this weapon is far removed from any design I've seen outside of movies and comics. Without hesitation, I aim it at the wall and press my finger against what I assume is the trigger.

Click.

Nothing happens.

I stare at the weapon for a moment before sighing. It's dead, now. Whatever battery or power source it once had, it's long since lost its charge.

Still, seeing the blaster sends a shiver down my spine. The design is unconventional. The long needle-tip sticking out of its front appears alien in origin, making me wonder whether a human crafted it... or something else.

Perhaps those monsters I've seen might know something about it.

With a shrug, I drop the weapon and continue on my way. It won't be useful to me, so there's no reason to carry it around. I need my hands free for other purposes.

I take a moment to glance around the facility again, but its size is simply too huge for even my magical orb to light up everything. After a minute of thinking, a lightbulb appears above my head.

I spoke a word when that shadow monster attacked me.

Light.

When I spoke, a blast of light fired from my palm and incinerated it. Does that mean I can do it again?

With a shrug, I speak up, elevating my voice a little louder than usual.

"Light."

A flash of brilliance escapes my body and fires into the distance! After a moment, it halts at the center of the room and begins brightening. I wince as the brilliant light easily dwarfs my orb and illuminates every corner of the massive facility.

Only then do I finally get a good look at the entire chamber. Piles of metal stack up to the ceiling at random intervals, while other areas have only small mounds of finished gadgets, all of varying quality.

I spend several minutes walking around, picking up anything I can find. However, no matter where I look, all I find are depleted weapons and random devices; their glory days long since faded. None of them serve me any purpose, so I leave them behind.

As I stumble around, fatigue swells within my body. I'm still suffering from Cryogenic sickness, but already I've fled from a statue monster and fought off a shadow monster as well.

I'm hungry, thirsty, and dead tired.

After skimming the various scrap piles, I eventually plunk my butt down on the filthy floor and sigh.

I don't know where I am, but I know it's not the Cryotek facility. How did I get here? What happened while I was in suspended animation? Where are all the people, and why do monsters lurk around every corner?

I want to cry, but I'm too dehydrated to muster any tears. Instead, I stare at my feet, wondering what I can do to alleviate my pain and suffering.

Minutes pass.

An idea occurs to me.

I spoke the word 'Light' earlier and summoned light. Could another word have a similar effect?

Figuring it can't hurt to try, I speak again.

"Pizza."

Fwoop!

Hardly has the word left my mouth before a giant pizza twice as big as anything I've received from any restaurant materializes before me. I jump in fright as the unexpected gift from the heavens falls down and slaps against the floor, scattering dust in every direction. The giant cardboard box encircling it has no logos, nor markings of any sort, giving it the impression of the Creator himself having crafted it.

I stare for a moment, wide-eyed, as the smell of a hundred mouth-watering toppings wafts toward my nose.

I summoned a pizza? I actually did it! Holy shit!

I reach a trembling hand toward the box, and a sumptuous sight greets me as I open the lid. I've always been a Supreme pizza lover, but not even I have ever imagined there could be so many toppings on a single pie.

In the blink of an eye, my hands move faster than my mind can react. I shove huge masses of cheese, meat, and vegetables into my face. Every bite intoxicates me. I almost begin to lose myself as I rapidly regain my stamina and fill up my empty belly.

Ten minutes later, I flop backward and gasp for breath. My body feels ten pounds heavier. The exhaustion from before fades away, and a comfortable sensation of satiation replaces it.

"Bed."

I speak another word, and a mattress appears behind me. It takes all of my remaining strength, but I manage to crawl atop it and drift away... away to a place where the world once wasn't so scary, and the monsters weren't out to eat me.

Ah. The simple times. How I long for them...

Zzz...

Part 003: The Prison

Upon awakening, my eyes flutter open, and a yawn escapes my mouth. I gaze at the ceiling for several seconds as memories of the previous day enter my mind. After being chased by monsters and stumbling onto a magical orb of light, I was so exhausted that I slept like an anvil. Not even a marching band with a full orchestra could have woken me up.

Without thinking, I turn my head to the left and wince as the brilliant light from my orb blinds me. "Gah!"

After a few seconds, my eyes adjust to its light. When I pick up the orb, I notice it feels much colder than it did yesterday. Most likely, I've finally recovered from the cryogenic sickness that stole my sense of touch away. Compared to how disoriented I felt when I fell asleep, I feel like a new man.

My eyes linger on the orb. I squint mightily and pull it closer to peer inside of it. I don't believe it's an object that can be described by science. It gives me abilities that are beyond human. It must be some legendary S-Tier item, but I haven't a clue where it comes from.

The closer I look, the more details I'm able to pick out. Inside the orb are hundreds, thousands, perhaps even millions of microscopic life forms. Like worms, racing in all directions, the minute organisms zip around, moving to and fro, and their excitement increases the closer I stare.

A feeling in my body makes me pull the orb away. A strange sound, like that of a gnat, buzzes in my ear. I swat at it, but the noise stays and coalesces into something more akin to a voice.

"...you?"

The voice is a whisper in my ear. I can barely make out a single word.

"...are you?"

It continues speaking, and I strain to hear it.

"Who are you?" The voice clears up and speaks directly to me. The timbre is that of a middle-aged man, deep, and full of knowledge. He's experienced many things in his life, yet there's also an animalistic growl in his voice, as if he's merged with the consciousness of an animal spirit.

"Me? I'm Jason Hiro. I'm a time traveler, I suppose." I answer the voice, figuring it must be coming from the orb. Seems plausible.

The voice doesn't respond, and the energy from the orb dissipates, leaving me wondering who it was. Perhaps the mysterious man was satisfied with my answer. Maybe I'll never know.

I climb off the dusty bed and twitch my nose in disgust at my clothes. They're still covered in the flaky debris from the cryopod, as am I. My body feels gross, but until now, I haven't had my wits about me. Figuring it's worth a shot, I speak a single word to nobody in particular. "**Clean.**"

As expected, my T-shirt, jeans, and underwear instantly change and become as clean as if I had tossed them in a washer and dryer for an hour. I repeat the process, but for my body, and smile as I also end up

as clean as if I had just climbed out of the shower. Heck, I feel completely refreshed!

I take a moment to reorient myself, then glance at the several cold slices of pizza leftover from earlier.

Should I eat them?

Nah. With my power, I shouldn't stoop to eating leftovers.

"Pizza."

Once again, a sumptuous pie materializes in midair and lands atop the previous box. I don't hesitate before diving into a second meal. Pizza is my favorite food. Even before I entered college, I tried to eat it as often as possible.

It only takes me a few minutes to eat most of the food. After I finish, I rub my stomach and ponder the meaning of life for a moment.

Then, I direct my gaze to the leftovers.

If I leave this food behind, I'll be putting myself in unnecessary danger. The smell of leftovers might attract those monsters. I'd prefer it if they never find out I was here.

"Erase."

With a single word, I eradicate the existence of the pizza and banish it to the shadow realm. Several seconds pass as I contemplate how I can figure out my powers without any trouble. Eventually, I shrug and jump to my feet.

I can't stay here forever. Even if this place looks abandoned, a monster might stumble in here by complete accident. I would be much safer if I could locate other humans. Surely I can't be the only person left alive, right?

A minute later, I step out of the facility and hold the glowing orb close to my chest, allowing it to light my path. It doesn't take long before I arrive back in the El-Dorado treasure room and decide to head down a different passageway. I have no idea where the other two lead to, but if the storage facility is a dead-end, and if the place I originally entered from leads back to the statue monster, I'll take my chances with one of the other two passages.

As I travel along, I slowly realize I've entered familiar territory. The walls of the Labyrinth are earthen again, and the glowing rocks appear to have vanished. The hallway continues for at least a few miles before opening into a series of corridors and doors. Something about the place gives me the creeps. It resembles a *prison*.

A dozen doors line the right wall, and at the end of the row is another entrance, far bigger than the rest. I walk up to the nearest one and shove it. Unlike every other door until now, this one doesn't budge.

I push harder and shove with all my strength, but it still won't move. Finally, I press my back against it, and grunt out loud, "Okay, orb! I need your strength! Give me the power to open this goddamn doo-!"

My words cut off abruptly as it suddenly yanks inward, making me stumble back and slam onto the ground. My spine screams in pain, but after a few moments, I breathe a little easier and pull myself to my

feet.

Only, this time, I freeze in horror. What awaits me is... no... I don't want to believe it. At the back of the room, there's a cryopod, identical to the one I left. It's broken and torn to pieces.

The walls are covered in blood.

The room yawns before me. The smell of iron forces me to stifle my gag reflex, and chunks of pizza threaten to crawl back up my throat. The sight inside of this room makes me never want to eat meat again.

The smell of death is thick, though not fresh. Much of the blood is hardened, crusty, and brown. If someone were to try and clean the room, they would need a paint scraper, and it'd be a hell of a job. The corpse torn to pieces and scattered all over the place is unrecognizable and desiccated. Whatever killed them, it happened a long time ago. The cryopod looks like something smashed through the window on the front and tore the occupant out with force.

Saying a quick prayer for their soul, I quickly step back out of the room and lean against the hallway door, and my breathing arrives in shallow gasps. *If that room housed one of the other cryopod occupants, then that can only mean...*

I don't want to check, but I have to. The room next door is in a similar situation. A violent murder, under the same circumstances, begins to reveal a pattern. I can barely make out long, blonde hair on a severed head across the room, but I don't want to go anywhere near the corpse. I quickly check the other chambers and find a similar situation in the third, fourth, and fifth doors.

The sixth, however, is different.

Inside, the cryopod is intact, and opened up. Whoever was inside must have escaped, since there isn't a horrible bloody mess to be seen anywhere. There's a journal on the floor, placed directly in the center of the room, laying in such a way that anyone walking in the room would see it immediately, and it's facing the door, so they'd know to pick it up.

While it feels like this is a booby trap, curiosity is my weakness, so I creep over and nudge the book with my foot. No Indiana Jones-style boulders come rolling at me, so it's probably safe. I quickly snatch the journal up and retreat to the hallway, my heart a pounding mess.

The first page has some writing, so I carefully read its contents.

Date: Unknown.

Location: Unknown.

Mental state: Hopeless.

My body is weak. I haven't eaten anything since I emerged from cryostasis, and if I don't find something soon, I'm going to die. I'm ready. I have to accept it. I always wanted to grow old and die in my sleep, but that isn't going to happen.

Anya and Faraday were my friends. That thing, the monster... Gressil. It took them. Their screams were awful. What a horrible way to go. Waking up, the jaws of a demon tearing them to pieces before they even have a chance to fight back, and all they could do was let out pitiful screams.

I don't want to go out like them. I have to try and escape, or die trying. If I can stab it once, before it kills me, I'll at least have my revenge.

Well, it's about time. My body's getting weaker. If I don't go now, I won't ever be able to leave. If only I could see my daughter again... just one more time.

Amy. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I hope Cryotek's payout helped you. I hope you lived a good life, but... daddy won't be coming home after all.

I deserve what's coming.

After reading it, I flip to the next page. Only two words are legible.

Umi watches.

Over and over, but the handwriting style is different. It's not as feminine. Perhaps someone else found the notebook and scrawled the words?

Every page has the same words repeated. *Umi watches*. A hundred times per page. The further through the notebook I flip, the more frantic the words become.

Silently, I set the notebook on the floor where I found it, and say yet another prayer. I don't know what happened to that man, but I hope he eventually found peace.

As I leave the room, I spin those two foreboding words around in my head, like marshmallows over a fire. Looking back on things now, I've felt that same sensation of eyes tracking me everywhere I go. Is it just my imagination? Paranoid delusions from the ever-present darkness shrouding the Labyrinth?

The final rooms hold no surprises. Apparently, only one man managed to escape without the monster tearing him to pieces. I offer more prayers for the fallen and sigh. I'm not even a religious person, and in fact, I'm something of an atheist, yet now I find myself wishing a god existed to save people from this hellish nightmare.

Finally, only one door is left; the one opposite from where I started. Whatever waits for me on the other side, hopefully my trusty Orb of Light can protect me.

The door slides open easily as I press it inward. For a moment, confusion overtakes me as I look around the room. These give way to terror and panic once I realize why it seems so familiar.

A cryopod rests against the far wall. I quickly walk over to it and examine it, spotting an open hatch on the back.

Jerking my head to the left, I spot a second closed door. The other Cryopod rooms didn't have any entrances other than the main lobby, but this room does.

I'm in my original Cryopod room. But the door that I just entered through was not here before.

The Labyrinth is shifting dynamically. The idea makes no sense, but neither does shooting light out of my hands or my sudden ability to summon pizzas.

If my theory is right, then I have a few options. First, I can return to the El-Dorado room and pass through the final door I missed. Second, I can travel past the statue monster room and go back to the

giant door, hoping the smaller door on the right from earlier will take me somewhere new. Third, I can try and use my abilities to shove open the supermassive door instead. I doubt that's doable.

If these are my options, then the choice is simple; no way am I going to take a chance with statue monsters! I'd like my innards to stay inside my body, thank you very much.

Turning around, I leave my cryopod room behind and head back through the cryopod chambers toward the El-Dorado room. However, my heart sinks. The long corridor back is gone.

As expected, the Labyrinth has shifted. I guessed correctly.

I cautiously and silently sneak around, checking this passage and that. Dozens of doors greet me. I don't open them.

After a few minutes of wandering around, I stop and listen. A sound of feet pattering approaches. Two pairs, in fact. It won't take long before whoever, or *whatever* is approaching spots the light from my orb.

"Oy, Tvoorik! Didn't ya notice? Them doors was open. What idiot leaves the doors open?"

English. I recognize their words. The speaker's voice doesn't sound human, however. His timbre reminds me of a wolf's growl. I quickly whisper to my orb, "**Dim.**"

Its light dissipates to nearly nothing, allowing me to see a flickering of torchlight approaching. I duck around a corner and hide behind a wall outcropping, making myself as tiny as possible while hiding the orb in my shirt.

Another voice replies. "Are ya kiddin', Ylvusk? Ain't nobody dumb enough to leave a door open 'round these parts. Gressil'd kill us!"

The footsteps draw closer. My heart smashes around in my chest like a pack of rats trying to escape. As long as the voices walk straight down the corridor, they won't see me.

"Yeah, but this place is the Popsicle Block. I thought only one fool was still left in 'ere?"

My eyes widen as the two beings appear, one of them holding a torch. *Imps*. I've read enough fantasy to know the difference between various monsters when I see them. They are, without a doubt, not humans. Their short little bodies, perhaps three feet tall, waddle along, and their fat eyes roll around in their heads. Bright red skin, wispy hair, and two tiny little horns give me all the other visual cues I need to fit the puzzle pieces together.

They're demons!

The two imps stop and sniff. Tvoorik speaks; a hint of wariness in his voice. "You ever wonder what Gressil does with 'is victims? I bet he lets 'em go. You know how Gressil is."

"Oh, come on," Ylvusk groans. "Keep your conspiracies to yourself."

"Nah, nah, I'm serious," Tvoorik continues. "He's been offin' the popsicles one by one over the last few years. But I got ta' thinkin'... what if he wasn't offin' 'em, eh? What if he was faking everything? Putting on an act?"

Ylvusk's expression turns sour. "*Why* would Gressil do that?"

"Dunno! I'm just thinkin' out loud, ya know? Don't tell me you don't have any doubts!"

"I don't," Ylvusk says, shaking his head. "Shut your trap and keep walking. We've got three more patrols to do before we earn our allotment for the day."

"Psh. You know that's just how the higher-ups keep us in line, don'tcha? It's the ol' carrot and stick treatment. I read about it in a book once!"

"Oh, stuff it, ya stupid knob! I know you ain't never read a book in your whole life! Don't throw the shrakh all over me just 'cause it works on the other dummies."

"I'm serious!"

"And I'm a succubus! Come on, move it along! I ain't got all day to listen to your globberin'!"

The two imps continue walking down the hallway. I hold my breath the entire time until their voices fade into the distance.

Once I can't hear their voices anymore, I sneak down several hallways, taking random directions as I try to find a way out of this labyrinthine series of passages. The different hallways blend together. Soon, the glowing rocks appear once again, illuminating different paths.

Suddenly, I arrive somewhere completely unexpected.

A massive chamber, over one hundred feet square, holds a statue of a young girl with an umbrella. While she raises it above her head, gold-colored water bubbles up from the top of it and drips down, barely missing her body. Thousands of flowers surround her, but the ones closest to her lay withered and dead.

The look on her face is that of acceptance. She's seen things in her life, things she couldn't help. Her eyes are young, yet worn out, tired of a fear-filled existence. Most importantly, she's *human* and not a misshapen monster. The realization that the only humans I've found in this Labyrinth were statues and corpses fills me with dread.

A giant golden door across the room catches my attention, but I ignore it. Something about the girl pulls my eyes to her.

The closer I walk to her, the more I notice that the flowers, choked and withered though they are, slowly grow back as the light from my orb touches them. This effect is more muted as I walk nearer to the statue and discover why. In the girl's other hand, the one not holding the umbrella, she clutches a black orb. Unlike mine, hers sucks the light in around it.

An orb of life, and an orb of death. The two are opposites. One drains life; the other breathes consciousness back into the world.

I don't want to go anywhere near that orb of darkness. Everything about it screams *danger*. If I were the protagonist in an action movie, it would surely be the ultimate final weapon of a villain.

"Why, hello there."

A voice speaks up from somewhere in the room. I drop to a crouching position to make myself a smaller target as I look around. Nobody else is here.

"Come, now. Don't be rude."

The voice continues, and now I realize it isn't speaking to me audibly, but inside my mind.

"Who's speaking? What do you want?" I answer the voice, and turn uneasily to the orb. *It can't be.*

A face appears in my mind, one of a man shrouded in darkness. He smiles, and the whites of his teeth spread open, just below the fire burning inside his eyes.

"What do *I* want? No. What do *you* want? Speak truth."

I consider his question for all of three seconds, before standing back up to my full height.

"I'd kill for another pizza."

Part 004: New Friends, New Enemies

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The smiling face of evil lurks in the shadows of my mind. "You would *kill*, hmm? It appears that this 'peat-zuh' you speak of must be incredibly valuable. Few mortals would shed blood for anything less than the object of their dreams."

I stare at the orb dumbly for a moment. This guy doesn't know what pizza is? Well, I guess that makes sense. He's inside a sphere in a labyrinth held in the hands of a statue formed in the image of a young girl. Nothing about this situation is logical.

"Pizza is food, tasty food. I'm homesick. I don't like this place, and I want to leave, jump into my warm bed, and pray I never see these walls ever again."

The face inside my head smiles even wider than before. "Ah, so you seek comfort, joy, and other trifles of life. Power will grant you all of the things you seek, and I can give it to you. With my energy, you will be unstoppable, capable of crushing all who stand before you."

"Uh. But that isn't what I want. The whole 'crushing' thing isn't my style." I take a step to the side and eye the orb a little more cautiously. "Err, don't take this the wrong way, but something about you is a little... untrustworthy. Sinister, even. Compared to this glowing orb in my hand, you sorta scream *evil*, you know? I think I'll pass on whatever you have to offer."

Instantly, his smile vanishes. "You deny my power? None would dare do such a thing."

I nod slowly at the face in my mind. "Well, I'm different from other people. I know how this goes. You'll offer me unfathomable power, and then damn my soul for all eternity. Doesn't sound pleasant. Besides, I've got this glowing orb here, and so far he's been nothing but helpful!"

"Hoarhiim? My brother is a weakling, incapable of helping you beyond acting as a light in the darkness. Accept my power, and you won't need a light, for you will be *one* with the darkness."

Ignoring his incessant prodding, I steal a glance at the small orb shining like a star in my hand. "This thing has a name?"

"Of course, as do I." The man shrouded in darkness frowns at me. "Your manners are awful, calling my brother a 'thing.' Hoarhiim! Wake up! Stop snoozing and say hello to your big brother!"

A familiar tingling itches at the back of my neck, and slowly, a second face forms in my mind. If I had to describe Hoarhiim, I'd say his face is like that of God. Shining, with long white hair that drapes down to his shoulders, and glowing eyes that could pierce the fabric of my being if he wished. While the dark-god appears to be a monster of evil and malice incarnate, Hoarhiim is more of a brilliant entity of righteousness and purity.

Hoarhiim blinks slowly. "Hmm? What is it, Blaarjiim? Why have you woken me from my slumber?"

The man inside the orb of darkness, Blaarjiim, sighs dramatically. "How long have you been in this mortal's possession, yet stayed asleep? You will never hope to defeat me if you cannot apply yourself."

With a grumble, Hoarhiim's face turns to his brother's in my mind. "Destruction is your calling, but I tread a different path. As for this young one, I felt his touch and ignored it. He hardly needs my energy."

I raise an eyebrow at Hoarhiim. "What do you mean by 'your energy'?"

"Spiritual energy, the power that manifests itself in all creatures born in this universe. As a human, you would usually possess very little of it, but in your case..." Hoarhiim trails off, and Blaarjiim pounces at the chance to interject.

"Speaking of that very thing... human, what are you doing in the Labyrinth? Only a foolish mortal or one of incredible power would dare enter this domain, especially by himself."

I don't know how to answer that. "I guess I'm foolish, then. I didn't come here on purpose; I'll have you know. It's an accident that I'm here at all."

A smile spreads across my face. Yeah. An accident. That's all it is. Even if I pinch myself, I can't wake up from the nightmare. Nothing about this place- this labyrinth, makes the slightest sense. Just when I thought it couldn't get any more bizarre, I ended up talking to a god of darkness and one of light. Next thing I know, there'll be a magical duck with the wings of a fairy guiding me to la-la land.

After a moment of silence, I turn back to Blaarjiim. "Well, anyway, I should be going. I'm glad you got to chat with your brother, and I'd consider leaving him with you, except he makes for a GREAT flashlight. So, yeah. Take care of yourself, god of all that is evil and gross."

Hoarhiim yawns mightily. "Mmm, you're an interesting human. I can't say I've known any who would turn down a chance for power, but then, I haven't known many humans."

His brother balks. "You deny me once more? You dare leave me behind?!"

"Mhm." I turn around and start to walk away. "Hope things work out for you. Ciao."

His image in my mind starts to dull as I take a few steps away, but suddenly his attitude changes. "Ah... aha! I see, so it's like that then, is it?"

"Uh, like what?" Internally I sigh, sensing that he's about to flip-flop.

"If you do not require my power now, perhaps you may in the future. Why not take me along with you? Unless you're too frightened by my infinite power, that is."

Slowly, I turn back and stare at the orb. "What, are you lonely or something? Don't like hanging around with a statue doing nothing all day?"

Blaarjiim finally decides to be honest, for once. "Yes, it is true. My existence here is empty and meaningless. With my former owner gone, I have nothing to live for."

A chuckle escapes Hoarhiim's lips. "Owner? I thought you and the girl were partners."

"Such simple words could not describe our relationship," Blaarjiim says, his evil aura from earlier somewhat muted now. "That is beside the point. I wish to travel with you. Take me along, and when the

time is right, you will beg me for my strength."

"I doubt that," I say dryly, as I glance at Hoarhiim's orb. "Say, if I touch his orb, is he going to own me for life? You seem pretty honest and upstanding, compared to your brother. You wouldn't lie, would you?"

Hoarhiim shrugs. "I could lie if I wished, but it would serve no purpose. My brother can do nothing if you choose not to accept his power. You and I share a bond now, due to the manner in which we met. Your mind begged me for the strength to survive, and thus I gave it to you."

"Oh. Neat." After a few moments, I think to myself, *fuck it, if Hoarhiim says Blaarjiim can't hurt me, it's probably true. I don't care either way. To be honest, if that statue monster comes back, I may need the extra firepower.*

Two seconds later, I stand before the statue of the little girl and pluck Blaarjiim out of her hands. "Yoink. Alright, you can come along, but you'd better behave like a good little orb of death and misery, or I'll put you back where I found you."

Blaarjiim returns to his creepy smile from before and slowly clasps his hands together. "I get the feeling we're going to have many good times together."

As I turn away from the statue, a sudden rumbling in the distance catches my ear. The sounds of cackling and laughing, from dozens- no, hundreds of voices scream together from the hall that I came from.

With a mock look of surprise, Blaarjiim holds his hand up to his mouth. "Oops, I must have forgotten. *They* probably won't be too happy that you removed me."

As the rumbling draws nearer, I feel the ground start to tremble. "Fuck everything about my life."

For the third time since I arrived in this Labyrinth, I feel fear take hold of my heart and freeze me in place.

Hoarhiim is unfazed. "The Army of Sheol. They aren't very friendly. You should probably start moving if you value your life."

"Why run? Take my power, and I will allow you to slay the weak little-" Blaarjiim tries to goad me again, but I'm simply too seized with fear to listen.

"Not now! Gotta go, and fast! Which path do I take to get the hell outta dodge?!"

After a moment, I jerk around to look at the sizeable golden doors. Unlike the giant double doors I noticed when I was fleeing the statue monster, these are much smaller, but painted gold, or perhaps formed out of the material itself. If I want to escape... that path might be...

The enemy is closing. I've got seconds to spare. Leaping into action, I rush to the giant door, an orb in each hand, and slam my shoulder against it, shoving with all my might. "Gaaaah! Open up, you stupid piece of shit! OPEN!"

Hoarhiim decides now is the perfect time to chime in. "If you want, I can give you some energy to boost your body. It should give you the strength to shove-"

"Do it! For fuck's sake, they're right around the corner!" I scream at his orb, and before I know it, a sudden wondrous feeling fills my body. I feel like more of a mountain than a man. My fatigue and fear vanish all at once, and my muscles bulge as if I took ten years worth of steroids all at once. This time, when I shove against the door, electricity bolts off my body and slams into the ground, and the entryway screeches and scrapes against the stone tiling, opening up half a foot.

I barely finish in the nick of time. Once I slide inside, my eyes shoot open. A group of orcs, goblins, and skeletons rush around the corner, their eyes locking onto me all at the same time.

One of the goblins points at me. "There he is! Told ya I smelled man-flesh!"

"Human! Get him! We eat good tonight!" One of the orcs stabs a fat finger at me, and I nearly scream as that same terror comes back. No matter how strong I am, I can't possibly take on an army of monsters! Using the strength the orb has given me, I shove the door shut behind me. The sound of melee weapons banging against the other side makes me stumble backward and fall on my rear. The monsters don't seem to have the collective strength to open it.

My breathing slows to normal, as the sounds of monsters beating the door increase in volume. A quick glance around the room makes my heart sink; there isn't any other way out. I just backed myself into a dead end. Stupid, stupid!

Blaarjiim seems to notice this fact as well. "Uh oh, it seems your day keeps getting worse."

"Stuff it." I glance uneasily behind myself at the door, but Hoarhiim intervenes.

"There's no need to worry. You are safe for now. Only several trolls or a powerful demon could open this door, and they're far too busy to bother. Not even a hundred orcs bringing their full strength to bear could budge it an inch."

"Seriously? How much strength did you give me?" Even as the words leave my mouth, I feel Hoarhiim's energy slip through my hand and back into his orb. "And what do you mean by demons? Where am I? Why are there goblins and orcs and other creatures from fantasy lore? This whole Labyrinth is unreal!"

In my mind's eye, Blaarjiim sneers at me. "How does one *accidentally* stumble into the realm of the demons, yet not know the manner in which he arrived? You must be quite the oaf not to understand the land in which you now tread."

"The realm of the demons? What, like, I'm in *Hell*?"

Hoarhiim nods matter-of-factly. "That is correct. This Labyrinth is part of the great interconnected structure known as Hell."

I clasp both orbs a little harder so that my hands don't shake. "D-does that mean... I'm dead?"

Blaarjiim stares at me in silence before bursting into a fit of laughter. "Pahahaha! Dead?! Surely you jest! Hah, that's the funniest thing I've heard in ages! Hoarhiim, your pet human is completely clueless!"

Hoarhiim, to his credit, merely sighs. "He's a mortal. If he doesn't know how he arrived here, he probably hasn't the faintest understanding of Hell. I'm surprised he even knows what orcs, goblins, and

demons are, given his rudimentary understanding of the universe."

I reach over and set Hoarhiim's softball-sized orb in the same hand as Blaarjiim's, though the fit is very uncomfortable and I have to rest both of them against my stomach so I can itch my cheek. "I mean, I read the Bible, and a bunch of other books when I was a kid. I'm a genre buff when it comes to mythology and other stuff like that. It never did me any good in college, and it didn't get me any attention from girls, but it was my hobby."

Blaarjiim squints to stare at me. "Caw-ledge? Buy-bul? What are you talking about? What do those have to do with books?"

Hoarhiim chuckles at his confused brother. "I suspect they are the titles of the books. I thought all books were destroyed by the demons, given their passion for illiteracy. How did you ever find books to read?"

Shrugging, I grab Hoarhiim's orb with my right hand again. "From the library. I suppose they don't have libraries here, but they did in America."

Now it's Hoarhiim's turn to look confused. "America? I have not heard of that district."

A sudden thought enters my mind. "Err, this seems like a dumb question, but I've been wondering... am I even on Earth anymore?" I thought the Labyrinth was under the surface or something, but that doesn't appear to be the case."

In unison, Blaarjiim and Hoarhiim's faces go taut. The two of them stare at me incredulously, as if they're unable to comprehend my question.

Blaarjiim is the first to break the silence. "Boy. This farce has gone on long enough. Who are you, and how do you know about Earth?"

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't I know about Earth?"

Blaarjiim stares at me with skepticism in his eyes. "As you have surmised, you now reside in Hell. Earth is not a place any mortal should know of, and very few demons do."

"Yet he does," Hoarhiim counters. "Sometimes a mortal can be full of surprises."

"I'm from Earth. I was born and raised there," I say, volunteering the information before the orbs can ask. "If we're not under Earth's surface, then where in the, err, 'hell' are we?"

Blaarjiim shifts uncomfortably in my mind, turning his back on my mental vision. "I do not think we should say. The rules forbid discussion of Earth."

Hoarhiim smoothly interjects, "Brother; those rules govern the demons. We are not demons. Jason already knows of Earth's existence, so I believe we can offer at least a bare minimum of explanation."

"Always the soft one," Blaarjiim growls. A moment later, he sighs. "Earth is dead. Destroyed."

"What?!" My voice cracks. I nearly drop their orbs. "You're kidding!"

"I am not one to jest," Blaarjiim says dryly. "'Twas wiped out, long ago. The demons live here, now."

"Forget the demons for half a second! What happened to the humans? Am I the last one alive?"

Blaarjiim squirms. Hoarhiim jumps in to answer before his brother can reply. "No. Many still live. However, they have no sovereignty. The demons control the remnants of humanity quite efficiently. Humans are little more than cattle for demons to feed upon."

Silently, I stare ahead at the golden door. The skeletons continue to bang on it, but the other monsters have given up. Maybe they're waiting for me to emerge.

"Wow. I'm not in Kansas anymore."

Blaarjiim raises an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

"Nothing. It's a saying from where I was born. Anyway, I can't worry about the humans for now. I need to think about my needs first. My first goal is to get away from the skeletons and escape."

Blaarjiim immediately reverts to his former self now that the topic of Earth has passed. "Yes, yes. If you accept my power, you would be unstoppable. Combined with my brother's energy, you could tear those monsters outside to ribbons."

"I'd rather not." Pausing, I turn to Hoarhiim. "You said before that as long as I don't ask for Blaarjiim's power, I can't use it, but he can't hurt me either, right?"

Hoarhiim nods.

"Okay, then why can I use your power? I didn't ask for it."

"But you did, young human." Hoarhiim waggles a finger and begins pacing. "Your body seized with terror, and you grabbed hold of my orb, begging me to save you from the Shade. At that moment, your intent was clear, despite not vocalizing your desire."

"Um..." Discomfort sets in my joints. "Can I give back your power, then?"

"No," Hoarhiim replies flatly. "We are bound for life until one of us dies. Given your mortal body and all its frailties, I will be back on my pedestal soon enough."

"Don't get all choked up about it or anything," I quip.

Satisfied that the monsters aren't going to tear me apart in the immediate future, I turn around to examine the room.

Compared to the ornate fountain, the golden doors, and everything else I've seen so far, including the El-Dorado room, this chamber is barren. The walls, rocky and jagged, uneven, are not the same earthen texture as the rest of the Labyrinth. There aren't any visible decorations of any sort. However, something catches my eye.

To my surprise, besides the light Hoarhiim's glowing orb gives off, there's something else illuminating the room. With the door at my back, I take a few steps forward and gape. A faint bubble surrounds a platform raised a foot in the air. The platform leads to a chair- no, a *throne*. On the throne rests a skeleton adorned in shredded cloths, wearing a crown.

Hesitantly, I walk toward it. The energy bubble hums quietly but grows more audible as I stop in front of it. Drawing closer, I realize the light it's giving off is green. I didn't notice before since Hoarhiim's light is much brighter.

"Uh, Hoarhiim? What is this?"

Silence. For several moments, Hoarhiim strokes his chin. "I don't know."

Blaarjiim raises his hand and grins. "I'll tell you... if you accept my power."

"Pass."

His mischievous smiles vanishes, "Very well then, I'll tell you anyway. This is the resting place of a great Hero. A mighty King, if you will."

"Hero? King? Is he- err, was he human?"

"Yes. A powerful one, at that. Humans with supernatural abilities are scarce. Only one is born every generation, in fact."

"*Were* born," Hoarhiim mutters. "Heroes are dead. Extinct, like the angels."

Angels, huh? I make a mental note to ask Hoarhiim about them later.

"What's with this bubble?" I reach forward and touch the energy field. A spark of electricity jumps to my finger before I can make contact, but I don't feel any pain.

A smirk appears on Blaarjiim's shadowy face. "It's a protective force field made of holy energy. Lethal to demons. Probably fatal to humans."

"Probably?"

"Probably."

Hoarhiim chuckles. "My brother loves the taste of fear. The more you squirm, the more you excite him. Worry not, mortal. Holy energy cannot harm a human."

Good to know, I think to myself.

For several moments, I pan my eyes up and down the skeleton on the throne. Who was he? Why did he die here, in this godforsaken Labyrinth? If he was a Hero, what did that mean for him?

The faded purple rags adorning his body look like they might once have been robes, something a member of royalty would wear. Blaarjiim wasn't lying about this man's status, then. A crown on his head draws my attention. I'm not fond of gold, or jewelry, or anything of the sort, but something about this circular hunk of metal makes me giddy with excitement.

Tentatively, I press my hand against the energy field. After a moment, a sensation like static electricity makes my hair stand on end, then *pop!* The bubble explodes with a loud snap, vanishing into the aether. All at once, several things happen. Air rushes to the throne. The skeleton seems to sigh, then the bones fizzle away, turn into dust, and fall apart. With nothing to keep them up, the robes tumble forward, and the crown falls, bangs on the throne, and clatters to the ground, rolling behind me a few feet before coming to a stop.

The two orbs stay quiet for a moment.

Hoarhiim pierces the silence. "You broke the seal."

Blaarjiim pales. "I expected many things to happen. That was not one of them."

Tentatively, I curl up my arm to hold both orbs, then lean down and use my newly freed hand to lift the crown off the ground.

Compared to how I would describe a crown, this one is plain. It doesn't have the spikes pointing upward as most crowns would, but instead is little more than a round band of gold, perhaps two inches tall. Different colored gems adorn the center, spiraling around the whole thing. As I hold it, a voice whispers to me, but fades away before I can interpret the words.

Hoarhiim leans forward in my mind's eye to examine the golden band. Blaarjiim follows suit a moment later.

"P-put it on," Blaarjiim says, though even he's more unsettled than usual.

"Alright," I croak.

Slowly, I raise it above my head, let it hover in the air a moment, then lower it.

Ten thousand voices scream out, all at once. Fire tears across my whole body.

The instant the crown touches my head, I lose motor control and flop to the ground, dropping Hoarhiim and Blaarjiim in the process. My eyes widen as hundreds of equations appear in front of me, followed by images of devices and machines I can barely fathom.

More information than one man could comprehend enters my mind. For a moment, the realization that I now have more knowledge in my brain than the Libraries of Congress or Alexandria combined gives me a feeling of elation unlike any in my life before. *I'm a genius! I'm omnipotent!! I can build anything!!!*

And then, as quickly as it arrived, the mental overload fades away.

I understand, now. This crown didn't belong to any ordinary king; it belonged to the wisest man of all time.

King Solomon.

It takes several moments, but eventually, the world forms around me once again. Hoarhiim's figure appears in my mind's eye. "Boy. Boy! What's wrong? What happened?"

Blaarjiim chuckles. "Don't you feel it, brother? His mind is swimming."

I clamber to my feet and shake the dizziness off. "I'm fine; I'm fine. The crown- it gave me visions."

"Visions?" Hoarhiim inquires. "What sort?"

"It..." I start to say something, but as I reach down to pick up the orbs, a fuzzy image materializes in front of me. Blinking, I straighten up and wave my hand in front of my face.

The image looks like a hologram. A series of lines, twisting and turning around each other, form a cube that expands until it takes up my entire field of vision, yet is still mostly transparent.

After a minute, I piece together what the image's contents mean. It's a map of the Labyrinth. A single red dot, smack in the middle, pulses softly, pulling my eyes to it. After a moment of staring, words appear above the dot.

CURRENT POSITION.

The dot must be me. I blink a few times, and the map disappears.

Huh. A map of the Labyrinth. It must be my birthday.

Leaning down, I grab Hoarhiim and Blaarjiim. "You're not going to believe what this crown can do."

Blaarjiim appears in my mind, casually leaning against something unseen. "I very much doubt that."

"The crown can project a mental map of the Labyrinth into my mind. I see not only where I am, but also everything around me for miles on end."

Silently I ponder the greater significance of my discovery. Solomon was a king in the Bible, one whom God blessed with untold wisdom and riches. If this is his crown, then it must be worth a fortune. Even more impressive is the ability it grants me, along with the mental acuity to understand concepts and branches of science I knew nothing about before.

Could such an object exist in reality? Perhaps I did die in that cryopod. Maybe this is all a dream brought on by cryogenic sickness.

Hoarhiim taps his foot impatiently. "You keep stopping and starting. Explain to me what's going on."

And so I do. A few minutes later, Hoarhiim turns to his brother. "You knew of this?"

Blaarjiim sighs. "My lady held me in her hand for thousands of years, brother. I considered the many possibilities that lay beyond the Golden Doors, and given the writing on its surface, only a few seemed plausible."

"Writing?" Turning around, I walk over to the entrance, and it doesn't escape my notice that the monsters outside have stopped pounding on the door. I raise Hoarhiim's orb up to illuminate it, and spot ancient letters I didn't see earlier. Usually, I couldn't hope to read them, but thanks to the Crown, I can.

TOMB OF THE KNOWLEDGE-SEEKER.

"Incredible," I murmur.

A minute passes. Carvings of humans, animals, fearsome monsters, demons, and angels cover every last inch of the towering barrier. Depictions of ancient wars, the struggles of humanity, and an apocalyptic battle I can barely fathom litter its surface.

"Hoarhiim. Does God exist?"

The being of light rubs his arms. "He did, once. The Creator was the most powerful deity in the universe. Everything in existence is a result of his efforts."

"I see."

Thinking back on my life before I entered the Cryopod, I was never a particularly bright young man. My grades were a little above average, but nothing special. I neither failed nor excelled. Trying to apply myself to my studies only ever resulted in burnout.

This crown... what would my life have been like had I possessed it sooner? I can see things in the world around me that I never noticed before. It's as if a veil has been lifted from my eyes, allowing me to examine everything in a new light.

Cricking my neck, I chuckle. "Heh, Hoarhiim, you saucy devil. Those monsters outside aren't a problem. But then, you already knew that, didn't you?"

The bright orb returns the laugh. "Haha, right you are, Jason. The crown has changed you. Do you sense my energy within you?"

I glance down at his orb. While it is stupefyingly bright, it no longer hurts my eyes as it did before. Now I can see a vague glow that envelops my body, right up to the point where Blaarjiim rests in my hand. He appears to swallow up some of his brother's energy.

My cracked lips beg for a reprieve. I lick them slowly. "I thought I was trapped in here, but that isn't the case at all, is it? Let's take the fun way out."

Blaarjiim shivers. "Oooh, exciting. I wonder what you're planning, mortal."

My smile falters.

"P-planning?"

Part 005: A Cute New Friend

It doesn't take long before I end up sitting cross-legged on the ground, mindlessly tracing circles on the smooth dirt floor with my finger. My mind churns through hundreds of thoughts, one after the other, while I try to figure out a way out of this mess. Hoarhiim and Blaarjiim's orbs sit a few feet in front of me, putting out and sucking in the light around themselves, respectively.

The Golden Doors only open inward. I shoved them shut earlier, and they don't have handles, so I don't know how the hell I'm going to pull them open to escape. Once I make it outside, I'm reasonably sure that Hoarhiim's power-up will improve my body to the point that I can either fight the monsters or evade them and flee. Probably...

I narrow my eyes and focus, and the mental map from Solomon's Crown appears once more. The Labyrinth stretches for miles in every direction, almost as if Hell is inside the hollowed-out remains of a planet. But if that's the case, why is there gravity pulling me to the ground?

While my mental map makes it seem like I'm at the center of a cube, in reality, it probably isn't displaying the Labyrinth's layout past a certain point. It could go on for hundreds, thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands of miles past the edge of my mental map.

Hoarhiim stirs. "What is on your mind?"

"A lot," I say, replying noncommittally. My mental map has started showing more than just a single red dot indicating my location; now it displays several other points of interest, including a few that I can only assume are the legendary weapons and armor I noticed when I first picked up Hoarhiim. However, they are considerably further from my current location than I'd like.

"Hey, Hoarhiim. Do I have to hold you to access your power?"

He shakes his head. "We are bound together, so distance is not a barrier. However, if you attempt to use my power without physically touching my orb, the connection will be substantially weakened."

"I see."

Another few minutes pass. The monsters outside seem to have fallen silent, making no noise at all. I don't know if they're waiting for me anymore. Maybe they gave up and left.

Standing up, I start pacing back and forth, chewing on my thumb as I examine the door and use the Crown to consider my options.

When I first picked up Hoarhiim, I killed that shadow-monster, but there was a trigger involved. I spoke a single word out loud. Why? What prompted me to do that?

I stop and pivot on my heel to face the entrance head-on. Raising my arm, I aim my palm at the door.

"Light."

Immediately, a light like the Sun radiates from my hand, reflects off the shiny golden door, and blasts me in the eyes, blinding me. "Geyaugh!"

Stumbling back, I fall on my ass and rub my eyes fiercely. "Fuck! Shit! Goddamnit! Worthless piece of garbage, Jason!"

After a minute, I blink my eyes open, but I can barely see anything. Hoarhiim appears in my mind and shakes his head. "Tsk. You've seared your retinas, Jason."

"No shit!"

I close my eyes again and think of the word I spoke. *Light*. I said it, and a light appeared. I've already made myself a pizza and a bed. What else can I summon with my words?

Stumbling forward, I lean against the wall and pull myself to a standing position, keeping my eyes closed the whole time. I aim my hand at the other wall. "**Rock.**"

An indistinct *whoomph* sounds off in front of me, and something clatters to the ground. Hoarhiim inhales sharply. "Brother, did you see that?"

Blaarjiim nods slowly. "I saw it, but I don't believe it."

"Quiet," I mutter at them. "I'm thinking."

My mind races. *I said the word 'light,' and created light. Then I said the word 'rock,' and a rock appeared. Does that mean that any word I say will make something happen related to its meaning?*

Deep in my chest, my heart slams like a jackhammer.

"**Sword.**"

This time, after the *whoomph*, a metallic object clatters to the ground. I jump at the sound.

"Merciful Creator," Hoarhiim whispers.

Perhaps an abstract concept will work?

I take a few moments to focus on my burning eyes. In the depths of my mind, I imagine each one restoring to perfection, and my pain fading away.

"**Heal.**"

This time, a crackling sensation appears in my eyes, but it fades after just a second. When I blink my eyes open, I can see once again. In fact, my vision is damn-near 20/20.

"Holy shit!" The curse bursts out of me as I regain my vision and catch sight of the sword laying on the ground. The weapon's design is nothing special, but it looks like it can deal some damage. I snatch it up and heft it around. The sword isn't heavy, perhaps a few pounds at most, but just touching the blade nearly splits my finger open.

Blaarjiim eyeballs the sword. "You spoke a word and forged that weapon out of nothing. I've been alive a long time, mortal, and never have I seen a spell that could do such a thing."

My hands start to shake. "H-Hoarhiim, am I doing this because of you? Did you give me this power?"

The light-being shakes his head. "Nay. It is a power that you already possessed. I have only given you enough spiritual energy to realize your potential."

"No kidding," I whisper.

I swing the sword at the wall, and when it hits, it cuts a few inches inside the stone and gets stuck. Damn! It's sharp as hell!

After yanking it around for a moment, I wrench it back out. "**Scabbard.**"

This time, instead of appearing in midair, I feel a small displacement of weight on my body, glance down, and marvel at how the sheath has emerged at my side, looping around me with a belt to hold sturdy. A smile forms on my face as I slip the sword into its holder and grab the orbs up.

"**Container.**"

This time, two round holsters appear on my left side. They're slightly bigger than the two orbs, with a little flip-up latch to hold them in place. I put Blaarjiim in the rear and Hoarhiim in the front. Plenty of light shines through to illuminate the path before me, and Hoarhiim nods approvingly.

"Well done, Jason. You're learning how your power works at an incredible speed."

"Thanks, Hoarhiim," I say, only to pause and think about it a moment. "I can manifest objects and perform other miracles by simply speaking a word. What would you call a power like this?"

Blaarjiim and Hoarhiim stare at each other for a moment. The dark one answers first. "Err, 'word magic?'"

Hoarhiim smacks his forehead. "Terrible! The title of such powerful magic demands more majesty! This ability is unlike anything we've ever seen before. It can forge weapons from little more than Jason's spiritual energy! It's a power beyond anything the ancient Heroes could have ever dreamed up."

"Thanks, Hoarhiim."

I blush a little at my savior's sudden enthusiasm and drift back to thinking about what I should name my power.

It can forge weapons out of midair, huh? That sounds pretty badass. Forging. Blacksmithing. It's as if I am a weaponsmith, crafting a world that bows before me.

Heh, I like that. Now I know what to call my power.

"Blaarjiim, Hoarhiim, I've made up my mind. I'm going to call it 'Wordsmithing.'"

The shit-eating grin on my face can't be contained. Already my mind bubbles with the possibilities my new power gives me.

Turning around, I face the door.

"Let's get out of here. **Open.**"

Seconds pass.

The grin on my face fades as the door doesn't budge.

I try again. "**Open.**"

Still nothing. Frustrated, this time, I try yelling it. "**OPEN!**"

Finally, a reaction. The door shudders slightly and nudges inward for all of two inches before coming to a stop. Outside, the screams of monsters and demons begin anew as they realize I'm trying to exit the

room. Several skeletons start pounding on the door, while other monsters bang on drums and holler like banshees. Now that the door is cracked ever so slightly, I can hear voices screaming out things like, "Man filth! Come out, coward!" Swords stab through the opening as hundreds of monsters scream and shout.

I wipe my forehead. My body feels fatigued, and all I did was speak a single word. Hoarhiim takes notice.

"Be careful, Jason. It appears your ability to Wordsmith isn't unlimited. Using magic drains the spiritual energy from your body, including that which I am giving you. If you keep spellcasting recklessly, you'll drain your reserves and leave yourself open to attack."

He's right, as always. I nod along with his words, then stand a little straighter and take several deep breaths. Unless I'm mistaken, the volume of my voice increased the energy used, but also the effect. Then, that means...

No, what am I thinking? If I use all my energy just opening the door, I'll be a sitting duck. The monsters will pour inside while I'm gasping for breath on the ground and gut me like a pig.

Yeah, that's the key. If I open it inward, I'm inviting them to carve off the juiciest part of my body. But if I forcefully open it outward, I can blow away the ones at the door and dash for the exit.

But how?

The Crown sends countless thoughts toward me, and a moment later, an idea springs into my mind.

Raising my arm, I aim it at the door. "**Push!**"

A wave of energy surges from my body, like a blast of wind, and smashes against the door. It impacts it with a bang, then knocks me back slightly. I quickly regain my footing and examine the door. It's rattling a little, but other than closing it the rest of the way, I don't think my magic had much effect.

Blaarjiim smirks. "You'll need more power than that, mortal."

"Right, right."

The knockback is a problem. If I turn the juice up, I won't be able to keep my balance. The door is exceptionally resistant to any form of attack. Gold is a soft metal, so given the door's defensive properties, it must only be painted gold, but forged from something far more resilient.

Aiming my hand one more time, this time, I prepare a shield for myself. "**Solidify. Root.**"

Dense rock sprouts from the ground, climbs up my body, and wraps around my flesh to hold me in place. With my frame now firmly rooted, I take the deepest breath of my life.

"**PUUUSH!!!**"

A stupendous wave of energy explodes from my body, comparable to the kinetic energy of ten hurricanes, fifty tsunamis, and a giant tornado. The wave of power instantly blasts the giant golden doors off their frames, smashes through the enemies in front, and sends them careening through the wall of monsters awaiting my exit. Before I can see what's happening outside, the magic force ricochets back against my body. It rips my hardened form from the ground, flings me back against Solomon's Throne, destroys my makeshift armor, and knocks the wind out of me.

A moment later, I blink my eyes.

I can't feel anything. I can't move my head, or anything else.

No, that's not right. I feel warm. Hot, even. It's as if someone has poured gasoline on me and lit a fire. The burning agony is like nothing I've ever felt in my life.

It hurts.

It hurts!!!

"Ney-unggh-"

A pitiful whimper chokes from my throat. The world rushes back to me, and I slowly manage to discern that the side of my head is resting on the ground.

Hoarhiim says something, but I can't hear him. I can't see him, either.

His figure appears in front of me, but it's foggy and indistinct. He's... waving his hand?

"-son. Jason. Jason!" He yells and makes me flinch, the slight movement sending spasms of pain across my entire body. "Jason! Gods, your body- it's..."

"How brutal," Blaarjiim says, as he appears beside his brother. "The mortal is still alive, isn't he?"

"Barely," Hoarhiim whispers. "I think Jason shattered every bone in his body. He's not going to make it, I'm afraid."

"Well, heal him, idiot!" Blaarjiim screams at his brother in anger.

When did he become so concerned about my well-being?

"Don't tell me you've forgotten how to do that?!"

"I haven't forgotten," Hoarhiim says quietly. "But he used up much of my energy during that attack. The best I could do is stem the bleeding. It doesn't matter anyway, brother. Look."

Hoarhiim points somewhere past where I can look. I try to follow his finger, but I can't move my head at all. I can only estimate he's pointing at the doorway.

Blaarjiim's voice softens. "Ah, what a shame. It looks like you didn't get them all, mortal. We had fun while it lasted."

From the doorway, the sound of breathing emerges. Something takes a step forward, its foot causing a *whoomph* on the ground. "Man-filth."

I manage to wheeze out a question. "Whuh ish et?"

Hoarhiim turns his back on me. "I'm sorry, Jason. It's an orc. There's nothing we can do to help you. Close your eyes. Maybe he'll kill you quickly."

"Kuh... kull muh?"

My mouth won't form words. I can't move at all. All I can do is lie still and listen in terror as the monster takes slow, menacing footsteps toward me.

"You killed friends. Me lose many blood brothers! You pay! Bahahah!" The monster laughs, and I can only thank whatever god might exist that I can't see the monster's face.

I'm going to die now.

More footsteps. The orc pauses. "Mormok, you live too?"

A second orc voice speaks. "Yup. Human not kill everyone. Skugs alive. Diablo be very angry about losses though."

"Diablo need stuff it," The first orc says. "Let's gut filthy human 'n give him to boss."

The two of them chuckle and take a few steps forward. Soon I can hear their breathing. They're less than ten feet away now.

"Hehe. Man-filth piss himself. Scared? Should be."

Suddenly, from outside, a bone-chilling scream from another orc rings out. "Aaah! No, stay back! Get away!"

Both orcs pause, probably to look back. The first one sniffs the air. "What that?"

The orc outside screams again, but his voice cuts off midway as a sickening *crunch* fills the din. The sound of snapping bones turns my blood to ice.

The second orc speaks, but his voice is trembling. "H-hey, Ugna. I-isn't this room that scary place? Gressil says no come here."

The first orc's breathing quickens. "Let's take look. Someone's 'bout to die, and it ain't me."

"B-but Ugna..."

"No buts! I ain't 'fraid of nothin'!"

Both orcs turn around and head for the entrance, leaving me to bleed out on the floor. I don't know whether to be relieved or terrified at this turn of events.

Hoarhiim nudges Blaarjiim. "Brother, is that-"

"Quiet! I'm trying to listen!" The dark orb walks over and leans against a barrier, as if trying to see past the entrance. His vision must be limited in some way. "This... this could be..."

The orcs stop at the entryway. Ugna, the first orc, sniffs the air again. "Where everybody go? Where skugs? Where kobolds?"

"U-Ugna, we should leave. Look. Look!" Mormok, the second orc, yells at his comrade frantically. "The statue! It's broken! It's-"

His voice halts much too fast for him to have simply stopped mid-sentence. The sound of something wet and damp hits the floor. Ugna howls in terror.

"No... no! NO!! It's the Black Witch! Get away from me! Filthy human devil!" He swings a sword at someone out of my sight, banging it against the wall in the process, but a moment later, his voice goes silent.

Blaarjiim and Hoarhiim gape at something unseen.

The awful sound of bones snapping and sinew twisting fills the air again. This time, however, it's accompanied by another sound: *Someone smacking their lips.*

"Mmm, yummy! Teehee!"

A little girl's voice rings out in the now-silent hallway.

The sound of clicking, like high heels on stone, slowly approaches me.

"Hello? Are you alive, mister?"

The little girl skips toward me, kicking pebbles and loose debris out of her way. Her pitter-patter of footsteps reaches me within a few seconds. "Mister?"

"Wung-guh..." I wheeze something out, but it isn't much more than a painful gasp.

A moment later, a pair of black platform shoes, and some pale white legs appear in front of me. Two inches above the ankles, a long fluffy black skirt starts, but I can't see much beyond that. The girl kneels down, and finally, her skirted knees come into view. I raise my eyes to look at her, but she's still too high up for me to see her face. I can just barely make out a black dress with red ribbons all over the place and fluffy white frills lining her arms and stockings.

She reaches forward and pokes my chest. The slight tremor sends lightning through my body. "Hmm. Not dead, huh? You won't put up much a fight. Oh! What's this?" She shuffles slightly and reaches toward my belt. A second later she squeals excitedly. "Ooooh! Blaarjiim? Hoarhiim?! You're both here!"

Blaarjiim forces himself to look calm, but I can vaguely make out a look of joy on his face. "My queen. It is wonderful to see you once again. Long have I awaited your return."

"Oh, you! You're always so stuffy! Why are you in this guy's belt, though?" A moment passes. Her voice pitch lowers. "Did he... *steal* you?" The shift is frightening.

Blaarjiim pauses for a moment, before turning deadly serious. "Aye, Lady Amelia. This mortal stole me from your grasp, and sought to take my power for himself. I can only imagine what nefarious deeds he was plotting."

"Muh-hung!" I choke out a protest, but it doesn't amount to anything decipherable.

Amelia's knuckles crack. "How... how dare you. Taking away my eternal partner while I was trapped in that awful statue... I'll make you regret this."

She starts to stand up, but Blaarjiim interjects before she can turn violent. "Just a joke, my queen. A jest. He is the one who freed you from your prison."

"Yes!" Hoarhiim interjects. "This human is named Jason. He has a unique magical power called Wordsmithing."

Amelia taps her shoes on the ground. "Oh! I see, now. Haha! Blaarjiim, since when, were you one to tell jokes?"

Blaarjiim bows slightly. "Your radiant smile is worth everything, my queen. However, I must recommend that you heal him at once. His life force is slipping away."

The girl hems and haws for a moment. "Do I have to, Blaarjiim? He looks pitiful and weak."

Hoarhiim lowers his voice. "As a long-time friend, I would ask the same of you, Amelia. I have attached to Jason. I like him."

A moment passes. Finally, Amelia sighs. "Okay, fine. Blaarjiim, give me your power again. I'll heal him up in a jiffy."

What comes next shocks me. An awful pain erupts in my chest, as if a trillion watts of electricity were coursing through every nerve in my body. I open my mouth to scream, but nothing comes out.

A minute passes. My bones wrench back together violently, and my skin folds back on itself. I writhe on the ground, whimpering like a beaten dog, even after my body finishes stitching back together.

"Oooh, sorry about that," Amelia says. "The phantom pain won't last long, though!"

Eventually, as she promised, my anguish subsides. I flop onto my back and breathe heavily, staring up at the ceiling. Finally, I turn my head to examine my savior. She's just a child, perhaps twelve years old. Her black dress is an elaborate, gothic-lolita style thing, with red lacing and frills on the edges. Atop her head is a cute little fluffy red ribbon. She looks adorable.

Then she smiles, and somehow it's the creepiest thing I've seen in my life.

"Aren't you going to thank me?"

Several moments pass as I stare at the strangely dressed young girl. The gaze she sends in my direction indicates a certain casual air I've never seen in a child before. I probably shouldn't call her a child, since there's only six years difference between us, but she's very short, standing well under five feet tall.

Amelia taps her foot. "Hellooo? Is anyone home? I healed you. Where are your manners?"

"What? Oh, right! Thanks." I quickly jump to my feet, only for my legs to give out midway into the hop, making me stumble forward and bash my knees on the ground.

I can barely stand. My limbs have the elasticity of wet spaghetti, rather than the strength of bones and muscles. Every breath threatens to rob my last bit of energy from me.

Hoarhiim grunts. "Careful, Jason. Even if Lady Amelia healed you, your mind still has some leftover trauma from the grievous wounds you suffered. Further, you have almost no spiritual energy left at all. It's a miracle you haven't fallen into a coma."

"A coma?" I repeat his words disbelievingly. "I feel weak as hell, but that seems a little extreme."

To my surprise, Amelia steps forward and grabs my arm with both her hands, helping me to my feet. As she does, a slight warmth enters my body, making me realize how cold I feel.

Amelia steps back, and I notice that Hoarhiim and Blaarjiim's orbs are floating in midair, though she grabs one in each hand right as I spot them. "Jason's your name, hm? Well, I'll give you a freebie. Call it a reward for releasing me."

"Generous as always, my queen," Blaarjiim murmurs. "Be thankful, Jason. The Black Witch is very picky with whom she rewards."

I rise to my full height of six-foot, two inches, only to realize I tower over the little girl. She takes a step back in surprise. "Oh, my. You're taller than I expected. Somewhat skinny, though. Not much in the way of muscles."

Self-consciously, I rub my bicep. "Um, yeah. I, err, never saw the need to work out. Haha."

The two of us evaluate each other for a moment before I decide to ask a question. "You said I freed you. How?"

Wordlessly, she points to the exit of Solomon's Tomb. "Out there. You broke the statue."

As I follow her finger, I spot splatters of blood and gore all around where the Golden Doors once stood. A green leg lies against the wall, looking as if a horrifying monster attacked and devoured whomever it once belonged to.

Slowly, she and I walk over to the exit. She hands me Hoarhiim's orb, then points at the center area. To my astonishment, one of the doors has embedded itself in the wall across the room, while the other has crashed into the ground and buried itself several feet deep.

I knew I shoved them with my "push" spell, but I didn't expect to send them flying off their hinges like that.

My eyes look away from the doors and toward the carnage in the room. Skeletons are crushed into dust, orcs and centaurs contort into various unnatural shapes, and several monsters are little more than a collection of body parts strewn all over the ground.

And the statue! Where once a beautiful figure of a girl in a dress once stood, with water billowing from her umbrella- *hey, wait a minute!*

I quickly look at Amelia, comparing her to my memory of the statue. "Hold on, are you telling me you were the statue itself?"

Amelia smiles. "Mhm! And you released me! That was super nice of you!"

But, I mean, I didn't do it on purpose, I start to say. Blaarjiim appears in my mind and glares at me, wagging his finger.

Right, duh. *Go with the flow, Jason. You did it on purpose.*

I quickly wipe at my nose. "Yeah, nah, it was no big deal. Blaarjiim suggested smashing the statue, so I thought it would be cool. Everything got a little out of hand with the monsters, but you saved me, so I'd call us even."

Amelia's smile disappears. "Uh huh... sure."

Even as Blaarjiim grins at me for making him look good, I sweep my gaze around the room once more. *Yeah, Amelia saved me, or at least I think she did. But... what about those awful chewing noises?*

Maybe I heard wrong. After all, I was in a state of delirium. Still, it can't hurt to ask, can it?

"So, uh, Amelia."

"Hmm?" She walks forward and nudges an Orc corpse with her foot.

"You healed me, so you have magical energy too, right? Magical powers?"

She spins around in a circle on her heel like a ballerina. "Mhm! I've got all sorts of powers! Why do you ask?"

"Well..." I turn my gaze to one of the horribly broken Orc bodies nearby. "These monsters... they're from fairy tales and fantasy stories. I never thought in my life that they truly existed. Yet, you can fight them... but how?"

She stops spinning to frown at me. "What a silly question. Hoarhiim, haven't you taught anything to this child? Surely you've at least told him about magic!"

The white orb sighs. "I tried, but we didn't have time to explain."

Tapping my lip, I recall what he told me before. "Hoarhiim, you mentioned spiritual energy once already, then Amelia did, too. What is that? Is it like mana?"

Amelia cocks her head slightly. "Mah-nuh?"

Aw, nuts. She has no idea what I'm talking about. "It's this mechanic from video games. It's like a meter that allows you to cast spells and stuff. When it runs out, you can't use magic anymore, and end up a sitting duck."

Hoarhiim squints. "I am not sure what you're talking about, but the concept is mostly correct. Spiritual Energy is the power that allows demons and angels to cast spells. Humans typically have very little, but even if they had more, they could not use magic."

"Oh. But Amelia has magic, and so do I. Are we special or something?"

Amelia's mouth goes taut. "Special. In a way, yes. Certainly, you are. As for me, I'd rather not say."

Once again, she gives off an odd feeling I can't quite describe in words. "You're a peculiar little girl."

Her expression shifts to annoyance. "Hey! You're the child here! I'll have you know my body is immortal. I'm tens of thousands of years old."

"Really?" I eye her carefully. "I guess anything is possible with magic."

She quickly looks away and blushes. "Y-yeah. Just drop it, okay? I don't like this topic. Tell me about your magic."

She's self-conscious about her looks, I think to myself, making a mental note. That's how most women are, I guess.

"I call my power Wordsmithing. I can make things happen by speaking a single word."

Amelia continues looking away for a moment, then suddenly jerks back to meet my gaze. "Wait, you *used a word*? Not your hands?"

I echo her confusion. "What do you mean, 'my hands'?"

Hoarhiim clears his throat. "Ahem, well, you see, Jason, every form of magic requires a specific amount of time, hand sign combinations, and spiritual energy from the user. Your power is very irregular

in that respect. I've never seen someone, especially a human, who could use magic just by speaking a word."

"Yes," Blaarjiim says. "And creating items out of thin air! That should certainly be impossible."

Amelia raises an eyebrow. "Show me."

All eyes turn to me. "W-well, see, I don't have any energy left. Even if I did, I don't know what to make."

Amelia leans toward me, reaches her free hand forward, and pokes me in the chest. A sudden rush of mana pours into my body. I stand awed by how revitalized I feel. "Have you tested your abilities yet?"

"No. I only just realized what my power was right before I sent the Golden Doors flying. I haven't had time to experiment."

Amelia nods and starts pacing back and forth. "I see. Blaarjiim, surely you've evaluated the boy. What can he do?"

I hate it when this little girl calls me *boy*. She probably does it to make me self-conscious.

Blaarjiim smoothes down his shirt, or whatever. I only see him as a vague black apparition, but apparently, he wears clothes. "Hmm, yes. He can heal himself, he created a sword and a rock, and he sent the doors flying. I don't know what his limits are, but based on what I've seen, I'd be surprised if he had any at all."

Amelia pauses her walking to kick an orc's helmet out of the way. "No limits? Absurd. Every magi has limits, especially if they're human. I need to test him."

She turns to face me.

"Make me a chair," Amelia points to an empty spot a few feet away. "Right there."

"A chair? That seems random."

She shakes her head. "I want to sit. Hurry up! Unless you think you can't."

"Fine, geez." I reach my free hand out and aim it at a bare patch of floor near a crushed skeleton and a beheaded horse. The sight of the corpses all around hardly fazes me anymore. "**Chair.**"

My heart skips a beat as once again, air rushes into the spot I aimed my hand at, and a chair forms in midair. It drops a few inches, landing perfectly on its four legs.

Amelia scowls. "You call that a chair? Look at it! I'll get splinters on my legs if I sit there! Did you envision a pauper's chair? It doesn't even have a cushion! Make another one, and make it fit for a queen!"

"A queen, huh?"

I stare at the chair thoughtfully. I hadn't thought of anything specific when I first used my spell, but this time...

The Crown of Solomon seems to speak to me, bringing up a mental list of ten thousand chairs. I close my eyes and focus, bringing up an image in my mind.

With a flourish, I jerk my hand out again. "Behold! I will summon a chair far greater than any you've seen before! Prepare yourself, Lady Amelia! Hah hah hah! **Chair!**"

A *thunk* of something hitting the ground makes me jerk my eyes open. Amelia stares at me, disgust on her face. "What was with that grandiose speech? Never do that again."

"Uh, sorry." My eyes flick from her to the chair and- HOLY MOLY!

A throne, something that would make King Solomon red with envy, sits on the ground amidst the corpses. The chair's vibrant golden color mixes with its bright-red fabric and elaborate stitchings to create an awe-inspiring image. Skulls made of silver and bronze stand atop the side pegs near the head, giving off a feeling as if it once belonged to a powerful necromancer.

Amelia notices I'm not looking at her anymore, and when she turns and spots the chair, she jumps in surprise. "Whoa! You made THAT?!"

I pull away and sweep my hair back with my hand. "Heh, yeah. Now you're beginning to see the true extent of my power. Something like this is trivial for a god, like me. I can create anything with the power of a single word."

Amelia's excitement flattens as she turns to stare at me. "Jason. You're doing the thing again. Don't."

My shoulders slump a little. "Okay. Sorry."

She perks back up and skips gaily to the chair, spinning and sitting down in one smooth motion. The instant she leans back, she moans out loud, "Oh, goodness, this throne is soooo comfortable! I feel like it was made for me!"

I resist the urge to boast once more. Instead, while Amelia rubs all over the chair, smiling ear to ear and praising my handiwork, other thoughts come to my mind.

I created that chair out of nothing. This power is unusual enough that Hoarhiim and Blaarjiim both saw fit to comment on it. What other properties could it possibly hold?

Silently, I ponder a hundred different options, each one more interesting than the former. Raising my hand, I point a finger toward the opposite wall and mutter a word. "**Fire.**"

A tiny *poof* of flame spits from my finger and fizzles away.

This time, I try again, but louder. "**Fire.**"

A stream of flame shoots out, travels around ten feet, and fizzles away.

By now, Amelia has calmed down, and she watches me with interest. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Trying new things. **Fire!**"

I feel my energy decrease substantially, but a plume of flame spews from my finger, forming a laser of fire that jets across the room and carves a line in the wall as I move my finger. A few seconds later, it cuts off, forcing me to take a breath. *That was exhausting.*

"Jason," Hoarhiim speaks up, surprising me. "Take Lady Amelia to the entrance of Solomon's Tomb, then use every ounce of energy in your body with that Fire spell. I want to see what happens. Don't hold

back."

Frowning, I glance at Hoarhiim's orb. "That's dangerous. I don't know if I can control my power. Besides, I might accidentally hurt Amelia."

Blaarjiim guffaws. "HAH! This mortal has a sense of humor! Flames can't harm the Black Witch, boy. Do as Hoarhiim says. The three of us all want to see what happens."

Indeed, Amelia leans forward and rests her head and hand on her knee as she stares at me with interest. "Go on. Let's see it."

I nod slowly. "Okay. Let's clear the room, then."

* * *

A minute later, Amelia stands beside me as I aim my hand toward the room of corpses and blood.

"This should be a heckuva way to clean the place. Hell doesn't have many janitors."

"Mmm," Amelia mutters.

To be honest, I'm scared. The last time I went all out with an attack, I nearly killed myself. Still, Amelia's here. The orbs insist I won't hurt her with my fire, and I know she can heal me if things go south, but still... I'm a little worried.

I stick Hoarhiim into my belt pouch and raise both arms, then take a deep breath. Using every pore of my body, I scream with all my might, "**FIIIRE!!!!**"

What follows next is terrifying. A flood of flame surges from my body, screams as if it were a living being, and tears through everything in its path. It leaps from object to object, swallows the golden throne and melts it to slag in an instant, crawls across walls and the ceiling, and races down the hallway across the room in search of more prey. Everything in the path of the flames screams for mercy as it burns and devours all it sees.

It's... it's incredible! It's terrifying! If I keep this up, I'll turn the whole Labyrinth into ash! I have to stop it!! But how?! How can I-

Suddenly, a sharp pain erupts at the base of my neck. I stumble forward, and the flames cut off. My body goes limp, and as I fall, Amelia catches me before I can plunge into the lake of fire.

Everything starts to go black as I pass out. I slowly realize that Amelia must have knocked me out with a judo chop to my neck. The last thing I see before I go under is a worried look on her face.

"Who *are* you?"

Then the sweet release of sleep takes me.

Author notes:

This is Amelia and Blaarjiim





Part 006: Sloppy Wet Kisses

Yawning mightily, I stretch my arms out and blink my eyes open. The sound of trickling water nearby catches my attention, along with a distant banging, like a spoon on a pan. I start to lean forward, and my back pops satisfyingly, stunning me for a second.

I think I just had the best sleep of my entire life.

My eyes rove around. I have no idea where I am, but it seems... *cozy*. The cavern I'm in is perhaps thirty feet squared, and moss covers all the cavern walls. To my right, a small freshwater stream bubbles from a wall, drips down, and runs along a natural culvert in the ground until it enters another wall. Hoarhiim's orb illuminates the room, but he doesn't appear in my mind. Perhaps he's sleeping? I stick him in my belt pouch.

My head hurts. I reach up to rub it, only to realize I'm still wearing Solomon's Crown. With a shrug, I activate my mental map. It takes me a few minutes, but I manage to piece together my current position compared to where I was when I fell asleep: about three miles away. I heal the sores on my head with a quick spell and lean back to think.

I didn't fall asleep. Amelia knocked me out. Where is she?

I clamber to my feet, but there's nobody else here. The entrance before me is barely a hole in the wall. I'd have to crawl on my hands and knees to get through it. Did Amelia drag me here? How did she fit me inside?

A glance at my resting area shows the moss I was sleeping on is thick to the point of artificiality. It looks like someone grew it by hand, just for me.

Another minute passes. I don't know where Amelia is, but an idea pops into my head. "**Locate.**"

My vision goes foggy for a second. My eyes suddenly race to the wall before me, pass through it, and travel around several corners to stop before Amelia as she walks along a corridor. She doesn't notice me, indicating I must have somehow used astral projection? I return to my body a moment later, nearly tripping and falling backward in the process.

That was jarring.

With a sigh, I get down on my hands and knees and start crawling out the little hole. Amelia's on her way back, and she isn't far, so she'll probably show up within a minute or two.

The hole looks like it was cut or smashed into the wall, and recently at that. As I shimmy through the few feet of dirt, I stop to scrutinize the hole. It almost looks like the Labyrinth's stonework is slowly growing back. Regeneration? Why would the Labyrinth do that?

I emerge from the hole and instantly freeze. The sound of humming and giggling echoes in the distance, all from women.

What the hell?

Their voices are cute. Friendly. Beautiful, even. A lump forms in my throat. I'm back in the labyrinthine dirt hallways I know and hate, but those voices are in the opposite direction of Amelia. Should I wait for her? Tch, she'll probably tell me to ignore them.

A high note from one of the girl's songs lilts up, tugging on my chest as I listen. *Amelia won't mind. I just want to take a quick peek. Won't take me more than ten seconds!*

No! My mind screams at me. *This place is literally Hell! Don't just go check out chicks! Your life is at stake!*

Oh, shut up, you. What can some pretty girls do? Besides, I have Wordsmithing. My fire spell can protect me if nothing else can. A little eye-fucking won't hurt anyone.

Two voices battle within me. I ignore the voice of reason and slowly tiptoe down the hallway. As I do, the girls grow more audible. They're perhaps the most incredible singers I've ever heard in my entire life. I almost want to grab them and force them to record music all day for me so I can run a billion-dollar recording company.

The sounds of water splashing around mix in with their giggles. Hoarhiim's orb usually lights up the Labyrinth, but it always tapers off the further away I look. This time, though, I can see a blue light up ahead.

Not wanting to disturb them, I slowly tiptoe and approach the doorway on the left. I try to muffle Hoarhiim's light with my hands, but it only works somewhat. *Maybe they won't notice!*

"Teehee!" A girl giggles again, making blood rush through my body. *God, she sounds sexy.*

Hoarhiim appears in my vision, yawning. "Oh, Jason. You're awake. What are you up to?"

I don't answer. I arrive at the doorway, and now the blue light pouring from it is unmistakable. Just inside, to the left, all those sexy girls are waiting for me. It's taking all my willpower not to tear off my clothes and dash inside. *I can't do that! They'll freak out and run away!*

Cautiously, I peek around the corner.

My blood freezes.

Whatever the things are in this room, they aren't sexy girls. They aren't girls, even. They're... monsters.

And they're staring right at me.

"I told you I smelled a man!" One of the horrifying fish-like creatures licks its lips, but its voice is still that of a hauntingly beautiful woman. As its tongue snakes out, I catch a glimpse of several hundred razor-sharp teeth.

"Jason..." Hoarhiim quietly whispers. "...Those are *sirens*. Run."

My gaze locks onto the nearest one's pitch-black eyes. We stare at each other for all of two seconds.

Then every living thing in the room leaps out of the water and slithers across the ground toward me.

One of the monsters bellows, "I saw him first! He's mine!!"

Another retorts, "I haven't tasted a man in months! I call dibs!"

I don't know the exact moment my body reacts instinctively, but one second my head is peeking inside the monster den, and the next I'm thirty feet down the hallway, running for my life. The sound of wet fins slapping on the ground and giggling of sexy women makes me move like the wind.

I glance behind me and spot ten of the monsters. Each one has a head like a cross between a fish and a shark, but their middle section is humanlike, with uncovered female breasts and two arms, while the bottom is something like I'd expect on a mermaid.

"We want to kiss you, boy! Come play with us!"

"Gah! Stay away!"

I hit the end of the corridor, then turn to take a right, only to smack face-first into Amelia.

"Wah!" She falls back and smashes onto her ass. I trip and stumble past her, bang my face against the wall, and land on the ground.

"Jason! What the hell?" Amelia leaps to her feet a moment later and turns to look at me. "You were supposed to be rest-"

"Behind you!" I yell the words out and point in her direction. At that moment, the Sirens come tearing around the hallway, giggling the whole time.

However, the instant they arrive, they stop dead in their tracks as their eyes lock onto Amelia.

Seconds pass. Amelia glares at them, and they shrink back slightly.

"B-Black Witch? But... but you're supposed to be..."

Amelia clears her throat. "What's going on here? Were you chasing my slave just now?"

"Slave? Yours? No! Of-of course not!" The head Siren shrinks away slightly. "We were just giving him a scare! Didn't want him, err, wandering into the wrong areas! Y-you know how it is!"

Amelia's foot slides forward half an inch, and the Sirens jerk away again. "Wow! I'm glad we got *that* misunderstanding cleared up! Hahaha! I mean, if you *were* trying to do something to him, I'd have to punish you! Hahaha!"

Amelia's giggle lilts cutely in a way that even the siren's don't. The Sirens all quickly retreat; their sloppy wet bodies dragging across the ground. "Well, ah, very good then! Carry on, Black Witch! Y-you have a wonderful day!"

Without turning their backs on her, the Sirens slowly slide around the corner, only to flop away once Amelia is out of sight.

A few moments pass, and Amelia sighs. "Oh, Jason. Don't tell me you got caught up with the Sirens. Did their cute voices draw you in?"

"Um... no?" I force a lie out, but even I don't believe myself. "Okay, yeah. I don't know what came over me."

"Stupidity, that's what. Siren voices can call out to males of other species and draw them in. They devour the body and lay their eggs in the fresh corpse. Even if you thought the fish-faces were attractive, they reproduce asexually. Not much luck there for you, I'm afraid."

"Y-yeah, I guess."

I don't know what to say. Sometimes hearing this child talk about such grown-up things can be very jarring.

A few moments pass, and I change the subject. "Where have you been?"

Amelia smiles. "I had to catch up on the latest happenings. Being stuck in a statue for thousands of years can put a girl out of the loop!"

"Yeah..." I pause to stare at her for a moment. "Say, all I did was smash that statue, and you were released. Why didn't anyone else do that? I didn't see anyone guarding the room..."

Her smile fades slightly. "That's not your business, Jason. Don't shove your nose where it doesn't belong."

Hoarhiim clears his throat. "Simply put, Lady Amelia had nobody to pull her out. Demons and monsters hate her, after all."

"Hoarhiim!" Amelia puffs her cheeks out. "Don't just say whatever you please!"

Well, the cat's out of the bag. I might as well push a little more. "Who put you in the statue? Medusa?"

Amelia curls her free hand into a fist. "A very evil woman, that's who. Someone who took pleasure in tormenting me. Do you want to know, Jason? Do you have to ask, even if it hurts me?"

I quickly shake my head. "No, sorry. I'm too curious for my own good and terrible at respecting boundaries."

"Yeah, I'll say." Amelia crosses her arms and looks away. "Let's move on. Why are *you* here?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"The Labyrinth, Jason. Why are you in the Labyrinth? Blaarjiim tells me you claim to be from Earth. I'm also from Earth, so I find that hard to believe. Humans barely live for a hundred years, let alone a hundred thousand."

"A hundred thousand? What do you mean?"

Amelia doesn't reply for a moment. "It's hard to believe, I know, but Earth was destroyed a hundred thousand years ago. You didn't know?"

"I had no idea!" I gawk at Amelia for several seconds as a bazillion thoughts appear in my mind. "B-but the cryopod was only supposed to freeze me for a thousand years! How could the battery have lasted for a hundred thousand? That's impossible!"

"Cryopod?" Amelia glances at Blaarjiim's orb. "What's that?"

The dark god shrugs. "The mortal is full of surprises."

I spend the next several minutes explaining to Amelia everything about myself and the cryopod, and she nods along, interrupting only to tell me to elaborate on this or that.

"A cryogenic pod for freezing people, huh?" Amelia finally leans back against the wall to let my words sink in. "But if it freezes you, wouldn't you die? Most humans die if they stand in the cold too long. Your story is a little unbelievable."

"It's a... uh... *science thing*," I reply. "The scientists used chemicals for the freezing process, and a bunch of other stuff was done to wake me up when the time was right. I'm not sure I could explain the process so you'd understand."

Amelia lurches toward me. "Are you calling me... *stupid*?"

"No! No, absolutely not! Uh, it's... it's mostly me! Yeah, I'm an idiot, so I can't explain it well!"

My quick deflection sates her curiosity. "Nice save. Anyway, you say you came here in that pod-thing, so where is it?"

"What do you mean? Do you want me to show it to you?"

Amelia nods. "Yeah. I want to see it. Do you know where it is?"

"Uhh..." I pull up my mental map quickly and scan the hallways. "It's a good distance away. Um. The only thing is, I kinda don't want to find it."

"Oh? Afraid I'll find out you're a liar?"

"Aaaactually, it's more about the, um, the *friend* I made when I first woke up. He was scary."

Sighing, Amelia cracks her neck. "Don't worry about demons while I'm around. You'll find them to be quite polite when I'm nearby."

I glance behind her at the trail of piss-water the Sirens left when they fled.

"Yeah. No kidding."

Part 007: The Demon Leaders

If we were to travel in a straight line, Amelia and I might only be a few miles from my cryopod room. Sadly, the Labyrinth is a twisted maze of right and left turns, heading up and down in many random directions. After two hours of walking, Amelia and I take yet another nonsensical right turn, then a left.

The little girl stops in front of a crossing where the path splits. She pauses for barely two seconds before quickly spinning to face left. "This way!"

Silently, I pull up my mental map and chart a course to the intended room. We are walking in the wrong direction.

"Uh, I don't want to spoil the mood, but we should go right."

Amelia puffs up her cheeks again. "I know this Labyrinth like the back of my hand. You've barely been here for two days! Just follow me, and we'll get to your pod in no time."

Before I can offer a protest, she immediately heads left.

Hoarhiim appears in my mind. Based on how translucent he sometimes appears, I've learned to tell when he's projecting himself to me, but not Amelia or Blaarjiim. "Give her time, Jason. Amelia may seem headstrong to you, but she was trapped in that statue for a long time. Her defeat, all those years ago, changed her somewhat. In the past, she'd have killed you the moment she met you, but her heart has softened over time."

Comforting, I think to myself.

We continue traveling in whatever direction Amelia pleases, and I sigh as the room for my Cryopod slowly moves further and further away. Soon we're five miles away, then six...

The walls begin to shift around us. It doesn't take long before the earthen brown texture changes to rock, and not long after that, I spot dozens of little glowing bugs crawling around on the walls.

Amelia furrows her brow. "Ugh. Maybe that last turn wasn't the best idea. Let's go back."

I pause to examine the hallway. "Where are we?"

She shrugs. "This is the Fairy Zone, one of several habitats for specific monsters. The place where demons hid my statue is near the center of the Labyrinth, so the further we stray from it, the sooner we'll enter a different area."

"Mmm." I squint to peer into the distance. There's plenty more light up ahead, green in color. "Why does the Labyrinth have varying biomes?"

Amelia's expression darkens. "Well, it has to do with Earth. Most demons lived on Earth at one point, but as humanity began to enter all-out war with demonkind, they also sought to exterminate the monsters of the world. Eventually, demons created the Labyrinth and brought monsters along to live in safety. Some monsters require or prefer specific habitats, so the demons sculpted certain areas of Hell for its various residents."

"Huh, neat. Why don't you let me lead for a while? Solomon's Crown gives me a mental map of the Labyrinth, so-"

She immediately holds her hand up. "Solomon was an ancient hero, Jason. I don't *like* heroes. We'll do this my way, understand?"

"But-"

"No buts!"

Defeated, I lower my head. "Alright, fine, if you insist. I'm just beginning to wonder if you know the layout of this place at all. According to my mental map, you're taking us the wrong way nearly every time."

Amelia flinches. "I am? You're lying."

Blaarjiim appears in both of our minds. "My queen, I did not wish to say anything, but the mortal is correct. I supposed you might have gotten turned around at one point, but-"

"You didn't say anything?! Oh geez, Blaarjiim! Now I look like an idiot!" She hollers at the black orb for a moment while Hoarhiim and I stare at each other awkwardly. Finally, looking more flustered than before, Amelia jerks her head up to me. "Okay! Fine! I admit it! I have no idea where I'm going! It's not like it's my fault! This stupid Labyrinth shifts pathways and moves walls around. I'm a little rusty from being out of the loop."

"Yeah," I mutter. "Look, just follow me, and I'll use my mental map, okay?"

Amelia crosses her arms and pouts. "Whatever."

* * *

A few minutes later, the glowing bugs become a distant memory, and we return to the familiar barren walls from before. We walk in silence, but a growing unease at Amelia's coldness prompts me to speak.

"So, Amelia, you said the Labyrinth changes pathways, right?"

A nod. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Just making conversation. The Labyrinth is massive, maybe a thousand miles cubed in every direction, and that's only the limits of my map. What is this place? Who, or what, created it?"

My question perplexes her. Amelia scrunches up her face and frowns. "Umm, I don't know. I've always wondered about that myself. Blaarjiim?"

Hoarhiim and Blaarjiim both appear and reply in unison. "We don't know."

Huh. A mystery. I glance at my map and turn right when a branch in the hallway comes up. My stomach turns into a galloping horse as we round the corner and arrive face-to-face with a gigantic troll. The monster's body takes up most of the hallway, and its head scrapes against the ceiling as it walks.

The troll glances down at us. "Hmm? Hoo-mun? What do here?"

The monster doesn't react aggressively, but his giant size sends terror down my spine. His hands are big enough to wrap around Amelia and crush her into pulp. I start to move to block Amelia from his incoming attack, but she swats my arm.

Amelia grabs me by the hand and smiles politely at the troll. "Oh, we're sorry! Are you going this way or that?" She points to the right and left, and the troll nods to the right.

"Me walk slow. Take up room. Let pass, please."

"Certainly! We weren't watching where we were going!"

Amelia pulls me back into the path we came from, and the troll ambles past us, nods politely, and continues on his way. After he leaves, Amelia releases my hand, and we continue our journey.

I breathe a sigh of relief. "My heart was pounding like crazy. That guy was huge!"

She raises an eyebrow. "What, you thought a little troll was scary? Trolls are docile for the most part. You can't judge a monster based on their looks, Jason."

I avert my eyes. "Yeah, well, up to this point, everything in the Labyrinth has tried to kill or eat me, including those sirens. I just assumed every monster and demon hated humans."

"Mmm, well, you're mostly right. Demons hate humans, but for them, it's more of a superiority complex involving disdain for weaklings. Monsters don't *hate* humans, but many do love the taste of human meat."

"That's comforting."

"Right?"

Several entryways come and go, and Amelia's eyes meander around inquisitively. I decide to ask another question. "So, not to pry, but, when those sirens attacked me, you called me your slave. Why?"

She blinks innocently. "Oh, you know how it is! Monsters and demons fear me, so if word gets out that you're my servant, nobody will dare to touch you."

"Why? How powerful are you for your name to cause the reactions I've seen?"

Amelia's smile falters, but she forces enthusiasm into her voice. "Very powerful! I'll have you know that I killed Satan! He used to be the First Emperor until I ripped his soul from his body! Now no demon wants to mess with me."

"Whoa. Seriously? That's... that's insane, Amelia!" I gawk at her, even as a look of hesitation enters her eyes. "I don't know how powerful Satan was, but, like, his name is *Satan*! Wouldn't that make him the most powerful demon of all time? And you killed him!"

My mind erupts with the possibilities. "Satan the Devil, the great serpent, the one who tricked the first woman in the Garden of Eden. It's hard to believe he existed once. Does that mean the creator you mentioned was the one from the Bible? What about Jesus? Mary, the mother of Christ? What about-"

"Jason, stop, please." Amelia pauses mid-stride and comes to a halt. Her breath catches in her throat. "Can we change the subject? I didn't kill Satan because of some moral obligation, or because I was trying to save the world. I had my reasons, and I don't like to remember them."

It occurs to me that I've been babbling without considering her feelings. My lips move, but my brain isn't keeping up.

Blaarjiim crosses his arms. "Satan hurt my queen. He took someone precious from her, and now she can never see them again. Please show restraint for once."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to dredge up bad memories."

We continue in silence for a very long time. I walk slightly ahead of Amelia, leading the way with my mental map.

Left turns become right turns. We pass various rooms, including one where I can hear orcs laughing in the distance, bashing something squishy with blunt objects. A male voice screams in agony. I try not to think about it.

At one point, a dozen imps come screaming down the hallway, their foot-tall forms and blood-red skin standing out compared to anything I've seen before. I only recognize them as imps due to my knowledge of mythology.

After they pass us, I glance back. None of them pay Amelia or I the slightest heed, and she ignores them as well.

"Those imps didn't even look at us. Why not?"

Amelia pulls on a strand of her long hair. "Imps are the lowest ranking demons. They're extremely unintelligent and rank lower than slaves until they grow into grunts. You're to pay them no mind since they have no status. Most imps are considered lower than humans on a hierarchal basis."

"What do you mean by 'lowest ranking?'"

Hoarhiim appears once again. "I can answer that, Jason. Compared to the other sentient species, demons are the most meritocratic. All demons are born weak and defenseless and must fight to improve their status. If a demon gains enough power, they can mutate into a new form, which typically varies based on their personality. The various classes of demons are known as Imps, Grunts, Lords, Barons, Dukes, and Emperors. Each rank is monolithically more powerful than those preceding."

I nod along to his explanation. Suddenly, the realization of Hoarhiim's words hits me. "Wait, but didn't Amelia kill Satan?! You said he was the First Emperor!"

Grunting, Blaarjiim narrows his eyes. "Yes, good, you fit the puzzle pieces together. However, let's not bring up that mess again."

"Right, sorry."

* * *

An hour passes, and finally, we arrive in a room I can at last call familiar. Two massive doors rise into the air. I recognize them as the doors I saw while first fleeing that statue monster.

"We're close. My Cryopod room should be at the end of the hall."

Amelia yawns. "Oh, good. I'm feeling a little sleepy from all this walking. The Labyrinth could use an interior decorator, too. I get all turned around since everything looks the same!"

That's the point of a Labyrinth, I think to myself.

We start walking down the hall, and sooner than I expected, we arrive at a familiar door. It's wide open, and a shiver goes down my spine.

It's the statue room. The statue isn't there.

There's another door on the opposite wall. Based on my mental map's blinking indicator, my Cryopod is just inside.

Amelia turns to look at me. "Why are you trembling?"

"Unpleasant memories. Let's get this over with."

Now that I'm here, I suddenly realize I don't want to do this at all. The terror of fleeing this room is fresh in my mind. I had no idea where I was or what I was up against, and in fact, things are worse than I expected. It wasn't just a statue, but possibly a powerful demon chasing after me. It, quite literally, wanted to devour me.

Amelia, without any hesitation, walks into the statue room and looks around. "Huh. Neat."

"What is?"

I follow her eyes as I enter. She gazes up at the square hole in the ceiling. I can feel a faint gust of air coming from it.

"Dunno. I've never seen a hole like that before."

Behind me, a shifting of air makes my body flinch.

A voice speaks up.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the Black Witch."

I pivot on my heel and jump back in terror as I spot two demons standing behind me! I haven't a clue how they snuck up on me, but based on their sizes, they must be powerful!

The first demon is an old man. Standing perhaps an inch shorter than me, at 6'1", he appears to be the one who first spoke. The old man leans on a walking cane with a glowing blue orb at its top. His clothes are little more than plain black robes, and his grey hair is stringy and neck-length, resembling a mop. Despite his appearance, he holds himself up with a certain regality, as though he's someone of significant standing among demons.

Beside him is a second demon, a younger, taller male who seems to be around thirty years old, though his age is probably much higher than that. The younger one wears a perfectly ironed and tailored black suit, and a yellow undershirt that stands out, contrasting with the rest of his appearance and drawing my eyes to his chest. It looks like a suit I'd expect someone in the Italian Mob to wear. His slicked-down black hair and overall appearance give him the aura of someone in control, someone who values appearance above all else.

Both of them have deep red eyes and skin, two horns protruding through their hair, and pointy ears exactly like the imps I saw before. The younger demon's horns, however, are much smaller than his senior's.

The older demon ignores my fearful reaction, and both of them set their eyes only on Amelia. "Black Witch, I'm talking to you."

I quickly turn to Amelia, only to be puzzled by the look on her face. Her expression is that of a deer caught in the headlights. It almost seems as though she's having a panic attack, as her lip quivers and her body trembles. Just as I start to wonder what has her on edge, she quickly straightens up, and her usual smile roars back.

"Oh my GOSH! Agares! You startled me! Don't sneak up on us like that!" She lunges forward, arms outspread as if to hug the old man, but both demons quickly take a step back, and the old man, apparently named Agares, lunges his hand forward to stop her movement. He palms her forehead and lightly deflects her momentum just enough that her attempt to hug him fails, but he appears fearful of using too much physical contact.

"Let's not be *too* friendly, B-Black Witch." Agares gulps. A bead of sweat glides down his face. "It's been a long time since you roamed these halls like the fearsome predator you are."

Amelia glares daggers up at him and crosses her arms. "Oh, phooey! That's no way to talk to a friend."

"Friend?" The younger demon shoots a look of concern at Agares. "Since when were you friends with the Black Witch?"

"Quiet, Beelzebub." Agares smooths his robes with his free hand. "Black Witch, it seems you've managed to escape your prison. I've heard about the carnage already following in your wake. The Council demands to know what your intentions are."

Amelia slips back over to my side and rolls her eyes. "Council, shmouncil. Were you always this cold, grandpa? I thought we had a *special* relationship. Why aren't you calling me by my name? Afraid you'll look bad in front of that cute trainee?"

Agares shifts his foot and glances at me for a second before returning to Amelia. "Evasive as always, I see. Please, *Amelia*, answer the question. Now that you've loosed yourself upon the Labyrinth, what horrors await us?"

Amelia waves her hand nonchalantly at the old man. "Oh geez, I haven't done anything wrong yet. Let's cut the interrogation and catch up! I'm dying to know what's changed while I was asleep!" She pauses to crinkle her nose.

The old man sighs slowly. "More than you might think. For example, we have a new First Emperor. It took a while, but after Joan put you to rest, we learned-"

Before Agares can finish his sentence, Amelia jerks her palm up, silencing him. I glance down and notice the smile on her face has cracked, and now has a maniacal edge to it. "What did you say? Did you just use... *her* name in front of me?"

Blaarjiim shakes his head slowly, and mutters under his breath, "Oh, lord. Agares pushed the Joan button."

"Shouldn't have done that," Hoarhiim adds.

Agares swallows audibly. "Well, ah, I didn't realize you were still... *sore*. I apologize."

Amelia grinds her teeth together, creating an unpleasant sound that makes my eye twitch. "You think an apology will save you? Don't you dare mention her name in front of me. I'll tear you apart, you worthless wrinkled *blood-skin*."

The way she bites off the last word, as well as the look of disdain on Beelzebub's face, tells me it's a slur that demons despise.

Beelzebub takes a step forward. "The nerve. Duke of Reptiles, give the order, and I'll burn her to a crisp. You won't be able to scrape what's left off the floor."

Agares reaches his hand out to block his junior. "No, Beelzebub. She's the one who slew Emperor Satan. You haven't a chance. Besides, she's immune to fire."

"Listen to grandpa, Skippy," Amelia says, biting her words off. "I don't want to hurt a pretty face like yours."

The four of us stare at each other for several long seconds. Amelia and Agares lock their gazes, but he's the one to back down. "Devils. I'm too old for this. Amelia, I am sorry. I did not mean to offend you. Please accept my apology."

He bows his head slightly, but also reaches behind Beelzebub and forces the younger demon's head down. Beelzebub doesn't appear thrilled but also doesn't resist his mentor's command.

Amelia exhales, then composes herself. "Fine, whatever. It's not like I cared or anything, idiot. I'll answer your question from earlier. My goal is to find the one who locked me away and pay her back in full. I couldn't care less about demons unless they get in my way. Is that answer suitable?"

Agares raises his head. The sweat on his face is more pronounced than before. "Oh... you wish to- to find her? Ah... that will be a problem."

"A problem? How so?" Amelia smiles politely again, but her expression wields an edge like the side of a knife.

"Well, you see... the one who imprisoned you, Joan... She died."

Amelia pales. "What?! Died?! How? When?"

Agares flicks his eyes to his junior. "I'm sorry, Amelia. After her battle with you, she lacked the energy to continue living. We're not sure what happened, but at some point, she vanished off the radar. We don't know where she died, only that the Oracles couldn't sense her life force anymore."

Amelia nods, and I notice her jaw quivering. "O-oh. I see. So, then, if she's gone... I have..."

"No goal? No plans? Yes, I'd imagine that to be the case." Agares reaches up and loosens his collar. He appears very concerned about her going on a rampage. "Perhaps you should take a vacation. There are plenty of souls worth reaping outside of the Labyrinth's confines. Despite how powerful you are, the Council has made it clear that if you continue your past ways, they will assemble to stop you. That includes me, and I'm not keen to die just yet."

Amelia nods, but it's almost as if she can't hear him. Her eyes are unfocused. She looks at his chest, and not at his eyes. "I see."

Beelzebub notices her shift and smirks. "Perhaps you've overestimated her, Duke of Reptiles. I can't see any reason a monster like her would travel with an aesthetically disadvantaged human such as this one." He gestures at me and looks away coyly.

I frown. "Hey! Are you calling me ugly?"

Beelzebub twists his face into a facade of mock indignation. "Devils, no! I would never pass judgment on someone's appearance. I'm merely noting a fact."

Agares chortles. "Now now, Beelzebub. Let's not be rude to the scrawny one. I am curious though, Black Witch, who is this boy? Why does he hold the orb of light? I thought you wielded both."

Amelia doesn't miss a beat. "He's holding it for me. Besides, I hardly need the power of both orbs to handle the likes of some wrinkled old demons or a few hundred monsters."

"Are you threatening us?" Agares moves his cane forward as if to put up a weak barrier between himself and Amelia. "I'm an ancient old man, now. I hardly have the strength to fight an energetic young thing like yourself."

Amelia sighs. "I'm not going to attack demons, okay? If demons die, it'll be because they thought I was an easy target. You'd best warn them to give me a wide berth."

"Fair enough," Agares says. "I must say though, what you did to the Riders of Sheol was gruesome. By the time we investigated their disappearance, the bodies had nearly turned to ash. I was not aware that flame manipulation was one of your powers."

Beelzebub bristles at Agares' observation. "Yes, do tell, Black Witch. I am considered the foremost expert on flame manipulation and possess the title 'Lord of Fire,' but even I could not have unleashed such raw, devastating power upon that room. How did you do it?"

Amelia's smile weakens. It occurs to me that I should let her do the talking here. I don't want the demons to lock their sights on me. "Oh, those nasty orcs? They attacked me, so I retaliated. As you can imagine, I was in quite a bad mood once I escaped that damned statue. Perhaps if you had released me sooner, they might still walk the realm of the living."

Her words carry a threat with them, and Agares doesn't miss it. "I understand. We'll let it slide, just this once. They were only monsters, after all. Had they been demons, we might have had something to say."

Agares's shoulders relax slightly, but Beelzebub slowly turns to eyeball me, and his eyes rise to the Crown on my head. "Black Witch, you didn't answer my mentor's question. Why is this human with you? I doubt you've left him alive for conversation's sake, and that treasure on his head looks quite valuable."

Amelia stiffens. She doesn't want them to know about my Wordsmithing just yet, or at least that's the impression she's given me so far. However, she laughs suddenly, her voice lilting cutely. "Why, this one

here is a mighty warrior! I procured him from a human settlement, and now he serves as my bodyguard! Do you want to face him in combat, Beelzebub? Perhaps you'd prefer-"

The old man cuts her off. "Aye, aye. Enough of those lies. The only human strong enough to be a bodyguard for you would be a Hero, and you're certainly not one to ally with them. If you're keeping him around for a snack, just say so. Seven Hells. Beelzebub, come. I've heard enough."

The younger one doesn't look as convinced as his senior, but he doesn't offer a retort. "Take care, then, humans. And for you, boy, don't worry about your face. All humans have the same malady afflicting their looks. You aren't special."

If you say so, Blood-skin, I want to say. Instead, I stick my tongue out at him. It probably just makes me look ridiculous.

The two demons turn and walk out the door. Eventually, they fade from our sight. Amelia and I stare silently for several minutes before I finally release the breath I've been holding.

"That was tense. I'm impressed though, Amelia. You even have Dukes like Agares running scared."

Amelia doesn't reply. Glancing down, I notice she's still staring at their afterimages. Her body begins to tremble.

"Amelia? Are you okay?"

Her lip trembles. "I... I..."

"Is something wrong?"

Slowly, the little girl kneels down, wraps her arms around her legs, and rests her head on her knee. She starts rocking back and forth, and a tear squeezes out. "I was... I was terrified, Jason."

What the hell? Did I miss something?

I crouch down slightly to get on her level. Standing over a crying girl makes me uncomfortable. "What do you mean? Why were you scared?"

She takes a breath, but her throat catches. "Jason... I'm not- I'm not what they think. I'm not the... the Black Witch anymore. I can't be. I'm not." She leans toward me and rests her shoulder against my side. "Joan's dead... she's dead. I can't even get revenge. After what she did to me, I can't even..."

Now I'm beyond confused. Amelia seems scared of something, but also angry, and a bunch of other emotions I can't piece together. I'm not an emotional guy, and understanding a woman's heart is way out of my league, especially when I barely know her at all.

Blaarjiim appears, but he only transmits himself to my mind. "Jason, after you used your fire spell and Amelia knocked you out to disable your magic, she put you to rest while she and I left to do some training. We took the time to evaluate our power levels. All I can say is that the might my queen once possessed has dropped off dramatically. She probably lacks the fighting power to fend off a Lord, let alone a Duke, Emperor, or the entirety of the Council."

"What? Are you serious?"

He nods. "Very. Right now, the only reason the demons haven't torn my queen apart is due to their ancient dread of her power. They don't know how weak she presently is. However, she killed Satan, the First Emperor of their kind. If the Demon Council members were to learn of my lady's paltry energy levels, they'd tear her to pieces, and you as well. Notoriety is her only ally, and if it fades, we're all doomed."

The realization of the situation dawns on me, bringing an ache to my chest. *What if I'd pissed Beelzebub off and he attacked me? We could have died. He was only a Lord, but he could have eviscerated us, to say nothing of the Duke of Reptiles.*

"Amelia, why are you weaker, now? Did sitting in the statue rot your muscles or something?"

She wipes her eyes, and rises to a standing position, having shaken off her earlier anguish. "It's... it's not like that. Jason, I think I need to be honest, now. The one who I fought in the past- her name was Joan. *Joan of Arc*. She was a legendary Hero, one whose power towered toward the heavens. She defeated me soundly, but instead of killing me, chose to lock me inside that statue with her magic."

"Joan of Arc? No way." My eyes shift a little as memories of books from my childhood appear in my mind.

Jeanne d'Arc, a warrior woman born during the 1400's in France. She was nicknamed the Battle Maiden, the Maid of Orleans, and led many skirmishes against the English. At some point, she was captured, tortured, interrogated, and burned at the stake under the pretense of witchcraft, among other charges.

My memory is a little spotty, but I remember the basics. Could Amelia have somehow fought her? Impossible. The Church executed Joan at the tender young age of nineteen. There isn't a chance Amelia battled her, given Joan's life was over in the blink of an eye.

Yeah, it must have been someone else: a copycat, or someone with the same name.

Amelia shudders. "I don't like to think about it, Jason. After battling Satan, I felt invincible. The demons shrank back in fear everywhere I walked. Earth was long-since dead, and none dared challenge me. I was neither happy nor sad, but merely content to go about my life, especially once I found Blaarjiim."

She continues. "It was then that I encountered Joan. I chanced upon a relic hidden in the Labyrinth. I don't know who put it there, but it caught my eye. When I touched it, *she* appeared. The Hero sprang from the weapon and declared me a servant of evil. She began fighting me, and I quickly realized her Holy Energy was unlike anything I'd fought before. Joan-

Amelia stops mid-sentence and clutches her chest. "No, no, I don't want to talk about it. It was too awful. I couldn't defend myself, I couldn't flee, and she wouldn't even let me beg for mercy. She was a heartless, vicious monster."

I listen in silence, but Amelia trails off and doesn't continue. "I see. For a 'Hero,' she sounds despicable. I'm sorry you had to suffer through that. Perhaps she believed herself an agent of justice, but over time, she became a killing machine."

To my surprise, Amelia reaches out and wraps her arms around me, then buries her head in my chest. "You believe me, don't you? She was awful. She hurt me in ways that would make you shudder. I didn't deserve that! I'm a good girl!"

Amelia's sudden closeness startles me. I'm not used to anyone suddenly touching me, so I cautiously wrap my arms around her and nod. "Yeah. A good girl, that's right."

All the while, I wonder to myself how true that is. If Amelia is a 'good girl,' then why are demons terrified of her? Why is she such a powerful magician? Why does she care so little about killing and death? What about those monsters she killed when she saved me? Would a good girl act like a violent psychopath?

Perhaps it's just self-defense. I don't know Amelia well, or what life she's lead. I don't know where she comes from, her desires, or much of anything about her.

I don't know her at all.

After a minute, Amelia pulls away and lowers her eyes. "For devil's sake... I'm a mess. Sorry. I didn't mean to throw this on you all of a sudden."

"It's fine, Amelia. We're friends. Friends are there for each other when they're feeling blue, right?"

She jerks her head up. "What? Friends? We're- I mean, you think of me like a... a friend?"

"Well, yeah. Why not? I freed you, you saved my life, and now you've told me about your past and what haunts you. If we're not friends, then what are we?"

The little girl pauses for a moment. "I... I don't know. I've just- well, aside from Blaarjiim, I've n-never had a friend before."

"Never? Not even once?"

Her expression darkens. "Well. Yes. Once. Satan took him from me."

I nod. "Right. You did mention that before."

She smiles cutely, and while the expression is a little forced, I'm glad to see her stop crying. I stand up and stretch my legs.

"Look, whatever happened, it's in the past. You have to look to the future, Amelia. I come from a place that I can never return. I'm here alone, just as you are. Let's stick together and help each other out. Whaddya say?"

Her smile widens. "Yes. I'd... I'd like that, Jason."

The two of us share a moment of bliss. For the first time since I arrived in this Hell, I feel more than just a tenuous connection to someone. Her past doesn't dictate where she's going, nor does mine. We can work together and give each other a helping hand.

We aren't alone anymore.

Tik tik tik.

From the ceiling, an odd sound catches my attention.

Tik tik tik.

Amelia's smile vanishes. Mine does too.

We both raise our heads to look at that square hole in the ceiling. The draft of air from before gently caresses my face, but now there's something else there.

A pair of beady eyes gazes at us from above.

Oh fantastic, another new friend.

Author notes:

This is Agares.



This is Agares too, with a slightly incorrect design, but he does look wicked cool.



This is Agares, but an outdated character design.



This is Agares, but another outdated character design.



This is Beelzebub.



This is Agares and Beelzebub, but with some flashier art!



Part 008: Size Matters Not

"Yeek!" Amelia yelps in fright and jumps behind me as a tiny, green creature falls from the ceiling. I flinch as well, thinking it's a giant spider, only to quickly realize it isn't.

I hate spiders.

A bipedal lizard, perhaps eight inches tall, smashes into the ground with the weight of a four-hundred pound man, nearly knocking me off my feet. It stands in the middle of the room and faces us, a look of anger in its eyes. From above, the pitter-pattering of more feet reaches our ears, and soon another lizard crashes into the ground, and another, and then a few dozen more follow. The Labyrinth trembles and quakes as each lizard strikes the floor.

Eventually, around forty of the lizard-men stand at the ready, tiny swords, shields, and armor raised for combat. I can't help but find them adorable, given how itty-bitty they are. However, I don't dare reach out to pet them, since they might chop my fingers off.

The lizard at the front, a red-scaled fellow, stands apart from his green-colored peers. He takes a step forward and raises his sword.

"Fleshbag! Intruder! How dare you intrude upon this holy domain!" He squeaks at us in an amusingly high-pitched voice, causing Amelia to smile.

"Oh, hello, little guy," I say. I drop to my knees to get a better look at him, but surprisingly, none of the lizards even flinch at my giant form dropping to their height. "Uh, is there a problem?"

Amelia leans over my back and eyeballs the lizards. She overcomes her initial fear instantly, then shoves her face down to their level to get a better look. "Oh my gosh! You're all too cute! I could gobble you up!"

The lizards recoil in alarm. One of the green ones steps forward and yells out, "King Ghidorah! The frilled one wishes to devour us! Orders?"

I raise an eyebrow. *Seriously? His name is King Ghidorah? What possessed this guy to name himself after a famous Japanese monster?*

The red one, King Ghidorah, bangs his sword on his shield. "Show no hesitation! The enemy will crash upon our bodies like waves on the shore!"

I quickly jump in before the misunderstanding gets out of hand. "I apologize, but my friend Amelia simply meant, uh... she meant she wants to kiss you! She loves kissing lizards!"

Nodding quickly, I shoot a grin at Amelia to hint that she should agree, but instead, she glares at me in disgust.

"Pass."

So much for that, I groan inwardly.

The lizard king examines us for a few moments. "Hmph! Lower your weapons, soldiers. These fleshbags seem tame compared to the others. Weak, too. I do not believe they mean us any harm."

"Weak?" Amelia's expression darkens, but she shakes her annoyance off after a moment. "Did we do something wrong? Why are you getting in our way?"

The king nods. "Aye, you did. We are the Children of Marie, the servants of the Greatest Prophet! Verily, she spake to us and told us to keep watch over this room. For, you see, the inner chamber holds a magical container, one she told us that would expel a most remarkable individual. Anyone who dares encroach upon this holy land must pay the price! In lieu of your ignorance, I will demonstrate my benevolence and let you off with a warning."

Amelia glances at me. I sigh. "Really, huh? A container. You don't say."

King Ghidorah nods sagely. "Aye. Our solemn duty is to guard the entrance to the container, alongside the Prison Warden, Gressil. Marie, our wise and courageous savior, has told us not to allow any intruders inside. We first assumed you wished to enter, hence our hostility."

Ghidorah's right-hand subordinate, a noticeably taller lizard than his leader, taps the king's shoulder. "Hurgh. My liege, where is Two-Heads? Was he not supposed to station a watchman here? He left the chamber unguarded!"

The king rubs his cheek. "Aye, Kar. Unusual. Gressil is not one to depart his post without giving notice. Perhaps he left for a moment to inspect the other cells in Faith's End. We will have to look into this breach of security."

A moment passes. Kar furrows his brow. "Turtle! Frilled one! I must ask why you have entered so deep into the Labyrinth. Do you not know the horrors that await? Wandering down the wrong hall will surely bring a swift end upon you."

I suddenly realize that he thinks we've stumbled into the Labyrinth by accident. "No, no, you guys are misunderstanding us. Uh, remember that magical container? I used to be inside it. Now I'm not."

All the lizards stare at me in silence. The king scratches his head. "Fleshbag, forgive my impudence, but... are you daft? Who could believe such a blatant lie? Marie has decreed that the one inside the container will not emerge for another forty-five centuries!"

Amelia shakes her head. "It's true! Jason came out of his cryptobob, and now he's here!"

The lizards share a look of unease with each other. Kar squeaks in a way that implies he's clearing his throat. "My liege, perhaps we should open the great door to check."

"Nonsense. Marie would say that we've been too kind and trusting. The fleshbags must be lying, though to what end, I do not know."

"King Ghidorah," I begin, acting as respectfully as I can of the tiny little thing in front of me, "Perhaps I should speak with Marie. Maybe I could clear things up with-"

"Tsh! Not a chance!" The King hisses, and his little tongue snakes out of his mouth. "I won't allow you to bother her with trifles!" He pauses for barely a second before turning back to his warriors. "Open the

great door! We shall inspect the icy container for ourselves!"

Amelia sighs. "This is going to be a long day."

We stand silently and watch as several of the tiny little lizards walk over to the door leading to my Cryopod room. They glance back over their shoulders at us and whisper conspiratorially, but I don't catch what they're saying. Secretly, I think to myself, *I wonder if I could enhance my hearing with Wordsmithing?*

Of course, since King Ghidorah is watching, I wouldn't do such a thing. I don't care that much about the opinions of the little critters.

The group of lizardmen lines up against the bottom of the door. In unison, all of them shove their weight against it. I start to speak up and say, "Do you want us to help with that? It's kinda heav-" but I stop mid-sentence as the door scrapes along the ground and cracks open. My eyes widen as I watch the itty-bitty lizards heave the several-hundred-pound stone door open like it's their day job. I can only assume they must be strong like ants, with a higher muscle-to-size density than any human.

Amelia, seeing them open the door, whispers under her breath, "Oh my goodness."

Hoarhiim and Blaarjiim watch in fascination as a dozen of the lizards march into the room, and soon they disappear from our sight. I squint to try and follow them with my eyes, but I can't make out a thing.

King Ghidorah whispers to his top henchman, Kar, and the two of them have a slightly heated discussion, likely about disturbing the sanctity of my Cryopod room, but I can only guess.

To make conversation, I decide to ask a question. "So, you guys are Children of Marie? Most monsters hate humans, but you don't seem like the others I've seen. Why is that?"

King Ghidorah looks irritated that I interrupted him, but Kar jumps in with a reply. "Our Mother is a fleshbag, just like you. It was she who saved our species from going extinct. We collectively owe her a life-debt!"

"She did? That's great! Was she in one of the cryopods too?"

Kar shakes his head. "Nay. Mother is an immortal human, one who has unlocked the power of the blood-machines. Her body neither ages nor decays. She is the most brilliant human who has ever lived!"

Ghidorah crosses his arms. "Aye, that she is. Our Mother is a human who has broken the limits of her mortal body. Her ability to foretell the future is unparalleled. She once spoke of an era of peace and balance, and we now live in that time!"

Amelia doesn't buy it. "Sounds like a bunch of crap to me. Nobody can see the future. If they could, the demons wouldn't have taken over."

"Perhaps." King Ghidorah glances back to check on the lizardmen who went to look at the Cryopod, but they haven't returned yet. He returns his gaze to me. "Tell me, young one, do you believe in fate?"

I shake my head, perhaps a little too quickly. "No. I control my destiny. If fate exists, then life has no meaning."

Kar grins a toothy, crocodilian smile. "So quick to answer."

"Aye. The fleshbag believes himself smarter than our Mother." Ghidorah winks at Kar knowingly. "But young one, if you believe that you control your destiny, do you also acknowledge that reality exists outside of your control? Perhaps events happen that will push you toward a future you could never anticipate?"

I nod. "Yeah, that happened to me when I woke up in Hell."

Ghidorah's expression of contentment fades. "Everything happens for a reason. The demons may rule the Labyrinth, but there is always a higher power. I have little doubt that we met here today for a reason. You are special."

"Uh, alright, I guess."

Before I have time to ponder his Ghidorah's words, one of the lizardmen skitters back into the room on all fours. He cries out in alarm, "King Ghidorah! The magical container! It has lost its light! Nobody is inside!"

"Well, well, well, very interesting." Ghidorah says. He waits until all of the scouts return, then glances at me, curiosity in his eyes. "Perhaps you are telling the truth. Fleshbag- no, *human*, tell me your name, as well as that of your friend."

I nod. "My name is Jason Leonardo Hiro, and this girl is Amelia."

"Amelia Greyheart," she adds. I widen my eyes, surprised she told him that. I didn't even know Amelia's last name until just now.

"Jason and Amelia. I see." The king looks at her, then at me. "I think that soon you will soon find Marie's prophetic abilities to be quite authentic."

* * *

A minute later, Amelia and I step into my cryopod's chamber, led by King Ghidorah. We both keep our gait slow so that we don't trample the teeny-tiny lizards running ahead of our feet.

Amelia raises an eyebrow as she spots my cryopod. "That's the thing that froze you? It looks suffocating."

"I wouldn't say it was a pleasant experience, but I only felt like I was inside for a minute or two. I've had worse experiences in my life."

Truthfully, I was in the Cryopod for such a brief time that it's barely worth mentioning. Rebecca, one of the scientists at Cryotek, told me the freezing and thawing process would happen faster than the snap of a finger. She wasn't kidding.

King Ghidorah stops before the cryopod and scrutinizes it. "Hmm, yes, I see. Hmm. There can be no doubt, then. You are, indeed, the human frozen inside the magic container. Our Mother will be pleased to hear from you."

"Oh? Should I speak to her, then?"

"Nay." The king shakes his head immediately. "Mother is much too busy for something like that. We will seek her out, and when the time is right, we will put you in contact with her. There is no rush. If you are indeed the child of prophecy, then you will only grow stronger and gain more power as time goes on."

Amelia shifts next to me. She suddenly looks uncomfortable, but when she sees me looking at her, she quickly turns away, avoiding my gaze.

What's her deal?

Whatever. It's not my business. I kneel a bit lower so I can see the king more easily. "You say I'll grow more powerful. Why do you assume that?"

"Because our Mother has predicted your rise to power! Lady Marie has never given a false portent in all the years she's lived."

Ghidorah's tongue slips out and flicks at the air. "However, while I know you will someday be a warrior for the oppressed, I won't allow you to go alone. Kar! You will protect these two with your life."

At the king's words, the tallest lizardman bows. "As you order, my king. I will protect the Turtle and Frilled One with my life."

I squirm slightly. "Um, really, it's no trouble. I, uh, I don't see how a tiny little guy like you could protect me. Are you going to crawl up someone's pant leg if they jump at me?"

"Jason!" Amelia backhands my shoulder lightly. "Rude!"

Hoarhiim chuckles. "You have much to learn, Jason. While you cannot yet sense spiritual energy, the rest of us can. The King of the Lizards is nearly on par with a Demon Duke, and the warrior, Kar, is still far mightier than any human."

Blaarjiim chimes in, "Show respect, mortal. Were you to anger the king, he could tear you apart in an instant!"

"Jeez, okay," I mutter, rubbing my shoulder. "I just figured with Amelia here; the lizards couldn't possibly do much to protect us."

"Size hardly matters, ignorant one," Kar squeaks. He raises his claws into the air. "Allies, lend me your energy so that I might protect these foolish fleshbags."

Amelia glares at the little guy. "Hey! Don't lump me in with this bozo!"

We watch as all the lizardmen raise their claws and send faint shimmers of light into the air. Each tiny orb condenses into a small ball of energy above Kar. He lowers it into his mouth and swallows, then burps, satisfied.

"I am the last living warrior of the Crocodiles, tiny fleshbags. So long as I draw breath, no harm will come to you."

For once, I'm a little awed by him. While I can't exactly make anything out, his scales shimmer slightly, as if he's shed a layer of skin to increase his power. Maybe he's as strong as everyone says.

A short while later, the king dusts himself off. "Kar, you will make the matriarch of our clan proud. These two do not know the path they must take; so you will show them the way. Guide them with vigilance, and stay on the alert for enemies. Everything depends on you."

"My king," Kar says, lowering his head. "Send word to Mother at once. She must know of this turtle and his exit from the container."

"Aye. Make your people proud. We will handle the rest." Ghidorah pulls away from Kar and looks up at Amelia and I. "I will personally contact Marie. You two must leave now. We will take the magic container and bring it to our Mother."

I nod at the king, but questions flood my mind. _Is Marie the only person left from my era? Are we the only people still alive who remember Earth?

Kar saunters over to us. "Turtle, let us go. I am eager to assist you on your journey."

I have more questions I want to ask, but they feel meaningless now. Not only can I never return to Earth, but I'm isolated, cut off from anyone else who lived a life similar to mine. I now must wander deeper into the realm of the demons if I hope to accomplish anything.

"Sure, Kar. And King Ghidorah... thank you."

"Take care, young one." The king turns and walks away, bringing the other lizardmen with him.

* * *

A few minutes later, Amelia and I step outside the room where once a statue overlooked my cryopod chamber. A faint pitter-patter of Kar's squishy feet slapping against the floor is the only other thing we can hear.

Amelia rubs her nose. "I wonder how they'll get your Cryopod out. It's pretty big."

"Dunno."

She continues. "You must be pretty excited to talk to Marie. After all, she's from your era."

"I suppose."

Silence. I glance over to see Amelia scowling at me. "Is there something bugging you, or what? I'm just trying to be nice, idiot!"

I shake the fog from my head. "No, sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. I have a lot on my mind. I don't even know what we should do next."

Amelia's expression softens. She stares ahead into the darkness. "I don't know either, Jason. Up until now, all I could think of was exacting revenge on Joan, but now that I can't get my revenge..."

Hoarhiim clears his throat. "Since neither of you has anything better to do, why not try exploring the Labyrinth."

Blaarjiim chuckles. "Brother, I have a better idea. At the end of this hall are two giant doors. We saw them when we were traveling here. Do you know where they lead?"

Hoarhiim slowly shakes his head. "Nay. Where?"

"Heh heh heh... those doors are a gateway to the center of the Labyrinth. Come now, mortal, don't tell me your mental map hasn't picked up on it yet. Have a look."

Wordlessly, I activate the Crown of Solomon and force my mental map to appear. It takes me a minute or so, but I'm able to piece together where Amelia and I are, along with the room Blaarjiim mentioned.

Ah! It really is the center of the Labyrinth! "What's inside?" I ask Blaarjiim.

The shadowy figure shrugs. "I haven't a clue, having never been inside. Why not travel there and find out?"

His words stir up a feeling inside me. I want to do something, but I don't know what! I can't just sit around and mope, and whatever is behind those doors must be important. As a human, I always find myself drawn to patterns and things that appear significant. If those doors lead to the center of the Labyrinth, they must be guarding something of incredible importance.

Amelia yawns. "It sounds more interesting than just standing around. I say we go check it out!"

I glance down at the tiny reptile. "What about you, Kar?"

He nods. "I will follow you wherever you go."

Alrighty, then. A goal. I can dig it.

Amelia trudges along between Kar and me, both of their bodies creating an amusing staircase of rapidly escalating height to the top of my head. Both of them chatter about various subjects, and for the most part, I avoid joining their conversation.

Amelia lilts her voice. "Why don't you let me pick you up? You can ride on my shoulder!"

Kar shakes his head. "My apologies, frilled one. My body is far heavier than you might imagine."

"I'm pretty strong, though! Aw, c'mon, how much could you possibly weigh?"

"It is not polite to ask someone about their age or weight."

"That's only if you're asking a girl! Pleeese?"

"I would prefer not."

"Just one little ride on my shoulder! That's all I'm asking! It'll look super cute!"

"I am the last warrior of my species; a proud vanguard of the ancient ways. I am not 'cute.'"

"Aw, jeez! Jason! Jason!"

I blink my eyes and recover from my daze. "Huh? What?"

"Help me convince Kar to ride on my shoulder! You know you want to see it too!" Amelia tugs at my jacket pleadingly, and I sigh.

Their conversation is grating. I just found out that there's another human alive, one from my Earth just like me. I can't stop thinking about the questions I want to ask her, given she's been living among the demons for so long. Instead, I have to walk along and listen to Amelia bug this pesky crocodile.

Amelia continues to pull at my jacket. "Pleeese? He won't listen to reason!"

I pull my arm away. "Amelia, stop pestering Kar. He doesn't want to ride on your shoulder. It's not polite to irritate your friends."

She pulls away from me and pouts. "What an ass."

I groan inwardly.

The door is a half-hour away down this loooong tunnel, and that's if we run. It'll take an hour at our current pace. Why does it have to be so far? Who made this stupid path anyway? If only I could speed things up a bit...

As that thought crosses my mind, a flash of inspiration strikes!

Heh, I'm a genius.

"Amelia, I'll be going on ahead. You two catch up when you can, alright?"

Amelia and Kar both glance at me questioningly, but I don't feel like explaining myself.

If this works, I will become a comic-book superhero.

"Speed!"

With a single word, I turn to look at Amelia. She freezes on the spot, as does Kar. The world around me grinds to a halt, preventing Amelia and Kar from speaking. After several long seconds, I smile, noticing Amelia hasn't blinked yet.

It seems that my guess was correct. I can speed my body up like *the Flash*. Now I can dash over to the golden doors and enjoy some alone time while these two work out their squabbles.

Piece of cake.

Turning toward the hallway before me, I take a step forward, and pain rips across my entire body.

I plunge into darkness as my entire body explodes into a puddle of gore.

The endless abyss swallows me whole.

"-son! Jason! Oh my gosh!"

I wake up with the taste of blood in my mouth. Everything hurts. It's a familiar sensation, like what I felt when I blew the doors off Solomon's Tomb. This time, however, the pain concentrates at the front of my body.

My face is broken. I can't move a muscle. I can't open my eyes. Both of my arms are bent in ways that shouldn't be possible, and I can't feel my legs at all.

Footsteps. Moving quickly.

Amelia rushes over to me. I can barely hear anything, and I have no idea where she is.

"Foolish turtle." Kar chastises me. "So much for the prophecy. He'll be dead in a few minutes."

"No, I have healing magic. I'll fix him up." Amelia quickly replies. I feel my body shift slightly, and she mutters some words in a language that the Crown tells me is likely Latin.

After a moment, the pain begins anew. My bones smash together like boulders crushing a wooden house, and I whimper in pain as my body pushes itself back into one piece. Not ten seconds later, my eyes

finally open, allowing me to take a pained gasp of breath.

"Huhk!"

Kar's squeaky voice is the next thing I hear. "Frilled one, that was a most impressive feat, especially for a fleshbag. Few can perform the level of healing you just did. Where did you obtain that ability?"

I glance at Amelia as she stands up. Her face turns into a bucket of nerves once she meets my gaze. "Uh, hum, well- I knew this lady, and she taught me how to use her powers. It's nothing special. Jason has the same healing ability."

"Mmm." Kar walks over to my face and squints at me, but he looks unconvinced. "If you say so."

A minute passes, and I cautiously pull myself to my feet. I'm even more exhausted than the last time Amelia healed me. Her regeneration technique makes me wish I could take a bath in lava to cool myself off.

Glancing up, I spot the giant doors. I must have activated my super-speed and smashed against them at a thousand miles an hour. Judging by the blood all over the base of the door and around me, I'm lucky I didn't instantly die.

Amelia yawns. "Okay, then. Go open them."

The doors before me stand nearly a hundred feet tall and fifty feet wide. Based purely on my guesswork, each one must weigh over a ton.

I walk over to the door, and as I start to touch it, I spot blood all over my arms. With a single glance, I quickly realize my body is caked in blood.

Amelia didn't even say anything? Gross.

"**Clean.**" I speak a word of power and breathe a sigh of relief as my clothes stop resembling a vat of raspberry sauce.

Something tugs at the bottom of my pant legs. I look down to see Kar gazing at me. "Turtle, you spoke a word just now, and your bloodied clothes became unsullied. How did you summon forth magic without performing the appropriate hand-signs?"

"Wordsmithing. I can make anything happen by speaking one word at a time. I haven't yet found a limit to what I can do, but I plan to experiment with it someday soon."

Awe appears in his eyes. "I... I understand. Use caution. Your ability is unlike anything I've heard of before." He starts to walk away, and I hear him mutter, "Indeed, I can't even begin to fathom its practical applications."

Kar trots away and turns around to watch me, so I spin to face the door.

Hmm. I don't want to use Push. That nearly killed me last time, and I've already had one near-death experience today. Maybe there's another option.

* * *

Oh, that's it! Magic words! Sometimes big doors like these are opened with unique phrases!

Smiling, I recite the first two words that come to mind. "*Open Sesame.*"

Nothing happens.

Frowning, I try another. "*Mellon.*"

Nothing happens.

Scowling, I try one last word. "Fuck."

It doesn't work either.

Obviously.

Amelia snickers. "Haha! What are you doing?"

"...Nothing."

I quickly walk up to the door and start shoving it with all my strength.

I won't lose to you, damn it!

Minutes pass. I give the giant slab of metal my full strength, but it doesn't budge an inch. *C'mon, asshole! Open! Open!* My feet grind into the ground as I heave and shove, but finally, I fall to my knees, panting like a dog.

Amelia stares at me silently. Out of aggravation, I yell at her, "Why don't you come over here and help?! Aren't you supposed to be strong as heck?"

Amelia yawns. "I'm a little sleepy. Besides, it's pointless. You've got everything under control."

"What?! I haven't made a nanometer of progress! How can you call this 'under control?'"

She shrugs, pulls her skirt under her, and plunks down on her butt to watch me. Boredom floods her face.

I wipe my forehead and tilt my head up to look at the door. *It's enormous! How am I supposed to open something like this? Impossible! If only I had more strength.*

Strength. Wait, hold on a second. Maybe Amelia's right after all.

I quickly jump to my feet. Aiming my hand at my body, I yell, "**Power!**"

Suddenly, my arms, legs, and the rest of my muscles hulk out, bulging and tearing my skin all across my body. It hurts, but at the same time, the adrenaline rush is incredible! It suddenly occurs to me that I've had this option available all along. Idiot me!

I slam my hands against the door and shove hard. "Hnnngh!"

My feet scrape across the ground, but a weird popping sound in my back makes me pause. Shit. With my muscles in this shape, I'm putting unimaginable stress on my body and heart. I could die while doing this.

Kar's squeaky voice echoes off the walls. "Turtle, if you don't mind, I could assist you."

"What?" I look down at his sincere, pleading gaze. "Uh, I mean, if you want to help, you can, little guy. I won't stop you from trying."

Kar crosses his arms. "Do you doubt me?"

"No, no, far from it! You're a, uh, big ol' crocodile! I'm sure you could do *something* to this door!"

Kar lowers his head. "Among my people, I am a revered, mighty warrior. I have earned intense admiration from those around me. I know what respect feels like, yet you give none to me. I must rectify this, or my people will appear weak to you, forever."

Suddenly, something incredible happens. Kar's body begins to expand. Slowly at first, but the expansion speed increases after a few seconds, and soon he reaches Amelia's size, then mine- what?!

He continues growing, and Amelia's eyes follow his head as he soars into the air. Kar's body stops rising, but not until he has exceeded well over ten feet tall.

A tongue slurps from the ginormous crocodile's mouth as he lowers his head down to smirk at me. "Well then, *little turtle*, who is the small one now?"

Kar's voice is no longer squeaky or silly sounding. Instead, his voice has the timbre of ten grizzly bears roaring all at once. It booms and echoes around us.

"M-me?" This time, it's my voice that cracks as he takes a step toward me.

"Mmm. What say you, tiny turtle? Do you acknowledge my power?"

"Yes. Yes! Um, I'm sorry! I meant no disrespect earlier, hehe..."

Kar grumbles in his throat before turning to examine the door. "That strength boost you used on yourself. Use it on me. I will heft this door open."

I nod, realizing what a difference it would make for him.

"You got it. **Power!!**"

...Nothing happens.

Kar tilts his head. "Mmm. I think I felt something. A trickle of energy. Was that all you could manage?"

I shake my head. "**POWER!!!**"

My energy levels drop noticeably, and my body, still fatigued from the artificial strength boost, weeps.

This time, Kar growls. "Ohh! Oh yes! There it is! I can use this!"

He stomps past me and slaps his claws against the door. "Turtle, take a few steps back."

I nod, then return my body to normal with a quick spell.

He doesn't need my help here. This door *will* open.

Kar looks at me in confusion. "A little further, to be on the safe side."

Oh dear.

Kar begins pushing against the double doors, and as he does, Amelia slinks up next to me. "Ohhh, that explains it."

"Explains what?"

Blaarjiim jumps in to reply. "Kar did not wish to be picked up by my queen. It seems he condenses his body into that tiny form, but it must focus his mass into a smaller area."

Hoarhiim adds, "Meaning that if he ordinarily weighs hundreds of pounds, he will still weigh that much when shrunken down."

"Ohh..." I nod, unsure if that's how the law of physics works. "Yeah, I guess that's why he didn't want you to pick him up."

Kar grunts as he heaves against the door. Amelia and I flinch as it shifts slightly.

"He's doing it!" Amelia howls, while nearly jumping for joy.

As for me, I suddenly feel apprehensive. I don't know what's inside. None of us do. We could be walking right into a trap. There might be something abominable sealed inside, and someone could have put it in there for a good goddamn reason.

The door inches forward slightly, and already I can see that Kar is running low on juice. He can't keep this up forever.

Suddenly, a horrible ringing sound screams through the air. It's both silent, and yet insanely loud at the same time. I quickly cover my ears, but my feeble attempt to block the sound accomplishes nothing. When I look at Amelia, I grimace. She's in pain. Her mouth opens as if she's trying to scream, but I can't hear anything.

The Crown gives me a hint, and I quickly face Kar. His mouth is open, and he's emitting an ultrasonic scream, like a warcry or something.

"Skreeeeeeee!!!"

Suddenly, Kar's muscles bulge, and the door begins to crawl across the ground inside.

With a final shove, Kar lurches back, and bashes against the door with all his might. Some invisible object blocking it from the other side must have gone flying, because the door surges open, causing Kar to stumble inside. Finally, he ceases his warcry, allowing Amelia and I to breathe again.

"Kar? Kar?!" I run over to him, with Amelia in hot pursuit, and as we reach the doorway, I can finally see what's inside.

It isn't good.

We made a big mistake.

Author Notes:

This is Kar



Part 009: The Labyrinth Core

It was only yesterday that I fled for my life from a horde of monsters. Not only had I never seen such creatures in my life, but I'd couldn't have imagined they existed in such numbers.

And now, for the second time, my mind boggles at how many monsters stand before me. Amelia and I gawk at what must be tens of thousands of fantastical beasts and demihumans milling about in an underground structure twenty times larger than the Dodger Stadium. *What lay behind the door* was a question I'd been asking myself for hours, and now that I have the answer, I regret asking.

Amelia very slowly turns to me and whispers, "Any bright ideas?"

"Not even one," I mutter.

The room just inside the door descends fifty feet into a basin filled with glowing stones, and what Solomon's Crown tells me are portals to other places elsewhere in the galaxy.

A dozen platforms rise into the air, and atop each one are two metal pylons that curve around to form an open oval. Between the pylons are images of other worlds, other places in the Labyrinth, and scenes I can barely describe.

Computers unlike any I've seen before line up in rows, each one twice as tall as my body, stretching to just above Kar's height. The towers power hundreds of monitors all over the damn place, almost as if I've arrived at the New York Stock Exchange. Their design is somewhat alien in nature, giving me an otherworldly vibe.

As Kar climbs to his feet, every monster in the room stops and stares at us, mouths agape. Instead of orcs, goblins, and demons, all the monsters here seem corrupted in some way. Their bodies leak clouds of darkness, and all of their forms appear disfigured and disheveled.

One of the monsters, a gangly looking freak with half its face melting off, slowly raises a trembling finger toward us. "F-F-F.... Fleshbags! They're fleshbags!"

Amelia forces a smile. "We... come in... peace?"

The room erupts into chaos. A hundred smoky apparitions rush this way, another hundred rush that way, and everyone loses their goddamned minds.

"They've opened the doors!"

"Big scary alligator!"

"Someone get the boss!"

"Broodmother save me!"

A chorus of screams fills the room. Monsters frantically type values into their computers, while others charge through the otherworldly portals to flee from us. Amelia and I gawk in stunned silence at their ridiculous reaction. There must be a thousand times more monsters in the room compared to the three of us, yet they're *scared*? What the hell?!

Suddenly, a feminine voice booms from loudspeakers in the roof of the stadium. "SILENCE!"

The crowd hushes all at once. Tranquility replaces abject terror. All of the monsters, even those about to flee, stop where they're standing. They stand at attention and wait for further orders from their unseen superior.

The monsters turn to face the right side of the room. Amidst the walls of computers, a single being steps out. Its chest and clothing are decidedly feminine, but its head is birdlike, with a beak and pitch-black eyes. The monster's appendages taper into four-fingered hands and two-toed feet, but each ends in a claw-like talon.

The monster, a female of some sort, silently strolls over to us, not a care in the world. Whoever she is, she commands absolute respect over the monsters here, and her half-bird half-human body stands out like a diamond in the rough. She's beautiful, in a majestic sense.

"Intruders. Hee! You've made a mistake, barging into my domain. Vermin are unwelcome here."

The bird-lady's voice is simultaneously delicate and soft, yet her tongue clicks every few syllables, possibly because her beak makes it difficult to form words. She sounds like a parakeet; capable of mimicking human speech, yet imperfect to a fault.

Blaarjiim grumbles. "Vermin? Well, isn't *she* the polite one?"

I take a hesitant step forward. All the monsters in the room swivel their heads to look at me, nearly giving me a panic attack, but I manage to keep my cowardice in check.

"W-who are you? What is this place?"

The bird-person stops thirty feet away and lightly scrapes her spiked fingers across her feathered scalp. "I ask the questions here. How did you enter? That door has a hundred tons of mass. Furthermore, it opens outward. You appear to be ordinary humans, yet-"

Her eyes don't swivel around as a human's would, but instead, she tilts and turns her head to look in different directions. Cocking it from left to right, she examines the three of us curiously.

"That big one there, the alligator. You must be the one who hefted my door open."

Kar croaks under his breath, "Crocodile, *not* alligator."

"Close enough. In any case, if you could open the entrance to the Labyrinth Core, your strength must on par with the Demon Dukes, perhaps even the Emperors. I presume these humans are your slaves, then?"

Amelia starts opening her mouth to object, but I reach over and squeeze her arm, subtly shaking my head. *There are too many monsters here. If they all attack, we'll probably die.*

Kar barely even gives her question a passing thought. "Hah! Of course they are! Do you have a problem with that?"

The bird-woman taps her beak. "Hardly. You may not have realized it, but this entire facility is mine, as are all the monsters here. I am Bahamut, the most powerful monster in the Labyrinth. Even the

demons fear my wrath." She takes a step toward Kar and completely ignores Amelia and I. "Why have you come here?"

"Because I felt like it!" Kar doesn't skip a beat. "I am Kar, the second mightiest of Marie's Children. I fear no-one!"

"Don't you? Hmm? You must think yourself quite impressive, but from where I stand, you're little more than an insect at my door."

Ugh, she's painfully braggadocious, I think to myself. Does this broad ever shut up?

Bahamut and Kar go back and forth for a minute, verbally sparring with one another. After a while, she laughs, though it comes out sounding like a bluejay's chirp. "Hee! You're an interesting fellow, Kar! I will offer you a unique opportunity. Follow me."

Kar looks at us warily as she turns and walks away, but shrugs. "Let us see what she has in mind."

Amelia reaches over and takes my hand in hers. "Jason, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Same, Amelia. Just smile like you always do, and if the worst happens, I might have a way out for us."

I'm not lying, either. I'll have to be creative with my Wordsmithing if Bahamut turns out to be a backstabber.

We follow Kar and Bahamut, glancing around nervously as the throng of corrupted creatures watches us silently.

My body perspires more than usual as we pass through hordes of monsters. Now that we've walked down the steps into the lower area of the bowl-like stadium, I can see the computers and creatures down here more clearly, and they seem very unusual compared to others I've seen up to this point in the Labyrinth. Some have skin covered in wood; many have loose hides, often disfigured by blemishes and sores, while others have tentacles instead of hair, and thousands of variations between those. One of the bastards grins evilly at me as Amelia and I walk past, his razor-sharp teeth on display.

He licks his lips and smiles. *"A test. All who challenge Bahamut will lose. You'll be one of us, soon."*

Bahamut and Kar don't hear him. Amelia sticks her tongue out at the monster and mutters, *"Take a step closer, ugly. I'll knock your block off."*

I pull her along, not wanting to start a scene. I'm sure she could tear the jackass apart with ease, but what about the other thousands of monsters? Doubtful.

Kar turns to Bahamut. "What is this place? Sure looks like an awful lot of fleshbag technology around here!"

Bahamut preens her feathers for a moment, then chirps shrilly. "Hee! You haven't a clue! The Labyrinth Core is the most valuable asset the demons have. It allows us to travel to various hunting grounds in search of food and energy. Maintaining control over fleshbags, as I'm sure you know, is a difficult task."

"Tell me about it! Bah, these worthless twig-limbs can hardly carry my supper to me every day. I beat them twice a week to keep them in line!"

I glance at Amelia and spot her glaring furiously at Kar's back. *Yeah, keep mouthing off, fish-breath. I'll break you in half when we get out of this dump,* her eyes say.

Honestly, after seeing Kar heft that door open, I'd be surprised if Amelia could budge him an inch. Bahamut said that opening those doors would require the strength of a Demon Duke, and they're the second most powerful beings in the Labyrinth. Kar is probably way stronger than Amelia.

Bahamut raises her hand, and the four of us stop. "Open a portal to Tarus II. On the double!"

The calmness of the monsters in the room breaks instantly as every being begins a mad scramble, dashing for their chairs and workstations, all of them trying very hard not to touch Amelia or I as they slip past. Bahamut continues walking up a walkway toward a portal. She stops in front of it, as do we, and I get a glimpse of the other side.

The portal appears to be a door to another world. It's as if we can look through a window into another plane of existence or a different dimension. The one we stop before shows an image of a river of green, and inside the rancid water, apparitions of humans rise over the low waves, scream wordlessly in agony, and fall back inside. Bahamut says nothing, but Kar strokes his chin.

"Hurgh. Is that the River Styx?"

Bahamut chirps. "Hee! Yes. A fetid graveyard, good for powering the demonic lust for fleshbag souls, but inhospitable to other life. Monsters steer clear of it, but we usually have to keep a dedicated gate open in case Diablo pops over."

Kar leans forward slightly to peer into the flowing green river. Its liquid bubbles and boils like lava formed of acid. "What happens if ya fall in?"

Bahamut's tone turns frosty. "*Don't.*"

I glance back at all of the monsters and watch as they frantically check displays on their stations, gaze up at the ceiling to stare at numbers scrolling across the overhead screens, then look down to type commands and mathematical equations into their computer. Thanks to the Crown, I can easily keep up with them.

Five minutes pass. Kar crosses his arms. "What is the meaning of this? Why are we standing here, twiddling our thumbs?"

The bird-woman's head twitches spastically, as if Kar's impatience is irritating her. "Hee! My pawns are calculating a jump destination. Unlike demons, monsters are quite adept at technology and its practical applications. However, calculating the positions of planets in the galaxy is exceptionally difficult, so it takes thousands of us several minutes to make the necessary preparations. In any case, it's almost time."

The image of the river fades away, and the portal shuts off for a moment or two. I'm relieved that I don't have to see what looked like human souls screaming and writhing in agony, but at the same time, an odd sensation wells up in my stomach. *Guilt.*

They're suffering. It's not my fault, but every fiber of my being thinks it is. I'm not responsible for the plight of those poor people. The demons control the universe. What could I, a single man, do to stop them? Nothing. That's the answer. Resisting billions, even trillions of demons, is pointless.

A *crack* of electricity in the air jerks me back to my senses. The gate begins arcing bolts of energy from its rounded pillars into the center, and a terrific explosion of lightning erupts, creating a hole in the air that rapidly expands to the edges of the gate. Once the hole finishes forming, an image of a beautiful, green, grassy field appears. The grass sways softly as the wind sweeps across it, and sunlight beams down, lighting the clearing up, as well as trees and a stream in the distance.

I want to cry.

I've been in this Labyrinth for only a few days, but I hadn't realized until just now how homesick I've been for Earth. The dark corridors, fear of demons attacking at any moment, and trepidation I feel from knowing one wrong turn could mean my death has been plaguing my mind.

Bahamut clicks her tongue. "Excellent work, slaves. You opened that portal twelve seconds faster than usual. Double rations for everyone. Crocodile, bring the two rats with you and let's visit the world I call Home."

A great sigh of relief fills the room as the monsters quietly murmur to each other about Bahamut's praise. Her words mean everything to them.

Kar tilts his head back at Amelia and I. Smirking; he says, "Come on, rats! You heard the boss!"

I can just barely make out the sound of Amelia popping her knuckles as her saccharine-sweet smile lights up the world. "Oh, *of course*, Master Kar! Anything you say!"

She's going to kill him later, I muse to myself.

* * *

While I feel nervous about entering the portal, it's not as bad as I expect. The stadium's stale oxygen and murmuring of its monsters vanishes behind me. One second later, a *whoomph* of air hits my face, dazing me for a brief second. The sensation makes me imagine jumping from a vacuum-sealed bag into a windstorm. I take a moment to yawn and pop my ears. Amelia does, too.

The harsh brightness of a midday sun beats down on me, making me see spots and blink my eyes rapidly. I raise my palm to block the light, but it doesn't help much.

Something about this world irks me. After a moment, I realize what it is. The color is wrong. This world's sun is yellow, like Earth's, but its hue is *just* off-color enough that it doesn't feel right. I can't put it in words, but there's a faint orange tint to the world around me that makes the grass and other Earth-like features appear somewhat fake.

Amelia casually glances around. "Wow, pretty."

"Yeah," I mumble, as I stare at Bahamut's back. "Something seems off."

We arrive on an elevated platform identical to the one in the Labyrinth Core, but to my disgust, this world's gate sits in the middle of a field of grass. It appears that whoever built it cared little for its

aesthetics. The gate's blackened stonework stands out against the bright, cheerful colors of nature like a bloodstain on a nurse's uniform.

"Wonderful, just wonderful," Bahamut says. She chirps cutely, then turns back to look at Amelia and I, making a chopping motion toward us with her free hand. Another *whump* echoes behind us, and when I turn around, I'm stunned to see that the gate back to the Labyrinth has been disabled.

"What the heck? Is this a trap?!" I pivot to face Bahamut, and she chirps again.

"Hee! You've seen too much, I'm afraid. Fleshbags who have seen the Labyrinth Core must be disposed of, by decree of the Demon Council. Luckily for you, I am a merciful host. Your owner, the fine specimen known as Kar, can save you if he deigns. Speaking of which, the midday sun is already in the sky. We haven't much time if we wish to get this over with by nightfall. Come along, now!"

Amelia shrugs. She doesn't care at all about this turn of events. Kar looks somewhat distressed, but he tries to smile and laugh it off. "Gwaha! You're an interesting one, Bahamut! I can only guess at what horrible torture you have planned for me!"

"Hee. Torture? I'll do nothing of the sort. Tell me, though, Kar. Do you like to play games?"

She begins walking down the steps of the portal, keeping her back to us, while Kar quickly falls into step beside her. His form dwarfs hers, yet *he* appears more nervous around her than vice-versa.

"Games? Hurgh, I have little time for those."

"Oh, you don't like them? Unfortunate. You see, by entering the Core without permission from me or obtaining a permit from the Demon Council, you committed a high crime against our people. If I killed you, that would solve the problem you created, but I'd rather not. I see potential in you, after all. You're not like the other vermin working beneath me."

Kar slowly scratches his arm. "Uh, thanks."

"You are most welcome."

...I guess Bahamut doesn't understand sarcasm.

The four of us walk along, and a warm breeze blows across the plains, cooling our bodies while the sun warms us up. To say this planet has the perfect climate would be an understatement. It's *exquisite*.

It doesn't take long before we arrive at the forest. Bahamut stops and holds a finger up. "Kar, I should warn you that the two weaklings behind us will be quite vulnerable in the Shrieking Woods. Don't let them stray far. The creatures here have all manner of poisonous fangs and barbed quills. Despite its tranquil appearance, Tarus II has a fauna predatory threat level of four stars. The plants are all deadly too, so don't eat any colorful berries you see, or you'll meet a swift end."

Kar grunts. "Noted."

Not a creature stirs in the forest, causing an eerie silence to linger in the air. The only sounds I hear as we climb over branches and limbs is wind whistling across the treetops above. Despite Bahamut's

warning, not a single animal bothers us.

An hour after entering the forest, Bahamut cocks her head again. "We're almost at the test site."

Kar sniffs the air. "Test? What test?" Evidently, he didn't hear the monster mentioning a test to Amelia and me earlier.

"Hee. It's more of a game than anything else. You will see."

Amelia and I share a look of worry with each other. Bahamut has been very vague this whole time, and frankly, I'm thinking about taking her down. I'd rather not kill anyone unless it's my last resort, but her hordes of monsters aren't around here. She's defenseless.

Up ahead, the forest parts away to reveal a barren, rocky clearing. Mountains of dirt and stone form a bowl, and the path narrows to perhaps a hundred feet wide. A staircase carved into the mountainside leads to the top, while a cave to the right ominously beckons for us to enter. Ten heavily armored guards, their bodies encased in steel, patrol the entrance to the cave. All of them stop and swivel to salute as Bahamut approaches.

I decide to ask the question on my mind. "Bahamut, are we going underground?"

She flicks her head back to look at me. "Quiet! I have nothing to say to piss-ants. If you enter the depths of Tarus II, it will be as a prisoner under forced labor, mining and toiling for the rest of your life. Hopefully, your master will pass the test, and that won't happen." She chuckles. "Hee! Or at least, it would be lucky for *you*. I'm hoping for the opposite."

Bahamut resumes walking, and soon, we arrive at the steps leading up the mountain. She ignores the guards outside the cave, and begins ascending the steps. Due to how narrow they are, perhaps six feet wide, Kar falls into line behind her, and I let Amelia go in front of me.

Since my position is in the rear and the only view ahead of me is Amelia's long black hair, I end up gazing at the tops of the mountains as we climb. The sheer canyon walls rise a few hundred feet and flatten at the top, making them nigh unscalable, yet perfect for building on. Indeed, several structures resembling Egyptian pyramids, huts, and other such designs are scattered across the tops of the mountains for dozens of miles, indicating a primitive culture.

Kar notices them. "Bahamut, what are those odd, triangular buildings? They are quite large."

Bahamut chuckles. "Hee. I am an ancient being, one who lived long before the fall of Earth. Fleshbags and monsters have worshiped me for my entire life, and the architecture you see here are from an ancient civilization on Earth known as the Egyptians."

"Earth? What's that?" Kar questions her further, and I suddenly remember the surprise Blaarjiim and Hoarhiim showed when I mentioned it. *Most monsters and demons don't know of its existence, or they've forgotten. I wonder why?*

"Earth is an ancient world, one destroyed long ago during the Energy Wars. It is the homeworld of humans, demons, and monsters."

Kar grumbles something guttural. "Hurgh. Homeworld? Are you daft? Sounds like a bunch of nonsense to me."

"It's true," I say aloud. "Earth is where I come from too."

"Oho?" The entire party stops as Bahamut turns and cranes her head around to look at me. "Now there's a fib if I ever heard one. The fleshbag thinks he's special."

"Stop calling me 'fleshbag.' My name is Jason, and I'm a human."

"Yeah! And I'm Amelia!"

Bahamut eyes us suspiciously. For a moment, she gazes at the crown on my head, then toward the light-source in my belt pouch. "Your slave is talkative. Why does he wear that gaudy band on his head?"

"Uh." Kar pauses for a moment, then raises a finger. "Turtle is a king I enslaved from one of the human worlds! The frilled one is his sister."

"Hee! A king and queen. I see. Royalty. You must value your property tremendously, keeping them so close." Bahamut immediately swivels around and continues walking. "Perhaps after we finish, you should give these mouthy rats another beating. I could teach you some tricks if you'd like."

Kar doesn't reply.

Several minutes later, the end of our climb comes into view, and I can finally see our destination. Monsters of all sorts roam around, and a large, elevated platform rises ten feet above the ground. It stretches fifty feet in every direction and has several dozen green squares painted side-by-side at one side, while the other end has a stand elevated another foot up. It looks like a stage meant for giving a speech, sort of, except without any comfy chairs or anything designed explicitly for speech-giving.

Bahamut climbs up the stage, and as she does, she claps her talons together. "A crowd, please! Give me a crowd!"

Immediately, all the monsters in the area drop what they're doing. Most walk toward us, but several of them dash away, likely to tell others of Bahamut's arrival.

This bird-bitch certainly wields a ton of authority. We can't trifle with her.

Bahamut walks over to the elevated stand and smoothly plants one foot atop it, then lifts herself the rest of the way. She does it effortlessly, as though it's a ritual she's performed a million times.

"The three of you, go find one of the squares to stand on. Once the crowd is big enough, I'll begin the test."

Kar mutters under his breath, *stupid test, I shoulda torn your head off while we were alone, ya dumb bird-brain, grumble grumble*, but Bahamut doesn't hear him.

More monsters fill the area around us, and I hear a few of them whispering conspiratorially.

"Think they'll pass?"

"Of course not. Nobody passes. It's impossible."

"The humans'll go to the mines, but what about the big guy?"

"She wants him in a position of authority. Easy enough. It's always the same."

"Silence!" Bahamut chirps shrilly, and the sound pierces the midday winds. The crowd hushes and waits for her to speak. "Finally, we've arrived. Welcome, Kar, along with your two servants. Are you ready to begin the test?"

Kar looks anything but ready. His expression flattens, and he sighs. "What's this test all about, anyway?"

Bahamut stabs a clawed finger at him from across the stage. "I have chosen you as either my successor or as my new second commander. If you pass the test, you will take my place and lead the Labyrinth Core. If you fail, I will enslave you under me forever, just as I have every other monster you've seen up to now."

Kar sighs again. "What if I don't want to take the test?"

Calmly, Bahamut examines her claws. "Then you will die right here and now."

I nudge Kar. "If anything happens, we've got your back."

This seems to cheer him up. As if he's only just remembered our presence, Kar puffs out his chest. "Hurgh. Very well! I accept your test! You will find that I am impossible to stump!"

Bahamut reaches into the pocket of her coat and pulls out a small hourglass. "We shall see."

Author notes:

This is Bahamut.





Part 010: The Tests

For some reason, standing inside a five-by-five green square makes me uncomfortable. I know my 'barrier' is only comprised of lines painted on the platform's surface, but being forced to stand in a box makes me feel like a lab rat. At this rate, someone is probably going to stick a needle in my ass to test my reaction to Botox.

Kar, Amelia, and I watch Bahamut raise her hourglass in the air. She does it slowly, allowing our eyes to track the movement of her hand.

"The grains in this hourglass represent one hour. The first two challenges are not timed. However, the final challenge is. If you fail any of my tests, you will become my slaves. If you choose to forfeit, I will kill you without hesitation."

The sound of an electrical pop at all four corners of the stadium makes the hair on my head start to stand up. A second later, beams of light shoot out from the green squares. They rise fifteen feet, then force fields pop out between them faster than I can react, sealing the three of us inside our squares.

"What the hell?! What are you doing?" I start to reach forward, only for a painful *zap* of electricity to arc off the wall and jolt my heart. My arm flops uselessly, causing me to nearly pass out from the pain. Luckily, before I faint, I gasp under my breath, "**Heal!**"

My breathing quickens. I look to the side to see that Kar and Amelia don't appear especially concerned.

Kar reaches a finger forward, and when the electricity zaps him, he merely shakes his wrist in annoyance. "What is the meaning of this?"

Bahamut chirps. "Hee! Many mighty warriors used to flee my test when they realized their doom was upon them. I devised this measure to keep them safely locked in place until the test is over. By the way, when I asked if you would take the test, I forgot to mention that the tiles you're standing on have magical infusions. You're honor-bound to complete it now."

Kar crosses his massive arms. "Get on with it."

"Mmm. The first test is rather simple. You must face your inner demons, wrestle with them, and come out victorious. This test has a 10% failure rate. Those who cannot pass will typically end up as drooling hounds, lying on the ground and whimpering until I put them out of their misery. I doubt this will happen, but The Test has a way of bringing out the worst in a monster."

After she finishes talking, Bahamut waves her free hand through the air and mutters several inaudible words, all of which the Crown tells me are Latin in origin. Why Latin? What's so great about that dead

language?

Nausea boils up in my stomach. I want to vomit, but I don't know why. The world twists around me. Kar, Amelia, and Bahamut all vanish into blackness.

Bahamut must be using magic to play with my mind. Am I being tested too? I thought she only cared about Kar!

The blackness shifts around me, and a familiar scene materializes. A person I once called 'mother,' my foster parent, beckons to me.

Amanda Tate, age 35, a woman living with her husband Robert and us six foster kids under one roof. We were always a handful.

My body moves by itself. I start walking toward Amanda, and my old house forms around us. The beat-up wooden floor creaks under my feet, and the smell of macaroni and cheese mixed with bacon bits fills the kitchen. She must have just finished cooking dinner.

My gaze wanders to the right, and I spot a mirror in the bathroom. My face reflects off it, revealing me to be much younger than I am now. By the looks of it, I must be around... twelve? If this is a memory, it's the most life-like thing I've ever experienced in my life.

"Jason," Amanda whispers, and her throat catches. "I need to talk to you, honey."

"What is it, mom?"

I ask the question, but it isn't me asking. It's like someone else is controlling my body.

"R-Robert... I just got off the phone with the hospital..."

"Mom? Did something happen?"

"I don't want you to be scared, okay? Robert, he... he was... there was an accident." Her voice catches again, and she quickly wipes her eyes. Now I realize the macaroni is getting cold and hard. It must have been sitting there a while.

"An accident? Is he okay?"

She wrings her hands and looks away, unable to meet my gaze. "H-he's paralyzed, Jason. I haven't told the others yet. You're the oldest, so I thought you should know first."

"Para...lyzed... how? Why?!"

She takes a step toward me, then stops to sit in a chair next to the kitchen counter. She taps the one beside her, so I quickly slide in.

"Jason, honey, life isn't fair. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, understand?"

"Is he going to be okay?"

I've heard this conversation before. I already know what Amanda is going to say, yet my words are ignorant as if I haven't a clue what's coming next. Not only is Robert paralyzed, but the accident crushed part of his skull. His job at the factory is over. He can't support the family.

I already know how this conversation ends.

From this day forward, I flitted from one foster family to the next. I was one of the lucky kids. Nobody ever abused me, but I had to deal with an unstable life, always worried about whether I would leave everything behind on any given day and start a new life.

Chaos. Disarray. My life never stabilized; not until I was old enough to fend for myself. By then, it was too late. I had lost my hope for a bright, sunny future. My mind was too weak to endure so many stresses from a young age. I put myself in a Cryopod and froze myself, arriving where I am today.

"The state is already looking into our residency, Jason. I've been on the phone for an hour talking to everyone, trying to figure out what to do. I'm... I'm at my wit's end."

Since I was eight, I've lived here. Four years of my life gone, flushed down the drain. I thought after I was tossed between the first three families, the Tates would be my final home. I got attached to Amanda, even going so far as to call her 'Mom,' but it didn't matter. In the end, the universe forced me to move on.

"I'm sorry, mom. Can we see dad in the hospital?"

Her teeth grind audibly. "Not just yet. He... he's comatose. They... oh god... they said he won't... won't wake up..." Amanda lowers her face into her hands. "Uwaa! It's not fair! It's not fair!"

"Don't cry, mom!" I jump out of my seat and hug her, but the words my mouth forms aren't the words I think.

Yes. Cry. You have to let your feelings out. Don't do anything rash, Amanda.

The memory fades away.

I'm back in the darkness now. I know how Amanda's story ends. After the children in our household, including me, were sent to other foster parents, Robert died. He only lasted three months before they turned off life support.

Amanda killed herself one year later.

I didn't find out until I was seventeen. That was a year before I entered the Cryopod.

The next four years, up to age 16, were a blur. I bounced from one family to the next. *He's too quiet,* they'd say. *He reminds me of a serial killer.*

I knew what other kids in the house would say. I didn't care. It was whenever the adults whispered about me behind closed doors, the times I accidentally overheard things no child should hear- those were what hurt me the most.

At age 16, I got a job delivering newspapers. Once I had enough money, I moved out, rented a flat, and put myself through school.

What would my life have become if I had stayed with Amanda and Robert?

Would I be here now, in Hell?

The darkness pulls away, and I blunder back to reality. The hum of electricity fills the air. I pull myself up and wipe the glumness from my face.

Bahamut cocks her head. "Oh? A fleshbag is the first to wake up. How little trauma you must have experienced."

"My name is *Jason*," I say, quickly correcting her. "That memory was unpleasant. I never wanted to remember that day."

"Chit-chit! Hee! The more distressing the memory, the deadlier the effect it has on the body. You're already on your feet, so you must have had an easier life than the other two."

I glance at Kar. The crocodile is bent down, one knee on the ground, while he bows his head and rests his arms on the other knee. His brow furrows, and a look of distress gradually spreads across his face, worsening every second. He looks like he's suffering an unimaginable nightmare.

Then I look past him at Amelia, and my heart skips a beat. She's rolling around on the ground; her body curled up in the fetal position as tears stream down her face. Her eyes squeeze shut with enough force to crush concrete. Every few seconds, she moans under her breath, "No... no... I don't want to... I don't want to..."

"Amelia? Amelia! Are you okay?" I turn to Bahamut. "What's going on? She's having a panic attack!"

Bahamut holds up her claws to examine them. "It seems the female has experienced some awful trauma in her life. She appears younger than you, yet some unknown horror has corrupted her mind. Hopefully, for your sake, she'll pass the test. I think not, however."

Fuck passing. I don't care about the stupid test. Amelia's my friend, and she's in pain! I have to help her!

My head spins as I try to think of what I can do to escape the trial. Right! Wordsmithing! I can probably use it to get out of here and save Amelia! I just need to figure out-

"Hurgh."

Kar's voice startles me, nearly making me stumble backward. The crocodile slowly rises to his feet, but his knees tremble, and he has difficulty standing. "That was... the worst experience of my life. Experiencing the loss of my mate. How *dare* you make me relive that pain."

Bahamut nudges a few feathers around on her head. "Hee! The magic does all the work. I had nothing to do with it. It forces you to relive your most painful memories. Take heart, Kar, second mightiest of your people. At least you aren't experiencing the same pain as that poor child. She'll be an empty vessel once her mind rots."

Kar looks at me in confusion, then at Amelia. He gasps. "Fried one? What's wrong?!"

Blaarjiim materializes in my mind, but his image warps unnaturally, giving him a distorted appearance. It's like I'm watching him on a busted TV, one that barely works and has those awful lines scrolling down as it adjusts the picture.

"Jason. Listen to me. This is important."

"What's happening with Amelia?" I ask.

Despite Blaarjiim's image being even more shadowy and hard to make out than usual, there's a sense of anticipation in his posture that I haven't seen before. "My queen is in agony. I can only guess what event she's reliving, but based on how tight-lipped she's been about her past before we met, I'm sure it will reawaken her primal nature. This is not a game. Bahamut is playing with fire, and it will burn us all."

My eyes flick to Bahamut. She ignores me again and opts to banter with Kar. Neither of them can hear Blaarjiim, so he must be projecting himself into my mind only.

"Is Amelia going to be okay?"

Blaarjiim turns to face Amelia in my mind's eye, stares for a few moments, then looks back at me. "You need to know, Jason. My queen isn't the same girl she was when we met. She used to be a monster, unlike anything you faced in the Labyrinth. There was a rage burning in her heart, one she neither tried to extinguish nor wanted to. I once preferred that persona. However, ever since she emerged from the statue, I've also enjoyed the simple talks we've had. Thousands of years of silence as I rested in her palm changed me as well."

"What are you saying? Out with it."

Blaarjiim's image flickers. "I feel it again. My queen's burning rage. She told me yesterday that while in the statue, she was at peace. She dreamed and allowed her mind to wander. After you released her, she had mostly forgotten the pain Joan inflicted upon her."

I finally understand what he's saying. "You're saying... she's reliving her encounter with Joan?"

"Possibly. Probably. I can't read minds, not even hers. What I do know is--"

Before he can finish, Amelia wails on the ground, releasing a high-pitched scream from deep in her chest. "Eeeeeeeeh!!"

Bahamut and Kar both jerk back in surprise. Big Bird squeakily chirps in astonishment. "Hee?! What the Devil?"

Amelia leaps into the air from her fetal position on the ground. The movement is so quick that I can barely register it before she smashes into the electric ceiling above, which repels her body back to the floor. She pounds into the tiles and snarls viciously like a wild animal.

Amelia's heads jerks back and forth wildly as she searches for a way out. Seeing nothing, the little girl leaps at the barrier and batters it with her fist, sending what must be thousands of volts of electricity coursing through her arm. She doesn't flinch, and whales on it again, this time with her other hand, the one clutching Blaarjiim's orb. She turns his orb into a battering ram, bashing it against the field over and over again.

"Stop! Stop it this instant! The test isn't over yet!" Bahamut screeches and grabs for something in the folds of her robes. She pulls out a small device that resembles a remote control, and after tapping a few buttons, a blast of lightning erupts inside Amelia's cage, making her scream in pain.

"Eeeyah!!"

Bahamut's breathing falters. "There! Get ahold of yourself, foolish child! If you don't, I'll send another pulse your way! You won't like-"

Bahamut doesn't get to finish her sentence. Amelia grinds her teeth together and rams her entire body into the front of the cage, then kicks off of it and slams against the other barrier. Our platform shakes as she bounces back and forth. Only now does she begin screaming obscenities. "You fucking bitch! I'll tear you apart! You took him from me! YOU TOOK HIM FROM ME!!!"

Bahamut's confidence vanishes. She quickly presses more buttons, and another wave of energy surges inside Amelia's chamber. This time, Amelia doesn't even feel it.

Amelia's bloodthirsty shrieks increase as she hurls Blaarjiim's orb at the wall with all her strength. He bounces off, but she catches and flings him again. By now the arena has begun shaking like a leaf in the wind. I can barely keep my footing.

"Jason!" Hoarhiim roars into my mind. "Don't just stand there! Do something! Use your Wordsmithing! Calm her down! If she breaks out, she'll tear Bahamut apart, then the rest of us! She isn't sane right now!"

Blaarjiim forms, but this time his appearance is much sharper than before, and his figure seems twice as big as usual. "Hahaha! Yes! That's right! My queen remembers her hatred! I feel fury welling up inside of us!"

Jesus Christ. Blaarjiim was calm only moments ago, but now that Amelia's awake, he's acting like a lunatic. I have to stop her. I have to calm her down.

Wait... yes! That's it!

I quickly reach my hand out, aiming it at Amelia. "**Calm.**"

Once again, Amelia swings with all her might at the wall, but suddenly her momentum stops. She pulls her punch right at the last second, only giving the electrified barrier a tepid nudge.

Silence.

Amelia stares forward blankly. Bahamut, apparently not hearing me Wordsmith, hovers her finger over the remote. Her breaths come in shallow gasps. "Wha... what was that? Is she done?"

I, for one, can only stare at Amelia in astonishment. *I changed her mental state. I calmed her down with a single word. Is this the true power of Wordsmithing?*

Finally, Amelia blinks her eyes. Color returns to her skin. "Huh? What happened?"

"D-don't give me that!" Bahamut steps off her pedestal and cautiously approaches Amelia. "What are you? A shapeshifter?! No human has strength like yours! Only an ancient Hero could have the sort of power you just displayed!"

"Hero?" Amelia cocks her head. "I'm not a hero. I hate them. All heroes are my enemies."

Her voice is monotone. The entire way she holds herself is unlike anything I've seen before.

"A likely story." Bahamut's feathers ruffle slightly as a shiver goes down her back. "After this test is over, I'll investigate you more carefully." Her voice holds a note of fear.

Bahamut turns and walks back to the podium. Blaarjiim reforms in my mind, but something about him is a little off. I can't quite put my finger on it. "Haha... Intoxicating. Did you feel it? My queen's power is formidable. Even this false god, Bahamut, knows better than to underestimate her."

I eyeball Blaarjiim's smoky form for a few moments. "You went berserk for a minute. I'm beginning to think you really *are* the embodiment of evil."

He sneers at me and vanishes without replying.

Typical.

Kar kneels to Amelia's level. "Small one, are you of sound mind? Whatever you experienced during the first test, it left mental scars that run deep as a canyon. I am here if you wish to discuss anything."

Amelia stares at him blankly. "Yes. Thank you. I am fine. I feel no emotion at all right now."

Now that she mentions it, she is eerily calm compared to her usual self. My spell must be the reason. How long will it last? Can I disable it? *Should I?* Maybe it's best to let her clear her head for a few minutes.

"Ahem." Bahamut, looking worse for wear, stands on her little platform again. This time, she keeps her remote held in hand. "Well, ordinarily there would be two more tests, but after that display, I think I'll skip the second test. I'd rather not have another mental breakdown. Besides, it's too easy. Nobody ever fails."

Kar glares at her. "Good to hear."

I notice with a small amount of amusement that as Bahamut reaches into her robes again and pulls out the tiny hourglass from earlier that her claws are shaking ever so slightly. *Yeah, tremble, you fucking bitch.*

"Hee. I will remind you of the rules regarding the third test now. It has a time limit of one hour. You must find the answer to an elaborate riddle, one that nobody has been able to solve for all of my life. The completion rate for this final test is zero percent. To be blunt, it's impossible. However, you have two options for proceeding."

Kar flares his nostrils. "And what are those?"

"Firstly, you may surrender. If you give up now, I will flood your chambers with lethal gas. If you fail, your chambers will fill up with lethal gas. Your death will be gruesome and unpleasant. I assure you, surviving would be worse than not."

"Secondly, you may choose to undergo the test. If you fail, you will become my pawns for all eternity! After analyzing that strange female, I will send the fleshbags to the mines and press you into my service, Kar! Of course, if you succeed, I will elevate you to the position of my first-in-command! I will give you one of my rings, and you will become one of the mightiest existences in the Labyrinth!"

Bahamut holds up her free hand, and only now do I notice three average-looking brass bands stuck on her index, middle, and ring fingers. They look drab and dreary, but a hint of intrigue enters her eyes.

"These are not just any rings, mind you. Long ago, when angels ruled the Earth, I fought alongside the demons and partook in the final battle against their mortal enemies. Each of these rings belonged to one of three archangels. Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. They are partially responsible for my awe-inspiring power."

Hoarhiim snorts. He whispers in my mind, "An unlikely fantasy. *Rings belonging to the Archangels.* As if such a thing could be true."

"You don't believe her?"

"Nay. If those rings are, in fact, such holy items, their power would likely kill her where she stands. Monsters and demons cannot use the holy power of an angel, let alone an Archangel."

"If you say so."

Hoarhiim knows better than me about these sorts of things. I should defer to his wisdom, but if the lie is so blatant, why bother? It seems like one of those 'so ridiculous that it turns out to be true' stories.

"Make your choice, Kar."

Her taunting words berate us, giving us little time to think. Kar glances at Amelia, then at me. "Turtle. What should I do? Bahamut's test is impossible. We'll die if we don't try it, but if we do, we'll lose!"

Kar's fearful words ignite rage within my heart.

I want to wipe that smug look off Bahamut's face. Zero percent? Get out of here. She's forcing us into a corner. Bahamut crafted this entire bullshit test to break our spirits. I won't go down without a fight.

I turn to Bahamut. "A question. Is only Kar allowed to answer? Can we speak?"

She coyly chuckles into her hand. "Hee hee! Of course, you may. Whether you have three heads or one, it makes no difference. The riddle is impossible to answer. Besides, two backwater savages like yourselves will be of little help. However, only Kar can make the final response. He is the candidate, so he must make the final decision."

I nod. *It'll do.*

"Kar. There's a saying on Earth, where I was born. *You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take.* Accept the test. I'm good with riddles and wordplay. Maybe we'll lose, but I can't stand the thought of willingly submitting to this stuck-up arrogant bitch."

Kar growls in his throat. "Hurgh. Wise words for a little turtle." He raises his head up to face Bahamut. "Very well. We will accept the test."

She clicks her tongue. "A shame. I had hoped to make you my pawn. Perhaps in death, your bodies may yield some use." She holds the hourglass up. "After I give you the question, I will upturn this device, and your hour will begin. If there is even one grain of sand still falling once you give your answer, it will count. If you run out of time, you lose. If you answer wrong, you lose."

I groan inwardly. *Bahamut just looooves playing up the drama.*

Gently, Bahamut lowers the hourglass. "Here it is, then. The final test. Riddle me this, riddle me that: **What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, three legs in the evening, and no legs at night?**"

Pain. Anguish. Desperation. These are the looks every sucker gives me when they accept my third challenge. I warn them. I tell them the odds. I tell them the hard truth.

And still, they never believe me.

Kar, the crocodile, slowly opens his mouth, but he cannot form words. I see the defeat in his eyes. A dumb animal like him hasn't a chance of solving my riddle. The girl stares ahead blankly, while the boy smiles. *Look at him.* By merely hearing my riddle, his mind has already shattered. He smiles because he knows that by the end of the hour, he will be in chains, mining demonstone for the rest of his pathetic existence. Today holds the last ray of sunshine he will ever see.

How many monsters and humans have I corrupted over the years? Thousands? Millions? I am the pinnacle of monster society in the Labyrinth, a perfect specimen.

It wasn't always this way.

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I was born a human, an Israelite slave among the Egyptians. Their society was the pinnacle of human engineering at the time, a marvel unlike any before. The Babylonians had their Tower of Babel, but the Egyptians had pyramids, animal husbandry, irrigation, and they even invented the first forms of writing.

However, no society is perfect. Tortured by those above me, I had no lot in life. The Egyptian masters cracked their whips and flayed the skin from any slave who couldn't scurry fast enough — no back-talking, thinking for oneself, or autonomy. Of course, as a child, I thought their actions were cruel and unjust, but I had little understanding of the world outside. *Not like now.*

It was during my eighth year of life that I discovered the horrors of the world. My brother's eyes were put out by a slaver for looking at the man's wife in a lustful manner. Then they took all of our belongings, flayed my mother so severely she couldn't walk, and said they would come for me on the next day.

Terrified of what fate had in store for me, I fled the city. I had no way of surviving in the desert wastes, but I would rather die in the scorching sands than at the hands of the beasts posing as humans.

I wandered the desert for two days. My throat turned to ash, and I knew that soon, I would perish. I wished to be in the arms of my mother again, but of course, that wasn't possible. Even if I wanted to go back, my weak, pathetic body couldn't handle the return trip. So I pressed onward.

On the third day, I knew the end was nigh. My life would end before I even reached my first decade alive, as so many other humans had.

And then... I found it. I stumbled upon an oasis in the desert. Cool water, trees with fruit hanging from them. Had I been a little older, I might have assumed they were mirages caused by the scorching heat, but I immediately trusted my eyes. Leaping into the water, I was fortunate that it was not an apparition.

My cracked skin softened, and my throat sighed in relief as I swallowed the tasteless liquid.

Then a gravelly voice spoke from the other side of the oasis.

"Who dares enter my land?"

I froze. Standing up in the shallow water, I turned to face what I knew could only be a chimera. A fierce beast stood at the water's edge, one with the body of a cougar, the wings of an eagle, and the head of a lion.

The beast spoke again. "Human. Why have you sullied my waters? Your kind is not welcome here."

My knees began to tremble. The beast was ten times larger than the biggest bull I had ever seen. For the second time that day, I felt my death was upon me.

"I-I-I d-didn't mean t-to..."

The words wouldn't come out. I merely stood there shaking, as the monster slowly took a few steps into the water.

"Hmm. A child. Bony, too. It hasn't had a good meal in its life. It's so terrified of me that it can't move. Bah."

The monster spoke its thoughts aloud as it approached. Soon it came to a stop about ten feet away. I could smell the blood on its breath; the remains from whatever its last meal was.

"Begone, human. Go back to your village."

"I... I... I can't." Speaking softly, I managed to slip a sentence out. "Th-they'll kill me, g-great one..."

"That is no concern of mine." The creature's eyes softened as it looked at me. "Hm. Tell me, two-legs, do you know who I am?"

I shook my head.

"I am Jarnof, the Sphinx. Based on your garb, you must be from Egypt. I know not how you stumbled through the barrier of my domain, but few humans could manage such a feat even if they intended it. My magic is powerful, and it allows me to stay here in peace without being bothered. Do you understand?"

My voice squeaked and cracked. "No... no... I'm sorry..."

Slowly, the Sphinx, Jarnof, raised his head to the sun above. "I am old. Ancient, in human terms. Ten thousand years have I lived. My body is strong as it always was, but my mind is beginning to slip. The former Sphinx, Lilliput, only lasted seven thousand years. I was but a mere imp when I first encountered him. Having solved his riddle, he chose to pass his power on to me. I, however, did not do the same when the Pharaoh Khafre solved mine."

Jarnof bows his head and yawns. "Shameful. Ten sphinxes have lived before me. I am the eleventh. Without fail, all passed their power on to the one who solved their riddle, but I did not. Tell me, two-legs,

am I worthy of holding this power?"

I didn't know what events he was mentioning. It took me many centuries to understand, but once I did, only then could I comprehend the weight on his shoulders.

"You seem quite powerful to me, Sir Jarnof."

The fear was beginning to leave me. I was still frightened, but not petrified. The Sphinx sat down, allowing the water to wrap around him as he lowered his gaze to meet mine. There was no killing intent in his eyes; no desire to slay me, unlike the Egyptians who called themselves human.

The Sphinx rumbled in his throat. "All my predecessors and I were forced to live solitary lives. A Sphinx must hold no earthly attachments. We can never experience love, or joy, or any empathy toward another being. If we do, they will die. Our power is a curse. Two-legs, if you had the power to change the world, what would you do?"

Memories of my mother caused my eyes to tear up. "I'd.... I'd make the Egyptians pay!"

"Aye. Revenge. A simple, understandable goal. And what then? Once your revenge was complete, what would you do with an eternity to live?"

"I don't know."

Moments passed.

The lion's lips curled up into a snarl, as though he were trying to smile. "You will have much time to dwell on that question. Human, I will speak my riddle now. If you can answer, I will pass my power down to you, and you will devise your riddle once you have the power. Every Sphinx has a different one, and each holds a unique power. Are you ready?"

"You want me to answer a riddle? I... I don't know anything at all."

"I'll be the judge of that."

I sought freedom my life. After being bound in slavery, I knew that the only way I could lead a worthwhile existence would be to enslave and chain those who shackled me.

Jarnof's riddle has long since faded in my mind, but I'll never forget the answer. *Bird*, a creature which flew free in the Earth's skies, unshackled by the laws of mankind. Somehow, for a child like me, it was the perfect question.

Jarnof bestowed his power upon me, and granted me a new life. After his death, I returned to Egypt and slaughtered those who once thought themselves my superiors.

A hundred thousand years I've lived, harnessing the power of the Sphinx to rule atop the pyramid of monsters. Two people, myself and the Pharaoh, cracked Jarnof's riddle. However, none have ever guessed mine. It's impervious. I need no friends or companions. Jarnof was weak, but I am mighty. I draw strength from my solitude.

* * *

I blink, remembering where I am.

Oh, yes, that's right. There were three before me, weren't there? Hah. Look at them, quietly whispering to one another. I haven't even turned the hourglass yet. Why haven't I? Because of pity?

Perhaps I, too, am beginning to feel the effects of age. My body stays firm and taut as the years go on, but my mind no longer holds the crispness of youth. The great wonders and mysteries of the universe no longer intrigue me, as they once did.

I... am tired.

"Hurgh. Bahamut, I have an answer to your riddle."

Kar speaks, and his booming voice jars me from my thoughts.

I blink in surprise, as I glance down at the crocodile. Unfortunate. The dumbest one of the three must be ready to say the first thing on his mind. The wise may worry they don't have the answer, but fools always assume their brilliance.

"I have yet to turn the hourglass, mighty Kar. I suggest you take more time to think it over. I am showing mercy by giving you more time. Don't waste it on thoughtless-"

"No, I'm ready." Kar cuts me off mid-sentence, flustering me. *He wouldn't do that if he were my minion. I don't allow backtalk from my inferiors.*

My tongue clicks and I cock my head as I finally turn the hourglass around, allowing the sand to fall. "Very well, Kar. Give your reply and accept your death."

A look of worry spreads across his face. He glances at the human male. "Turtle, are you absolutely certain?"

"Mhm. A hundred percent." The boy leans back casually and scratches his head. He seems perplexed, likely about the riddle. This should be interesting. Perhaps his guess will be more creative than others I've heard.

The crocodile croaks nervously. "Hurgh. Very well, then. The answer to your riddle is... Man."

My body freezes. A thousand needles of shock lance into my stomach, causing gaseous pain to erupt in my chest.

What.

Part 011: Riddle Me This, Hero

"What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, three legs in the evening, and no legs at night?"

Bahamut chirps her question, and after a moment raises her head to stare vacantly at the sky.

Several seconds pass. My heart trembles in my chest, increasing in power until it feels like a monkey trying to break out of my ribcage.

No way. That can't be the riddle.

The Sphinx's Riddle?

The easiest riddle that every grade-schooler knows?

Maybe it's a trick. Maybe the answer is different from what I remember. Bahamut doesn't appear to be someone who would waste her time on something dumb for no reason.

I shoot a glance at Kar. He slowly lowers to his knees and makes signs with his hands. "It is over. We've lost. Father, mother, ancestors, forgive me. I should have studied more as a hatchling. We will fail this challenge and die because of my incompetence."

My eyes move slightly past him to Amelia. She continues to stand, arms limply at her side, and stare ahead blankly at Bahamut. "Too bad. I don't know the answer at all. I wish I could cry."

Neither of them knows the answer, but I do.

Man.

It's so easy that I'm having trouble coming to terms with my thoughts.

I whisper under my breath, "Kar. Amelia. I know the answer to the riddle. At least, I think I do."

Kar shakes his head. "You may hazard a guess, boy, but the riddle is nonsense. Changing legs based on the time of day... hurgh. Absolute foolishness."

Amelia turns to look at me, her expression as loose and emotionless as ever. "Jason, Kar and I haven't a chance of guessing correctly. If you think you know the answer, by all means, go ahead."

I've never been in a position like this before. The other two are completely useless. I can be the savior!

Striking a pose, I snap my fingers to get Kar's attention. "Kar, the answer to her riddle is 'Man.'"

The crocodile slowly raises his head. He ponders the answer for a few moments. "Ah, you are guessing. That cannot be the case. Man walks on two legs. He does not change how he walks based on the time of day. I had hoped for a better answer, little turtle."

"No, no, you misunderstand. A riddle doesn't use conventional logic. The time of day is an allegory for the different periods of a human's life. Morning refers to childhood, afternoon refers to our prime, the evening is old age, and night-time is death."

Several seconds pass. Kar rises to his full height. His eyes narrow, and he stares ahead silently as he mulls my answer even more. "I see. But what about the legs? Humans do not grow and lose legs at different points in their life."

"The legs are also allegorical. Babies crawl on all fours, children and adults run around on two, old folk walk with a cane, and the dead do not walk at all."

Kar's eyes light up. "Ah! I see! That's... that's brilliant, young one!"

Amelia stares at me. "Yes, that is a good answer. I like it, Jason. You have outdone yourself. I suppose since you are wearing the Crown, that much is to be expected."

Her blank expression is starting to unnerve me. It's like she's become a zombie. "Uh, thanks, Amelia. I knew the answer without the Crown, but I'm glad I had it anyway." After a moment, I turn away and cough into my hand, "**Normalize.**"

If Amelia heard me use my Wordsmithing, she doesn't mention it. When I turn back to her, she's already blinking and rubbing her forehead. "Ugh. My head hurts. Feels like an anvil was sitting on my skull."

Hoarhiim privately appears in my mind. "It seems your Wordsmithing worked on her. I would be cautious, Jason. I'm not attached to her like I am with you, and I cannot sense her emotions in the way Blaarjiim can, but my brother's mental change was... unsettling. We orbs are affected by the emotional states of those we bond. If he displayed that much intense rage, Amelia must have snapped."

I subtly examine Amelia. She looks tired, but nowhere near as angry as a few minutes ago.

"Yeah, maybe," I whisper under my breath so only Hoarhiim can hear me. "She's okay now. Those mental visions are pretty traumatic. I saw something awful too."

Hoarhiim grunts. "Mmm. I think that if we survive this encounter, you should sit down with Amelia and have a talk about her past, as well as yours."

A moment passes. Hoarhiim looks away. "Jason, you should know that... Amelia considers you a friend. I've known her, as well as my brother, for a very long time. To say she is not friendly with many would be an understatement. My brother and I do not always see eye to eye. Blaarjiim thirsts for power, as you may have already guessed. He's been quite toned-down from his past self as of the last few days, but what you saw when Amelia erupted in rage were his true colors."

"So he's evil?"

"Not exactly. Evil is a difficult term to pin down. Some commit evil acts for righteous reasons, such as when Joan tortured and violated Amelia to teach her a lesson about pain. Others perform acts of kindness for selfish purposes, such as when an individual attempts to manipulate someone else via a favor for personal gain."

"Like a politician?"

"I don't know who those people are, but they sound unpleasant."

"You've got that right."

I chuckle wryly and bow my head to stare at the ground. I don't know Amelia very well. She has an entire past, awful events she's experienced in her life, and she was locked in a statue for millennia. The fact she could live that long must mean her mind has experienced things no other human has before. I'm just a teenager. I can't even imagine what she's gone through.

When this Bahamut crap is done, I want to learn more about her.

Raising my eyes, I smile. *At least Bahamut is about to have her block knocked off. I can't wait to hear her stutter and stammer when she realizes we guessed her riddle's solution.*

A minute passes as the dumb bird stares up into the sky. *C'mon, stupid. Let's get this over with. I want to see you squirm.*

Finally, Bahamut shakes her head. She blinks, apparently trying to get some memory out of her mind. Looking down, she tilts her head to examine each of us with her black, bulbous, birdlike eyes.

Kar, realizing Bahamut has returned to reality, clears his throat. "Hurgh. Bahamut, I have an answer to your riddle."

She holds up her hand. "I have yet to turn the hourglass, crocodile. I suggest you take more time to think it over. I am showing mercy by giving you more time. Don't waste it on thoughtless--"

Kar smirks. "No, I'm ready."

I try not to laugh, but a little air escapes my lips. Bahamut's sudden look of irritation only makes his interruption funnier.

Bahamut turns the hourglass around and allows the sand to fall. "Very well, Kar. Give your reply and accept your death."

Her confidence causes Kar's to falter. He turns to me. "Turtle, are you absolutely certain?"

"Mhm. A hundred percent."

His eyes betray his unease, but still, he stands fully upright and faces the bird-person. "Hurgh. Very well, then. The answer to your riddle is... Man."

* * *

A minute of silence passes. Bahamut stares at us wordlessly, her face not betraying a single emotion.

What is she thinking?

Abruptly, her head cocks to the right. "Hee. You're wrong."

"What?! Impossible!" The words burst out of my mouth before I even realize what I'm saying. "How can it be wrong? I know what the answer is! The time of day refers to the phases in a person's life, and the legs refer to--"

"You're wrong." Bahamut interrupts me and closes her eyes sagely. "The correct answer is 'human.'"

Wh... but... she...

"That's... that's just semantics! The meaning is the same!"

Bahamut's beak vibrates, and her feathers twitch. "It's not the same! Empty-headed fleshbag! I decide the riddle, and I decide the answer! If I say it's wrong, it's wrong! Now you all die because of your stupidity! Hah, just as I expected. Nobody can guess the correct answer to my riddle. Hmph." Her entire body starts to tremble in rage. "Worthless, pathetic insect, thinking you could guess the answer! Hah! You haven't a clue! You're all braindead, empty, idiot numbskulls!!!"

My anger slips away. *I see. Bahamut's trying to rationalize so she can kill us. Damn. I didn't think she'd be such a sore loser.*

Amelia smirks. "We guessed correctly, didn't we? Uphold your end of the bargain. If you don't, I'll break out of this cage and tear your head off."

Bahamut recoils ever so slightly, likely from the thought of facing Amelia's wrath. "Chrrrr! As if I'd accept defeat from a couple of humans and a slimy frog!" Bahamut suddenly hurls the hourglass at Amelia's cage. It breaks apart, exploding like a tiny grenade, and the bird holds the remote up again. "You think you're so smart, hee?! I'll activate the poison gas, and you'll die! What do you think about that, little pest?! You won't beat me! I can never lose!"

Bahamut's gone crazy. This power-mad bird-brained bitch is going to kill Amelia, then Kar and I. Why did she mention those magical runes in the ground earlier, though? I assumed it was to create a magical contract with the three of us, but maybe it was for something else.

Ah! That's right; she made it very clear that only if we failed the first two tests would we become her pawns. But why? Did the magic have a specific trigger that had to activate to take over our minds?

Hell, maybe she lied. I can't be certain.

Maybe I can stop her before she kills Amelia.

"Take."

I aim my mind at the remote in Bahamut's hand, and an instant later, it appears at my feet... along with the rest of her hand.

"Heeee!" Bahamut falls to her knees and shrieks in pain as she stares in horror at the stump where her hand used to be. Blood begins squirting from the wound, and her eyes bulge as she howls and falls to the floor, clutching the bloody stub with all her strength.

I quickly bend down to grab the remote, but pause, noticing the hand I tore from her was the one with the three rings on it. Supposedly these rings belonged to the Archangels, right?!

Bahamut raises her head and quickly scans us. She spots me reaching for her hand, and her body shivers. "N-no! Stop! Those are mine! My rings! You can't have them!"

She isn't putting on an act. These rings are invaluable to her. What if I...

Reaching down, I pluck all three of them off her hand. The rings are bland and uninteresting, but now that I can see them up close, each one has a different word inscribed across the band. The language of all three words is Latin.

Michael.

Raphael.

Gabriel.

Bahamut wasn't lying! These rings must be the genuine article.

Wordlessly, I slip the first one onto my middle finger.

Gabriel.

A moment passes.

When Gabriel's ring touches my finger, nothing happens at first. I start to vocalize my disappointment, only for the world around me to fade away.

Instead of pitch blackness like in Bahamut's earlier visions, the world transforms into pure whiteness. My eyes sting from the glare, but no matter how I try to shield them, the light pierces into my mind.

"WHO has entered my domain?!"

A voice speaks, but it comes from far above me. I wince and open my eyes a crack to try and see who's talking, but my hesitation changes to fear as a gigantic foot appears before me! The foot must be ten feet tall, for I can barely see the top of the big toe. A sandal with dozens of straps wraps around the foot and a bit past the ankle.

My eyes rove higher, and a white robe comes into view. Still further, and the knees, hips, stomach, and so on continue until I take a step back and gasp. Whoever this being is, he stands at least two hundred feet tall!

Gabriel, the Archangel: A deity so imposing he could carve a chunk out of a mountain with a sweep of his hand. His white, feathery wings stretch out a hundred feet to his left and right, and his muscular arms cross in front of his chest. When I finally look up high enough to see his face, I grow a little nervous.

"Child! I asked a question! Answer!" His voice booms from the sky, pounding the ground with primal ferocity. I stagger and dig my heels in to hold myself up. Around us, the white void shifts and a field of corpses appears. The sun shines down as if it were any other day, but the mountains of armored and unarmored humans, angels, and demons litter the land. Green grass sags under the weight of blood, and the upbeat feeling one would expect from a meadow gives way to forlornness in the wake of tragedy.

I barely squeak out a response. "A-are you Gabriel?"

With terrifying speed, the giant lurches to his knees, causing a gale of wind to pummel my body. "Indeed, I am. Who art thou, and how didst thee obtain my ring?"

"I'm... I'm Jason Hiro. I solved Bahamut's riddle, but she decided not to uphold her end of the bargain. She was going to kill us, so I tore her hand from her body and-"

"Bahamut? Stop speaking in tongues, boy. I know not of such a name." The giant uncurls his arms from his chest and swings them toward me. I gasp and curl reflexively into a defensive position, but he stops just before hitting me, extends a finger the size of my body, and pokes my back. "Tiny little thing. What a runt. Human, judging by thy appearance."

I blush and slowly rise to my feet. "Uh, um, yeah? I'm human. I-is that bad?"

"Hoho! Bad? Far from it! I've been cooped up for so long that I was growing bored! I'm just glad to have someone to chat with!" The Archangel stands up again, and the motion causes an updraft, yanking me off of my feet and nearly tossing me into the sky. "Surprising, though. None should be able to activate my ring except for another angel. They're all dead, unfortunately."

He utters the words casually, as though he couldn't care less. Despite that, his flippant observation of the past has a ring of pain to it.

"The angels are all dead?"

Gabriel gazes into the distance. "I have come to call our final stand the Day of Reckoning. The demonic onslaught was so sudden and swift that we hadn't a chance to prepare. Demons have little mercy for other beings. They are the most vicious of the sentient species, without exception."

"I'm sorry," I murmur. "That must have been..."

"The worst day of my life. Aye. Brothers and sisters I had known for millions of years fell one after the other. I exhausted my power and could only watch. Perhaps a quick, merciful death was for the best. Maybe we deserved to die."

A gasp escapes my lips. "What?! Nobody deserves to die! Certainly not angels! I mean... you're *angels*! Why would you think agents of justice deserved such a fate?"

"Hah. I like thee, child." Gabriel strokes the scruffy white hair lining his face. It doesn't entirely form a beard, nor does it match with the long, gangly hair on his head, but it gives him a superficial air of authority different from his imposing figure. "What is thy name?"

"Jason Hiro."

Gabriel blinks. "Jason *Hiro*, hm? Amusing. That name can't be coincidental. I said before that only an angel who wore my ring could speak to me, but that wasn't entirely true."

I raise an eyebrow. "If not an angel, then who...?"

The massive Archangel bends down again, but this time much more gracefully. Winds don't even kick up. He gently reaches a finger forward and touches the top of my head.

[Recommended Listening](#)

A series of images appear in my mind. Men and women bow before altars of various gods. Some wear the armor of monarchs, while others stumble about in rags.

The vision shifts to show a different scene, one of an army of demons and monsters standing off against thousands of angels and millions of humans. The angels levitate in the sky, while the humans form ranks with shields and spears.

"Long before man grew powerful enough to fight demon and monster on his own, he aligned with the angels and Titans to stand up to the infection that demons and their kin spread across the Earth. We

fought together time after time, seeking to rid the world of their filth and to restore purity to the only home we ever knew."

Gabriel continues. "However, in those ancient days, even with our combined efforts, the demons were nigh unstoppable. Humans could not exterminate them fast enough. One demon could slay five members of thy species with ease, reaping their souls and increasing the power of his allies in turn. While humans, Titans, and demons could reproduce, angels could not, meaning that every one of our kind lost permanently diminished our numbers."

I want to rub my head due to a stinging pain, but can't move my arms. "How did you overcome such dire odds?"

"We merged our powers with that of man. A forbidden union of Titan, angel, and human forged a new soul, one that would later come to be known as the Heroic Aura. A human gifted with the powers of the Heroic Aura could lead the charge into battle. This proved to be the exact weapon needed to combat demonkind. For a time, stability improved. We began to drive the demonic hordes back."

Gabriel pulls away, and I can finally move again. Fatigue hits me, as though I've lived the lives he beamed into my mind. "For a time? What changed?"

"Many factors shifted over time. The important thing, Jason, is the Heroic Aura. There can only be one Hero at a given time. When they die, the aura moves to a new vessel, and that person gains incredible power."

An electric shock shoots down my spine. "Wait! J-Joan of Arc! Wasn't she a Hero?"

Gabriel nods. "Mmm. Joan. Yes. A short-lived Hero of justice, but one that stood out like a shining star. Her quick end at the hands of her species, the very ones she was charged to protect, caused a significant schism between human and angelkind. Things changed after her death."

"Like what?"

"In time, all will be made clear, young one. Know this: If my assumption is correct, then thou art a descendant of the Heroes of lore. Thou art cut from the same cloth as King Solomon, King Arthur, Jephthah the Shepherd, Joan of Arc, and so many before and after them. There is only one problem..."

I wait, but he doesn't elaborate. "And what's that?"

Gabriel's face twists into confusion. "In the human calendar of the ancient times, near the turn of the year 1900, the Heroic Aura vanished. No matter where we looked, the angels and Titans could not find the next in line. Hundreds of years later, as the Energy Wars reached their apex, and our ultimate defeat, we knew then the truth: Someone had managed to extinguish the Aura, forever. Perhaps, had there been a Hero during those dark times, we might have survived."

Silence.

The Archangel stares at me, then slowly closes his eyes. Anguish radiates from every part of his body.

My hands begin to tremble. "G-Gabriel... you said the year 1900, right?"

"Mmm. Indeed."

"I... I was born in the year 2010. If I'm a Hero, then... well, you see... I put myself in a cryogenic stasis pod. I was asleep for a hundred thousand years, and only emerged from it recently... which might mean..."

The angel raises his head to look at me. "The Heroic Aura will not pass on to the next Hero without the former passing away. If ye sealed thyself in this 'cryogenic stasis pod' as ye claim, then..." His voice trails off. "I do not know for certain."

"I have powers! I have an ability I call Wordsmithing!" My heart begins to beat furiously. "I... I must be a Hero! If I'm the missing Hero, then that means I left everyone behind to die! Earth fell because of me!"

A look of alarm appears on Gabriel's face. "Thou hath the gift of magic? When didn't thy ability first appear?"

I wasn't expecting that question.

A moment passes. I finally remember. "I touched an orb of light, and the person inside of it gave me a bunch of magical power, or energy, or... something." Pausing, I remember what Hoarhiim told me. "But I later learned that I had the power all along, and he merely amplified it."

Gabriel shakes his head. "No, how *old* were thee when thy power manifested?"

That answer comes much more easily. "Eighteen. Well, technically I was a hundred thousand and eighteen, but who's counting?"

A smile creeps across Gabriel's face. "Boy, thou hath given me something I lost an eternity ago; hope. Hope is a powerful weapon, able to turn ragtag militia into efficient armies. As long as one has it, they will fight to their dying breath. If thou art indeed the Hero reborn, the future is not as bleak as I've come to expect."

"Huh?" I take a few steps back as the weight of his words hit me. "Do... do you expect me to do something about... all of this? The demons, the Labyrinth, and all the rest of it?"

"Of course. 'Tis thy solemn duty, Jason Hiro. The angels and Titans have long-since entered the Great Beyond, but the demons would be lax if they were to throw their food and energy supply away. Humans still exist, somewhere out there. As the Hero, 'tis thy responsibility to unite thy people against the demonic menace and take back that which they stole from us."

"I... I can't do that! I'm just a kid! I don't know how to save anyone!"

Gabriel's smile vanishes and irritation replaces it. "How impudent of thee. Alexander the Great was a fresh-faced, eager sixteen when he raised an army to slay the demonic hordes. Joan of Arc fought for but a few precious years before other humans burned her at the stake. She was only nineteen. Thy right to object is null. As others have given their lives in the service of humanity, so too must ye, for who will rise to the cause if not thee?"

A moment passes.

Gabriel is right. I don't have a good counter to his logic. Suddenly there's this huge weight on my shoulders, but I don't know if I can handle it.

Perhaps sensing my uncertainty, Gabriel's anger fades. "Jason, the path the Hero must walk is an arduous one. Alexander the Great faced many difficulties over his short life, as did all other Heroes. Many died in spectacular battles that gave way to stories, myths, and legends... but some Heroes shirked their duty. They rejected the call and squandered their gifts, leading debauched lives. The difference is that in those days, humanity and the angels were able to fend off the demons for a time until the Hero died and passed their power to the next in line. No longer do we have such a luxury! Thou must train with all thy heart and soul if ye expect to right thy past wrongs."

Gabriel rises to his feet again, and the field of grass changes around us. I suddenly begin to fall as I appear in outer space, where the distant twinkles of millions of stars shine brighter than I ever saw on Earth. Gabriel's form expands, and he grows to the size of the Sun, then past that, until he is as big as the Solar system.

Continuing, Gabriel takes me on a journey through the cosmos until we arrive outside of the Milky Way. He gently holds his hand underneath the galaxy, allowing it to spiral in his palm.

"Thou art a speck within many specks, Jason. Even so, among humans, thy power is as unstoppable a force in their eyes as the galaxy is in thine. If ye do not fight the demons, humans will live in subjugation to them for all eternity. They will languish in darkness forever."

Gabriel reaches his hand toward me and pulls back his finger, pinching it with his thumb. A second later, he flicks me, shattering my consciousness and sending me careening across the universe.

"Go, Jason, and be the Hero thou were meant to be."

[Recommended Listening.](#)

Hero.

The word plays in my mind as Gabriel fades away. My body falls, for one year, for ten, for a million.

I'm somebody important, someone with the power to right the wrongs of the world. I have an ability passed down by ancient legends I once read about in mythology textbooks. What feats did they accomplish? What feats can *I* perform?

...That isn't important. Gabriel is right. I've stumbled around aimlessly my whole life. I've sought to pursue my pathetic desires without thinking of others. I've been selfish and arrogant while ending up the progeny of fate. Yes, I have suffered, but others have endured worse and even died because of me.

I shouldn't have frozen myself in the Cryopod. If I had stayed on Earth, I might have been able to save it. I doomed my fellow humans, all because I felt a little depressed.

Pathetic.

What would Amanda say? What would my *mother* say? Am I going to give up, just like she did? I have to fight. Everyone depends on me, even if they don't know it yet!

My body falls through clouds, and the arena from before appears below me as I hurtle to certain death. I'm not scared, though. It's just an illusion.

Ah, there I am. Bahamut stands before my cage, screaming something I can't make out, while my slumped figure lies on the ground unmoving.

Here it comes. I'm going to merge with myself once more.

My soul slams into my mind with the force of a comet.

"Hwah!" I yell something unintelligible and leap to my feet, frantically scanning the arena. A dull roar greets my ears as my hearing pops back in. Only now do I hear the maniacal ranting and raving of Bahamut as she screeches and screams.

"Insect! Thief! Monster! Give my rings back! They're mine! MINE!!"

Blinking, I spin to look at Kar and Amelia. The relief on their faces is evident as our eyes meet.

"I thought you died!" Amelia smiles cheerfully at me, but pauses and shivers. "Ooh, what's that sudden chill? Does anyone else feel it?"

Looking away, I glance down at my hand. Gabriel's ring is still on my finger, but the other two were clenched so tightly in my palm that they left circular imprints.

Raphael. Michael. I'll try them out, but later. Right now, I have other goals. Wordlessly, I slip them in my pocket and spin to face Bahamut.

Something about my posture strikes a nerve. Bahamut stops screeching and takes a step back. "Wh-what?! What are you staring at?"

My body feels different. Maybe it's just my imagination, but my energy feels more intense than before. The birdlike figure of Bahamut doesn't cut quite the intimidating figure she once did.

"Sphinx. A unique monster species. The Sphinx's spirit travels from body to body by way of Riddle Magic, granting its user unprecedented strength, agility, and immortality. It doesn't distinguish between any species, only that it must enter the mind of something intelligent enough to answer the riddle. Is that about right?"

Bahamut clutches her stump and narrows her eyes. "Where did you learn that? Did... did the Archangel tell you something?!"

"No. The Crown did. Just now. It's the Crown of Solomon, you know. Unparalleled knowledge, all that fun stuff. Bahamut, you've been a naughty girl, haven't you? You were born a human, yet you've abused the power of the Sphinx to your advantage, and even gone so far as to enslave members of your former species."

Bahamut takes another step backward. "Hee. What... what is this? Who are you? Before, you cowered like a rat. Now you stand tall and act confident! Do you think I'm frightened of you?! I have an army that heeds my call!"

Saying this, she snaps her fingers, and several corrupted monsters rush onto the stage from the sidelines. Based on their body language, none of them like or respect her, but they're unable to resist and must follow her commands.

Crown, give me information on mental manipulation. I want to know what the Sphinx can do with riddle magic.

Walls of text appear in front of my eyes, but nobody else can see them. I peruse their contents in an instant, using the Crown to augment my reading speed.

"I see. You bend others to your will with strictly enforced clauses in your riddle magic. I was right in guessing as much earlier. Unfortunately for you, I can undo your magic."

Bahamut balks. "Chrrr! Hee! As if! You're just a human! Even if you managed to speak with the Archangel, you're still nothing!"

"No."

From the sky above, a familiar voice speaks. Everyone's heads jerk up to look at it. Only now do I notice a chilly sensation that's been giving me goosebumps. It's Gabriel.

His massive form devours the horizon, but it's only an apparition. He isn't alive in his full body, but instead in spirit form. The Archangel is different from how I saw him, as he now wears golden armor and a Viking-style helmet. In his right hand, he grips a sword made of pure light, and in the other, a silver shield emblazoned with a glowing, golden cross.

"The one who stands before thee is none other than the reincarnation of the HERO. Repent and beg forgiveness, lest he smite thee where ye stand. Bare thy sins before him, or die knowing thy injustice was brought to a deserved end!"

Bahamut's eyes bulge as I lower my head to stare at her. She jumps back even further and holds a palm up to me. "A Hero?! Impossible! They died out! Went extinct! Vanished!"

"It seems I'm the last one. I will slay those who commit vile acts and atrocities, especially upon humans. You will be the first to fall."

I reach my hand forward and aim at the barrier surrounding me. **"Fizzle."**

A crackling sound of electricity follows after a loud *pop*, and the barrier fades away. I step through without any resistance, regarding Bahamut with even less fear than I did a minute ago. She's more pathetic than I thought.

"Hee! Guards! A-attack! Take the Hero down before it's too late!"

All of her guardsmen move in lockstep like a tsunami, intent on bringing their weapons to crash against my bones.

They don't get a chance. **"Release."**

With a single word, I break Bahamut's mind-control spell over them. The guards falter and stumble, giving me time to hop back and avoid them as they fall over each other and slump to the ground.

"What?"

"Her control! It's broken!"

"We're free!"

Before my eyes, the black smoke pouring from their bodies slows to a trickle, then disperses. Several of the monsters morph and change into humans, while others shrink from hulking behemoths back to average sizes. It seems her powers had other effects as well.

Bahamut staggers and stutters. "You... you undid..."

"Your spell? A trivial matter. **Fizzle. Fizzle.**" With two words, I release my friends. "Kar, I think our dear Sphinx is hungry."

He steps out of his former cage and raises an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon, little turtle?"

"Give her a knuckle sandwich."

I wink at him and smile at Amelia, only to see a blank expression on her face. She hasn't moved from her cage and continues to stare at the sky toward Gabriel.

"Amelia?"

* * *

No response.

Shrugging, I tap Gabriel's ring. "How do I put him away, I wonder?"

After a few moments, air rushes toward me. I watch silently as Gabriel sucks into the ring. Before he leaves, Gabriel whispers so only I can hear him. "Thy companion's heart is besieged by darkness. Stay safe, Hero."

His form shrinks the remainder of the way and absorbs into the ring, causing it to glow and warm up for a moment before returning to its inert state.

I turn to look at Amelia, and am taken aback by her hollow gaze. Her eyes meet mine.

"So you're a Hero, huh?" Her voice is nearly a whisper.

My heart stops.

Oh. Oh no. I forgot what Amelia went through. I forgot what Joan did to her.

I'm an awful friend.

This is Gabriel.



Part 012: The Past, The Present, And The Monster Within

Amelia turns away, unable to meet my gaze. The expression on her face says it all. *I should have known you were a Hero. I thought we were friends, but you betrayed me. How can I ever trust you after this?*

She clutches Blaarjiim's orb to her chest and turns to walk away. "Don't even look at me."

"Amelia! I didn't know! I just found out!"

Immediately, I turn away from the defeated and humbled Bahamut to jog to Amelia's side. She's already walked a few steps away, but I grab her arm to stop her. "Please, can't we just talk for a minute?"

Amelia violently yanks her arm from my grasp. Tears well up in her eyes as she whips her head back to look at me. "I told you to stay away! You're a liar!"

Before I can react, Amelia pounds her foot into the ground and leaps away. The shockwave from her superhuman jump knocks me off my feet. I watch in astonishment as she leaps over the edge of the cliff and lands somewhere into the canyon below.

I stare blankly for a few seconds, before craning my head back. "Kar. Listen, I need to talk to Amelia. Can you handle Bahamut without me?"

The crocodile grunts. "Hurgh. Females are complex, little turtle. Do not let her be alone with her thoughts. If she begins to imagine falsities, it will tear both of you apart." He pauses. "As for the False Goddess, I will handle her myself."

"Thanks, Kar. You're the best."

There's no reason to worry. I've seen the limits of Bahamut's strength, and now that she's facing off against a turncoat army and Kar, she hasn't a prayer of winning.

I dash over to the ledge and peer into the canyon. Amelia is nowhere in sight. "Shit. Hoarhiim, any idea where she went?"

The deity of light shakes his head. "Nay. She may have entered the mines, but since she seeks solitude, the forest is much more likely. Surely you can find her with your ability?"

My heart skips a beat. *Right, Wordsmithing. Duh! I need to start using it more! Hmm. Something to track her, is it? Loads of words come to mind.*

Ah, right! I can use that one word from earlier!

"Locate."

Immediately, my eyes suck from my body, leap over the edge of the cliff, and hurtle to the canyon below. Then, they take a sickening lurch to the right and race into the forest. Within seconds my

disembodies eyes tear through foliage and vines to find Amelia. As she runs, her dress catches on thorns and brambles. It rips at the seams, all due to her extreme speed as she runs through the forest.

A moment later, my vision returns to my body. "Amelia's moving fast, Hoarhiim. I can't possibly catch her."

Hoarhiim crosses his arms. "Is that so? Perhaps you should try thinking outside the box. You've barely begun to fathom Wordsmithing's potential. Think, Jason. Think."

I nod and furrow my brow. "Right. I can't use 'speed,' since I'll end up meat paste when I hit a tree. What can I do to catch up to Amelia...?"

Behind me, Kar howls with laughter. "Come on then, little birdie! I passed your test! Be a good sport and concede!"

A quick glance back shows Kar and Bahamut's forces converging on the helpless bird-lady. She backs up to the edge of the arena, but no matter where she looks, there's nowhere to run. Thousands of newly freed slaves linger below the platform and eyeball her with looks of rage and disgust.

"Heeee! Stay back! I own you! You're all mine! You can't turn on me like this!"

One of the monsters, a goblin by the looks of him, cackles. "Kekekeke! How the tables have turned, 'boss'! I owe you for what you did to me!"

An orc nearby yells in agreement. "Yeah, me do too!"

Suddenly, an idea comes to mind. I turn back to face the forest. "Hoarhiim, if I run through the underbrush, I'll never catch up to Amelia, but what if I travel above the canopy?"

The deity of light smiles. "That's the way, Jason. That's the way."

Perfect. "**Flight.**"

Almost immediately, my feet levitate an inch off the ground, and the sudden lack of dirt under my shoes makes me yelp in fright and tumble off the cliff. "Aaaahhh!!!"

...Only for me to realize I've started hovering in midair.

Holy shit! I'm Superman!

Unlike the Man of Steel, however, my movements are anything but graceful. I fly around ass-first for a few moments, then suddenly my feet start dragging me around. No matter how I stretch my fist out, I can't form a Superman pose and fly naturally.

Frustrated, I lower myself to the stairs below while bashing against the cliff face a couple of times. "**Normalize. Wings.**"

This time, feathery grey wings sprout from my back. The sensation is painless, and after they finish forming, I note with interest that they resemble the wings Gabriel had.

It's time to test my new appendages out. With a mighty flap of my wings, I leap a hundred feet into the air. My eyes bulge, and a horrified scream escapes my lips as my fear of heights swallows my mind. After a

few moments, I swallow huge chunks of pizza and refocus my vision. Thanks to Solomon's Crown, I manage to reorient my body, then I check to see if I pissed myself.

Luckily, I did not.

A glance below me shows Kar beating the ever-loving shit out of Bahamut and laughing all the while. I can't hear what he's saying, but he has things under control.

[Recommended Listening](#)

A minute later, I begin gliding above the forest canopy. My wings are much easier to fly with, giving me the ability to stabilize myself, perform tricks and loop-the-loops, and other kinds of aerial maneuvers. It occurs to me as I flap around that if I had to engage in combat, aerial supremacy would be an excellent way to give myself an edge in a fight. *I'll make a mental note for later.*

However, as the minutes pass and the wall of trees stretches out before me, I realize I can't see anything below. Using *Locate* again will disorient me and send me crashing into the ground, but perhaps there's another way.

Once again, the Crown augments my mental responsiveness and an idea forms. "**Thermal.**"

My sight blurs for a moment, and changes to a heat-based vision type, allowing me to see patches of blue for cold, and red for warmth. It only takes a minute of scanning the forest below to notice a tree shaking, along with a tiny form of redness at the base of it. I deactivate my thermals, swoop down, and pierce the canopy in one smooth motion. My wings are surprisingly resilient, allowing me to slow my fall and land on my feet without jarring my spine.

I see her, now. Amelia stands with her back to me and punches a tree over and over again. "Liar! Liar! Liar!"

Her strength causes the ground to tremble and sends ripples of air pressure through the tightly-knitted woodland. I mutter under my breath, "**Normalize,**" and my wings shrink inside my body. I touch my back and notice my black jacket is torn apart, but it's the least of my worries.

"Amelia! Amelia!"

My voice echoes through the forest, and she stops hitting the tree. Pivoting around, she scowls at me, tears in her eyes. "Wh-what do you want?! I told you to leave me alone, Jason! We're not friends anymore!"

Her black dress is ripped and torn all over. It's as if she ran straight through a blackberry patch without stopping. Despite the damage to her clothing, I don't see a single cut or scratch on her skin. It's moments like these that make me realize how decidedly inhuman she can be.

"Yes, we are, Amelia. Stop saying that." I take a step toward her, and she tenses up.

"Oh, yeah, good friends! Great friends! Why not use that sword at your waist and cut me into chunks! How about dipping my limbs in boiling oil, or blasting me with holy energy?! That's what Joan did to me! That's what YOU did to me!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Amelia." I take a few more steps toward her, holding my palm up to try and calm her down. "I'm not Joan, okay? I don't have any of Joan's memories, or know any of her-"

"Bullshit! Lies!" Amelia kicks her foot in the ground and sends dirt flying at me, along with leaves and a twig or two. "Do you think I'm stupid?! First, you tortured me, then you locked me in a statue, and after giving me nightmares for tens of thousands of years, you released me, all so you could see how pitiful I've become! Well? What do you think? Do you like how much I've suffered?! Does my pain fill you with joy?!"

She's irrational. Her voice cracks, and more tears come down with every word. I've never seen her, or, hell, anyone else for that matter, this shattered before. Her level of emotion is way beyond anything I've ever handled.

Even so, I must fight.

"Amelia, I need you to calm down, okay? I'm not Joan. Joan is someone else. I'm Jason. I'm your friend."

"Jason, Joan, it's practically the same name! You might as well have red letters above your head screaming 'HA-HA' because your pun is SO clever!"

Christ. Now Amelia's using wordplay to spin a bunch of conspiracies in her mind.

"Amelia... come on. That's... how can I prove I'm not lying? I didn't know anything about you when we met. You and I have already been through some terrible things together; surely we can talk stuff out."

She hesitates, for a brief second. "Yeah? Talk? What do you want to say, Jason? Are you going to apologize for what you did to me? Can you do that? What good would words be, huh? They won't give me back all the time I've lost!"

I swallow, feeling a lump of dirt form in my throat. "Amelia, I'm not lying. Whatever Joan did to you was horrible. I can't apologize enough for her actions, but she isn't me. We're different people. We're-"

Amelia suddenly slumps forward, falls to her knees and begins to wail. "Uwaaa! Don't say it! Don't remind me! I don't want to remember!" She buries her face in her hands, dropping Blaarjiim's orb on the ground midway into the motion. "Aaahh!"

She screams uncontrollably for over a minute. "Bastard! I hate you! I hate you!!!"

Eventually, Amelia's anguish subsides slightly. She wraps her arms around her legs and begins rocking back and forth, as if trying to make herself as small as possible. Her actions remind me of a child throwing a tantrum... only more visceral — more raw.

Calmly and gently, I walk over and kneel beside the crying girl. She may claim to be thousands of years old, but her mentality is still child-like. Her emotional maturity is stunted, clouded by her past.

Hesitantly, I reach a hand over and rest it on her shoulder. "Amelia. I'm sorry. I... I didn't ask to become a Hero. I don't even know what a Hero is."

She chokes back a whimper. "Heroes are vicious killers. They always hurt me. You'll hurt me too."

"I wouldn't do that," I say, putting as much reassurance into my voice as possible. "I'd never hurt you, Amelia. A hero is supposed to be a good guy. If other Heroes have done evil things, then... then... I'll make up for it! I'll be a better Hero than any of them ever were."

A few moments pass as she sniffles uncontrollably.

"R-really?" Amelia swipes her arm across both eyes and rubs her tears onto her dress. "Do.... do you mean that?"

"Well, yeah. I don't lie, Amelia. We're friends, and that means we don't hurt each other. If you need help, I'll always offer a hand. That's just how it works."

Amelia doesn't look me in the eye. She continues to stare at the ground, even as she clenches her fists together and rubs them against her knees. "You think I'm a bad girl, don't you?"

"Huh? No. I don't think that."

"But... when Bahamut made me see the past, you saw me at my worst. I freaked out and exploded. I went berserk!" Now she looks up at me, and her eyes puff up and pulse red from how hard she's been crying. "I'm dangerous, Jason!"

For some reason, I don't want to look into her eyes. I reach around and pull her close, hugging her. She squeaks in surprise, not expecting me to embrace her so suddenly. Her body tenses up, and just when I feel like I've made a mistake, she exhales. A moment later, she leans into my embrace and falls silent.

Her small frame shakes slightly now and then, as if she's trying to choke down a sob, but after a few minutes, they stop. I rub the back of her head gently, and we share our feelings through touch instead of words.

When I pull away, she opens her mouth, perhaps to protest, but gives up halfway.

"Amelia. Do you still sense any hostility from me? Do you think I'm trying to hurt you?"

She looks away, shakes her head, and twirls her long black hair through her fingers. "No..."

I pick Blaarjiim's orb off the ground and hand him to her. "Good. I never want you to think like that again, okay? If we have a problem, we should talk it out. There's always a resolution."

"Uhn."

Amelia crosses her arms.

"I... I was wrong about you, Jason. I'm sorry. I never wanted to hurt you."

"Oh, jeez." I reach back and itch my scalp. "It's not a big deal. Sometimes people say things they don't mean, you know?"

"No, I don't know. I've never talked to anyone sincerely in my entire life, other than Blaarjiim. I'm... I'm glad I have you as a friend, though. Without you, I'd..." She trails off, unable to finish her sentence.

"You'd what?"

"Nothing."

Amelia jumps to her feet and takes a few steps to the side, putting distance between us.

"Let's drop it, okay? You left Kar all alone up there. We should go and help him out."

"Kar is fine, Amelia." I stand up as well, but a little more slowly and deliberately. "What about you? Are *you* fine?"

She nods, but won't meet my gaze. "Yes. Thank you. Why did you hold me, though? I'm not complaining or anything, it just felt nice."

I squirm slightly. "It's called a 'hug'. People who are very close friends do that sometimes. It's a sign of trust."

"You... you trust me?" Amelia raises her eyes and finally looks into mine. "After everything that's happened?"

"Yes. *Especially* because of what's happened."

For the first time since seeing me as a Hero, Amelia smiles. It's a beautiful expression, one lacking any sarcasm, apathy, or any other cynical emotions. A genuine, honest-to-god pure feeling of warmth radiates from her.

"I see. Thank you, Jason."

I'm glad Jason came after me, but I'm also angry.

I'm angry that I didn't put the pieces together sooner. I should have realized when Jason used his powers the first time, let alone the other times; he was a Hero.

I'm angry that I trusted him. His smile seemed genuine, but now I realize he has the same look in his eyes as all the other humans I've met.

Now I'm even angrier at myself for forgiving him. Since he's apologized and sworn to me to be a kind person who won't hurt me, I have to *keep* trusting him.

Jason's voice suddenly interrupts my thoughts. "Amelia, are you ready?"

"Huh? Ready for what?"

His smile fades a little. "Err, we're going back to see Kar. And, um, your dress is all torn up. I can fix that for you."

Looking down, I suddenly feel embarrassed by my exposed body. My mangled dress catches Jason's gaze, even though he looks away. It's torn up, ripped here and there, and I can even see my white under-blouse in several spots!

"Don't... don't look." I suddenly feel self-conscious and start to pull away, but Jason sighs.

"Jeez, Amelia. I can't see anything underneath," Saying that, he still blushes and looks away. "Besides, I'm not into kids. **Mend.**"

The sounds of ripping fabric make me look down. After a few seconds, my dress pieces itself back together again. It becomes as good as new.

"Oh. Um, thanks."

"Yeah, anytime."

Both of us fidget for a few seconds before he says something under his breath. The instant he finishes speaking, two feathery wings erupt from his back.

I gawk at them for a moment. "How did you do that? Wordsmithing?"

"Yeah. I chased after you by using these."

I nod and silently take the feathery wings in. They're grey, a different color from the angels I've seen, but otherwise the same size and look. Jason gave himself the flight capabilities and appearance of an angel, and he did it with only a single word. His power is incredible.

Blaarjiim notices, and whispers to me. "It looks like the mortal is already beginning to experiment with his heroic aura."

Jason takes a few steps forward and extends his hand. "Do you trust me?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, I suppose so."

He stammers. "Err, that line was from an old movie- uh, never mind. Look, I'll fly us back to Kar, okay?"

I try not to sound suspicious of his intentions. "How?"

Jason blushes madly. He quickly walks over beside me and kneels to wrap his arm around my waist. "Hold on."

Suddenly I realize what his intentions are. I try not to let out a squeak as he flaps his wings and we both take off. The wind yanks my head back and makes my mouth flap wildly for a moment as we erupt out of the trees and into the sky.

Jason's smooth rise upward falters after a moment, and he grunts, "Ugh, you're heavier than I expected."

I spit a leaf out. "Hey! Are you calling me fat?"

A nervous laugh. "Haha... uh, that came out wrong!"

"Idiot."

I'd cross my arms if I were on the ground, but since I'm a few hundred feet up, I settle for a pouty look and wrap my arm around his waist a little tighter. "D-don't drop me, okay?"

With more sincerity than usual, Jason smiles. "I'll never let go."

I avoid his gaze. "Idiot."

I hold Amelia firmly with my left arm, using as much strength as I can muster to keep us airborne until we reach the mountain-top once again. The moment my feet touch the ground, I stifle a sigh of relief. I almost insulted Amelia's weight once, so I'd rather not repeat that mistake.

Amelia quickly pushes away from me and fluffs her dress, shivering for a moment, but not due to the cold. "You know, Jason, it's considered polite to warn a girl before you sweep her off her feet like that."

I glance past her at Bahamut's arena. The back of Kar's head catches my attention, along with the other monsters on the opposite side of the upraised platform. "Sorry. I'm kind of awkward. My social skills are lousy."

She snuffles. "It's fine. That makes two of us."

* * *

A minute later, we climb the platform, walk across it, and peer down at the crowd below. Thousands of monsters kneel and stare at Bahamut's broken and battered corpse.

Amelia gasps. "Kar! What happened to you?"

I frown, unsure what Amelia means. The moment Kar turns to look at us, I understand. His face has morphed dramatically. No longer does he have a long, crocodilian snout, but instead, a vaguely human-proportioned set of facial features, along with green scales and sharp, dagger-like teeth.

Kar waves at us, and when he speaks, the growly voice he had before sounds more pleasing to the ears. "Hello, Amelia and Jason. I see you made up with each other."

He isn't calling me a turtle anymore, so that's a positive change in my book.

"Yeah, we're doing fine now, Kar. Uh, what happened to your-"

He interrupts me. "My apologies, but given that I have vanquished the fiend known as Bahamut and thus inherited the power of the Sphinx from her, the name 'Kar' no longer suits me. I have yet to choose a suitable replacement, and was wondering if perhaps you might offer aid to help me in my endeavor."

Amelia and I both stare at Kar blankly. She points her finger at him. "He's weird now. I don't like it."

Kar suddenly laughs. "Hurgh! I fooled you! Speaking like that wears me out. Jokes aside, I am the new Sphinx. I need a new name."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Good to have you back. Let's worry about your name later. I want to know what happened to Bahamut after I left."w

Kar gazes at me for a moment, then gestures to her limp corpse. "I killed her."

"Yes, but how?"

A look of recognition appears in his eyes. "Ah, that's what you mean. I used my fists."

This guy... he's still a meathead. I decide to drop the line of inquiry. "If you're a Sphinx now, what's changed?"

Kar shrugs. "I think I have gained strength, but it is difficult to say. Hurgh. I can use Riddle Magic, but I haven't tried yet."

The other monsters around us have been silent up to now, but one of them, a goblin I saw before, raises his hand. "Hey! I got a question! Are we all still slaves now or what?!"

Kar immediately shakes his head. "No. You're all free to do as you please. Bahamut's black magic no longer binds you."

"Nice." The goblin turns around and decks a smaller goblin in the face. "That's for stealing my sweet roll yesterday!"

"Hey! I'll knock yer block off!"

The scrawnier one jumps to his feet and starts to take a revenge swing at the first, but Kar suddenly roars, "Hey! Stop! Monsters must not fight among each other, not on this sacred day of liberation!"

Both goblins look at each other guiltily, then sag back into sitting positions.

I examine the horde of transformed turncoats. Perhaps fifty humans sit among the hundreds of monsters here and there, and they all wear beaten-up armor. Some wield swords and shields, while a few with others hold bows and arrows. The monsters barely take notice of them.

I gesture toward the humans. "I thought Bahamut put humans in the mines, but you're up here hanging with monsters. What's the deal?"

One woman, perhaps thirty years old, stands up. "Um, I can answer that." Her medium-length white hair hangs down in front of and behind her shoulders. Her pristine leather armor sticks out from the mess of people around her, and she carries an aura of authority. She appears both confused and dismayed, yet also thankful and hopeful as well.

"Great, go ahead then, miss...?"

She meets my eyes and quickly looks back at a blank patch on the ground. "Phoebe, your grace. Phoebe Berthold, a retainer under King Arthur, as it were. The humans here were born of different political or physical stature than those in the mines. Sir Adams, for example, worked closely with a man named Napoleon, while Sir Jorrin was a general in the Roman armies."

"King Arthur? The Romans? Aren't they ancient societies? How old are you?"

Amelia smacks me. "Jason! First the weight, now age too? Stop asking women such personal questions!"

Phoebe holds a hand up. "He meant no offense, young one. Indeed, Bahamut's magic changed us into monsters and gave us temporary immortality. Now that she is dead, I suspect we shall wither and die as well, or we will continue aging as we did before."

Grim, I think to myself. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. Then again, it sounds like Phoebe and the other humans have gone through something similar to my Cryopod's freezing process. Maybe they were 'frozen' at their current ages for thousands of years, and since Bahamut is dead, they'll age normally now.

I guess we have something in common.

"Thank you for the explanation, Miss Berthold."

She blushes. "I merely perform my duties for the Hero, your grace, as do we all. To meet a second Hero in my lifetime is an honor I cannot express with words."

"A second Hero?" I echo her words. "Who was the first?"

Before Phoebe even says the hero's name, I mentally facepalm for not remembering what she said only seconds ago. "King Arthur."

Phoebe reaches down to her side and clutches the sword at her waist tightly. "He was a venerable and honorable hero, one who gave his life to save the kingdom. I pray you will be as just as he."

"Err, I'll try."

I glance at Amelia, but her expression blanks out for some reason. "King Arthur, huh?"

"What, did you know him or something?"

Amelia slowly rubs her finger across her lips. "Did I, I wonder?"

"What do you mean?"

She shrugs. "I haven't mentioned this before, Jason, but I have terrible memory problems; especially after Joan sealed me away. My past is a blur, and Blaarjiim wasn't around back then so he can't help me either."

"Oh, shucks." I rub my head and look away. *Great, now Amelia is manic-depressive, suffering from trauma, and she has memory problems too. A cornucopia of quirks!*

Three hours later, I yawn as Kar raises a torch and presses it against a wooden pyre. Bahamut's body lays atop it, motionless, as if waiting for her end to come.

A fire begins to rage, and her form engulfs in flames while the several hundred monsters and humans around us watch in silence. Nobody here holds any love for her, but as Kar argued, all life is sacred and deserves respect. Even those whom we hate.

Hoarhiim bows his head. "You've done well, so far, Jason."

Amelia isn't here. She followed a few monsters over to Bahamut's palace to rest. I haven't ever seen Amelia fall asleep, but she said she was tired, so anything is possible.

"Thanks, Hoarhiim. It's rare for you to commend me out of the blue, though."

He nods sagely. "Yes, well, today you went above and beyond the call of duty. You solved the riddle within seconds, chased after the friend you cared for, convinced her of your heartfelt intentions, and returned to find an ally boosted thanks to your efforts. To say the day went off without a hitch might not be accurate, but few have accomplished so much in such a short time."

"Yeah," I mutter. "And I found out I was a Hero, too."

Hoarhiim doesn't respond for a moment. When he does, he speaks slowly. "Do you... regret that discovery?"

"No. Well, yes, maybe. A little bit. I know I shouldn't."

Hoarhiim holds up a hand, and a small chair appears. He sits down on it and leans forward and waggles his finger at me. "Why do you regret learning you are a Hero? Shouldn't you be overcome with

joy?"

It takes me a second to come up with a response. "Look, you heard what Amelia said. A hero viciously attacked and hurt her, then sealed her inside of a statue. Joan was scum, and I don't feel comfortable having a power that once belonged to such a psychopath."

Hoarhiim chuckles. "Heh, it sounds like you've got the Heroes all figured out, Jason. Tell me, young one, have you considered the possibility that the Black Witch hasn't been entirely forthcoming with you about her past?"

A pit forms in my stomach. I glance around and walk away from the burning pyre, noticing the sun is beginning to set. "What do you mean? Did Amelia lie to me?"

Hoarhiim touches his hands together and closes his eyes. "Jason, there's a reason everyone calls Amelia the Black Witch. There's a reason why demons fear her, and nobody released her from that statue for 100,000 years. Joan did not mercilessly attack Amelia based on some innate psychopathic tendencies, as you might have been led to believe. The punishment Joan unleashed upon Amelia, in my eyes, was more than justified. It was merciful, even, since she did not kill the Black Witch."

"Oh, come on, Hoarhiim." I glance back to make sure nobody else is around. "Joan cut her, broke her body and spirit, and you're telling me it was justified? How could that be true?"

The deity within the white orb glows slightly. Hoarhiim opens his eyes and pierces me with his stare. "How little you know. I will show you what happened on that fateful day."

Author Notes:

This is Kar's second form.



Part 013: Shattered Mind, Severed Link

"What am I looking at?"

My words enter a void. A bubble of images surrounds me, as if I've materialized inside of a snowglobe, looking outward. The outside world appears distorted and difficult to perceive.

Hoarhiim's voice responds in my mind. "I will take you on a journey through my memories, back to when my brother and I had been much closer than we are now. Back when we first met Amelia."

I squint to peer at the world outside, which seems as distant as stars in the sky, yet also as if I could reach out and touch it. "So, back then, was this *before* you and Blaarjiim became orbs, or has that always been a thing?"

Hoarhiim pauses for a while. "I do not know. The existence I remember has always been my current form. Sometimes, I see flashes and images of people I no longer recognize, but they are as foreign to me as the demons are to you. Now, focus, Jason, and allow me to show you a side of Amelia you may not expect."

Hoarhiim arrives beside me. The form he takes is that of a transparent shimmer in the air, vaguely human in shape, yet hardly defined enough to be anything more than a hallucination. Hoarhiim aims his palm forward, and the images surrounding us disappear. "I apologize for the murky picture. What you are looking at is my view of the world. I perceive reality in a sphere around my orb. However, I can interpret my vision in a manner you will more easily understand."

"That'd be great, thanks," I say with a chuckle. "So you're going to show me Amelia's past?"

"No, mine. It just so happens that Amelia always took my brother and me along with her. Despite bringing me along, she never once attempted to wield my power. Considering I am a being of the light, and her darkness was incompatible with my aura, I can only guess at her intentions. If I had to surmise, I would say... loneliness. Yes, that was likely the reason she kept me at her side."

I nod, and with a wave of his hand, Hoarhiim changes the world around us. The sphere of images instantly shifts into a flat screen, not unlike a projected picture in a movie theater. The Labyrinth's walls immediately stand out to me, given I've lived for the last few days always engulfed by them. Just seeing them again gives me the creeps.

After I finish my business on Tarus II; I'll have to return to the Labyrinth. Oh boy, that sure sounds appealing.

The walls move a few inches closer, but then further away, then closer again, repeatedly, over and over. It's as if I'm standing on a pendulum, watching the walls come and go.

"What's up with this picture?"

Hoarhiim clears his throat. "Amelia always carried Blaarjiim in her hand, but dangled me in a pouch at her waist, not unlike what you do now."

"Sorry." I apologize, but don't know why.

Several minutes pass. As the walls roll past and Amelia slowly walks forward, I crane my neck to see if I can see the path up ahead. "Hoarhiim, not to be a Debbie Downer, but all I see are walls. Can you, maybe, possibly, adjust the orientation?"

Hoarhiim stares ahead at the walls blankly for several moments. He shakes his head. "Hm? What did you say?"

"The orientation. We're looking smack at a wall." I scrutinize his face for a few moments, though I still can't make out any details. "Are you okay?"

Hoarhiim waves his finger and the view rotates forward so we can see in front of Amelia. I can finally see the black fabric of her dress now, though not much else beyond that. "Apologies. I accidentally skipped forward and relived the memory ahead of time. Ah. Let's move on." The deity of pure light crosses his arms and shakes his head again, but much more slowly this time. "Maybe it was for the best," he mutters.

The bland, empty halls of the Labyrinth seem darker than usual. I can barely see anything, even with Hoarhiim's orb in Amelia's pocket. Before I can ask why, Amelia rounds a corner, and the flat walls of the Labyrinth begin to change dramatically. Instead of a brown, earthen color, they become black and grey and turn into jagged rocks. Even the floor loses its flat, easily traversable texture. Irregular edges of rock stick up here and there and Amelia's knees wobble as she tentatively puts each foot down, searching for the best places to step.

"Where are we?" I wonder aloud.

Hoarhiim answers. "This is a sublevel of the Labyrinth. Amelia was a rather *greedy* person during this period of Hell's history. She pursued anything that caught her fancy, and since the Labyrinth suffered a chaotic power struggle for hundreds of years after she killed Satan, the demons and monsters couldn't form a resistance to stand up to her. She had free reign to go wherever she pleased, and she used that to her fullest advantage."

The picture suddenly shakes. Amelia yelps in surprise and tumbles to the side as her foot catches on something. "Gah! Shoot, this ground is impossible to walk on." Her voice is much deeper than the one she has now, not the high-pitched, kidlike sound I'm used to hearing.

"Hoarhiim, why does she sound different?"

The sage clasps his fingers together. "Oh, brace yourself, Jason. Amelia may look a little different than you expect." Saying this, he tilts the viewfinder up until I can see Amelia's face and body. My heart pounds in my chest. She looks a little older than me, perhaps twenty-five. She is incredibly attractive, with perfect pink lips, a softly defined nose, but also cruel, sadistic eyes. Her gaze makes me want to bark like a dog.

Amelia leans down to rub her knee. "Land's sake, at least the humans knew how to smooth out potholes. How's a lady supposed to walk in heels around here?"

Blaarjiim's voice speaks, making me nearly jump out of my skin. His tone is ten times deeper than usual, and it drips with the sensation of evil. "My queen, there are three goblins up ahead. They will surely

point you in the right direction."

"Finally, good news." Amelia leans against the wall, and only now do I realize I can hear her high-heeled boots clicking on the floor as she walks.

Still, I can't take my eyes off her face. She is, perhaps, the most beautiful person I've ever seen. Her face has a hard-set edge to it, as if she could take a bite out of concrete without blinking, yet her skin is soft and fair, like that of a princess. Her long black hair flows down to her waist, blending in with the color of her black dress. Unlike the one she wears now, it exposes a substantial amount of cleavage.

"Wh-why does A-Amelia..." I swallow suddenly, realizing I've never looked at her in this way before. "Why does she look so, uh, different?"

Hoarhiim doesn't pick up on my underlying feelings. "As expected, I knew you wouldn't understand. The battle with Joan changed Amelia's physical figure, though I never knew if the effects were permanent. The girl you know today is but a child in appearance. However, this memory is from during her prime."

"Yeah. *Her prime.*"

Amelia licks her soft, pink lips, and my tongue snakes out as well. I'm mimicking her without meaning to. I can't believe a human can look as good as she does. Her body is fully-figured too, and not like that of a child. To say she's my 'type' would be an understatement. Why couldn't I have met her when she looked like this?

Her boots continue to click on the ground. Hoarhiim turns the view away from her face, and finally, my heart slows back down. It must have been pumping at a thousand beats per second. Up ahead, the sound of three goblins cackling and laughing about something benign grows steadily more audible. Before I can comprehend the movement, Amelia lunges with terrifying speed a hundred feet down the hallway and grabs one of the goblins. She hoists him up by the neck.

"Skree! The Black Witch!" His two companions howl in alarm, fall on their asses, and scramble away, but Amelia ignores them.

"Where is it? I know you little thieves are hoarding a treasure! Tell me where you've stored it, or I'll take your head off!" Amelia squeezes the goblin's neck, and he squirms violently, hitting her arm with his hands, kicking and punching, even as urine begins to run down his leg. The poor little guy looks petrified. "P-Please! Deno knows nothing! Deno knows nothing! N-no kill me!"

"You're lying!" Amelia slams the four-foot creature against the wall, and judging by her voice and his expression, glares ferociously at him. "Last chance, puke-skin! Spill the beans, or I spill *you* all over the floor!"

Her squeezing grows even tighter. He wheezes out a gasp. "N... no... nothing..."

Just as he starts to slump in her grip, Amelia effortlessly flings the goblin behind her. I don't see what happens, but judging by the sickening *crunch*, he ends up a splatter on the wall.

Hoarhiim adjusts the view again to the other two goblins. Both of them leap to their feet and start to dash away, though their movement falters as their bodies spasm and shake in terror. "Buh-Black Witch!

Fiend! Monster!"

Amelia hops forward, clearing fifty feet in an instant, and delivers a spine-shattering kick to one of the two goblins. He hurtles forward into the darkness, and the distant sound of a *boom* tells a tale of his instant death.

"Goal! Ten points for me! Hyahyahya!" Amelia giggles nastily, an unpleasant, throaty sound. She lunges down, grabs the final goblin by his hair and violently thrashes him around. "Last one! Tell me where your treasure is, or you'll learn what it's like to become a bowling ball!"

She shakes the little goblin like a ragdoll, and he begins to sob uncontrollably. "Please! Please! Me don't know! Only elder knows! Elder Morru knows!"

"Elder Morru?" Amelia's voice lilts into a higher pitch. "Aww, that's more like it! Now you're saying something worthwhile. Where is your elder?"

"Huhk..." The goblin gags on his tears and snot. "M-Morru not far... me take you! Please no hurt! Me show you way!"

"Very well." Amelia releases him and stands up straight. Her hand moves past our vision, and she grunts. "Damn. Goblin blood all over the back of my dress. Why must you nasty creatures have so much of it inside you?"

Hoarhiim holds up his hand, and the image freezes. "I hope I have sufficiently shown you some of the cruelty Amelia has inflicted."

I nod. My mouth tastes like sandpaper. "Y-yeah. I... I can't believe I'm watching the same person."

The deity of light bows his head. "Amelia found Elder Morru. She tortured him and severed both of his legs, then when he finally told her where the treasure was, she killed him by tearing his jaw apart. After that, she slaughtered every goblin in their colony for wasting her time."

Hoarhiim pauses.

"Let's... move to what happens next."

"Sure."

I reach out automatically for a glass of water, but remember there isn't any here — a shame. I feel like I've swallowed all the sand in the Sahara Desert.

The image shifts again. This time, to a much brighter hallway. The floor and ceiling glow from bioluminescent moss hanging off the walls, as well as rocks embedded here and there that emit tiny sparks of electricity. Amelia casually struts forward, barely looking at anything. Her hand brushes against one of the vines, and I watch in amazement as the plant recoils, withers, and dies.

"What the hell was that?"

Hoarhiim clears his throat. "Ah, her dark miasma. It's poisonous to most life, especially vegetation. A slight brush, and most plants will die after a few seconds. Creatures, both large and small, don't fare any better."

"Jesus Christ. Talk about an environmental disaster waiting to happen."

The hallway opens into a room with hundreds of fireflies aimlessly floating around. A ray of light shines down from somewhere unseen, almost as if it were from sunlight, but since this is the Labyrinth, that makes no sense. The light beams against the far wall, forming the shape of the Christian Cross. Underneath it is a barebones altar, with dozens of flowers growing all around it. A tiny chameleon looks up, spots Amelia, and skitters away to a nearby nook in the wall.

Her voice rings out in the din. "Seriously? I traveled all this way for nothing?"

Blaarjiim responds almost instantly, and I can practically hear him rubbing his hands together. "No, my queen. Look! There on the altar! A sword and scabbard!"

Hoarhiim pans the view up so we can see Amelia's face. She sighs. "Oh. A sword. And here I was hoping for some pretty jewels or something cute."

"Be careful, my queen," Blaarjiim cautions. "I sense energy like that of the angels here. It's faint, but..."

"I've killed a few angels, Blaarjiim. Holy energy stings for a bit, then the pain fades. I'd hate to walk out of here empty-handed."

Amelia strides forward, crushing the lovely flowers under her boots. As she does, they wither and dry out, disintegrating into ash.

She stops in front of the altar, and Hoarhiim pans our view down to examine the sword. It's ugly, boring, housed in a faded leather scabbard with brass hinges and a belt that looks about ready to fall apart. I can't see the blade, but judging by the sheath, it's just over two and a half feet long, short by most standards. Almost like the sword was forged for a woman of small stature. The hilt is brown, with a glimpse of gold here and there.

Amelia hesitates. She slowly rubs her thumb around her soft pink lips. "What an ugly piece of shit. Four days of travel, all for nothing."

Blaarjiim's tone softens. "It would make a fine addition to your collection, my queen. Perhaps it may serve some use later."

"Yeah, sure. Maybe I'll use it to carve up a roast. Let's get out of here." Amelia reaches forward to grab the sword, but the moment she wraps her hand around its sheath, a sudden flash of light makes her yelp in surprise. Amelia gasps and topples backward, flopping on her ass. "What was that?!"

Her question receives an immediate answer. A stream of light erupts from the sword. It pours from inside the sheath, as if its energy were contained within the blade itself, and streams to a spot perhaps two feet away. Within seconds, a shape resembling Hoarhiim's body of light forms, and quickly takes on the appearance of a young woman. She immediately takes a knee and swallows several long breaths. Her short-cropped blonde hair and stunning blue eyes immediately grab my attention.

The woman's armor is majestic, a combination of white and gold, with a giant red cross carved onto her chestplate. Her blue cloak hangs behind her, a thousand golden crosses lining its fabric. She regards Amelia with caution.

"Merci. Long have I slept, only to be awakened from my slumber by a demon as foul as thee." The girl, perhaps nineteen years old, clambers to her feet and snatches the sword from the pedestal. "En-Garde! Have at ye!"

Amelia rises to her feet. "Who the devil are you? How did you get here?"

The blonde girl unsheathes her sword and points it at Amelia. "I am a servant of the Highest God, the Creator who formed the heavens! Jeanne d'Arc, leader of the French, The Maid of Orleans! Thy greed and malice awakened my dormant body when thou dared disturb my artifact. I sense limitless power and evil flowing from thee, thrall of the darkness."

Hoarhiim pans the view to Amelia's face. Her eye twitches. "Now listen here, you little shit. Nobody points a sword at me and lives to tell the tale. My name's Amelia Greyheart, but you will call me 'Master' after I break you in half." Amelia smirks, then crosses her arms. "You seem confident about your chances, warrior of justice, but I should warn you that I've already killed the First Emperor of Hell, along with a few million others. If you give up now, I'll make your death quick and painless."

"Never!" Joan takes a step forward and bares her teeth. "Dost thou think me a fool? A Hero never wavers! She always stands up to evil, no matter the cost! I would sooner cast myself into the raging flames of Hell than allow one such as thou to profane the name of God!"

"What a coincidence, you're already in Hell," Amelia mutters. Her hand makes a popping noise as she balls it into a fist. "I don't believe in your shitty 'God' anyway. The only deity I believe in is myself. I'll make sure you bow down to me when this is all over, sweetheart."

"Impudent knave!" Joan lunges forward with frightening speed, catching even Amelia off-guard. She drives her fist into Amelia's face and sends my friend careening backward, smashing into the wall. An instant later, she jams her foot into the ground and thrusts her sword straight into Amelia's heart.

Shik!

Joan's eyes darken as she twists the blade inside her opponent's chest. "God shan't forgive me if I spare thee! Die quickly and return to the soil from whence you came!"

Amelia wheezes in pain, but Hoarhiim pans up to show both of their faces, now only inches apart. A wild, maniacal smile spreads from one corner of Amelia's mouth to the other. "You... you fucking bitch. That hurt. I'm going to enjoy teaching you a lesson."

She kicks her foot out and knocks Joan back, sprawling the Hero across the ground before yanking the sword from her heart. Amelia pauses and stumbles for a moment before shaking the pain off with a twitch of her head. She stabs the sword into the wall behind her, then steps in front of it to block it.

"That sword must be precious to you. It'd be a shame if you couldn't use it for the rest of the fight."

Joan leaps to her feet and laughs. "Hah! Fool. That is no ordinary weapon. It is the Sword of Heaven, gifted to me by the Creator! I am bound to it for all eternity." She holds her hand forward, and Amelia stumbles suddenly as the sword yanks from the wall, tears through her body and out of her front-side, then lands in Joan's grasp. Before Amelia can regain her footing, Joan begins chanting words in Latin.

"*Lux. Virtus. Miscere.* By the hand of the Creator, the first rite of sealing; initiate!" Her sword begins to glow white and vibrate wildly, and a moment later, she lunges forward, pauses, and delivers ten rapid stabs into each of Amelia's limbs. A second afterward, she appears at Amelia's side, opposite Hoarhiim and I, and shoves her palm out, blowing Amelia sideways across the room. Amelia's body bashes and crashes across the ground with sickening speed. Hoarhiim and I go flying straight out of her belt loop and across the room. My body swirls unconsciously from all the motion, but once we come to a rest, Hoarhiim vision gives us a full view of the spectacle.

Amelia's broken and crumpled body lies on the ground. Her right arm twists unnaturally, and her jaw appears dislocated. After a moment, her wounds begin to heal, and she gasps violently. "Kaaah!"

Joan hesitates. "That attack dealt a most grievous blow, but thou are quite resilient. Compared to the three Demon Dukes I once fought, thy body is leagues more powerful than they. However, I warn thee, that after the third rite of sealing, you will never harm another being again."

Amelia whimpers for a moment, and then reaches out to pull herself along the ground. The fire in her eyes disappears. She manages to climb to her feet, but something about her appearance is different. She looks three or four years younger, perhaps my age. "You... you s-sealed... my..."

Joan's eyes turn a luminous white, and she holds her sword at her side, preparing for a lunging stab attack. The instant Amelia sees this; panic floods her body. She leaps to the room exit, then dashes out of sight. Joan charges after her, and a horrible scream rends my heart in two. Amelia gasps, begging for mercy.

While Hoarhiim and I can no longer see what's happening, her pitiful, heartbreaking screams make me cover my mouth.

"Hoarhiim. Hoarhiim! That's enough. I've seen enough." I stumble to the side and fight the urge to vomit as I fall to my knees. "Oh god, they're all sick and evil. Amelia tortures and murders, and Joan is no better. She enjoyed the pain she caused. What the hell? Is this the sort of person who would become a Hero?!"

Hoarhiim slowly ambles over to me, and leans down, gently rubbing my back. "Jason. I know Amelia's past is difficult to accept. After all, you've never seen her in this manner before. However, I assure you that she is not the innocent angel she pretends to be."

I start rocking back and forth. "Fuck. Fuck. No, come on, think about it. Sh-she killed some goblins! That's all it was! They're monsters anyway, right? They're sneaky, thieving bastards! Amelia didn't deserve what Joan did to her! Shouldn't Joan ally with someone who kills monsters and demons? God damn!"

Hoarhiim pulls his hand away. "Do you believe that thievery deserves a death sentence? Where was their trial? Where was your human interpretation of justice? Just because they were goblins doesn't mean-"

"No! Stop! I don't want to hear anymore! Get me out of this dream!" I quickly jump to my feet and rush to the sides, hitting an invisible wall. "**Release! Escape! Leave!**"

Hoarhiim's voice quiets down. "This is a mental link, Jason. Your Wordsmithing won't work in here. If you want to leave, that's fine."

I quickly turn to face him. "Yeah, yeah, I do! I can't believe you're trying to turn me against Amelia like that! You SAW what Joan did to her! Amelia barely touched the sword and Joan went Super Saiyan and started attacking her for no reason! Gah!" I start pulling at my hair and pacing back and forth. "Just let me out. I'll- I'll talk to her. I'll find out her side of the story!"

"Jason..." Hoarhiim's voice holds an edge of caution. "I wouldn't advise that."

"What?! Why, are you afraid I'll find something out? Are you even telling me the truth, or are you lying to me too?" A pause. I consider the options. "I've never seen Amelia act anything like this. You hate Blaarjiim, so it's reasonable to assume you have some goal, some plot to-"

"Jason!" Hoarhiim bellows at the top of his lungs, making me flinch. After a few seconds, he calms himself. "That's enough. Begone, then. I was trying to help. If you don't wish to see the truth, so be it. I cannot convince a fool to drink from the water of life if he wishes to die of thirst."

A moment later, the world around me fades away.

I appear back at the funeral. It's dark out, already. I'm sitting with my back to a tree, though I don't remember how I got here. Everyone else has already packed up and left.

I quickly reach down and touch Hoarhiim's orb. "Okay, look, I'm sorry, alright? I didn't mean to freak out like that. I... I can't believe you'd say all those awful things about Amelia. Can we forget about it for now?"

* * *

Silence.

I wait, but Hoarhiim doesn't answer.

"Hello? Buddy?"

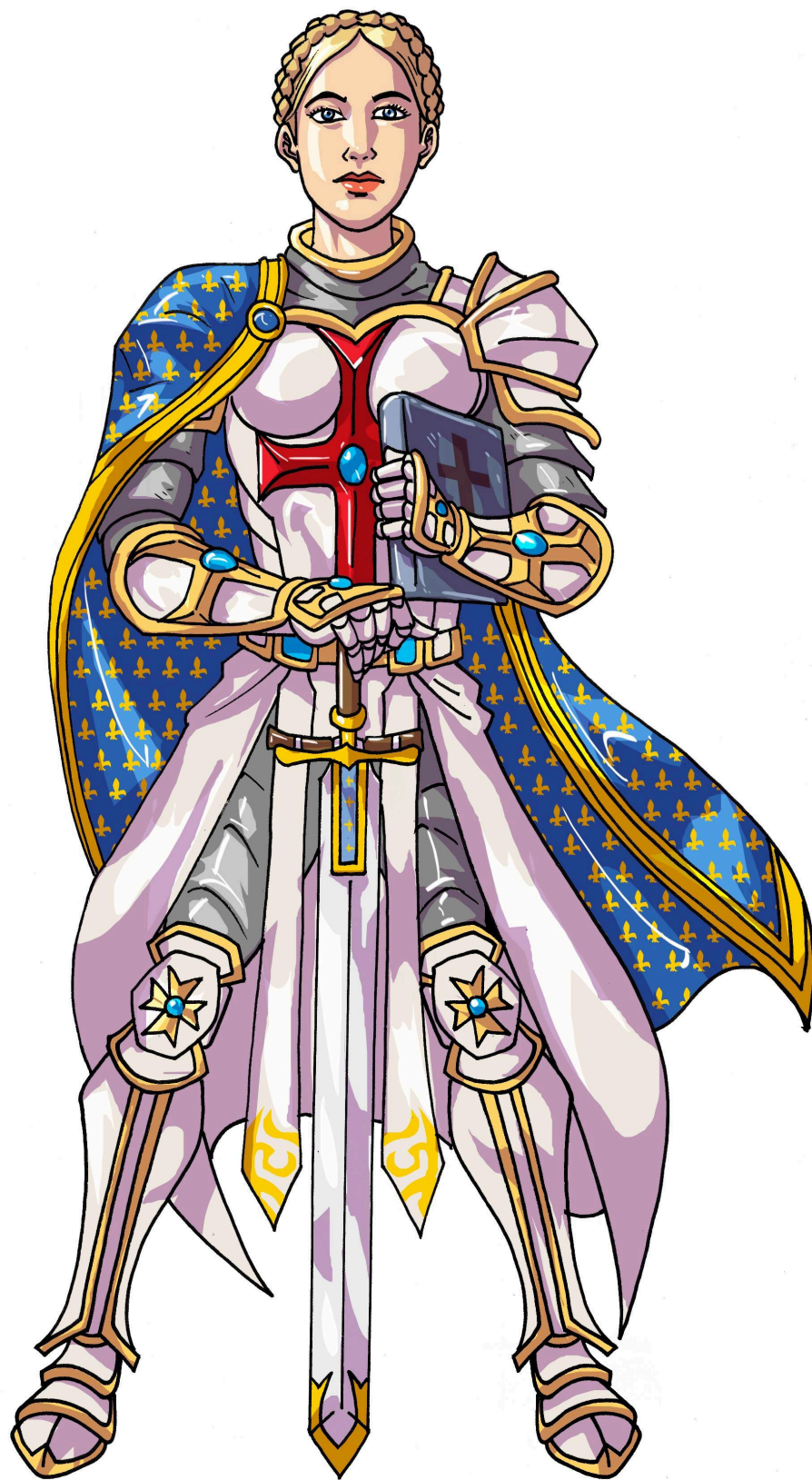
Still no reply. Great. Now I hurt Hoarhiim's feelings and he's giving me the silent treatment.

Fine, be like that.

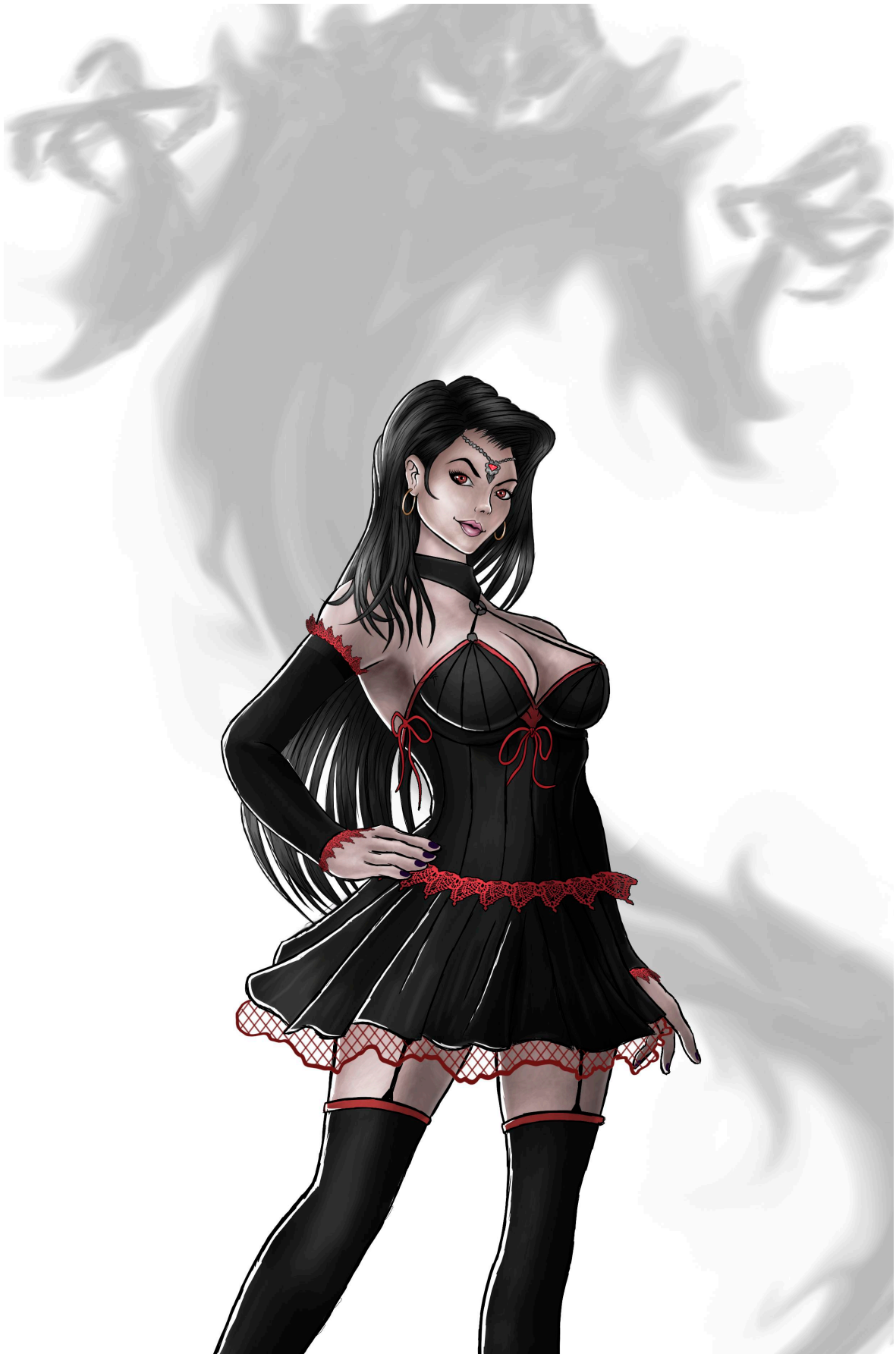
I get up and start walking to Bahamut's palace in the distance, her residence on this world. Maybe Amelia can answer my questions. If Hoarhiim wasn't lying, I'll know soon enough.

Author notes:

This is Joan of Arc.



This is Adult Amelia.





Part 014: A Weapon to Surpass Metal Gear

I tap the white orb as I hold it in my hand, using it to light up the landscape around me. The darkness of night tempts me to use the stars to navigate, especially since I can't see them in the Labyrinth, but I'm tired and just want to catch some sleep.

My feet scuff across the rugged, uneven ground. Pebbles go flying as my mouth forces itself open, making me yawn violently. Fuck. Today has been rough. Not only did I nearly get eaten by a bunch of Sirens, but I also had all that fun stuff involving Bahamut, and I had to deal with a bunch of crap involving Amelia. My laziness is not something I can grow out of easily.

Bahamut's palace eventually rises before me. The building isn't as large as I expected, but it still looks to be about three stories tall and somewhat reminds me of architecture from my lifetime. It's square and mostly undecorated, sans two gargoyles, and while it does have some shiny gold and silver ornamental designs, calling it a 'palace' doesn't seem appropriate. It's more of a creepy office building. Of course, compared to the tiny huts on this side of the canyon, it's practically a mansion.

Humans and monsters mill around outside, chatting with each other about this and that. Despite the miniature sun in my hand, not many people pay me any heed. Most passersby glance at me, wince at Hoarhiim's brilliance, and look away. I pause to take in the scene of peacefulness between humans and monsters alike. The orcs don't attack the humans, nor do the goblins, the harpies, or any of the others.

It's nice. Seeing the different sides look at each other without a hint of anger or fear gives me a glimpse into something I never experienced back home, which is a total lack of prejudice on either's part. After all, they appear to all just be happy they're no longer under Bahamut's mind control. How could they care about petty matters like bigotry, or hatred based on looks?

However, I have to wonder how long the peace will last. By week's end, will everyone here begin squabbling? Will the difference between man and monster grow too much for them to overcome?

My shoulders slump at the thought. I'd hate to see this tranquillity disturbed by the will of human nature.

Continuing forth, I start to walk up the ten steps into the palace, when someone appears at my side. A white-haired woman who... ah, it's the one from before. Phoebe, I think.

I pause my ascension and turn to look at her. When I do, she hesitates and bows her head shyly.

"I see you have finished mourning, Your Grace."

"Mourning?"

Phoebe nods, but doesn't look at me. "Yes. You left the pyre with such an intense look on your face that none dared to bother you. We were moved by your respect for your adversary, even in the face of such blinding evil. It has been the talk of many while you secluded yourself."

I try not to laugh at her misunderstanding. *That isn't what happened at all* is what I want to say, but she's so earnest that I'd rather just let her think what she likes. "Thank you for that. Err, your name is Phoebe, right?"

She looks up at me and swipes a hair from her face. "Yes. I'm pleased you remembered the name of a lowly retainer such as I."

"I try my hardest."

With a smile, I turn away and avert my eyes. Something about Phoebe's appearance reminds me of the Amelia I saw in Hoarhiim's vision. While Phoebe has an air of humility surrounding her, her body is strong enough to heft heavy armor, but she also has the softness of a woman. She has the same hard edge to her that Amelia did, and it disconcerts me.

Phoebe reaches up and plays with a clump of her hair strands absentmindedly. "All here are your loyal servants, Your Grace. If ever you should require our services, we will do all in our power to fulfill your wishes."

A guilty feeling wells up in my chest. "No, that's not necessary. I freed you all from Bahamut's control. You're unfettered to do as you please. Both the humans and the monsters as well."

She coughs. "We know. Everyone has come to a unanimous decision, of our own volition, to pledge ourselves to you. We do it not out of fear, but respect. Your honor in the face of evil, moral uprightness in the face of malice, and forgiveness to those who might otherwise be your enemies has stirred the hearts of Bahamut's former slaves. We've begun freeing the slaves in the mines as well, and by week's end, there will be two hundred thousand willing and capable warriors ready to die in your name."

"D-die?!" I reflexively take a step back. "Phoebe, Phoebe, please, you don't need to go that far--"

"Ah, but they *do*."

A voice speaks from behind me, and I quickly spin to see Kar standing there, intently listening to our conversation. "Turtle, in the Labyrinth, power and strength rule. None dare object to following one who dictates using fear and violence, but their mindless terror pales in comparison to the zeal of those who

follow a kind and compassionate ruler. Striking down a foe, in anyone's eyes, is morally just, especially when they have wronged you. However, sparing them takes a different sort of strength."

My heart beats irregularly. "But- but Kar! You killed Bahamut! How could I have spared her if you ended up taking her life?!"

Kar grunts. "Hurgh. I only did so at the request of her former captives. Everyone understands that you were perfectly capable of killing her yourself. Everyone knows it was you who solved the riddle. Despite this, you did not pursue your glory and personal empowerment, instead choosing to give it to one as unworthy as I."

I groan inwardly.

Great. People are quickly getting the wrong idea about me. I left to chase after Amelia, not because I cared about Bahamut. I thought she deserved to die, so why is everyone spinning the story like I forgave her sins and sent her riding into the sunset? She's dead, goddammit!

Phoebe takes a step toward me and clasps her hands against her chest. "Please, great Hero, do not forsake us. It would be our heartfelt honor to serve you. It matters not what your goals are, for we will ensure you may pursue them at any cost."

"Uh..."

I don't know how to respond. I feel like I'm being bombarded on all sides here. Still, having an army might be okay, I guess. I'd prefer they didn't throw themselves off cliffs in anguish if I rebuff their offer.

"Haaah... fine, whatever." I sigh in defeat. "Look, Phoebe, I'm a little tired right now. I'm going to find my friend and talk with her for a bit, then go to bed. I don't have long-term plans for my future. This stuff is all a little heavy for me right now, and-"

Phoebe's face whitens. "Oh, oh goodness! I am eternally sorry, Your Grace! I didn't mean to irritate you with my presence!" She quickly bows. "I shall return to my quarters and chastise myself at once. Please forgive my rudeness, I meant no disrespect!"

Before she can dash away, I reach out and touch her shoulder. "Phoebe, you did nothing wrong. There's no need to apologize."

The confusion on her face turns comical, but I force myself not to laugh. She nods slowly. "I... I see. Well, in any case, I thank you for your kindness. You are a most generous king."

"King? What do you mean, 'king'?"

She points to the Crown on my head. "Is that not the crest of a monarch? And the holy artifact of light in your belt, surely that is your demon-slaying weapon of righteousness."

"Right, the Crown. Sometimes I forget I'm wearing it. I'm an ordinary guy. I'm not king material." I reach into my belt and procure Hoarhiim's orb. "And this isn't a weapon. This is my friend, Hoarhiim."

"Your friend?" Phoebe shields her eyes from the blinding light. "You are friends with a glowing rock?"

"It's a long story. Hoarhiim, say hello."

Nothing happens.

"Hoarhiim? Come on; you're not still giving me the silent treatment, are you?"

Still no reply.

Phoebe blushes. "Your friend is quite reserved."

"I swear he talks. I'm not making it up."

"Mmm. Haha." She laughs nervously, then looks around. "Well, Your Grace, I thank you for giving me a few minutes of your time. I must attend to helping house the freed slaves tonight. If you'll excuse me..."

Without another word, Phoebe pulls away and walks down the steps, eventually fading into the distance and leaving Kar and me behind.

"Hurgh. You certainly have a way with females."

"Oh, shut up. Can you point me toward Amelia?"

Kar smirks. "Two mates at the same time. White-hair and the Frilled One. I wonder which you will take in the end."

"Come on, stop teasing. Amelia's just a kid."

"Oh? You didn't say anything about White-Hair. Perhaps you fancy her?"

"KAR!"

Kar slaps his knee. "Bahaha! Watching the Turtle turn crimson is a sight to behold!"

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Kar's human-like face contorts into a wickedly toothy grin. The scales on his face give him an eerie, monstrous look. He unnerves me when he grins.

"Turtle, you're a king now. Everyone looks up to you. The females will fight each other over you, soon enough. And that power of yours is something special. However, the test of a king lies not in what he does, but what he doesn't."

I cock my head slightly. "Are you warning me not to abuse my power?"

"Aye. Once you learn to use your magic, I believe you might become unstoppable."

A memory appears in my mind. I vocalize it. "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Kar snaps his fingers. "Yes! I am pleased you understand."

I take a moment to reach up and touch the Crown on my head. "It's hard for me to comprehend my situation, you know? I'm an ordinary guy. It was only a week ago that I was living off cheap food from a supermarket. Now I'm a legendary Hero, and many people think of me like a King. I don't know how to adjust."

"Hurgh. It will take time. None are born knowing how to lead. All kings learn on the fly. Luckily, you've got that Crown to help out."

"Yeah... I don't think it'll be useful. But, thanks for the thought."

Kar chuckles. "You're welcome. You don't need me to tell you where the Frilled One is. Use your power. I'll catch up with you later, Little Turtle."

The croco-sphinx turns on his heel and laughs to himself about something, then swaggers away.

I yawn. Exhaustion hits me like a wave.

Fuck it. I'll talk to Amelia tomorrow. Right now, all I want is to sleep.

Turning around, I head inside. The servants tell me where my room is, and I eventually land face-first on a pillow.

Zzz...

"Rise and shine!" A shrill voice erupts from the darkness, and a light from Heaven itself blasts my face.

I leap up, screaming in fright. "Aah! What?! Who?!"

My eyes sweep my room frantically, even as I shield them from the intense sunlight. I don't remember falling asleep last night. I think I was out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

My eyes lock onto Amelia's form. At that instant, she cheerfully pinches the covers from the end of the bed and yanks them off with a flourish. "Up'n at 'em!"

...Only to expose me in just my underwear. "Amelia! What the heck?!"

She frowns. "Jason, where are your clothes?"

"Shut up! Gimme some privacy!"

Amelia rolls her eyes. "Okay, fine, geez. I'll be downstairs in the dining room. Try not to take too long getting ready for the day."

As she walks out of the room, I rub my eyes in disbelief. She isn't wearing a black dress anymore. Instead, she has a sky-blue sundress on, and she's replaced her red hair bows with blue ones. As the door closes behind her, I catch a final glimpse of her shoes; white high-heels that click as she walks.

The slamming of the door makes me blink. Amelia doesn't look at all like the monster from Hoarhiim's vision. I feel like the black color gave her a darker appearance, but with the sundress, she seems cheerful and sunny now. Perhaps she's shaken off yesterday's events.

But what about me? Have I?

I hop out of bed and start to grab my dirty clothes, only to realize they're gone. Did a maid come in and take them while I slept? This king-sized bed was undoubtedly the most comfortable thing I've ever rested on in my life. I slept like a rock and didn't hear a sound.

Well, without clothes, what am I going to do? I pull open the closet and gawk at the assortment of dresses inside, which seems appropriate given this used to be Bahamut's royal chamber. I won't wear dresses, so those are out of the question.

Almost immediately, an idea pops into my head. I turn and aim my hand at the bed. "**Shirt.**"

A quick *whoomph* of air rushes to the bed, and a second later, an ordinary green T-shirt materializes. Huh. Neat.

I try it again.

"**Shirt.**"

This time, by focusing my mind, a black T-shirt appears along with a picture of *Megadeth* album art on its front.

Wow. The intent of the word matters too. I used the same word but got a different result. Hmm.

Glancing at the dresser beside my bed, I pick up and stick Solomon's Crown on my head. A rush of information floods my mind for a few seconds before fading away.

Thanks to the Crown, my ability to picture specific details increases dramatically. This time, before speaking, I form a clear picture in my mind of what I want. "**Shirt.**"

A long-sleeved shirt appears in midair and flops on the bed just like the two before it. Opening my eyes, I scrutinize the article of clothing. Every detail is accurate to the picture I had in my mind. The plain black shirt has golden threads sewing all of its parts together, and the threads string down from the shoulders onto the back, forming an intricate design of a fire-breathing dragon.

Next, I flip it around and stare at the front, which is purely black with no decorations. I form another picture in my mind. "**Modify.**"

My breath catches as gold stitching magically appears on the front. Within one second, an image of Amelia's face from the vision Hoarhiim showed me stitches into the fabric.

I stare at it for a while, perhaps a minute. My fingers move on their own, tracing the outline of her adult face. *She looks beautiful. Why did Joan attack her? Why did Amelia kill the goblins? Was Hoarhiim lying to me?*

As I rub the stitching, I wonder to myself how soft her face must be. I have no romantic interest in her younger self, but the Amelia I saw in that vision was a woman. A fully figured, beautiful goddess. I want to see her like that, but in person.

If only I could change the way she looks.

Gah. What creepy thoughts am I thinking?! Amelia looks like a kid, now. Even if she is thousands of years old, it wouldn't feel right to age her up! People might get the wrong idea! God, my mind is doing some weird shit, this morning.

"**Modify.**" I use my magic again, causing her face to vanish and be replaced with a depiction of a sword. I didn't envision any specific weapon, but after a moment I recognize it as the one Joan emerged from in Hoarhiim's vision.

Goddamn. I can't get Hoarhiim's memory out of my mind. Everything about it was all kinds of fucked-up. It had to be fake. *It had to be.* Amelia isn't a violent person.

Well, when I was at the foot of Solomon's Altar dying of a broken body, I did hear orcs screaming in pain... Amelia must have killed them. Those sounds after their screams cut off were unsettling.

Maybe she gave them a scare. I don't know. Perhaps they fled for their lives after recognizing the Black Witch. Yeah, that's probably it.

I change the picture of the sword once again, but this time I imagine a shield from a video game I used to enjoy playing. Between the dragon and shield, my new shirt looks like the sort of thing I'd grab off the bargain rack at a GAP clothing store. Oh well, nobody ever said I had a good sense of style.

I quickly Wordsmith myself some black jeans, some new socks and shoes, and only once I'm done do I realize how terrible I smell. I haven't showered since I left my Cryopod. Man-musk is one thing, but my stench is disgusting. Guess I'll have to take my clothes off and go shower- ah! Amelia's waiting for me. I've been goofing around with Wordsmithing instead of getting a move on!

Rather than hunting for a shower, I aim my mind at my body.

"Clean."

My body tenses up, and the feeling of a shower and drying off passes over me within seconds. I dab my armpits and shrug.

Faster than a shower, but I still like the feeling of warm water running down my body. It'll do for now.

After patting myself down to ensure I smell like an angel, I reach into my dresser drawer and pull out Hoarhiim's orb. Last night was the first time I was able to sleep without his light blinding me, but I feel terrible sticking him in a dark and lonely cage.

"Good morning, Hoarhiim!"

I pour some enthusiasm into my voice, but he doesn't respond.

"Still the silent treatment, huh? Alright, suit yourself."

I Wordsmith another belt, since my old one vanished along with my clothes, then stick Hoarhiim inside one of the pockets.

Before leaving the room, I spot the sword I made before I met Amelia. It doesn't seem necessary to keep it with me, given Wordsmithing is infinitely more potent than a blade, but who knows? Better to have a sword and not need it than to need one and not have it.

I strap it to my left side, shift Hoarhiim to my right, and turn to leave. However, I end up pausing in front of a full-body mirror on my way out. My skinny body and gangly form hardly appear heroic. How the hell can everyone look up to someone like me? I solved a riddle — big deal. I look like I could pick a fight with an eight-year-old girl and still lose.

Some Hero I am.

Once again, an idea forms. I turn to face the mirror. **"Muscles. Abs. Grow."**

My heart skips a beat as my body forms into something that would make any bodybuilder weep with envy. My body stretches upward ten inches, causing my spine to pop multiple times. My muscles bulge, and a six pack forms, giving me the look of a football jock. I stumble forward, almost crash into the mirror, and barely catch myself by grabbing the side of a wall. The floor looks a lot further away than it did a few seconds ago.

The Crown allows me to judge myself in an instant. I'm now exactly seven feet tall. My short blond hair and blue eyes mix perfectly with my chiseled body but clash with my face. I have what looks like a baby-face on a man's body. Gross.

Uh. What's a single word that'll make me good-looking? "**Appearance.**"

I watch in silence as my face morphs. My jaw protrudes out, my eyes sink in and narrow, and every aspect of my face defines itself more clearly than before. After a few seconds, I look like a goddamn movie star.

My tongue slowly circles my lips as I gaze into the mirror, unable to grasp the face staring back at me.

What if I had looked like this when I was younger? How would my life have turned out?

Turning away, I finally open the door and step into the hallway.

"Ah! Good morning, Your Grace-" Phoebe is standing outside my door. She starts to greet me but freezes mid-sentence and stares at me in disbelief.

I play it cool, acting like I have no idea why she's gawking. "Do I have something on my face?"

She opens and closes her mouth several times before cocking her head. "Uh- um, no! Nothing at all! You just, ah, look very handsome this morning! D-did anything happen while you were sleeping?"

I pull the door closed behind me and wipe at my nose. "Nah. Nothing in particular. Hey, do you know where the dining room is?"

Phoebe nods dumbly. She doesn't say anything and instead continues to stare at me for several seconds blankly.

"Phoebe? Miss Berthold? Hello?"

My words wake her from her stupor. "Hm? What? Yes, of course! I will show you the way, Your Grace." She bows her head and blushes madly before quickly walking ahead of me and leading me down the hall.

Her shyness makes me grin. I've never had a woman act bashful around me before. It feels... good. Empowering. I could get used to this.

We round a corner and start to head down a spiral staircase. "Say, Phoebe, why were you waiting outside my room?"

She flicks a glance back at me for barely a second before looking forward again. "I am your personal retainer, Your Grace, just as I was King Arthur's. If, however, you should wish it... I... I can assign another t-to take my place."

I shake my head, but she doesn't see. "No, that's not necessary. Carry on."

Several minutes pass. We arrive at our destination.

"Right through here," Phoebe says, as she stops in front of a set of double-doors. They're metallic, with a large glass window on the front allowing me to see inside. As I walk up to them, the doors slide open without making a sound, which makes me pause. I know the monsters are more technologically savvy than the demons, but even so, some of the stuff I've seen is borderline sci-fi.

The dining room is stunningly ornate. I start to ask Phoebe about it, only to find she's vanished into the wind. A glance at the hundred or so empty tables tells me this is a place only meant for 'important folk.' White tablecloths, wine glasses, lines of silverware, and plates with exotic designs dot every table. A beautiful chandelier hangs from the ceiling, and the sudden realization that my clothes are too casual fills me with dread. There's nobody here to judge my appearance, but I still feel like I don't belong.

A glance at the back corner reveals Amelia leaning on her elbow, muttering something inaudible to the black sphere sitting on the table before her. She and Blaarjiim must be discussing something, but it doesn't look super important.

After I take five steps and start crossing over to Amelia, her eyes flick up to me. "Oh, Jason!"

Her voice must have caught someone's attention, because, by the time my butt hits the chair seat, the kitchen doors fly open and a cavalcade of chefs marches out with a vast array of food on rolling carts. I note with amusement that Amelia picked the remotest corner of the dining area to sit at, and we ended up with a tiny table as a result. There isn't enough room for the avalanche of food headed our way.

"Greetings, mighty Hero!" The chefs smile enthusiastically, and I nod politely back. Some of them are human, but most of them look like bipedal geckos, and one individual stands out among the rest, given he's nearly as tall as Kar. He's a giant minotaur, with a bull-head and legs, but a human torso and arms. The beast lumbers over and bows his head.

"Great Hero, the one who freed us from bondage, I am Yamir, the former head chef under Bahamut, and your loyal servant."

His voice isn't deep, loud, boisterous, or anything else, but instead quite refined and polite. He wouldn't be out of place on a Sunday morning British cooking program.

"I have cooked you a feast of the ages, and as such, you are free to eat as much as you please. If you request seconds, thirds, or portions beyond those, I will deliver them quickly and perfectly."

"Uh, awesome. Thanks, Yamir."

I nod politely again, and the giant monster walks away, leaving the others to begin serving the food.

"Might you wish to sit at a larger table, your majesty? You've hardly enough room for the feast!"

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine. What do you have?"

Several minutes pass. Amelia stares at me intently while I pick out a filet mignon, a soup made of Heaven only knows what (It smells incredible), and some other things as well. I meet Amelia's gaze. "Did you eat already?"

She shakes her head and continues to stare at me. "No. I don't eat food."

"You don't? There's no need to be shy. We have plenty to go around."

Sighing, Amelia clarifies. "I can't. It's complicated."

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't know that."

My cheeks flush, and I send the chefs away after thanking them profusely.

A minute passes, and I shovel food into my face, wondering why the heck Amelia keeps staring at me. It's only when she speaks that I remember why.

"You look very different this morning. Wordsmithing can change your appearance?"

"Yup. Do you like the new me?"

She leans on her hand. "I suppose. Honestly, you were cuter before. Now you look like a man who's about to go on a rampage. Didn't you ever learn anything about subtlety? Your chance of survival is always higher if you look unintimidating. The more your enemy underestimates you, the better your chance of surprising them."

"Well, actually, Amelia," I pause, unsure how to say this. "I thought you'd like me more if I looked masculine. I've always felt like a wimp."

She averts her eyes to stare out the window beside us. The morning sun stretches out over the mountains, illuminating the canyons and mines in the distance. Miles away, the forests stretch seemingly forever, beckoning for our return to the Labyrinth.

"You know, Jason, appearance isn't everything. Besides, why does it matter if I like you more or less? We're friends, right? I'm not going to look down on you just because you don't have the perfect body."

My hand freezes, stopping before I can put a spoonful of soup in my mouth. *Friend*. That's right. She thinks of me as a friend. Of course. Why wouldn't she? I've never said anything to indicate otherwise.

I quickly stick the soup in my mouth and follow her gaze to stare outside.

There's more to what she said than one might initially think. Do I judge others based on their looks? Don't I somewhat look at her as weak because she has the appearance of a child? Did I always feel inadequate because of my looks, and using Wordsmithing to change myself was just a band-aid? Hell, I even considered changing Amelia's body to look more like she did in Hoarhiim's memory.

I'm obsessed with appearance. Is that just because of my culture? Maybe I should ask.

"Amelia, how much does appearance matter to you?"

She blinks, then slowly turns to me. "Hmm? I don't follow."

"Uhh. I'm asking if you think appearance means anything at all. Do you feel that you were more beautiful before you entered the statue, or-"

"I didn't *enter* the statue, Jason." She clenches her teeth. "Why would you even bring that up? I told you I hated thinking about it."

"Right. Uh. Sorry, again..."

She examines me for a moment before returning to the view outside. "Did Hoarhiim show you my past?"

I flinch. "How'd you guess?"

"I wondered if he might. Hoarhiim may be misguided, but he's a sweetheart."

Amelia's eyes drift back to the table and eventually fixate on my half-eaten filet; one that was recently fished out of the local river. There's nothing like fresh produce.

"You asked about appearance. I learned a long time ago that appearances could be deceiving. Sometimes those who look like scary monsters can be the kindest, sweetest, most gentle beings you will ever meet. Sometimes, those you trust the most hide their intentions behind smiles and fake laughter."

"Sounds like a story," I murmur.

"Not one I want to tell. It carries many memories." Amelia gently pokes one of my plates nearest her. "A life filled with regret."

Another bite of soup enters my mouth. I'm starting to get full already. Gently, I reach across the table and touch her hand. "I'm always here if you want to talk."

She doesn't pull away for several seconds. When she does, it's a hesitant motion. "I know. Thank you, Jason."

After finishing my meal, I leave the building with Amelia. The sunlight shines directly at us as we exit, blinding me for a second, but I don't cover my eyes. Soon, we'll be back in the Labyrinth, and I'll miss the sun's warmth.

I'm surprised that Phoebe hasn't appeared from the bushes yet, given her stalkerish tendencies, but she's nowhere nearby. Kar stands in the middle of the gravel road, pointing monsters here and there, telling them what to do and where to go.

He turns around and spots us. "Ah, Turtle and the Frilled One. Is it time, then?"

"Mhm. I'm taking Amelia, and we're going back to the Labyrinth."

"Excellent. I'm done here."

Kar falls into step on Amelia's right, sandwiching the little girl between us, but she doesn't say anything. "Turtle, what do you plan to do once you return to the Labyrinth?"

A few ideas roll around in my mind. *Those legendary weapons might be worth tracking down, plus I'd like to learn more about humans and wherever the demons have hidden them.*

I decide to play it vague. "Dunno. I was thinking of traveling with Amelia until we got into trouble."

Kar grunts. "Hurgh. A haphazard plan, but who am I to argue with the Hero?"

* * *

Time passes. Instead of walking through the forest and climbing over vines, I take the time to remove trees in a straight line back to the portal, using my Wordsmithing to delete them and create a walking

path behind us instantly.

All the while, Amelia observes me casually, but I see the gears turning in her head. If I had to guess, I'd assume she's wondering about Wordsmithing and its practical applications, just as I've been doing.

Along the way, a gigantic animal appears from the forest just before we get out. Its body is reptilian and reminds me a lot of dinosaurs from the Earth's history. It spots us and roars, evidently thinking we'll make for a good meal.

The creature, a four-legged juggernaut covered in bony armor, bares its flesh-rending teeth at us and charges, but with a single word, I send it flying back into a tree, making it bash its head in the process. **"Push!"**

Confused and panicked, the monster races away, making Amelia snicker. "Good one, Jason."

"I didn't want to hurt him if I didn't have to."

Minutes later, we emerge from the forest line and spot the portal in the distance. It takes only a short walking distance before we stop at it and stare.

"It's deactivated," Amelia says without a hint of emotion.

"Yup. Kar, you're the new Sphinx. Can you turn it back on?"

The former crocodile grunts. "Hurgh. I am not certain. Give me time."

Amelia and I cross our arms and wait while Kar walks over and pokes at the warpgate's controls. Amelia exhales out of boredom. "So, Jason, what have you found out about Wordsmithing?"

She's taking an unusual interest in my power lately. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing. "I made this shirt with Wordsmithing, including the gold embroidering and everything."

"A shirt, huh?" Amelia leans forward to examine the design of the shield in the front. Unimpressed, she leans back. A second later, she gasps. "Whoa! Is... is that a dragon?!"

"Mhm. Stitched it with Wordsmithing, just like I said."

I glance at her face and am surprised by the stars in her eyes. "I can't believe it! Wow! He looks great!"

"I'm glad you feel that way." I smile graciously at her but feel a little confused by her over-the-top enthusiasm.

As soon as it appears, her smile fades. "Can you bring people back from the dead?"

Her sudden change of topic catches me off-guard.

Seconds pass. I hem and haw to myself. "I... I don't know. It would be incredible if I could."

Urgency appears in her eyes. "You should try it. You need to learn your limits."

"I know, I know. I'll need a dead body, first, and I'm not about to kill anyone or bring back Bahamut."

Amelia's shoulders slump. "Oh. Okay."

Resurrection. Amelia brings up a good point. Bringing people back from the dead sounds impossible, but maybe it's more doable than I think. Do I have power over life and death? Can a single word from me

reshape the cosmos?

Well, I don't have a dead body hanging around, but maybe something else would work.

I take a few moments to ping the Crown and pull up several options. My eyes widen as one possibility comes into focus.

Reaching down, I pull out my sword. "**Boulder.**" A gigantic rock pops into view and crashes to the earth. Amelia flinches, not expecting me to Wordsmith all of a sudden.

"What- what are you doing?"

Instead of answering, I swing my crappy sword at the rock. It bangs loudly and bounces off, as I expected.

"**Sharpen.**"

I swing again, and still, it bounces off.

"**Sharpen!**"

This time, the sword cuts into the edge of the rock and jams a few inches inside of it.

It's working.

I yank the sword out and try again. "**Sharpen!**"

When I swing for the fourth time, my blade passes through the boulder, carving a razor-thin slice through it. The instant it flies out the other side, the blade snaps, and a chunk of the sword flies out and embeds in the ground ten feet away.

It's sharper, but still just a weak sword.

Now for improvements. "**Reform. Sharpen. Sharpen. Sharpen. Reinforce. Reinforce.**"

I shake the sword around and smile when the blade doesn't wobble at all. This time, when I slice the rock, the sword passes through with no resistance, and the boulder flops over and smashes into the ground.

Now THIS is a weapon I can use against monsters and demons.

Another idea appears in my mind. Stupid, but worth a shot.

"**Sentience.**"

I aim my mind at the sword and wait.

A minute passes.

Nothing happens.

"What are you doing, Jason?" Amelia slides up next to me and gazes at the sword.

"I'm trying to make this sword sentient. I wondered if I could make it talk or something."

She smirks. "That's silly. It's a sword. You have to have a soul to be sentient. Everyone knows that."

"The hell I do!" A shrill voice screams out from the sword, making me drop it and hop back out of fright. "Ain't no dame shit-talkin' me, no sirree! Not on my watch!"

Amelia's eyes widen like dinner plates. "Jason. The sword spoke."

"Damn tootin' I did! I got a lot to say to a pretty lass like you! Name's Dellfingler, and what's yours, sweetcheeks?"

His odd accent is rough and irritating to listen to, but Amelia doesn't seem to mind. She reaches down and picks the sword up. "I'm Amelia! How are you speaking? Do you have a mouth?"

"Course not! I'm a sword, little lady! Swords ain't got no mouths, honey-bear! I'm usin' voice projection! Can't see anything around me either, but I kin' feel the vibrations in the air!"

Amelia looks at me like a puppy. Her lip quivers. "Oh, Jason, he's wonderful! I'm not one for weapons, but can I have him, please?"

"Hell yeah, honey! That's what I'm talkin' about! You 'n me are gonna ride off into the sunset together and get all hitched up! Yeehaw!"

The sword's enthusiasm is quickly getting on my nerves. I nod. "Yeah, that's fine. I can make another one. Here, take the scabbard, too." I pull the sheath off and hand it to her, and as I do, her hand touches mine. Amelia steps back quickly, and her cheeks flush red. "Th-thank you, Jason. Nobody's ever given me a present before."

My heart beats like conga drums. "Glad I could be your, err, first. Haha."

I suddenly realize what I just said had a lot of innuendo, and I curse my filthy mouth. Luckily she doesn't pick up on it. *Thank god.*

Kar grunts. "Hurgh. Stupid machine. Worthless!" He pounds his fist on its display. "It's broken! Busted! We're stuck here forever!"

"You don't have a key to access it?" Amelia walks over to him after she finishes latching Dellfingler to her belt. "I thought you obtained something like that when you killed Bahamut."

Kar shakes his head. "Nay. It's not a simple matter of opening the portal with a password. We also have to do a bunch of math and crap to open the portal inside the Labyrinth Core. I ain't smart enough for this crap. The other humans and monsters on this planet rely on the team at the Labyrinth Core to open and close the portals."

Dellfingler pipes up. "Hey, I know! Why not try'n break it! Just punch it til' it works! That never fails!"

I walk over and gently nudge Kar out of the way. "Let's call that 'Option B,' okay, Dellfingler? I'll try messing around. If it's just a matter of math, maybe the Crown can help."

When I tap the console, an array of numbers and letters appears, along with hundreds of rapidly changing variables, equations, and other such things. The Crown activates, improving my mental faculties until I can understand what everything on the console does. There are variables like planet orbital speed, distance to one of seven hundred locations throughout the galaxy, atmospheric fluctuations, and more things that continue on and on.

Five minutes later, Amelia reaches over and touches my arm. "Jason? Are you okay? You've been just standing and staring this whole time..."

I nod absentmindedly. "I'm calculating. Won't be long now."

She pulls back, and I see her shrug at Kar from the corner of my eye.

Finally, my mind has all the variables in play.

I tap the connection numbers in a row. "Four deltas, sixteen alphas, four-two point two-three sequence breaks, then a parameter of eight and fifteen for the lightspeed calculations... engage." My finger reaches over and mechanically taps the initiate button.

Eruptions of electricity arc from the gate's pylons to form a circular hole in space.

Amelia and Kar exhale simultaneously. The Sphinx grins. "Unbelievable. You truly are a Hero, Jason."

I shoot a glance at Amelia, then back to Kar. "I'd prefer if you stopped calling me that, but thanks."

Before we start walking up the steps to the portal, I realize that without a weapon, if we meet armed resistance inside, I might be a sitting duck. Several weapon ideas pop into my head, including some excellent plasma blaster concepts, but a single word takes my breath away due to the sheer possibilities.

"Lightsaber."

Author Notes:

This is Phoebe.



This is Jason's bigger, buffer form.



Part 015: Jedi.

The Crown of Solomon is a weapon unlike any other, but only in the hands of a Wordsmith. It allows me to imagine the inner workings of complex mechanical objects, perform Ph.D. and Doctorate level math, and even comprehend the concepts of string theory. My mind compresses and expands, making me wince as I imagine all the parts and pieces that would go into a weapon like a Lightsaber. Despite being a fictional weapon, I rapidly manage to craft a functional prototype in mere seconds.

When I open my eyes and hold out my hand, a small cylinder, perhaps the size of a flashlight, appears in midair and lands in my palm. I stare, wide-eyed, at the silver cylinder I once dreamed about as a child.

My heart skips a beat. *A lightsaber. It's a goddamn lightsaber! This is the coolest moment of my life!*

I hesitate to activate it, but when I do, ecstasy overtakes me. A bright white blade of light shoots out, and a wave of heat begins emanating from the weapon.

Amelia stares, wide-eyed. "What is that?"

"A lightsaber. It can cut through anything. Metal, rock, you name it. It's the greatest melee weapon that has ever existed."

The stupid grin on my face begins to slip. The sound my new weapon makes isn't quite right. It's less of a gentle hum, and more like a fireplace rapidly crackling after tossing a bunch of kindling on top. The white color also seems odd, given I envisioned blue in my mind.

I stab it to the ground, and the moment the saber touches the dirt and grass, a small wildfire ignites, making me pull it out and step back. A second later, the saber makes a sputtering noise, then deactivates. No matter how I shake it or press the activate button, it won't reignite.

The Crown gives me an answer as I scrutinize the small weapon. *Battery depleted.*

Seriously? I activated it for all of ten seconds! How much energy does it use? Perhaps sustaining a beam of energy takes a lot more power than a quick energy pulse like that of a blaster rifle, so it dies rapidly. Geez. I suppose having a cool weapon isn't in the cards for me.

I hook it through my belt and sigh. "That's a bust. Let's go already. **Extinguish.**" The fire at our feet snuffs out, bringing my smile back. *I don't need a lightsaber anyway. I have Wordsmithing.*

The steps leading up to the portal take only a few seconds to climb. Once we make it to the top, I almost burst into laughter. The frozen looks of fear and awe on the faces of the monsters inside are comical in a way I've never seen before.

The three of us step through the portal, and the *whoomph* of air pressure inside makes my ears pop. One of the monsters slowly points at me and says something, but I don't catch it. After a moment, I realize he isn't gesturing toward me, but Kar.

"...new leader! Behold his aura!" The gangly-haired monster continues to point at Kar, and several others nearby nod simultaneously.

"Yes, he has the power of the Sphinx. That must be how he opened the portal without our assistance. Only a Sphinx could have the wisdom to do such a thing."

I open my mouth to retort. "Actually-"

"All bow before the new Sphinx! May he show mercy upon us!" The monsters in the room all fall to their knees, prostrating themselves before us.

"Fuck it," I mutter. I nudge Kar with my elbow. "You can take the credit for this one."

"Hurgh. Your generosity knows no limits."

"Shut up, scaly."

Amelia pokes me in the back, *hard*. "Jason. Rude!"

* * *

The sudden shift in the monster's personalities surprises me. Where before they were vicious and looked like they wanted to tear the flesh from our bodies, they now smile and nod politely. Kar notices my confusion. "Monsters have a hierarchy, just as demons, angels, and humans do. The King or Queen leads all monsters, and that one's aura tends to pass down through to the rest. A wicked king will lead to violence, but one who is peaceful will lead to unity and order."

I frown. "Why is the Sphinx the leader of all monsters?"

"Hurgh. Before, t'was Dragons who sat atop the hierarchy, but as they have long since disappeared from the galaxy, 'tis the Sphinx who leads. The fewer members a species has, the more potent their magical power becomes. I am the only Sphinx; therefore, I must rule."

Amelia pipes up. "Dragons used to lead, huh? Why don't monsters slaughter others of their species to condense their power? Wouldn't that improve their magical abilities dramatically?"

A hissing to my side makes me flinch in surprise. A giant cobra slinks up beside us and flicks its tongue out. "That would be pointlessness... There can only be one rightful king. Even orcs, without any magical power, can be ussseful in an army."

Kar barely even looks at the freakishly long cobra. "Hurgh. Exactly. A bloody war over monarchical power would serve no purpose. Besides, some monsters birth vast litters of spawnlings, while others, such as the Sphinx, cannot procreate. Our species' self-regulation determines the leader without any artificial assistance. We don't expect a non-monster to understand our ways."

I nod along, forming links in my mind. Monsters, demons, humans, angels, Titans. Each of them works together to form a complex, symbiotic relationship. The Energy Wars must have been unthinkable in scope for the Titans and angels to die off.

Kar trots away to speak with some other monsters, leaving Amelia and me alone together.

Dellfingler shrills out, "Oh boy! I hope we're going on an adventure! What do you guys think, eh?! Amelia, sweetheart, I can't wait for you to wrap those cute little hands around my-"

Before he can finish, she smacks the sword. "Hush! Lewd!"

I chuckle. "Heh. I guess we're going to go out and start looking around, huh?"

Amelia's expression grows more serious. "Jason, I have to ask you something."

"What?"

"It's regarding what we discussed while you ate." She pauses and crosses her hands in front of herself. A trio of goblins pushes past us, nudging her against me. Amelia squirms and pulls away, and her cheeks flush red. "Um, there's a lot of others here. Can we talk somewhere more private?"

"Yeah. That's fine." I swallow slowly, unsure what she wants to discuss. Lately, she hasn't been the bubbly, explosive person she was when we first met. She's grown more subdued, especially since Bahamut's visions took hold of her.

* * *

A few minutes later, we step outside of the Great Doors, which are still wide-open from when Kar flung them inward. The darkness of the corridor leading to my cryopod stretches out before us. I make a mental note to start installing lights all around the Labyrinth where possible.

Amelia taps her foot on the ground. She forces an awkward smile, then loops her hands behind her back. "L-look, um, I don't know how to ask this... it's about what Hoarhiim showed you."

My back muscles tense up reflexively. "What about it?"

"What memories did you see? You saw what I used to look like, but Blaarjiim mentioned something to me while we were walking through the forest, and it was a little unsettling."

Now I understand the look on her face. It isn't just nerves, but a lack of faith that's bugging her. She doesn't trust me, given everything she's experienced over the last day or so.

Can I blame her?

"Hoarhiim showed me the events leading up to your encounter with Joan, Amelia. He... he showed me how she hurt you."

Amelia's breath catches. "Hoarhiim showed you our fight?"

"Yeah."

Her lip quivers. "Wh... why wouldn't you just ask me about it?"

"I didn't want to push you away, Amelia. You don't want to talk about Joan, that much is clear. Anyway, Hoarhiim offered to show me. I didn't ask him."

Amelia's eyes drift down to the ball of light resting in my belt pouch. "A likely story. Hoarhiim! Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

I half-expect him to reply, but as before, he stays silent. Blaarjiim appears in my mind, and Amelia's as well. "Hm. Odd. I cannot sense my brother's presence. He must be sleeping again."

"Sleeping?"

Blaarjiim grins. "When you first met him, he was in a similar state. If something disturbs my brother, or he feels rejected, he goes into isolation. His psyche is too fragile for my liking."

A realization hits me. "Rejected? You... you don't mean..."

Guilt hits me in waves. *Hoarhiim showed that memory of Amelia for a reason, yet I spit in his face. I ignored him and called him a liar. He's always been there for me, but I didn't just doubt him yesterday, I outright accused him of deceiving me.*

Is that why he's gone silent?

Amelia studies me intently. "Why did Hoarhiim show you my battle with Joan? He wouldn't do something like that without a good reason."

It occurs to me what she's prodding for. "Hoarhiim wanted to explain to me why you were, uh, hurting so badly. I didn't understand your trauma until he-"

"Bullshit." Amelia grits her teeth. "Hoarhiim isn't one to meddle like that. He thinks he's an agent of justice, a force of good against evil. He'd only show you my past if..." She trails off and looks down. A spark of recognition appears in her eyes. "He didn't just show you my fight with Joan."

"What? No, that was all he showed me, Amelia. Why don't you believe me?"

Amelia's jaw slacks, she tilts her head to look at Blaarjiim's orb. "You're right, Blaarjiim. He must have shown Jason something else."

Too late, I realize lying wasn't the best option. "Fine, he showed me one other thing. It wasn't that big of a deal, but you were looking for a lost treasure or something, and some goblins got in your way."

Instantly, Amelia takes a step back. Her jaw drops. "I knew it! You were lying to me!"

"I-I wasn't lying, Amelia! Really! Honest to god!" I start to reach toward her, but she swats my hand away.

"It all makes sense now, Jason. Blaarjiim was right about you. You're a Hero, just like Joan. You keep trying to get close to me so you can hurt me again. If you thought my past didn't matter, you wouldn't lie about it."

Things are getting out of control. She's not listening to me again. "Amelia, please, talk this out with me. Calm down."

She freezes and gawks for several seconds. "You... you used your Wordsmithing on me during the trial! Blaarjiim told me about it! I started acting unnaturally, and I lost all ability to feel my emotions! I couldn't let out the pain inside! What did you do to me?!"

"I calmed you down and undid it a few minutes later, that's all. Amelia, I swear! I didn't want you to hurt yourself-"

"Liar! Jason never tells the truth!" Tears well up in Amelia's eyes. "I... I can't believe you. I thought we were friends, but you used your powers on me just because you were scared. You *should* be scared! I'm powerful! I'm not a little kid you can look down on!"

"I never said you were, Amelia..."

"Your eyes say it all! You always look down on others, and on me! All you care about is looks; you even said so yourself! Huhk-" Amelia's heel on her shoe catches on a patch of uneven dirt, and she stumbles to the ground. "Ahh! I can't believe you'd do this to me! Liar!"

Blaarjiim appears in my mind, and a sinister grin appears on his face. "Hohoho, my queen is angry at you. She's about to blow, Jason. How will you stop her this time?"

Blaarjiim! That bastard!

Everything clicks into place.

Blaarjiim must be manipulating Amelia to turn her against me. I made a few mistakes, but he keeps weaving a web of conspiracy around my actions, turning me into a villain before her eyes.

"Amelia! Blaarjiim is behind all of this! He's trying to tear us apart, can't you see-"

Before I can finish, Amelia's eyes widen. She jumps to her feet. Her breathing comes in shallow bursts. "Now you're trying to lie about my best friend? Who are you, Jason?! I've known Blaarjiim for thousands of years, while you've barely been around for three days. I have no reason to believe you over him."

I can't think of a response. I watch in horror as she draws Dellfingler from her belt. The sword hollers in surprise. "Whoa, lassie! Let's calm down and think things over! No reason to-"

"Shut up, sword. You're a weapon. You do as I command." Amelia gnashes her teeth together. Her face is horrifying; an angry amalgamation of emotions I've never seen before.

She won't listen to reason. I have to Wordsmith and stop her. "**Calm-**"

Before the word leaves my mouth, Amelia lunges and pounds her palm into my chest. Several spinning, blurred images of the world swirl around me. My body comes to a sudden stop, and several moments pass before my brain can catch up.

Then the pain hits. I'm upside down. Every inch of my body screams for mercy. I'm in the same situation as when I first met Amelia, only now I have no recourse. My body groans and flops over. I end up face-first on the ground, with my nose and mouth inhaling and swallowing dirt. I can't see more than a few inches ahead. My vision pulses red. Blood? Is that blood pouring from my face? Where am I, again?!

"You were right, Blaarjiim. I sensed the magical buildup. He was going to use his Wordsmithing on me."

Amelia walks over and spins me onto my back with a quick kick. My body flops to the side uselessly, and I can't cry out in pain. My lung must have collapsed. I have maybe a minute to live.

My eyes swivel to look at Amelia. She looks terrifying, like a specter of Death. Dellfingler, in her hands, reminds me of a scythe. She's going to reap my soul!

"What do you mean?" Amelia holds the sword to my chest, but pauses to stare at Blaarjiim.

His face appears in my mind, and hers as well. "If you kill the mortal, his Heroic Aura will pass on to another. You'll have to face an unknown Hero eventually, one who will have the upper hand in a fight."

Amelia nods absentmindedly. Her heart has hardened, and she seems to think very little of killing. "I see. Thank you, Blaarjiim. You've given me an idea."

Dellfingler pivots in her hand, and she aims it at the side of my neck. "Wordsmithing. You must have felt pretty invincible with that power, just as you did when you tortured me, all those years ago. Heroes love to rule and flaunt their power."

The sword flicks to the side, and my eyes bulge as I feel the blade cut across my throat. Warmth spills out over my neck. "Kahk! Amel- kkuh!"

I'm going to die. I'm going to die! I'm going to die!!

Only now do I understand the foolishness of my actions. Had I paid more attention to the heart of the girl I cared about or had I heeded Hoarhiim's warning, I'd never have ended up in this situation.

Amelia steps over me, straddling her legs across both sides of my body. I watch in silence as my life ebbs away. Seconds remain.

She sheathes Dellfingler and holds her free hand up, pointing it at my chest. After making a few quick motions, she mutters something under her breath, and the pain in my body fades.

My throat stops gushing blood. My eyes begin to slump as a wave of exhaustion takes me, and Amelia sighs.

"Now you'll never hurt me ever again."

Part 016: Crippled Man, Broken Bond

Where am I?

I open my eyes, only to see an endless void. I can't feel anything. My body drifts in an infinite ocean of disorienting darkness, giving me the impression I'm floating deep in outer space. I want to move, but my body feels empty.

My nose itches. I try to scratch it, but from nowhere, a blunt object bashes me in the face, stunning me and sending my head into a disorienting spiral.

My mind screams in alarm: *You're under attack! Someone's trying to hurt you!*

I try to raise my hand and protect myself. "Stah- kkhnn..."

The words won't come out. My throat stings. It won't move properly. My saliva slides down my throat with the same ease as a drop of battery acid. I can't even shift my head to look around.

After a few moments, no more attacks come. Whoever struck me must be standing in the darkness, watching, waiting. It's only now that I notice a painful discomforting sensation on my skull. I'm still wearing the goddamn Crown! It can't be removed from my head unless I do so myself.

Ah! Amelia. That's right! She attacked me! Is she keeping me locked up somewhere? Why is everything so dark? Where did she put me? Hell, come to think of it, how am I alive at all? After seeing the rage on her face, I thought she was going to kill me.

Still, whoever my attacker is, he or she says nothing. I reach out to the Crown to access its database. Solomon's knowledge fills my brain up, and after a few seconds, a series of observations appear in my head.

Auditory receptors: Acceptable. Optic nerves: Burned out. Somatosensory system: Diminished. Mental acuity: Diminished. Movement: 95% impaired. Speech: Disabled.

The readings come from my body. I can still hear, but I can't see or feel anything. What happened after I passed out?

My head is still cocked unnaturally to the side, so I try to reach up to adjust it, only for the invisible assailant to reach over and strike me in the face again. "St- khh!" I choke out a weak plea for mercy, but still, they say nothing.

The sound of a door opening makes me freeze. The creaking of hinges, along with hesitant footsteps causes my heart to pound violently. Another person? Who? Someone's already here, hitting me every time I try to move, and now there's a second intruder? Oh god... I've never felt so alone and scared in my life. I'm more scared than when the statue monster chased me! I can't even defend myself or hide in a corner. I'm completely at their mercy!

"Your Grace?" A female voice pierces the din. The sudden sound hurts my head.

"Mmnggh," I mutter.

The footsteps draw closer. I can hear the woman breathing now, so close is she to my bed. "You're awake? Oh, thank the gods!" After she speaks again, I recognize the woman's voice.

Phoebe?

That's right. Phoebe Berthold. I've only spoken to her twice, but she seems a kind and caring soul. Is she working with Amelia? Why would Amelia give me back to Phoebe? I don't understand.

A sensation of warmth brushes against my face. I try to reach up to swat at it, only for another violent blow to strike me. I try to cower away, but I can't even move my head to try and evade the assailant's attacks. Tears bubble in my eyes as I try to stifle the terror in my heart. Whoever's hurting me, they must love seeing the agonized look on-

"Your Grace! Be careful!" Phoebe speaks again, much closer now. The warmth returns to my face, and I finally realize she must be touching me. "Why are you striking yourself? I mean you no harm."

Striking myself? What does she mean? Am... am *I* the one who keeps hitting my face? But that couldn't be *my* hand... could it?

A moment passes, and the horrific reality sets in. I can't feel my body at all. It *is* my hand striking me. I thought there was someone standing above me, silently, torturing me every so often... but it was me all along. I... I feel like such an idiot.

The sound of choked breathing makes me pause. After listening for a few seconds, I realize it's Phoebe. She's trying to stifle tears, but after a few moments, she can't control herself. "Your Grace... I'm so, so sorry. I should have been there. I can't believe what the Black Witch did to you! It's my failure! I'm so sorry! I failed you in your t-time of need..."

It's not your fault, Phoebe. Don't blame yourself for this. I want to comfort her and tell her everything's going to be okay, but I can't speak at all.

"White-hair?" A masculine voice speaks now, and I instantly recognize it as Kar's. He sounds like he's at the door. "Has Turtle woken up yet?"

She snuffles audibly and pulls away. The warmth on my face disappears, and she replies to Kar, "Y-yes, my lord. He has woken, but I don't believe he can speak. He struck himself in the face, too."

"Mmm. I see." Kar's heavy footsteps plod toward me. He stops, and several seconds of silence follow. "I do not know what Frilled One's plans involved. She slashed his throat, only to then partially heal him. 'Twas only enough to close his wounds, but she left his spine shattered. He'll be paralyzed for life if we can't find someone both willing and able to heal him."

"Amelia slashed his throat? B-but, that's awful! I thought they were friends! Why would she do such a thing?!"

Kar grunts. "Hurgh. I can only hazard a guess, White-hair. Turtle is a Hero, one with a power called Wordsmithing. If he cannot speak, then he cannot use his power. It seems her goal was to turn him into a cripple. Now that he can't use his Wordsmithing, he won't get in her way."

Phoebe snuffles again, and I can barely make out the sound of her wiping at her eyes. "Horrid, foul monster. I can't believe she would do such a thing."

"Aye." Kar walks a little closer. I feel the bed shift as he sits down at the far end. "I've sent out a query to the demons, but I doubt any will respond. Healing magic is exceedingly rare, and most demons cannot heal something like a broken spine. I'm afraid that Turtle will stay paralyzed for a long time to come."

I try to blink and open my eyes, but nothing comes into view. I can't see anyone, or anything, not even the tiniest sliver of light. The sensation of tears crawling down my face makes my chest ache.

I'm paralyzed; a hero who can't move. That must be what Amelia meant. *You'll never be able to hurt me again*, she said. I can't hurt or help anyone. I'm useless. A lump of flesh stuck in a bed.

A choke escapes my throat. The bed shifts slightly. Kar grunts. "Ah. I've disturbed you. I'm sorry, Turtle. I know this must be hard for you, but I assure you. With some patience, I may find someone who can heal you. Don't lose faith."

"Please don't cry, Your Grace." Phoebe's warm hand touches my face again. "I shall stay by your side. I won't let you be alone, no matter the- ah!" She squeaks in surprise. "Kar! His eyes! Look!"

Kar grunts. "They're glowing? What is the meaning of this? Tilt his head this way."

Phoebe pauses. "Forgive me, Your Grace." Saying this, I feel my head shift into a more natural position as she tilts it to allow me to look straight up.

"Hurgh. How odd. Why would his eyes glow white? The color reminds me of- oh! That white orb of his! Have you seen it?"

My heart pounds in my chest. *Hoarhiim!* Where is he?!

Phoebe grunts. "Ah, I apologize. I know not of what you speak."

"He carried a glowing orb in his belt pouch. You removed his clothes, as I recall. Did you see it?"

Phoebe stutters and stammers as embarrassment floods her voice. "H-his clothes. Right, o-of course. I saw m-many things, but not the orb. My apologies."

"Unfortunate. Perhaps the Frilled One took it. I am sorry, Turtle, but I will do my best to locate it. As for your eyes, I can only guess what the glowing means. White-hair, is Turtle able to see?"

A sensation of wind brushes over my face. "No. He isn't following my hand."

"Can he speak at all?"

I cough and try to force out a word, but all that escapes my lips is, "Kuh- nnguh!"

Kar sighs. "I believe he could heal himself if he had access to Wordsmithing. However, I have an idea. Turtle, you may not be able to speak or move, but perhaps you could communicate in other ways? If you can understand my words, cough twice."

A flash of realization hits me. *The blinking code!*

I remember reading about a man who lay paralyzed and in the hospital back in my time. He was able to communicate with his doctors and loved ones by blinking once for no, and twice for yes!

"Kuh. Kuh."

"I see," Kar mutters. "Cough four times."

"Kuh. Kuh. Kuh. Kuh."

Kar's voice brightens noticeably. "That is good news. White-hair, I will leave you to take care of him. I must seek out a healer, if possible. Use simple yes and no questions to talk to him. I have known many warriors who ended up in similar situations after a battle. Try not to leave him alone, where possible. Loneliness and helplessness can crush a man's soul."

Phoebe's voice quivers. "I would sooner fall on my sword than leave him in darkness."

"I know." Kar stands up and walks to the door. "He may not be able to say it, but I sense that the Turtle appreciates you, more than you think. You must let go of your feelings of guilt if you wish to feel happiness."

Kar shuts the door behind him, leaving Phoebe and me alone together.

Questions appear in my mind. *Why would Phoebe feel guilty? Did she do something to me?*

I wish I could ask.

Phoebe sits beside me for a long while, saying nothing. I try to reach up and touch her, only for her to jump in surprise. "Your Grace?"

"Kuh." I choke out a reply, but it doesn't amount to much.

She stands beside the bed for a few seconds before sitting down again. "You can still move your right arm? Can you feel my hand?"

"Kuh."

A pause. "Ah, right. One cough for no, two for yes. That was the system, right?"

"Kuh. Kuh."

"So you can't feel my hand. I'm holding yours right now. Try to squeeze, if possible."

I try, but I'm unsure if it worked. Based on Phoebe's reaction, I failed. "Are you squeezing?"

"Kuh. Kuh."

"Nothing changed. Perhaps you can move your hand, but can't feel anything. Be careful, Your Grace. You could hurt yourself." She hesitates for a moment. "D-do you need to use the restroom?"

That's an odd question, I think to myself. A moment later, it occurs to me the gravity of my situation.

Bed sores. Food. Toilet breaks. In the modern world I came from, a hospital would be well-equipped for all of those things. How am I going to use the bathroom in my current state? How will I wash myself? I won't. Phoebe will have to take care of me.

The thought makes me want to die. I've never felt so helpless and ashamed in my entire life.

Phoebe coughs. "I... I know you must have many thoughts now, Your Grace. I just want you to understand that I'm here for you. You saved my friends and me from a lifetime of servitude to a dark god.

Please... please don't hesitate to use me. I will care for you with all my heart. I won't fail you like- like I... like I did King Arthur."

The bed shakes slightly. Phoebe chokes a little, making an odd noise in the process. She's crying again. Why does she weep for me? I feel like someone chained an anvil to my neck. I want to cry, too.

She wipes her eyes and touches my face. "Can you feel this, Your Grace?"

"Kuh. Kuh."

"Ah... I'm glad. I'll stay like this, just for a while, if you'd like."

"Kuh. Kuh."

Part 017: Trauma, Ancient Wounds, Ancient Allies

[Recommended Listening](#)

A month has passed since Amelia crippled me.

Once again, as part of my daily routine, Phoebe carefully leans me forward to rest my chin on a handcrafted wooden device. The custom-carved implement allows her to set me up in bed so she can wash my back and body. She loops my arms through the front to help support my weight, and I feel her breath in my ear as she leans close and presses the cold sponge against my skin.

Her soft humming, gentle as always, soothes me. I'm beginning to recover my sense of touch throughout my body, but only a little. My right arm and hand are just about all that I can move of my own volition, but I can't perform any delicate tasks. They're both so numb that moving them around is mostly guesswork.

"I'll read you another story later, okay? Would you like that?"

Phoebe keeps her voice low, and I cough twice to answer. "Kuh. Kuh."

Phoebe likes to read to me for several hours a day. A week or so after my paralysis, Kar found a cache of books in Bahamut's library. Most of them are dry, tedious descriptions of monster and demon physiology and none of them strike me as creative literature, but Phoebe's soft, gentle voice makes listening to them bearable.

A man named Neil Adams pops in to say hello occasionally. I don't know him, but based on his conversations with Phoebe, I've gathered that he's one of Bahamut's ex-slaves. He and Phoebe share some vague memories of their time living under the Sphinx, but neither of them likes to discuss Bahamut unless necessary.

Of course, Kar also visits from time to time, but aside from him and Neil, nobody else has so much as sent a get-well-soon card. Phoebe never explicitly states the obvious, but I get a sense that many people are disappointed in me. The almighty Hero who solved Bahamut's riddle has become an invalid; one who can only lie in bed and choke.

How can I blame them? I'm useless. I might as well be dead, for all the use I am.

Despite my dark thoughts on the matter, Phoebe doesn't mind even in the slightest. The diaper I wear now was at first a source of incredible embarrassment, and I cried several times knowing she would probably mock me, but this gentle soul never once said anything disparaging about my situation.

Her sweetness is more than a simple lack of mockery. I've come to realize that Phoebe somehow feels fulfilled when she cares for me, as though she wants to be needed by someone, and I'm an outlet for her emotions.

"La la la..." Phoebe cleans my back from top to bottom, and after she finishes, she pats me down with a towel. "There we go... there we go... nice and clean. Doesn't that feel good?"

She crawls behind me and rubs my back, pressing her hands softly against my tender muscles. I'm already beginning to feel the effects of atrophy, given my body never stretches or exercises. It probably won't be long before I can't move around even if Kar does find a healer.

Like that's going to happen.

Suddenly, Phoebe surprises me. She wraps her arms around me and leans forward, pressing herself against my back. "Your Grace... Sir Jason... I spoke to Kar today. He can't... he can't find anyone who will help you. I don't know what to say." She leans forward and rests her chin on my shoulder. I feel her heart beating against mine. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Don't blame yourself, Phoebe, my mind says. It's not your fault. I'm glad you're here with me.

Every time Kar shows up, Phoebe's voice fills with hope, only for her mood to crash when he reveals the bad news. No demons are willing to heal me. I'm a Hero, after all, and while he assures Phoebe they don't know that fact, it's unlikely a demon would care in the slightest about healing a human.

If not a demon, who *could* heal me? Do humans exist with technology that could repair my shattered spine? If someone could fix my throat, I might be able to do the rest with my Wordsmithing.

Phoebe's hands press against my chest. My gut aches from grief. I wish I could embrace her back. She says she should have been there to protect me from Amelia, but what could she have done? Amelia's strength is superhuman, exceeding the logical. It's better that I'm paralyzed instead of Phoebe.

She's a gentle person, a kind soul. Too good for me. What have I done to deserve someone like her in my life?

Phoebe pulls away. *Don't go*, I plead in my mind, but she can't hear me. Her voice catches. "Okay. Time to clean your front, Jason."

An hour later, Phoebe yawns audibly and leans me back in bed. I can practically hear her eyes blinking as she pulls the wooden implement away and tucks me in.

The familiar sound of a well-worn book cracking open catches my attention. Phoebe yawns again. "Ahh, sorry, Your Grace. I didn't sleep well last night."

You don't have to read if you're too tired, I think to myself.

She doesn't hear me.

Phoebe begins to read a book regarding different subspecies of Gorgons. "The Medusa is a variant of the Gorgon that only appears every five generations. Her appearance is noted for having... having snakes instead of hair. The hair is both a defensive weapon, and a method for consuming nutrients, given..." She yawns again and pauses for a few seconds before continuing. This is the third time in a week she's started to doze off while reading.

"...given the Medusa's inability to consume sustenance through her mouth as most other monsters do. Her snakes are a precious tool, and their bite is highly... highly venomous. It has been said that one bite from... ahh..."

A silence follows. Phoebe whispers, "S-sorry. I'm... I need to rest my eyes for a bit." The shifting of the bed as she leans her face on it makes me smile. A few minutes later, her breathing evens out as she rests on the bed beside me.

I move my right arm forward, slowly, uncertain of its position in the environment around me. When I reach her head, I carefully lower it. I can barely make out the sensation of her hair under my hand, and I stroke it carefully, trying hard not to wake her up.

Considering my options, I'm probably stuck in this bed for the rest of my life. I'll eventually have to accept my fate, but what about Phoebe? No matter the guilt she feels, caring for my pathetically broken husk will wear thin eventually. She'll leave me, once she realizes a future with a vegetable is no way to live. If I were on life support, I'd cut the power to save her the trouble.

Before I entered the Cryopod, I was a leech on society. What has changed? Nothing. I'm as useless now as I was before.

Phoebe's shallow breaths seem to fill the whole room. I can't hear the outside world at all. No children playing, servants working, warriors training, swords clashing, or any other sound.

When my life ends, I can only pray I will pass away quickly. I can't dwell on my past forever.

I just...

I wish I hadn't deserted Hoarhiim.

At some point, I must have dozed off, because when I wake up, I hear Phoebe flipping pages quietly. My glowing eyes catch her attention, and she closes the book. "Did you have a good nap, Your Grace?"

"Kuh. Kuh."

"I'm pleased to hear that." I can almost feel the smile in her voice. "Um, when I woke up, your hand was on my head. W-were you trying to wake me up?"

"Kuh."

"So... you just wished to touch me?"

Her phrasing makes me blush. I don't know why I wanted to stroke her hair... I just did it. Maybe that was the wrong move.

"Kuh. Kuh."

My heart skips several beats as the seconds crawl past. Phoebe doesn't say anything. After a full minute, she exhales. "I'm glad. You know, I've never had a purpose in life. When I was a child, I wanted to be more than just a wife or a maid, so I put all my energy into knight training. Women weren't allowed to do such things, so I had to train in total secrecy. Imagine my surprise when the king himself, Arthur, took

notice of me one day and challenged me to a swordfight. He must have seen me training behind his castle, but when we fought, he knocked me down in just fifteen seconds."

I stare at the blackness around me. *Phoebe's more talkative than usual. I don't mind. I'd like to know more about her.*

She pauses, and a lilt of sadness creeps into her voice. "I felt ashamed, worthless. The king was going to put me to death. I knew women weren't allowed to use weapons unless their lives were in danger, but I did so anyway. Despite this, Arthur surprised me. He turned out to be a kind, sweet gentleman. If a demon threatened his land, Arthur would burn everything to the ground if it meant retribution for his countrymen, but for the people under him, he never once treated them as inferiors. He told me that since I had lasted three seconds longer in combat than the average man, I deserved a position of prestige. And so, he knighted me as the commander of his Silver Battalion."

Arthur sounds like an excellent Hero, my mind says, somewhat bitterly. If only I could be as extraordinary as him.

"You know, Jason..." Phoebe trails off for a moment before continuing. "You and Arthur are very similar. Well, you *were* similar, I suppose. He died long ago, but all the qualities he had as a Hero, you also possess. Your kindness reminds me of him. When I'm around you, I feel... I feel as though I'm with the king, once more."

To my surprise, I feel warmth somewhere below my neck. It takes me a moment to recognize the sensation is emanating from my hand. Phoebe must be holding it again.

More silence follows, and I feel a sensation move across the top of my fingers. Phoebe strokes my hand slowly, over and over, tiring me and causing my eyes to flutter. I've begun to fall asleep more easily as of late. I can barely keep my mind awake for a few hours at a time. I wonder what that means? Perhaps death is coming for me ahead of schedule.

Phoebe pauses. The bed shakes slightly as she sits next to me. "Oh, this ring. I recognize it. Isn't this one of the rings Bahamut wore?"

I blink my eyes slowly. *Yes. Bahamut's ring. One of three, as I recall. I never bothered putting the other two on. I suppose, in the end, such an act would be pointless.*

The feeling of exhaustion weighing on me clears up in an instant. *Wait, what am I saying? Those rings belonged to the Archangels! Where are the other two? Where are Michael and Raphael's rings?!*

I pull my hand away from Phoebe and slap it against my stomach.

Rings. They were in my pocket. No, Phoebe undressed me. Where did she put my clothes? Didn't I lose my clothes before I left with Amelia? I made a new shirt and pants, so where did my old clothes go?!

"Kmungh- nguuh!" I choke hoarsely, and my hand slaps my face as I fumble around. My mouth works just enough for me to swallow liquids, though my jaw lacks the strength to chew anything solid, but perhaps if I...

I navigate my hand to my mouth. *Ring finger. That's where I put Gabriel's band.*

I slide half my hand into my mouth, and Phoebe cries out in alarm. "Your Grace?! Are you choking? Is something lodged in your throat?!"

No, dammit! I'm trying to get my ring off! I carefully lick my fingers until I taste the brass band, then I slowly bite down until my incisors lock onto it. With a Herculean effort, I pull my hand away, and the ring comes off. It stays clenched between my top and bottom teeth, and Phoebe notices. "You wanted that ring off?"

"Kuh. Kuh."

"I see." She reaches forward and gently pulls it out of my mouth. I release it and let her have it. Several seconds pass as she examines the ring. "There's a word written here, but it's a language I don't understand."

Gabriel. It's Gabriel's name. Curses! How do I tell her I need to find the other two rings?!

Seconds pass.

My mind races with options. I don't know why I want to try those rings, but I feel as though something is calling out to me.

A curious lilt enters Phoebe's voice. "Say, didn't Bahamut have two more rings just like this?"

"KUH! KUH!" I nearly spit mucus everywhere as I choke out the affirmation.

Phoebe picks up on my signals. "Do you know where the other two are?"

"Kuh."

"Do you want me to find them for you?"

"Kuh! Kuh!"

A sound of brass on wood pings to my right. "I'll set this one here on your dresser, Your Grace. I'm going to leave for a while. Perhaps I can find out where the other two went."

"Kuh. Kuh."

"As you wish."

Phoebe shuffles to the door, and a moment later, it creaks shut behind her.

I'm alone, now.

Please, Phoebe. Find Raphael and Michael.

"Your Grace!" Phoebe's voice rings out in the silence of the room, jarring me awake. The paralyzation terror hits for the third time this week, only to fade after a moment. "I've found them!"

Phoebe walks over to the bed, followed by another set of footsteps. "Huk?" I lilt my choke slightly, and Phoebe picks up on my question. She's grown adept at understanding my signals.

"It's Neil Adams, your grace. The man in charge of the mines, as you may recall? He helped me track down one of the maids who had found the rings in the wash."

Splendid, I think to myself. I smile as wide as I can, but it doesn't come out well.

Mr. Adams clears his throat. "Always a pleasure to be of service to the Hero, milord. I'm sorry it took us as many hours as it did, but the palace has quite a lot of staff."

Phoebe pulls her chair up next to the bed and touches my hand. "You wanted to wear the rings, isn't that correct?"

I pull my hand and fumble around to my side, trying to find Gabriel's ring, and Phoebe pulls my hand back onto the bed. "All you had to do was ask, Your Grace."

She slides Gabriel's ring off the dresser and places it on my ring finger. Before she can put the other two on, Adam takes a step forward. "Hold, lady Berthold. Please allow me to examine the bands."

Phoebe hesitates, unsure if it's okay to let him touch the Hero's artifacts, so I choke out a *yes, that's fine*. "Kuh. Kuh."

The sound of movement follows, and Adams mutters to himself. "Hmm, yes. These were Bahamut's rings, weren't they? The writing is in Latin, an archaic language. They each say Raphael and Michael, respectively."

More movement. Phoebe holds my hand up again, and a smile enters her voice. "Here you go, Your Grace."

The coldness of the first ring stings my middle finger. I choke out a gasp as a series of images flood the blackness of my vision.

Sometime later, I appear in an open clearing, where a small campfire crackles in the darkness of the night, four logs arranged around it for seating purposes. The stars twinkle above me, and a gentle breeze sways the trees in the distance.

An old man in white robes sits atop the far log and pokes the fire with a stick. His majestic white wings spread out five feet in every direction. A grey beard five inches long stretches down from his chin, nearly touching his knee due to how far forward he sits.

The old man doesn't look up at me as he reaches over and places a log in the fire. "How art thou, Jason Hiro? I see thou hath finally come to pay this old bag of bones a visit."

I nod dumbly and walk over to sit on the log across from him.

Without asking, I already know his name.

Raphael.

For a full minute, neither of us speaks. I stare silently at Raphael, grateful to have the use of my eyes again. However, after he says nothing, I figure he must be waiting for me to talk first. "Raphael, I need your help."

"Mmm, yes, I imagined as much," Raphael replies. He yawns and pushes a log into the fire to give it some air. The embers crackle loudly for a second as some kindling shifts around.

"I'm paralyzed. I need to heal myself."

Raphael shakes his head slowly. "Oh, I don't think that is thy biggest problem, young Hero. The body can heal in an instant, but the mind is where pain lingers."

"What do you mean? Are you going to help me?"

"Patience, boy. We've time aplenty to spare. Art thou in a rush?"

"Somewhat. Then again, I've already spent a month in bed, so... maybe not?"

The old man clears his throat and rests his hands on his lap. "Hahaha... The young always move too quickly. Life is a never-ending dash when one is healthy. Occasionally one must slow down, breathe deeply, and ponder the path ahead."

"I've spent a month lying in bed. I think I've taken things pretty slow."

"Nay. 'Tis not the body, but the mind that determines thy restless nature. Things both small and large cause thee endless turmoil. For example, I wonder how many times thou hath flayed thyself over the event that caused thy paralysis."

I follow his gaze to the fire and bow my head. "I keep thinking I should have spoken to Amelia differently. I should have listened and asked her about her past."

"Perhaps. One will always make mistakes when he is in a hurry, hoho."

Raphael reaches behind his log and pulls out a brass flute. He doesn't play the instrument, but instead wipes it down with his robes, cleaning some dust from it. "When it comes to women, most men are terrible at listening. I expect a blunder from one as inexperienced with the opposite sex as thee."

"Th-thanks," I mutter, trying not to sound sarcastic.

"My pleasure."

The winged grandfather twiddles his beard for a few moments. "The angels are the most ancient of all species, Jason. Of them, I am the eldest. I've seen many things strange and wondrous. Few happenings surprise me."

I rub my eyes. "What do I do, Raphael? If you're old, you must be wise too. Can't you give me any pointers?"

"Wisdom is a word used to divide the young from the old. Simply because one is old, that does not make him wise, just as a youth may not necessarily be a fool. Everyone calls me the Archangel of Wisdom, but 'tis just a title, as Gabriel is the Archangel of Power, and Michael is the Archangel of Courage. I have plenty of courage to spare, similar to how Gabriel has wisdom and Michael, power."

This guy loves his word games.

I clear my throat. "Well, you're probably smarter than me, right? How do I heal myself? How do I convince Amelia I'm her friend? How do I save humanity from the demons? How-"

Raphael holds up a palm. "Those are not the questions thou must ask, young Hero. Instead, look at the guilt welling up in thy heart. 'Tis a sore that will grow to engulf thy entire body. Thou dost blame thyself

for Earth's destruction and humanity's present situation. In thy eyes, thou art a failure who has yet to measure up to the greatest heroes of the past."

I try not to look too miffed. "That sounds about right. You have me pinned perfectly."

"Of course I do. I'm old!" Raphael chuckles and sticks his flute back behind the log. "However, the heroes of the past are hardly the perfect deities ye imagine. All faced trials and tribulations that tested their mettle, their character, their morality, and their convictions."

"Oh yeah? What about Joan? She looked violent to me."

Raphael squints, and I feel the faint brush of something tickling my brain. "Ye saw a vision of Joan, eh? A courageous Hero, she was. While powerful, t'was her conviction to eradicate evil, no matter the cost, that allowed her to stand out from the crowd. Where some heroes may have stayed their blade and tried to convert an enemy to the light, Joan always hardened her heart. She cared little for her humanity, and instead sought to put every waking hour to the destruction of demonkind."

My mouth gapes open. "Joan sounds like a psychopath! Are you telling me that she murdered every demon in her path without mercy?!"

"Aye. Arthur faltered at times. Solomon was a peaceful soul. King David believed that righteousness existed in the hearts of all beings. But not Jeanne d'Arc. She believed that demons were contrary to the Creator, and that her duty was to purge them from the universe. In just a few short years, she slew tens of millions all by herself."

The air between us grows silent enough that I could hear a pin drop.

"That's... that's awful. She sounds like a monster!"

"A monster, aye, perhaps. The demons, desperate to halt Joan's rampage, pulled out all the stops to have other humans accuse her of heresy. They burned her at the stake before her 20th birthday."

"So that part was true? But how did Joan end up fighting Amelia if humans had killed her thousands of years before?"

Raphael's face turns grim. "Heroes, when they reached a certain threshold of power, tended to bind their life-force to an artifact. Solomon, for example, to his Crown. Joan, to the Sword of Heaven, her most treasured artifact. Thus, her soul survived the destruction of her flesh."

The memory of what happened hits me. "You mean... when Amelia touched the sword..."

"The Black Witch's malevolent evil activated the remnants of Joan's soul and released her from the Sword of Heaven. Joan was a purifier, one who would eliminate evil at any cost. She did not merely attack thy friend for no good reason."

A minute passes. I glower into the fire as bits and pieces of events fall into place. "Amelia murdered those goblins. She sought out the sword, and accidentally released Joan from it. Almost everything makes sense now."

"Almost?" Raphael leans back and pulls a smoking pipe from the folds of his robe. He drops some crushed leaves inside and lights it, then puffs a few smoke-rings into the air. "What confusion still

befuddles thy mind?"

"Amelia never once acted the way she did in Hoarhiim's memory around me. She turned against me at the end, but... I think I deserved it."

"Ye deserved for a companion to paralyze thee and render ye defenseless? My, if she's the sort of person one calls a friend, I'd hate to meet thy enemies."

The old man chuckles again, but I don't. My head hurts from all this thinking.

"I need to face Amelia again, Raphael. I have to confront her. Will you help me? Is there a way to cure my paralysis?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, a simple matter."

The Archangel smiles but says nothing else. I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't.

"And that would be...?"

"I cannot heal thee, but Michael can. After Becky placed my ring on thy finger, time froze while we spoke. Soon she'll-"

"Phoebe. Her name is Phoebe."

He shrugs at my interruption. "Becky, Phoebe, same thing. I'm a forgetful old man. In any case, once ye leave, thou must meet the remaining Archangel. Michael may even prove wiser than I."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe what you will. I care not." Raphael puffs on his pipe again, and his voice grows cold. "All the angels are dead, Child of Gaia, and the Titans as well. Chains bind humanity. The demons may seem to rule on high, but they are hardly the greatest threat to life as we know it. In time, thou shalt learn of an enemy beyond the Demon Emperors. Stay on the alert. Our abilities as Archangels are but a fraction of their former power. We will be of little help to thee in the future."

Before saying my goodbyes, a question remains. I rub my hands together. "Say, Raphael?"

"Yes?"

"Why didn't Joan kill Amelia? I mean, you said Joan was a murderous Hero who always slew evil... but she left Amelia alive."

The Archangel stares at me, a grim look in his eyes. "Joan hated demons. Not humans. No matter how evil the Black Witch was, Joan would never kill someone of her species. When her fellow humans burned her alive, she went willingly, believing her death was the will of the Creator. She was vicious and violent, yet loving and kind."

"That's quite the contrast."

The old man sticks some fresh plants in his pipe's bowl. "Thou aren't wrong."

I watch Raphael puff on his pipe for a minute, then I stand up and bow graciously. "Thank you, Archangel of Wisdom. You've helped me greatly."

"And thou hath given me the best conversation in a long time! Drop by more often! Don't leave an old man to suffer in loneliness!"

"Ehehe, I'll do my best, grandpa."

* * *

Several moments later, the world fades away, and the darkness of my unseeing eyes takes over. Phoebe fumbles with my fingers for a moment. "Did you see that, Mr. Adams? He arched his back for a split second."

"Are you certain? I saw nothing of the sort." The man's gruff voice overpowers hers, and Phoebe coughs meekly.

"Perhaps t'was my imagination. Well, I'll put on the next ring, then."

The third band settles onto my index finger, and I shiver as a wave of coldness envelops me. A chilling blizzard wraps itself around my hand and travels up my arm to my heart.

The world fades away, and a different name appears in my mind.

Michael.

A frigid breeze blows across a grassy plain. October's sunlight shines down, preventing the land from freezing, though Mother Nature does her best to hush the greenery to sleep.

Winter is coming.

A nearby lake lies still, and the occasional duck flaps around, quacking in the water. Deer and Antelope graze next to a nearby forest, and the sound of a goat braying on the other side of a nearby hill somehow seems relaxing. These are not just the sounds of animals, but animals from Earth. My home.

I shiver unexpectedly and feel a small bit of frostburn on the tips of my ears. If I stay in this cold for long, I probably won't be able to wake up.

"H-hello? Muh-Michael?" My stammering voice is a squeak in the wind, barely audible even to me. A maelstrom surges, piercing every layer of my clothing and knocking me to the ground as I try to withstand winter's onslaught. Snow pours from the sky, as though the North Pole's floodgates have suddenly opened. Within seconds, two inches of snow build around and on top of me. The animals flee to the forest for safety, but it's too far away for me. I'm alone.

I'm going to freeze to death in a mental hallucination! What the fuck?! Where's Michael?!

As if my mental voice is a mighty horn beckoning across the plains, warmth surges from the hill next to me. A slow glance upward reveals a bright light atop the grassy hillock. A single man, wearing a crown of thorns, stares down at me.

"Art thou cold, young one?"

My teeth chatter. "Y-y-yeah."

"Warmth pours from me. Come closer. The snow will melt if ye enter my aura."

"I-I c-can't... m-move... too... c-cold..."

My body locks up. The slight warmth Michael gives off isn't enough to melt the snow around me. I might die within seconds if I can't get a move on!

"Dost thee lack courage, or perhaps conviction? Thy current predicament is a simple trial, a test of thy willpower. If thou cannot force thyself to stand, then perhaps ye deserve to die."

I blink in surprise. "What- what are you saying? I thought... aren't you Jesus Christ? Aren't you supposed to be kind and compassionate?!"

Michael holds his hand up, and a massive two-headed lion crawls up the peak beside him and rolls around in the grass playfully. "Kindness and compassion can take many forms. Some would call my trial 'tough love,' young Hero. Listen to thyself. Art thou still shivering?"

A quick breath escapes my lips.

Michael is right. I don't feel cold anymore. In fact, I'm halfway up the hill. When did I get here? Did I crawl?

"I'm not cold, no. Why... what...?"

Michael gazes past me at the forest across the lake. The wind slowly dies down, and the sun begins melting the snow. A single deer peeks through the trees, checking to see if it's safe to come out.

"Have ye ever sacrificed a part of thyself for someone else, Hero?"

Yes, I want to say, but I pause to think about it. "No."

"Hath thee ever gone out of thy way to help someone, even if it greatly inconvenienced thee?"

"...Not really."

Michael looks me right in the eye. "The defining trait of a Hero is self-sacrifice. A Hero must have the courage to wound themselves, even if their actions will only save the life of one person."

I nod dumbly, unsure of what he means. "That sounds about right, but I don't see what you're driving at."

Michael bows his head. "When the angels and gods were at their weakest, I knew it wouldn't be long before the demons launched a final assault and killed us all. Death is everlasting to an immortal, and incomprehensibly more painful than to a mortal. A mortal might live a hundred years, but an angel will live forever. Losing an eternity with those I loved was the price I was willing to pay if it meant they could go on without me."

"Is that why you're known as the Archangel of Courage?"

Michael closes his eyes. A single tear squeezes out and drips down to his robes. "I was terrified. I stood firm, so those I cared about wouldn't fret, but in truth, 'twas the hardest thing I ever did. The only thing that would have hurt more would have been killing my closest friend."

A shock like electricity arcs down my spine. "Killing your closest friend? Wait! You don't mean..."

"Amelia, thy companion, slew many members of my family. She is not the innocent child thou dost think she is. I know thy thoughts and thy past, Hero. Thy childhood was lonely and devoid of companions. Nobody loved thee. Upon meeting Amelia, thou didst harden thy heart and pretend not to care, but secretly, thy thoughts dwelt on her. Thy feelings for her might be pure, but she is corrupt. Few beings exist who have sunk to similar depths of depravity as the Black Witch."

Michael wipes his tears away and hardens his gaze. "Whether ye lack conviction or courage, one thing is for certain. Hero, thou must kill the monster posing as a woman. Joan lacked the courage to sacrifice her morality. She was unwilling to kill another human being, and as such allowed the Black Witch to survive to today. However, Amelia is still weak. The demons won't dare to strike at her, fearing her powers, but her weakness is known to thee. Thou hath the power and the obligation to strike her down, where others will not."

Cautiously, I stand up and take a step back from the Archangel. "You... you want me to *kill* her? I-I can't just kill someone! That's awful!"

"Death is a way of life," Michael snaps. "Thou hath already spent a month with thy new companion, Phoebe. She cares deeply for thee, but if ye allow the Black Witch to roam free, Phoebe will be in grave danger, along with the rest of humanity. Phoebe is willing to fall on her sword should thou ask, but have ye the same conviction as she? Art thou willing to sacrifice thy morals to save thy friends?"

"Amelia is my friend too!" Anger roars into my voice. "Just because I've spent more time with Phoebe doesn't mean I value Amelia's friendship less! What the hell kind of Archangel are you, anyway? You talk about death more flippantly than the Archangel of Power! Even Gabriel has more respect for life than you do!"

Michael glowers at me for a moment before looking away. His eyes soften. "Perhaps you're right. In a way, it takes a different sort of courage to choose one's morality over the lives of others. Still, tell me, Hero... dost thee care about Phoebe? She stays at thy side when others do not. She devotes herself to thee fully. If ye had to choose, would ye save her life, or Amelia's?"

"That's an awful question," I counter. "I have Wordsmithing. Maybe I can do both. You don't know."

"I don't," Michael admits. "But if thou can accomplish such a feat, thou wouldst be the first. One cannot merely pacify evil. The hammer of righteousness must crush darkness wherever it appears."

Michael trails off, and my gaze wanders. A glance down at my feet reveals flowers sprouting in the grass below me. Somehow, winter has passed, and spring has arrived. How long have we been talking?

"The only problem with that statement, Michael, is that evil can be very subjective. Maybe I don't consider myself a righteous paladin ready to crush demons under my boot. Even if I did, I refuse to believe what others say about Amelia until I see her supposed evil nature for myself."

Michael keeps his voice low. "A fool learns only from his mistakes, but a wise man learns from the mistakes of others. One may choose whatever path they please, but I pray, for thy sake, that thou dost not regret thy choice."

After a moment, the Archangel walks down to me. When he draws closer, I can't help but notice that I'm a little taller than him. "I will heal thy shattered spine, Hero. Before leaving, however, know this: Thou art the last Hero. Due to the extinction of the angels and Titans, the Heroic aura will no longer pass on to another after thy death. Please, I beg of thee to carefully consider the path ahead."

"I will, Michael. Of that much, you can be confident."

The Archangel walks behind me and inhales. "My power is limited, Hero. I can only help thee this one time. Take care to create safeguards for thyself, lest ye stumble into another unfortunate situation."

I nod and bow my head as his arms touch my back. An explosive pain erupts through my body, and tears of agony blast from my eyes like Niagara Falls. "AUGHHH!"

Michael releases me, and I fall to the ground, unable to control my arms and legs as they convulse erratically.

"Be strong, Hero."

Michael's last words fade as the mental world dissolves away.

A moment later, I scream a raspy, pained growl as several hands grab hold of me. The blackness around me becomes unbearable as I struggle to look at whoever is pinning me down. I can't control my limbs though, and every finger and toe squeezes together all at once.

"He's going into shock!" A man, likely Mr. Adams, yells in alarm. "Try to hold him down! He'll hurt himself otherwise!"

"Your Grace! Jason! Please, stop!"

Phoebe screams in fright and throws herself on me, but I can't control my flailing form. She wraps herself around my arms and holds them tightly, even as I unconsciously struggle to free myself. After several agonizing seconds, the pain in my body subsides as quickly as it arrived. I flop back down and gasp violently.

"Haah... haaahh..." My throat aches, but not in the way it did only minutes earlier. Phoebe pants quietly, and I feel the warmth of her breath on my face.

"Y-your Grace? Are- are you...?"

"Fah... I'm fah..." I choke and try to get the words out, but going a month without using my throat has left it dry and raspy. I take a moment to swallow, before replying. "I'm f-fine, Phoebe. Thank... thank you. Thank you for stopping me."

I can't see anything. I can only feel Phoebe's clothed body pressing against mine. A moment of silence follows before she climbs off of me. "I-I apologize for my impropriety, Your Grace."

"I... I didn't mind. Not at all," I say, suppressing a tiny smile. Cautiously, I lift my hand and squeeze, feeling vigor return to my body. My sense of touch is back. Slowly, I sit up and swivel my head around.

My vision remains black. I'm still blind.

"**Vision.**" I speak the word, but nothing happens.

"My liege?" Adams intones questioningly. "Have you recovered?"

"I have. The Archangels healed me."

This time, a huge smile crosses my face.

I may be blind, but thanks to Michael, I can speak and move. I am grateful, Archangels. I won't waste your gifts.

Author Notes:

This is Raphael.



This is Michael.





This is Neil Adams



Part 018: Freedom Comes With a Price

My entire body shakes as I slide my legs over the edge of the bed. My body might be healed, but I barely have a drop of strength left in me.

Phoebe sits beside me and uses her hand to support my back. "I'll help you, Your Grace. If you want to stand, use me as a crutch."

I nod. "Yeah. Thanks, Phoebe."

Disgust overcomes me as I realize I'm still wearing a diaper. I tilt my head in the general direction of Neil Adams. "Ah, would you mind giving us some privacy? I'm sorry to send you away like this, but..."

Neil coughs. "I'm glad to have helped, my liege. I shall take my leave, then. Miss Berthold, be certain to let me know if there are any complications."

A moment later, the door opens and closes behind him, leaving the two of us alone together.

Phoebe's hand brushes against my back. "Why did you send Sir Adams away?"

"Well, I'm covered in excrement. I didn't want Adams to see me like that."

I feel a faint vibration in the air as she nods. "I understand. Do you want me to leave you, then? Now that you can stand on your own, you'll certainly want to take a bath and-"

"Ah, that won't be necessary, Phoebe. At this point, there isn't anything you can see that you haven't already." I pause a moment before continuing. "**Clean. Strengthen.**"

The filth caked all over my body vanishes. My muscles rebuild themselves in an instant, and my shaking stops. Before I know it, a nauseous sensation I'd barely noticed has disappeared too.

"Briefs. Jeans. Shirt. Jacket."

My diaper vanishes and swaps out for some underwear, and the rest of the clothes appear a moment later. Everyday blue jeans and a white shirt/black jacket combo pop onto my body like some sort of cheap magic trick. I can't see what I'm wearing, but based on Phoebe's reaction; they must look pretty dapper.

"Is that Your Grace's magic? I've not seen it until now."

"It's the power of my Heroic Aura. I call it 'Wordsmithing.' I can make anything happen with a single word, so long as the effect I want is related to the term."

"I see. Is that how you guessed the answer to Bahamut's riddle?"

"Nope. I already knew the answer from hearing it when I was younger."

"Goodness. To solve the riddle in seconds without the use of magic, His Grace must be highly intelligent."

"Uh... sure. Let's go with that."

After a moment of breathing, I climb to my feet and marvel at how my paralysis already feels like a distant memory. I'm now able to stand and move as if Amelia had never maimed me in the first place.

However, I'm still blind.

That's a problem. Hm. How do I solve this dilemma?

Well, maybe I don't need my eyes to 'see' around me. Animals use a myriad of techniques to see their environment. Perhaps I could duplicate that?

"Where's my crown, Phoebe?"

She coughs. "Err, you're wearing it, Your Grace. We were unable to remove it."

"Oh. Right. Thanks."

I groan inwardly at my absentmindedness. Within seconds, I pull up information from the Crown on animals from Earth. Bats, snakes, and dozens of other species appear, along with some deep-sea animals I've never even heard of before.

Sonar. Bats use echolocation to detect the world around them. I could turn into *Daredevil* and continuously scream to hear the environment surrounding me. Unfortunately, I would end up looking like a lunatic in the process.

Infrared. The ability to see heat instead of light might work.

Other options appear in my mind. I close my eyes and focus. *I'll try using all of them.*

"Perception. Infrared. Sonar. Detection. Tracking. Targeting."

Each word shifts my mind and body — the pores on my skin flex and shift, allowing me to feel the heat surrounding me. My ears and brain adjust, allowing me to hear in a way that my eyes never could. The sound of a mouse inside a hole in the wall sends ripples of vibration in all directions, 'illuminating' the room. I feel as if I can see a wire-frame view of the world, complete with red blobs of heat and blue blobs of cold.

"Your Grace?" Phoebe speaks questioningly, and her voice echoes throughout the room for a brief moment, displaying every object in a sphere, as though I have eyes covering every inch of my body. The experience is disorienting, yet, at the same time, it's as if I've unlocked the Third Eye. I have senses unique from any other human.

I take a step forward, and the faint sound my foot makes lights up the room again. Thankfully, I don't have to scream like a madman, since any sound, no matter how faint, displays the world in a wireframe around me. To say that normal eyesight pales in comparison would be a gross underestimation.

However, there is one downside. I can't see Phoebe's face at all, aside from a blob of featureless red. Her womanly figure gives her different curves than that of a man, but red blobs aren't attractive, no matter how I imagine them.

So instead, I close my eyes. "You were there for me, Phoebe."

My random statement catches her off-guard. "What? Your Grace?"

"You don't have to call me that, you know. You can call me Jason. I'd feel better if you did."

She stammers for a moment. "W-well, ah, that would be too forthcoming for me to use the name of the Hero so casually. I don't... I don't think I could call you by your name, Your Grace."

"You called me Jason a few minutes ago when I woke up."

The heat in Phoebe's face increases slightly. I think she's blushing, but it's difficult to tell. "Well, that was different. I was attempting to calm you down."

I take a moment to sit back on the bed beside Phoebe and wrap my arm around behind her. "I'm really, truly grateful, Phoebe. You never looked down on me during my paralysis. Without you, I probably would have given up within a week."

"You're much too kind. I only did what any servant would."

Her quick dismissal makes me grin. "Are you sure about that? Did anyone tell you to care for me? Didn't you choose to do so by yourself?"

Phoebe squirms. "I... I may have decided on my own. What of it?"

It takes me a moment to come up with the right words. "I care about you. You care about me. I've only known you a month, but nobody has ever meant as much to me as you do right now."

Phoebe wrenches her hands together. "Y-Your Grace... for a servant and a king, such a relationship would be... improper."

"I'm speaking to you as Jason, the person, not Jason, the king. I never asked for this. Everyone declared me a ruler without my consent, but I didn't want to let them down. As for you, Phoebe, I don't see you the same way I do the others."

Her head bows slightly. "How do you see me, then?"

I linger on the question for a moment. "As an equal. A friend, for sure, not just a subject. I'd be happier if we could go further than that, though."

Phoebe glances at me suddenly. "You've grown that fond of me? I... I don't know. We've only known each other for a month."

Disappointment itches at the back of my mind. "You don't... like me? But, I thought we had a special connection?"

To my surprise, Phoebe suddenly stands up and pulls away from my touch. "Your Grace, I can't. I simply can't. A few stray emotions clouded my judgment on occasion, but I pushed them aside. Commoners and nobility cannot court each other and mingle so freely. That is the way it should be."

"Phoebe, hold on. Look, I'm not nobility. I'm a regular guy - a commoner, like you. You don't have to overthink-"

"Not true! Not true at all, Your Grace." Phoebe's hands tremble slightly. "I cannot accept such a lie! The Hero is unlike any other human, in that their gift comes from the gods. Common nobility is too low a title for one such as yourself. When I call you a king, I refer to the highest sense, that of the divine authority to rule."

Phoebe carefully slides past me, leaning against the dresser as she makes her way to the door. "Your Gr- ah, Jason, I care for you, I do, but you're moving too quickly. You must think about your position and what it means to rule. You've only just healed, and I believe the shock has yet to wear off. I will take my leave, and once you are ready, you should come to the dining room and break bread with your palace staff."

I nod numbly at her. "Right. I.... I understand. I'll be down soon."

She stares at me for a few long moments before quickly opening the door and stepping outside. After she closes it, I suddenly feel incredibly awkward. She stops in the hallway and stares out a window blankly... but I can still see her with my spherical vision. The walls, floor, and ceiling are no barrier to me. Anywhere that sounds emanate; I can sense the surroundings within several hundred feet.

After a minute, Phoebe wipes her eyes and continues walking away, sniffing as she walks.

She's crying — the woman who took care of me during my paralysis. I did that. I made her cry. *What the hell is wrong with me?! Ugh! Idiot! Bonehead!*

Within seconds, another thought appears in my head.

You're too desperate, Jason. You keep making moves toward people to fill up a void in your heart. You're pushing people away, and it needs to stop.

Minutes pass, and I sigh. I'm alone now, without even Hoarhiim to fill the silence. I've always been alone. No friends. No family. Maybe that's why I keep acting so damn needy. Why *would* Phoebe want to hang out with a loser who latches onto every tenuous emotional connection? I'm like an emotional vampire or something.

Standing up, I spot my personal effects stacked neatly in the far corner of the room. Among them are my old clothes, and as I walk over and pick them out, I can only smile at how the blood has been thoroughly scrubbed out. Phoebe's doing, most likely.

In the basket rests my shitty broken lightsaber. It occurs to me that if Phoebe had activated it, she might have accidentally killed or injured herself. I need to be more careful in the future.

I stare at the lightsaber for a few minutes. Solomon's Crown gives me a summary of its issues. *The battery is too weak for sustained use. Internal mana from my body could power it, but that would drain me quickly. External energy would be ideal, but the Labyrinth has little to no ambient power sources lying around, and certainly none sufficient to energize a weapon of this caliber. Hmm. I'll have to think about how to improve it.*

"Belt."

I Wordsmith myself a belt, then slip it around my pants and stick the lightsaber in a custom-made holster.

A thought occurs to me. *If I want to be a Jedi, wouldn't I need Force Push and Force Pull? Those are standard-issue basic-bitch force abilities! And what's the best way to mimic them?*

"Telekinesis."

A single word spoken to the silent room is all it takes. A moment later, I aim my mind at the saber on my belt and call it to my right hand — the process so natural that it feels as if I've been using telekinesis for my entire life.

At least this is helping take my mind off of Phoebe.

Idiot! You pushed her away!

No, no, stop. You can't keep beating yourself up over your past foolishness. Negative thoughts won't get you anywhere, you stupid nincompoop.

I'm not a nincompoop! You are!

Why am I arguing with myself?!

Because you're dumb as hell!

Ahhh!

I quickly storm out of the room, leaving my split personalities to feud among themselves. Instead of pushing the door shut with my hand, I pause outside and aim my mind at it.

Foop!

With a shove from my newly acquired telekinesis, I close my room behind me and smile.

God, that's cool as hell.

* * *

Half an hour passes. I slowly stroll down the halls, adjusting to my new 'vision.'

The world around me shapes itself into splotches of red and blue. The morning sun beats down outside, warming the roof of Bahamut's palace and radiating heat down through each floor until the effect is hardly noticeable at the middle and lower levels. Bugs crawl on the walls, their tiny skittering noises making them appear as little more than bumps in need of sanding.

I'm surprised at how empty the halls are. No matter where I check, I can't find anyone in the myriad assortment of smaller quarters to my right or left. I even stop and stare out a window to see if there's anyone outside, but my spherical vision doesn't spot a soul.

Once I arrive at the lowest level and approach the dining room, a smile spreads across my face. Through the wall is a massive group of red blobs, each one crouched low to the ground. Based on their posture and body language, as well as the lack of heat from overhead lights, the people inside must be waiting for me to arrive so they can throw a surprise party. That, or I'm about to enter a room full of deadly ninja assassins and meet a quick end.

I wipe the smile off my face. *They don't know you can see through walls, Jason. Make sure you play up the surprise.*

Forcing myself to look slightly sad and melancholic, I push the doors open and lean against the wall, acting as though I'm having a tough time seeing around, and the room erupts into a thousand cheers. "Surprise!"

I jump back and fake confusion. "Huh? What's going on?!"

A sea of red pushes toward me as humans and monsters alike howl and jeer. "Hah! The look on his face!"

"We got him real good!"

"Welcome back to the living, Hero King!"

I smile politely and nod. "Wow, I didn't expect a surprise party! Whose idea was this?"

A minotaur strides forward, one I immediately recognize as Head Chef Yamir. "Great Hero, I am glad to see you have recovered from your wounds. The one responsible for this party was none other than your most faithful servant, Miss Berthold. She told us of your recovery, and we put the entire thing together as quickly as possible. I do apologize for the lack of decorations."

"Quick, huh? No kidding. It hasn't even been half an hour since I healed." I chuckle, and the room full of monsters roars in laughter, drowning mine out. "Where's Phoebe?"

Yamir nods behind me. "She went to train in the courtyard. Won't you come and eat? You've lived off liquids for a month now. I bet you'd kill for some juicy meat." The Minotaur's politeness fades for a moment as his giant tongue leaps from his mouth to slather his lips. "Meat is very, *very* good."

My throat tightens reflexively at the slight aggressiveness. "I, uh... I can make my own food. My mag-"

"Nonsense! I won't allow the king to cook. I'd sooner hurl myself into the River Sheol than make our savior feed himself! Sit!"

Yamir pulls out a chair.

I sigh.

"Alright. I'd hate to turn down your hospitality."

Moments later, the distant doors fling open, and a cavalcade of chefs pours through, mimicking my experience a month ago with Amelia. I stare silently at the wall of food approaching me at Mach 10, wondering to myself, *how the hell am I supposed to eat all of this?!*

Yamir places down cakes, pies, meats, cheeses, and a litany of other entrees. My eyes look from one thing to the next. "Where do I start? It all looks amazing. I couldn't imagine most of this if I wanted."

The minotaur smirks. "We don't expect you to eat the majority of the food here, Your Majesty. The leftovers will go in the trash."

"What?! No way! That's awful! Don't waste food! Give the rest to the hungry!"

He shakes his head. "I cook for kings and rulers. Besides, the commoners have food aplenty. Mister Adams has seen to that. He created a distribution network for our stores that ensure none go hungry."

"I see."

Half a minute passes. Yamir watches me expectantly as I gingerly reach for a fish.

Suddenly, an idea comes to me.

Yamir thinks I'll waste 90% of his spread. I'll teach him a lesson. Never underestimate a Wordsmith.

Casually, I spear the fish closest to me. "Yamir, I'll make you a bet."

"Oh? What would that be?" The Minotaur leans down on the table, resting on his hands.

"If I eat this entire breakfast, you have to promise only to cook one or two main entrees at a time for me from now on. You choose which ones, of course."

Yamir eyes me blankly. Then he smiles. "Hehehe, a good jest, Your Majesty. A mountain troll couldn't stomach this entire feast. I'll entertain your deal."

"Good. You're about to learn what a Hero can do."

I stuff the fish in my mouth, savoring the mixture of saltiness and sweetness, along with that delicious fishy tang. It isn't the same as tuna, salmon, or any other fish I've eaten in my life. The taste and texture are distinct, peeling apart under my fork and knife and melting in my mouth.

Christ. The food is amazing.

Minutes pass. I finish off the fish and pat my stomach. Already, the feast is looking insurmountable.

However, I have a secret.

Using my left hand, I pull a plate of cake toward me, and with my right hand, I dab my mouth with a napkin. Then, I whisper under my breath, "**Empty.**"

The sensation of fullness in my stomach vanishes, as does all of the food I've just eaten.

A wicked smile spread across my face. *I win.*

* * *

Three hours pass.

Yamir stares in awe. I swallow the last swig of lentil soup and dab my face with a miraculously clean cloth napkin. He offered to swap it out many times, but since I have Wordsmithing, I cleaned it without telling him. He has no idea how I'm accomplishing my feats of superhuman eating.

"I can't believe my eyes. Your Majesty, did your paralysis inflict a devilish hunger upon your body? Are you cursed to spend the rest of your life suffering from an unending appetite?"

"Nah. I have a few useful abilities. Eating an infinite amount of food is one of them."

Usually, I would smile. At this moment, however, my jaw hurts like hell. The human mouth is not designed to consumed food for three hours straight. I cough into my fist, "**Heal,**" and the pain vanishes.

Leaving Yamir behind, I wink at the Minotaur. "Remember the deal. No more waste."

The head chef gazes at me with a look of admiration and awe. "Of course not. I will do as you command, Your Majesty."

The cobblestone path outside Bahamut's palace appears more distinct than the grass nearby, given how my footsteps echo around it. The wind produces a steady trickle of sound, illuminating my surroundings more clearly than when I was indoors.

A bird chirps on a nearby fence. I pause to admire it, though once it sees me, it flies away.

"Turtle!" Kar's voice rings out, startling me. He's harder to see than other people thanks to his cold-blooded body. "Where are you off to, now that you've healed?"

"I'm trying to find Phoebe."

Kar slithers up to me and rests his reptilian claw on my back. "You can look for her later. I've been wanting to show you something in the Labyrinth Core. Come, follow me."

The crocodile takes off and starts walking briskly, but I hold up a hand. "You want me to walk all the way to the portal? I'd rather admire the sights for a while. Can it wait? Let's put that off until tomorrow."

"Trust me, Turtle. You'll like what I have to show you."

Kar continues to insist, so I sigh. "Alright. Fine."

* * *

It's an hour walk to the portal from Bahamut's castle, even with the path I cut through the forest, but Kar tells me all sorts of interesting things as we march. Kar was busy with various administrative tasks the entire duration of my paralysis. He and Phoebe accomplished a lot.

As it happens, the Labyrinth has several portal rooms similar to the Labyrinth Core, but all of them only have one portal each, and none are in nearly as convenient a location as the center of the Labyrinth. Because of this, we ended up taking control of one of the most critical areas of the Labyrinth, stealing it from the demons in the process.

Still, I have my doubts. As we exit the forest and the portal looms in the distance, I ask, "Aren't monsters allied with demons? Why would they stand up against their former allies and side with a human Hero like me?"

Kar chuckles. "Diplomacy is a tricky thing, little Turtle. While Bahamut was, in fact, Queen of all monsters, she only enslaved the most powerful and those she thought were worth controlling. Most of the numerous, weaker monsters stand opposed to our goals. A few powerful individuals, including Medusa, ally with the demons, since they were beyond Bahamut's ability to control. Any whom she did command now answer to me, and they all do so of their own free will."

I nod. "So, it isn't that the monsters listen to *me*, but that they recognize *you* as ruler."

Kar growls. "Hurgh. It is as you say. The monsters here on Tarus II know of your exploits, but we have agreed not to release information about you to the others. As far as my subjects are concerned, 'twas I who single-handedly defeated Bahamut."

"Well, ain't that convenient," I grumble under my breath. "I'm glad things worked out perfectly for you."

"Thank you for your blessing," Kar replies. "You are a most generous Turtle."

I decide not to explain the meaning of *sarcasm* to him.

When we arrive, there's a tiny figure, perhaps five inches tall, flying around outside the gate. I'm surprised to find that instead of red or blue, its heat signature is yellow. When we're a hundred feet away, the thing flies over to us and squeaks out in a cutesy female voice, "Master Kar! Is this the guy?"

The crocodile nods. "Turtle, this is Blinker. She's a fairy, and also my assistant. I couldn't manage the Core without her."

I smile politely. "Ah, nice to meet you, Blinker. I've never seen a fairy before."

She giggles cutely and flutters up close to my face. "Heehee! And I've never met a human with glowing eyes! How'd you get those peepers? They're pretty!"

"It's a confusing story. Maybe I'll tell you some other time," I reply.

Never have I spoken truer words, since I haven't a clue why they shine.

She pauses to stare at my crown. "Hey! Kar! This guy has a big shiny ring with gems on his head! What's up with that?"

"It indicates he's a king," Kar replies. "Humans call it a 'crown.'"

"But I thought you were king?"

"Of monsters, yes, my butterfly. Jason rules the humans."

"Ohhhh, I get it! Neat. Well, let's get going, already. I've been flying around waiting for you, and I could use a break. I hear the Demon Emperors are getting antsy, too!"

She darts away like a dragonfly on the wind and disappears into the portal. I shoot a questioning glance at Kar. "The Demon Emperors?"

"Aye. News of Bahamut's death has sent shockwaves throughout the Labyrinth. The fact we're barring demons from using the Labyrinth Core has sparked concerns among the demons of a possible revolt. Demons usually leave monsters alone and allow us to settle our disputes, and vice-versa, but I cannot in good conscience allow them to use our portals to kill humans. Due to my choices, our situation has changed from an internal conflict among monsters to an external one involving demons. The Emperors are sure to issue several demands shortly."

We're halfway up the steps before I fully comprehend his words. "Are you saying that you've intentionally painted a target on your back? You're willing to fight the demons to protect humans?"

We arrive at the top platform, but Kar halts before we enter. "My upbringing is quite different compared to other monsters, little Turtle. Marie, the mother of lizardmen, taught us the values of humanity. While many monsters look upon humans with disdain, I see them as beacons of hope and ingenuity. I can't say my mother would approve of my reckless actions, but I am me, and she is she."

Kar tilts his head slightly to look at me. "Demons are vile, Jason. They consume human souls, but only to fuel their lust for power. Demons are greedy beings, unlike the monsters who live in the Labyrinth. Mother may have grown used to their hunger, but I have not."

We continue forward and step through the portal. The *whoomph* of air pressure makes my eardrums squeal and pop for a moment, but they clear up. None of the monsters turn to look at us — they're busy

doing their own thing.

Blinker flies around us in circles. "Geez! You big guys always walk sooo slow! Come on, Kar!" She flies away again to a nearby panel and the crocodile gestures for me to follow.

We stop in front of a video screen, but I can't make out any details. All I can see are varying shades of red and yellow light from the heat it produces. Blinker presses her tiny body against the panel, then buzzes over to another spot and presses again, repeating the action several times. "Okay! All done!"

Kar grunts and gestures to the screen. "Now, do you understand?"

I shake my head. "I probably haven't mentioned this yet, Kar, but I'm technically still blind."

The reptile flinches visibly. "O-oh, I didn't know. Hurgh. That means I brought you here for no reason."

"Kinda. Can you explain whatever it is I'm supposed to be seeing?"

"Certainly. We've compiled a list of planets commonly accessed by the demons. This computer pulls information from all the warp-gates used across the Labyrinth."

I nod absentmindedly. "Okay. What about it?"

"We now know where all the feeding grounds are for demons. Humans don't live in the Labyrinth. They live on planets strewn across the galaxy."

A spark of realization pops into my mind. "So we could disrupt the demon food chain by liberating the worlds they oppress?"

Kar snorts. "Hmph. It will not be an easy battle. Humans are not allowed to have weaponry, technology, or anything that might give them a fighting chance against their oppressors. They live in squalor — barely able to maintain enough food to support their population. It will be an uphill battle, to say the least."

"Why don't they build better weapons to fight the demons?" I ask, unsure of their exact situation. "Even in my day, we had guns and tanks and other shit. You don't mean to tell me the demons can fight a tank and win, can they?"

Several moments of silence follow. Kar turns his head away. "Jason. The humans you speak of are from the ancient times. Humans in the modern era are primitive and defenseless. The closest things to weapons they can use to defend themselves with are sticks. I don't know what a 'taynck' is, but it is likely far superior to anything a human has now."

Blinker buzzes in front of my face. "Kar is right! Humans haven't a chance against demons! It's probably best you give up now. Honestly, Tarus II ain't a bad home! All sorts of scenery to see, things to do—"

"No," I say, cutting her off. "If humans are suffering at the hands of the demons, I have a moral responsibility to do something about it."

She flits a foot away from my face. "Well, okey-dokey then, mister glowing-eyes person. I'm just trying to help you, not waste your time. Suit yourself!" Blinker flies back to the computer screen and lands on

top of it.

Kar coughs. "Hurgh. Your reaction is as I expected. In any case, if you choose to liberate humanity, demonkind will rally against us. The Labyrinth Core is susceptible to attacks from any direction, especially with the great doors still open. How will we fight back against the demonic hordes and our fellow monsters?"

"I don't know. I have to think about it," I mutter, as my hand brushes against the lightsaber on my belt. "If demons are keeping humans weakened, there must be a reason. They need humankind for our souls, but at the same time, they fear us. Perhaps they have a good reason."

Yes. I see it now, my mind mutters. Weapons will allow humanity to fight back. Before I can decide on a course of action, though, I'll need to visit a few worlds and get a feel for their political situations. Then, I'll need to find Amelia.

No, dummy, you need to find Amelia first! She took Hoarhiim!

Yeah, good point. Thanks, me.

Sometimes I talk to myself. I'm weird like that.

"Kar, find the most populated planet full of humans and open a gate there. I'm going back to town to find Phoebe. I need to talk to her."

"Hurgh. You'll return soon, then?"

I nod. "Yup. Within a few hours, I hope. I'll be back."

I make my way to the Tarus II portal and sigh. *Maybe this time, I'll summon wings. Walking is such a buzzkill.*

Author Notes:

This is Blinker



Part 019: A Taste of the Good Life

Recommended Listening

My skirt flaps in the wind as I run through a field of wheat. Before me, a juicy snack runs with all her strength, trying desperately to escape my clutches.

"Oh my gosh! Slow down, lady!" I call out cheerfully, but for some reason, she doesn't listen!

The panicking woman screams in terror and trips over a rock. She falls to her side and hits the ground hard enough to lose her breath. "D-demon! Monster! Please, no! Stay away! I have a family and children! Don't hurt me!!"

"You've got a whole family too?! Oh, boy, it's my lucky day!"

I skip gaily over to the woman and yank her up by the front of her dress. "If you tell me where they are, I'll make this quick!"

Her eyes bulge. "No, gods! Save me! Somebody help! HELLLP!!"

Aw, man. She isn't going to squeal. Bummer.

I sigh and promptly unhinge my jaw, preparing to devour her like all the others today. "Too bad!"

With a quick flick of my wrist, I toss her flailing body ten feet in the air and catch it head-first in my mouth, squealing in delight as I bite down and savor all the blood and entrails. Ooh! She tastes way better than the others!

The woman's lip-smacking goodness rolls around in my mouth as I savor every drop of iron-rich blood. The bone-marrow is probably the yuckiest part, but it goes down without much resistance.

A glance around the farm after I finish reveals that the woman's husband and children have fled. Men are such wimps. There was once a time when I'd have to watch out for a militia, but that was long before Joan stuffed me in that stupid statue. Humans these days are utterly defenseless!

Blaarjiim smiles in my mind. "Well done, my queen. That makes two hundred and four in the last hour."

I pull my jaw back together and crack my neck. "Ohh, it takes too long to eat these snacks one by one! My teeth hurt!"

While I rub my chin, Blaarjiim looks my blue dress up and down. "You're covered in blood, my queen. Perhaps you should find a river so that you can bathe and wash your clothes."

"Oh, phooey. I'll just get dirty again. Besides, I don't have to look cute for anyone! Well, other than you, but I know you don't mind the sight of blood."

Blaarjiim chuckles. "Hehe... how right you are."

I scan the horizon for a moment, squinting to look for movement. I've already cleared out most of the farms in the area, but the woman said she had a family... they must be hiding somewhere nearby.

"Blaarjiim, sweetie, don't keep me waiting. Give me some good news."

My best friend spins in a circle. "You don't need to ask twice, my queen. I've already investigated the area to look for signs of life. To the west, there are a few birds, and a rodent scampering around in the house. Oh, and three warm bodies behind a hay bale to the north-west." He absentmindedly points toward a bale blending in with some dry, cracked yellow grass a half-mile away. "Two children and a man, it seems."

"Yay! Children are the juiciest!"

My feet kick up dust as I skip from the green grass into the yellow field and whistle merrily along the way. A six-year-old girl shrieks at the top of her lungs and bolts from behind the bale, her little brother following in hot pursuit. "Janey! Janey!!" A man jumps out from behind the bale of hay, a shovel in his hand. His entire body shakes in terror. "Fiend! I'll- I'll end you myself!"

I wiggle my finger at him and lean forward, showing him my brightest smile. "Big words, mister! Your wifey-poo screamed for help, but you let her die like the shameless coward you are! What are you gonna do with that shovel, anyway? Surely you're not going to hit a cute little girl like-"

The man leaps forward, howling at the top of his lungs. "MONSTER! DIE!"

I reward his bravery by standing perfectly still and letting his shovel smash against my face. Naturally, his pitiful attack does nothing. "Was that IT? Oh gee golly whiz, I thought you were a big strong man! I didn't even flinch!"

The man pulls away, a look of panic on his face. "You're... you're not human!!"

With a shrug of my shoulders, I sigh. "Yeah. I get that a lot."

After an awkward silence, I jump at the man and break his neck in one quick motion. His clothes are nasty, so I tear them off before hurling his body into my gaping maw.

Yeck. He tastes terrible. Far worse than his wife did.

"Aaaooo... Blaarjiim, my tummy feels awful."

He nods comfortingly. "I know, my queen, but you must endure the pain. You've already grown significantly from your former self. By human reckoning, you appear nearly sixteen years old. Soon, you'll return to your full power."

I glance down and examine myself. Already my kiddish body has begun filling out into an adult figure. "How many have I eaten?"

"Around twenty thousand, by my reckoning."

"That isn't nearly enough."

My eyes sweep into the distance. I can barely make out the forms of the little boy and girl fleeing for their lives. They won't make it far.

Blaarjiim slips a note of curiosity into his voice. "Oh? You sound worried. Does your concern have anything to do with the mortal?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The Wordsmith. You left him behind with the rest of his kind. You should have dragged him along." Blaarjiim growls in annoyance. "They might heal him."

"Unlikely. Bahamut doesn't have the healing technology the humans did during the Energy Wars. Demons won't heal him. He won't be able to Wordsmith. There's no issue."

A minute passes. Blaarjiim doesn't say anything. I start to walk toward the boy and the girl, pleased he's finally shut his trap, but then he speaks again. "Your heart has grown attached to the mortal. I sense your conflicting emotions when he is near. When he summoned the wall of flame, you confided in me that his latent power was terrifying. Despite this, you revealed your weakness to him, and now he knows that you're no match against the higher demons. Even paralyzed, he could give that information to them and-"

"And what, Blaarjiim?!" I burst into anger and grab his orb out of my purse to glare at it. "He can't speak, and he can't move! Jason's just a lump of flesh rotting in a bed! No demon will heal a human, and humans can't treat him, either. He's as good as dead, so why do you care?!"

Blaarjiim cocks his head. "Ah. I understand, now. I see why you didn't bring him along."

His reversal makes me hesitate. "You... you do?"

"Mmm." He rubs his chin thoughtfully. "You plan to heal and challenge him to combat. You must still feel the sting of defeat even to this day, so your ultimate goal is to beat him and redeem yourself."

Blaarjiim's conjecture proves to be entirely wrong, but still, my cheeks burn red. "Th-that's not true."

"Of course, it's true. I know my queen all too well." Blaarjiim smirks haughtily. "I don't blame you for what happened, Lady Amelia. You were unprepared for Joan's power, and she caught you off-guard. Had your fight taken place under different circumstances, you'd-"

"Stop, Blaarjiim. I don't want to hear about her." My voice wavers slightly. "Can't we talk about something else? You're depressing me. Sometimes I wonder if you like seeing me cry."

My closest friend in the whole universe bows his head. "That isn't true."

"Yes. I know."

Minutes pass. I stare into the sky, feeling the warmth of the sun beat upon my chest.

My hand rubs Blaarjiim's orb, almost instinctively, before placing it back in my purse. I pause to tap Hoarhiim's orb as well. "Sunshine here still hasn't said a word."

"Hoarhiim continues to rest. I've never seen him in such a state," Blaarjiim muses. "We've wasted enough time. The children continue to flee. It would be unlike you to let them go."

I force myself to smile. "Don't worry your pretty little face. I won't let those snacks escape. I need their souls to break Joan's seal."

After a moment of hesitation, I jam my shoe into the dirt and leap up, scanning ahead for the children in a cornfield up ahead. A few stalks of corn move, and I lick my lips. *Snacks.*

It only takes a minute for me to dash after them, whistling loudly to scare them and make them run faster. "Hellooooo! Are there any children hiding in the corn? Let's play Hide and Eat!"

A squeak from the little girl catches my attention. I spot a flash of brown as she charges further into the corn. Unfortunately for her, there's no escaping my maw.

With a hop, I gently leap a hundred feet forward, land right in her path, and giggle as the six-year-old slams into my legs. The dread on her face gives me the shivers. "You're a cutie! Where's your brother?"

She doesn't let out a word, so I grab her by the neck and lift her into the air. "Well, if you won't tell me, I'll just have to find him mys-"

"My queen!" Blaarjiim's voice fills with alarm. "I-it can't be!"

I pause mid-sentence and try not to look too annoyed as the child squirms and tries to unwrap my fingers from her neck. "What? What is it?"

"M-my brother's orb... it's..."

I steal a glance down at my purse — every fiber of my being freezes.

Hoarhiim's orb is gone.

Part 020: Lightsaber, Tradition

My stomach churns. My mind spins. It takes all of my concentration to break away from the scene of horror before me, and to speak a word of power.

"Take."

A moment later, Hoarhiim's orb appears in my hand, and I retract my vision from the grassy field to return to my body.

I'm sickened. Disgusted. Nauseated.

After using '**Locate**' to find Amelia, I ended up witnessing a scene I'll never forget.

Amelia, her sky-blue sundress covered in blood, was chasing after a family of humans with a psychotic grin plastered across her face. Her expression reminded me of scary clowns from horror movies I saw in my youth. Unnatural.

What planet was she on? What reason could she have for performing such horrible, vile acts? What could motivate her to walk such a path of evil?

Sweat glides from my forehead and drips past my eyes. I stop at the edge of the forest and lean against a tree. *Amelia isn't the sweet little girl she pretended to be, I think to myself. Everyone has been warning me, but I ignored them. I didn't want to believe the truth.*

Amelia isn't just a liar; she's dangerous. She tore me apart in less than a second and left me to die. I can't allow her to slaughter human settlements for her sick, demented plans!

But... how can I stop her? She outclasses me in speed, strength, and every other category. She has magic, too; I know that much for sure. Can she match my Wordsmithing? Possibly not.

I'm vulnerable. Wordsmithing requires me to speak and form words. One broken jaw, and I'm out of the fight. I have to protect my neck, head, and lungs, at the absolute minimum. If that's the case, then it seems I need a helmet.

"What do you think I should do, Hoarhiim?"

Silence follows as the glowing white orb offers no response. I guess he's not going to say anything, after all — not even a thank-you for the rescue.

Maybe he hates me.

After a moment of silence, I stick Hoarhiim's orb in my belt-pouch. My hand brushes against the faulty lightsaber, and I decide that now is a good time to try fixing it. I need an edge against Amelia. She's too dangerous for me to ignore anymore.

When I press the lightsaber's activation button, it only makes a sputtering noise, pops out for a split second, then retracts again — dead battery.

"Recharge."

After saying a single word, I watch as the weapon activates, and the beam shoots out like it did before. However, once again, after fewer than ten seconds, it sputters and dies.

I can recharge the lightsaber's battery, but the amount of power it needs is ridiculous. Unless I plan to say 'recharge' every ten seconds during a battle, the saber is functionally useless.

Maybe there's a better way to power it. I activate the Crown and begin perusing my options.

A power cell sitting a distance away could beam the energy required to my lightsaber wirelessly, but the power draw is too high. I'll have to turn it off every couple of minutes and let it charge to full. Worse, the further I move from the power source, the less energy that will transmit.

There's also the option of adding a much bigger, bulkier battery. I might be able to create a fusion power core and attach it to the bottom of the saber, but that would make it bottom-heavy and awkward to swing. The saber also would look like an inverted hammer, which would be super dumb.

Hmm. Maybe there's another option.

Oh! I could create a portable battery and maybe wear it like a backpack! Then I could attach it to my lightsaber with a thin cord, and I could even use a wireless charging mode if the situation called for it! Brilliant!

"Battery." I speak a word of power and create a fat, highly energized cell with straps to wear on my back. The battery is a little warm, but not uncomfortably so. I then create a cord, alter the lightsaber a bit, and attach the cord to its underside.

With a flick of my thumb, I press the ignition button and watch as the lightsaber springs to life.

This time, several minutes pass, and the sword continues to hum audibly, sounding far stabler than it did before. I swipe at the ground a few times and smile as it finally serves its purpose. Best of all, I can attach and detach the charging cord using telekinesis!

Wow. That was a surprisingly easy fix. The battery is pretty bulky, but giving myself more physical power with Wordsmithing is child's play.

"Strength!"

My physical strength increases by around 40%, turning me into a man capable of lifting over a ton. The stress on my muscles nearly bursts my arteries, but I manage to solve my problems with a few rounds of healing and conditioning.

Satisfied, I nod and continue into the woods, slashing at trees every so often while I wait to see if the battery will die. Indeed, after fifteen minutes, it finally does, but I can refill it instantly with Wordsmithing. Fifteen minutes is nothing compared to ten seconds — a win in my book.

Depression takes me as the trees loom from both sides. *I'm making a better weapon, just in case I have to fight Amelia. Am I going to cut her down with this laser sword? Is that the sort of person I'll have to become?*

Heroes shouldn't kill. They're supposed to be saviors, arbiters of justice. Superman never kills anyone, unless it's the absolute last option. Not even Batman murders, unless a particularly edgy author is writing

the comic.

A second voice appears in my mind. *Those superheroes were comic book characters. Stop living in the fantasy world, Jason. To be a hero, you have to make sacrifices. Remember what Michael told you? There's no way you can argue with an Archangel who lived for tens of billions of years.*

I shake my head. *It's not about being like Batman or Superman. Yeah, they're only comic book heroes, but they're also inspirational. I can't inspire others to commit genocide! If I kill Amelia, who's to say I won't kill someone else, and another person, and another after them? Where will it end?*

You're a gas, my second inner voice snorts. *If the good guys never kill, then how will evil ever be annihilated? If we didn't kill Hitler, then who knows how many more millions he'd have gone on to exterminate?*

I frown. *Hitler killed himself.*

My second inner voice hesitates. *...Nobody likes a smartass.*

Rolling my eyes, I gaze at the sky.

Joan was supposedly a Hero, but she annihilated tens of millions of demons. By my reckoning, that made her a genocidal maniac.

She's the only Hero I know anything about, but already she's soured my image of what it means to be a champion of justice. How can someone call themselves a 'good guy' if they commit acts of evil? Isn't the point to be better than my enemies?

Maybe I'm naive. I come from a world where the 'good guys' dropped two atomic bombs on an enemy to cow them into submission and used internment camps just like the dictators they opposed. Maybe my idea of justice is infantile. I probably need to grow up and face the facts; violence is a necessary evil.

But...

...That doesn't mean I have to like it.

Half an hour later, I emerge from the woods, climb up the canyon stairs, and stop to watch a Harpy playing horseshoes with a ten-year-old girl. The two are having great fun, and it makes me realize that the monsters aren't as different from humans as their looks would suggest. Heck, the Harpy is even letting the kid win. Adorable.

"Locate." I speak the word to the wind and aim my thoughts at Phoebe. My mental vision travels into the air and zooms around to a small training area behind the castle. I pause mid-flight and watch as Phoebe swings a sword repeatedly into a training dummy, adding several chop marks into an already diced-up frame. The poor thing is on its last legs, and about ready to fall apart.

Once my mental vision returns, I summon a pair of wings and fly over the castle, waving politely at the citizens below who gaze up and gawk at me.

I swing left over the castle and smile at the sound of Phoebe's grunting as she continues to chop the wooden dummy. "Haah! Hyah!"

Landing silently about fifty feet away, I quietly magic my wings away, then Wordsmith at the dummy. "**Repair.**" It shifts and grows back again, catching her off guard. Phoebe stops swinging and gawks at the mannequin, then spots me out of the corner of her eye. "Ah! Your Grace! How long have you-?!"

"I just got here a second ago. Sorry to scare you." I smile for a moment to disarm her anxiety before continuing. "Getting some exercise, huh? You probably needed it, after being cooped up with me for a month."

"I... I trained when I could." Phoebe lowers her sword and stares at me. "Your health was my primary concern."

"Yeah, I know. I, ah... I wanted to talk to you about that." Casually, I start closing the gap between us, walking about a step per second. "Look, uh, about earlier-"

"Twas' nothing worth mentioning," Phoebe says, clamming up suddenly. "I... I barely even thought about it! You had just woken up, and your nerves were a bit frazzled. No man could be blamed for rushing to judgment."

"Hah... rushing? No, no. I spent that entire month thinking, Phoebe." I stop in front of her and stare down at the nearly six-foot-tall blob of heat before me. She's taller than most women, but not quite at my level. "Phoebe, I can't take 'no' for an answer. Maybe I'm just a young, idiot guy, but I care for you. I don't want anything to happen to you. I want to protect you."

Her cheeks flare-up. "That is quite kind of you, Your Grace."

"No, you're the kind one, since you selflessly took care of me without anyone asking you. You could have left at any time, but you didn't. Why not?"

Phoebe stammers and reaches up to brush a stray hair from her face. "Well.... you see... you're the Hero. If you die, then humanity has no hope..."

"Yeah? So you only care about me since I'm the Hero, and not for any other reason?"

She wraps both of her hands tightly around her sword's hilt. "I didn't say that."

"Then, why?"

"Just because."

"That's not a good enough answer."

I sigh and stoop down to my knees so I can look up into her eyes, though it's mostly pointless given I can't see anything. Oh well.

"Phoebe, I'm not good at awkward things, so I'll spit it out. I love you. I don't want anything to happen to you, and most importantly, I want you by my side. You're not only a friend or a caregiver, but someone more precious to me. I hope you feel the same-"

I pause mid-sentence as Phoebe suddenly reaches a hand up to wipe her eyes.

"Are... are you crying?"

She sniffles. "N-no..."

"I think you are."

"I'm not!" She stomps her foot and looks away. "Augh! Jason, I'm a hand-maiden! You're royalty! It can't work between us!"

"Yes, it can, dammit! I was born believing that as long as two people cared for each other, it didn't matter what their status was!"

She growls. "I was taught the opposite! Only marry within your class!"

"Marry?" I balk suddenly. "Whoa, I- I didn't want to move that quickly."

She takes a sudden step backward. "You what?! But... a woman must be chaste until she enters wedlock!"

Only now do I realize the situation I'm in. Phoebe comes from a different time period than I do, and her expectations of a relationship follow from her life growing up. She isn't just old-fashioned, she's *ancient-fashioned*.

I, on the other hand, grew up in a time of casual romance and constant divorce. Marriage was little more than a minor formality for two people who had been together for several years already. For Phoebe, marriage is the very first step.

So, if that's the case, I have two options: I can change her stance, or I can accept it. I don't know what the correct choice is.

Phoebe kneels as well, meeting me at the same eye level. "Your Gr-, ah, Jason... if you wish it, I can be your Mistress. I... I never expected a king to take me in such a way, and it does betray my convictions, but if it's for your happiness, then-"

"No, I can't do that. That would only hurt you." I cut her off before she can finish. "You know, Phoebe, you're right. I'm taking things too fast. I'm immature, still. I have much to learn."

"We all do," She replies, nodding. "In truth, I feel the same toward you that you do me, but with God as my witness, a woman cannot shirk her sworn duties. I must protect and care for the Hero, no matter what form he or she may take. That has become a personal task above, and beyond the creed I swore my life on as a child."

Phoebe slowly tilts her head up to look at the clouds. "It was so long ago that I've forgotten the words. Does the oath bind me to my dying breath?"

"Perhaps, Phoebe. Perhaps."

Without meaning to, I stretch my hand out and take hers. It's an unconscious movement, but unlike before, she doesn't pull away. Instead, she lowers her head to stare into my eyes. "Jason?"

"I don't care what form your oath takes, Phoebe. I want you to be with me. That's all."

She smiles sweetly. "And so, I shall." A moment passes as we stare into each other's eyes. Phoebe swallows. "C-close your eyes."

"Okay."

I close them, but my eyelids don't limit my spherical vision. I watch in silence as Phoebe leans forward and presses her lips against mine.

A moment later, I pull her against me and finally release my burning passion upon her lips. I know what I want, and I won't take no for an answer.

Tradition be damned.

Part 021: I, Demon

A tiny imp races in front of me and rubs his claws together gleefully. "Emperor Diablo! Always a pleasure to see you, your nastiness!"

I nod at him. "Dingle, I've summoned the Council of Dukes. They should all be here shortly. Gather any relevant information in the meantime."

"Of course! Anything for you! Nyehehe!"

Dingle quickly turns and scurries up the hall, and I turn to the Warper behind me.

"Grigori. I'll be back soon. Consume a few souls if you must, but I don't want to wait for your energy to refill."

The lanky demon weaves some hand signs. "Of course. It is as you wish, Third Emperor."

"Great. I can't wait to hear what's gone wrong this time."

After breaking away from Grigori, I plod down the hallway, yawning all the while. *I had to wake up from a nap for this. Ever since the Black Witch escaped containment, it seems there's always something going wrong in the Labyrinth.*

Devils. She's more than a nuisance at this point. I'm reasonably confident she has no grudge against the Emperors, but if she does, it would be such a *drag* to have to fight her. There'll be a whole process. I'll have to gather the Dukes and form a strike force... what a pain.

I stop just before leaving the hall in front of a shiny demonstone slab. Thanks to the light entering from the outer room, I can check my appearance. As always, a few black hairs stick up on my head, spurning my efforts to keep everything slicked back and professional-looking. I quickly lick my hand and smooth them down, but with my luck, they'll pop back up in a few minutes anyway.

My pressed black robes, as always, are stunning. The red cloak and its golden linings speak to my status. I don't care about looking good for anyone in particular, but being a Demon Emperor means I have to try to look the part. The devil only knows how Belial's flitting about damages the reputation of the Council.

I stifle another massive yawn. I barely get any rest these days. There's always some trifle wasting my time, some inane tomfoolery pulling me away from the sweet embrace of sleep.

Stepping out into the main chamber, I stifle my gag reflex as the smell of the River Styx hits me like a cave troll. The pungent green liquid roils a few levels below, flowing from one corner of the Labyrinth to the other, forming a perpetual stream that never ends. The images of human souls rising from the liquid and screaming in agony don't sit as well with me as they did in the past ages, possibly since I don't need to consume them anymore. Judging by the greedy looks on the faces of the imps scampering about, they would be all too eager to swipe a few souls when nobody was looking, were it not for the *consequences* of soul theft.

I nod at several massive minotaur guards patrolling the river. Their axes swing with enough force to dent demonstone, and that's no small feat. These mangy imps wouldn't dare grab for a few souls with the elite guards patrolling. Not unless they wanted their heads lopped from their shoulders.

Yes, every soul is precious. Humans are limited in quantity, and most of the souls that end up in the Styx are aged and decrepit, or too young to have much energy. It's a delicate balance, trying to ensure the fair distribution of souls, and someone has to do it.

I just wish it wasn't me.

Minutes pass as I make my way down the side-wall paths of the massive chamber. The sounds of imps and human slaves pounding on demonstone to forge new tools echoes off the walls. Sometimes I can even hear the crack of a whip as a Demon Lord punishes a slacker. By the time I arrive at the bottom, I can finally make out the sound of deep, uproarious laughter in the distance. The one making such guttural noises can only be Bael.

"-then I said, 'If you're hankering to die, I can oblige!' So I slapped the head clean off the bastard's body! Gwahaha!"

Bael and two other Dukes, Mephisto and Barbatos, come into view as I round a corner. Bael, the fourth most powerful demon in the Labyrinth, and the highest-ranked of the Dukes, slaps his knee and wipes a tear away as he regales the other two with his no-doubt hilarious story about torture and pain. His brutishly powerful body usually cows most lesser demons into nervously laughing, but among the other Dukes, it hasn't much effect. They merely nod politely at his crude banter.

I wish Bael would put on a damn shirt. Come on, we get it; you're a big guy. The bone belt with human skulls is a little excessive too. At least he's wearing underwear. The Devil knows I don't want to see what he's hiding down *there*. Several chains wrap around his chest and connect to a massive flail hanging on his back, one that weighs over half a ton.

'Big Bonk,' he calls it. What a guy.

Bael spots me the instant I appear. "Oy! Diablo's here! Took you long enough, ya lazy bum!"

I force a smile. "Long time, no see, Bael, Barbatos, Mephisto."

The other two Dukes are very different from Bael and I. While we have the traditional red skin and hulking muscles, Mephisto is an incorporeal entity, not unlike a ghost, while Barbatos is a demonsteel-clad behemoth wearing black and gold armor over every inch of his body. Barbatos, the Third Duke, is the sixth-ranked demon in the Labyrinth, surpassed only by the Three Emperors, Bael, and Agares. However, my personal opinion is that he's probably the mightiest Duke of all. Bael is very fortunate the metal monster isn't one with an eye for leadership.

Barbatos growls as I stop near the trio. "Third."

He doesn't like to waste his breath.

I turn from the black and gold-clad giant to Mephisto, the Seventh-ranked demon in the Labyrinth. He's much shorter than the rest of us, which probably explains his inferiority complex. His body is

partially translucent, allowing light to pass through. Mephisto's title, the Duke of Mist, befits how he lives his life. He and Barbatos, the Duke of Steel, are considered invincible. Neither has had a scratch put on their bodies in their entire life.

At least, not by other demons.

"Mephisto. It's been a while since we last spoke. A hundred years, by my reckoning."

The Duke of Mist rubs his skeletal hands together and hisses from under his grey robe and hood. I can barely make out the blood-red eyes marking his identity as a demon. These days, there aren't many demons who have seen his skinless face, but I have. "Diablo, the pleasssure iss mine. The Ssseventh Gate hasss proven quite monotonousss of late."

"So I hear," I murmur. "Who called the meeting today?"

Bael guffaws. "You don't know?! Bahaha! I bet an imp woke you up! We oughta rename you the Emperor of Sloth!"

I make a mental note to break his neck later, though not because he's correct in his assumption or anything like that. I would *never* dream of sleeping on the job.

"Just tell me, Bael."

The look of annoyance on my face shuts him up. He probably still smarts from the last thrashing I gave him. "Oh, erm, uh... President Ose called the meeting."

"Ose? Haven't seen her around in a while."

Barbatos shifts, causing the black metal encasing his body to clink and clank. "Agares. Belial. Where?" His deep voice is all the worst parts of a bear and a troll mixed into one; unpleasant to listen to for any length of time. I'm glad he doesn't talk much.

"I'm sure Agares will show up soon, along with that pupil of his. Belial though... well, we all know how Belial is."

Bael chuckles. "Lazy whore."

Mephisto takes a step away from Bael. "I'd watch your mouth if I wasss you, Duke of Pain. Your title will take on a new meaning if ssshe hearsss you."

"Pft. I have nothing to fear from a woman." Bael, feigning obliviousness to Belial's combat prowess, continues running his mouth without a care in the world. He knows Belial can slap him through ten miles of the Labyrinth's walls effortlessly, yet he continues to insult her. I can only hope she doesn't learn of his comments and decide to teach the big guy a lesson.

My arms cross involuntarily, and I stifle a shudder. *I still remember the one time I made an off-hand negative comment about Satan's performance as the former First Emperor when Belial was around. She broke almost every bone in my body.*

The other three don't say anything, but I notice Bael shoot a look of curiosity at me. It's obvious what he's thinking. *I wonder if the First Emperor will show this time?*

Of course not. The First is a recluse. Only Belial and I have ever seen the First in person, and neither can retain their identity in our minds. It gives me the creeps knowing the Labyrinth's highest authority is a demon nobody remembers.

The four of us share idle banter for a bit, while the stench of the River Styx wafts toward us now and then.

Bael reaches back and scratches his ass, pausing to sniff his finger afterward. Gross. "Hey, Diablo, what's the deal with the little human girl running around? When do we get to snap her in half?"

"We don't," I mutter. "Though I presume today's meeting has something to do with the Black Witch, so we'll find out soon enough."

"Whaddya mean, we don't? It's one brat! She ain't even half my size! Just give the word, and I'll have her gone by this time tomorrow!" Bael pounds his fist into his palm, making a loud *wham* as it sends a shockwave around the room. He's too confident in his physical strength.

"Sssize hardly matterssss," Mephisto hisses, which seems slightly ironic, given his short stature. "Bael, the Black Witch killed Sssatan. The combined power of all Dukesss couldn't achieve sssuch a feat. Have patience."

"That was a long time ago," Bael grunts. "We ain't got nothin' to be afraid of anymore. I'm way tougher'n I used to be."

I sigh and shake my head. "Perhaps so... but if Satan couldn't beat her, none of us can. That's a fact not even you can dismiss."

Bael rolls his eyes. "Pft. We'll see."

Barbatos shifts again, causing everyone to flinch, including myself, as his armor grinds together. "Agares approaches."

I quickly sweep my eyes in every direction, but no matter where I look, the old man isn't visible. It takes a full minute of waiting before the sound of his cane tapping on the ground catches our attention, causing me to wonder how Barbatos could hear him. Even for a demon, his senses are unusually acute.

"Ahh, sorry, sorry."

The Duke of Reptiles apologizes as he appears on the other side of the River Styx. It isn't a wide gap, but it still impresses me when he spryly hops the river, lands on the tip of his cane, perches for a moment, then drops to the ground into a hunched-over standing position. A glance behind him reveals his young pupil, Beelzebub, one of the more promising Lords in the lower echelons of power. Beelzebub lightly jumps into the air, and two small jets of flame erupt from under his boots, propelling him over the river. Magnificent. He's a prodigy, able to control magic without forming the signs — a rare ability among demons.

Myself, Bael, Agares, Barbatos, Mephisto, and Beelzebub form today's Council. Belial is nowhere to be seen, and the First Emperor obviously won't show up, but we have enough leaders here to deliberate.

Agares clears his throat. "I suppose we can begin."

Beelzebub snuffles. "A shame the Council had to hold their meeting here. The stench is ghastly."

"Hah! Got a weak stomach for souls, boy?!" Bael lumbers over to Beelzebub and slaps the lad on his back, knocking the wind out of him and nearly sending him sprawling to the ground. "Nothin' like the smell of death in the morning to get a demon's blood pumping! Up and at 'em!"

"Kuh-" Beelzebub gasps for breath, and twinges of fire spit from his mouth as he wheezes. "Cuh-clumsy oaf!"

While they share a moment of brotherly affection, the imp from earlier, Dingle, runs up to Agares, a smile spread across his face, and a scroll of parchment held in his hands. It's nearly as tall as his whole body. "Duke of Reptiles! Nyahaha! I have the President's thingy here for you!"

Agares smiles and takes the parchment from the tiny imp, then pats him on the head. "Thank you kindly, young one. Run along, then."

As Dingle skitters away, Agares chuckles. "Oh, they're all so cute before they mutate."

"And weak," Bael replies. He wanders back to his original spot beside me and starts grinning like he said the funniest joke in the world. I don't understand him sometimes.

Several moments pass as Agares unrolls the parchment and squints to examine it. He always tries to play up his age like he's a frail old codger, but I know better. "Hmm. Yes, yes, I see. The group of rogue humans has liberated several outer worlds in the last few months. Additionally, a monster uprising has resulted in the loss of the Labyrinth Core, which means we cannot travel to more than one planet at a time to replenish the human souls in the River Styx."

"Cheh. Monsters. I guess they've forgotten who runs the place." Bael leans forward and flexes aggressively. "I'll go down there and knock some sense into Bahamut! That oughta teach the bitch a lesson!"

Agares flicks his eyes up from the parchment, stares at Bael in annoyance for all of two seconds, then looks back down. "Beelzebub. Tell him."

The Lord of Fire smirks. "It's depressing how far out of the loop you are, Duke of Pain. Bahamut died over two months ago. She was killed by a young upstart, at that. One of Marie's children!"

"Marie?! That whore!" Bael balks for a moment, before scratching his head. "The name sounds familiar."

Agares unrolls a bit more of the scroll. "It should. Our best Oracle, Umi, works under her direct supervision. Umi has never once given us unreliable information."

Bael nods dumbly. "So this Marie chick, what kinda gal is she? Succubus? Raven? Vampiress? Maybe even a Felaris? I like their kitty tails."

Barbatus, unamused by Bael's stupidity, growls out a single word. "Human."

"What? A human?! No way! We ain't working with no stinkin' fleshbag! You've gotta be kidding me!"

"He isn't, and we are," I say, shooting a death glare at Bael. "Stop interrupting. Marie is one of our best tools. The ideal way to control humans is for someone who knows their psychology to invent mental traps."

Breaking the human body is a simple matter, but breaking the mind is no trifle. As the former leader of humanity, she's the second-best person for the job."

Mephisto hisses. "Pressident Ossse hasss done more than Marie to ssserve demonkind."

"Yes, true, and she bests Marie when it comes to knowledge of human psychology, but let's not get off track. Agares?"

Agares continues. "Thanks to the monster alliance with humankind, they've begun building fortified bases on human worlds. I've even heard talk of a technology boom. The humans may soon start creating weapons."

"Weapons?" Beelzebub leans over his mentor's shoulder and squints at the paper. "What sorts of weapons?"

Mephisto's eyes jerk around uneasily. "Kss... you were not yet whelped during the Energy Warsss, ssso you likely have little idea of what they are capable. Humanssss usssed devicesss called 'gunsss' and 'riflesss' to fight back againsst the demonsss. Their technology ssslowly improved to the point that we were no threat to them."

Beelzebub crosses his arms and looks at Bael, then me. "If I weren't standing among the Council members, I'd find such a proposition laughable. Humans, fighting back and crushing demons? Inconceivable."

Bael grunts. For once, a look of doubt appears in his eyes. "It's true, whelp. Humans ain't a match for us now, but that wasn't always the case. There were times even I thought we'd go extinct, or be forced to live underground in caves and shafts for the rest of eternity."

"What changed?"

Beelzebub's probing goes unanswered. Before Bael can reply, Agares holds up a hand. "Hold your tongue, Duke of Pain. You know we're not to discuss the Energy Wars with the young." He turns to Beelzebub and waggles a finger. "You're being groomed for power, boy. Know your place. Someday the secret information will be yours for the taking, but that day has yet to pass."

Beelzebub's expression flattens, and he sighs. "Of course. Forgive my impudence."

My foot starts tapping. "Come on, let's get this meeting over with. Finish Ose's scroll so we can get out of here."

Agares nods and returns his attention to the unrolled paper. "Umi's confidence threshold has lowered ten percent since we last contacted her. She believes that the monsters are not working alone and that a certain human may be assisting them."

"Black Witch." Barbatos's voice rumbles in the air, and everyone nods along with him.

"She isss a troublemaker, that one. A ssshame Joan didn't finisssh her off."

"Maybe this is part of her plan," I muse. "Agares, didn't you tell me you confronted her recently?"

The old bat nods. "Aye. My pupil was with me at the time. She insisted she wasn't interested in causing trouble in the Labyrinth."

"She is the rumored 'Black Witch,' though." Beelzebub states. He pauses for a moment. "Come to think of it, didn't she have a human male with her?"

Agares rubs his forehead and quints at the ceiling as he searches for the memory. "Oh, yes, I remember. A lanky, scrawny little thing. Looked like he hadn't a good meal a day in his life. I wonder why she was bringing him along."

Bael snickers. "Maybe the kid broke her out of the statue."

"Don't be ridiculoussss," Mephisto counters. "Her ssstatue wasssss sssealed with powerful magic. We concluded that it would take the might of all the Demon Emperorsss to releasssse her."

"I know, I know. I'm just kiddin', sheesh." Bael coughs into his fist. "Anyway, it sounds like we're coming back around to my plan. We gotta take out the Black Witch."

Agares rolls the parchment back up and slides it into the folds of his robe. "You might be correct after all, Bael. We assembled the Council today just in case we might have to make such a decision. Facing down the Black Witch will not be a simple task."

I shudder as a memory of the day she slew Satan appears in my mind. Waving it away, I yawn. "Fine. We'll take a vote, then. If anyone is in favor of engaging the Black Witch, raise your hand. If four of us agree to attack, we'll all have to pitch in."

I don't raise my hand. Neither does Agares, but Mephisto, Bael, and Beelzebub do. I'm slightly surprised when I look at Barbatos and see he hasn't raised his hand, either.

"Barbatos, you don't wish to attack the Black Witch?"

The Duke of Steel slowly turns his armored head to look at me. I can just barely make out the scorching red coals of eyes illuminated beneath his helmet. The sight chills me to the bone. "Peace. Negotiate. I will not fight unless I must."

I try to swallow, but my saliva sticks in my throat. "Y-yes, I see your point. Well, that's a three to three split. I guess we'll have to put it off a while."

Bael glares at me. "Pansy. I bet Belial would've raised her hand if she were here."

"Of course, but she didn't pop her head in," I say, coughing into my fist. "Barbatos has a point, however. Perhaps we could learn the Black Witch's motivations and strike a deal with her. Mephisto, Barbatos, I want the two of you to visit her. Bring Agares and the whelp along for backup. I know you four are the most reasonable members of the Council, so you might be able to persuade her to stop draining our resources."

Bael guffaws. "Hey! What about me?! If she starts swinging, I should be there to knock her flat on her ass! I'll put the little runt in her place!"

I sigh. "Ugh. Bael, you never listen, do you? We're going to try diplomacy. You're the worst when it comes to speaking softly and carrying a big stick. You'll piss her off, and then we'll be forced into a bloody conflict." I pause to stare at him for a moment. "Besides... I don't believe we could beat her even if everyone here joined together."

The Duke of Pain rolls his eyes. "I think you're just a scaredy-imp. Whatever. Just promise me that if negotiations break down, I get to take the first swing at the brat."

"I can do that. Hell, it might do you some good to get the shit kicked out of you once in a while."

"Hehe." Agares chuckles.

"HAH HAH." Barbatos laughs twice, and it's possibly the worst noise I've ever heard in my entire life. His voice reminds me of the mating call of a Demogorgon. Everyone turns to stare at him, and judging by the looks on our faces; it's safe to say nobody enjoyed it.

Mephisto shudders. "Now isss assss good a time assss any to end the meeting."

"You said it," Bael mutters. "Good talk. I'm gonna go to Faith's End. I hear Gressil's added a few pretty prisoners to his collection."

"You're sick in the head," Beelzebub replies. "Fornicating with a *human*. Disgusting."

"Fornicating with *several* humans, all at the same time," Bael replies with a wink. "Agares, you've gotta get that whelp a mate. He's too pent-up."

"I'm trying," Agares replies. He turns away and pats his pupil's shoulder. "Come, then, Beelzebub. Let's get a move on."

The two of them turn around and leap over the river, and Mephisto crinkles a finger at me. "Farewell, Third."

Barbatos doesn't say a word. He makes a motion with his hands and opens a portal, not unlike the one Warpers create. He steps through to the sounds of several mermaids giggling, and a moment later, it closes behind him.

I turn around and begin walking back the way I came. A wave of exhaustion hits me. Bael stomps away and cackles in the distance. "Have a good nap, Emperor of LAZINESS! Bahahaha!"

His humor is the *worst*.

When I arrive back at the hallway and travel back through, I spot my Warper up ahead, standing stiffly, and waiting for my arrival. "I hope the meeting was a success, Third Emperor."

"Oh, as good as ever, I suppose. Do you have another jump left in you?"

He smiles. "Just one, Emperor Diablo. Where to?"

"My estate. I can't wait to feel my pillow press against my face."

"As you command. You deserve the rest for all your hard work."

"Well, thank you, Grigori. I'm glad someone appreciates me around here."

A moment later, we step into his portal and vanish.

Author Notes:

This is Diablo.



This is Bael.



This is Barbatos.



This is Barbatos, but an outdated character design.



This is Mephisto.



This is Mephisto, but an outdated character design.



Part 022: Unforgivable Sins, Blemished Past

"Gah!" I let out an involuntary yelp as Phoebe drives the wooden sword straight into my gut, knocks me flat on my ass, and sprains my tailbone in the process. "God, Jesus, fuck! I think I hit a rock!"

Phoebe stiffens. "Your Grace! Are you alright?!"

I nod despite the tears rolling down my face. "Yup! Great! Never better! I told you not to hold back! Not your fault!"

The two of us are sparring behind the palace. For the last two months, ever since I recovered from my paralysis, I've insisted on training with Phoebe and learning how to use a sword. The uneven ground usually won't make me lose my footing, and I should have a size advantage over her, but she still routinely kicks my ass up and down the streets.

Phoebe used to go easy on me until I insisted that I wouldn't learn unless she put my feet to the fire, and I can heal myself, so it's not like she'll cause any permanent damage...

But *still!* Goddamn! Phoebe is light on her feet, quick to avoid even my most accurate attacks, and my spherical vision doesn't matter if my body can't react to her movements.

Phoebe steps forward and hunches down in front of me. "Do you wish to take a break, Your Grace? Your movements have slowed down noticeably of late."

"Nah, I'm fine. **Heal.**" I drop the shield in my left hand and rub my sore ass for a moment before climbing to my feet. "That sudden stab caught me off-guard. Usually, you swing wide."

"Of course. I've been playing around with you, Your Grace, using a repetitious pattern to catch you off-guard when I eventually vary my strike. In battle, a swordsman must be inventive. He who strikes the first blow wins, after all." The heat pattern on her lips changes slightly, which I've grown to learn indicates a smile.

Reading faces is somewhat tricky when using infrared, but I can do it as long as I focus. Unfortunately, no matter how I try, I can't follow anyone's eye movements, giving me a slight disadvantage. Luckily, I make up the difference by not moving my eyes either, so it cripples my opponent's ability to read me as well.

...Or at least it *would*, if my opponent wasn't Phoebe. Every time I think I understand her fighting capability, I'm surprised. She isn't just a fantastic caregiver, but an expert swordswoman, too. I can't afford to underestimate her.

I force a grin. "So, uh, where did I go wrong?"

"Your shield. You always forget it exists. You could have easily parried my stab, had you raised your shield, but you didn't. If you don't protect your vitals, you might die before you can use your magic."

Phoebe's smile falters at the last sentence. Anytime she brings up my potential death, a feeling of melancholy fills the air. *I can't ever let him die*, her body language says. It's sweet of her and makes me

want to train even harder.

I grab my shield with telekinesis. "Okay. I've gotta guard myself better. Got it."

"It isn't just that, Your Grace." Phoebe reaches out her sword and taps my knee. "You're a head taller than me. In combat, a size difference can be both positive and negative. I use my size as often as possible, ducking under your wide swings and attacking your legs. Your shield has to protect much more body area than mine does, leaving you exposed more often. If you hopped up to avoid my low attacks, that would leave me wide open for you to parry, and you would win."

I nod, forcing myself to memorize her words. "I think I can remember all that. It's a lot to recall in the middle of combat, though."

Phoebe sighs and rests her sword-hand on her hip. "You shouldn't have to think of these things consciously, Your Grace. Swordfighting comes down to split-second movements and instincts. Your body will move automatically if you train it right. That's all there is to it."

From behind the shadow of the house, I sense a male's heat signature appear. Evidently overhearing Phoebe, the man laughs. "Hah! There's a lot more to combat than rote body instinct, though the lady has a fair point." I recognize him as Neil Adams, and nod as he walks over. Neil continues, "Military tactics are the way to win battles! A sword is useless against a musket."

Phoebe's face tenses up. "Unless the musket misses."

"True, true!" Neil stops near us and examines me. "My liege, have you learned to fight back yet, or are you still taking a beating from this young lass?"

I try not to blush. "I have yet to land an unearned blow on her."

Phoebe rolls her eyes and smiles. "His Grace doesn't want to hurt me. He's too soft. He always swings slower than he should, giving me time to dodge."

"A gentleman, true to the core. I can respect that." Neil lifts his brimmed hat for a moment to scratch his head, then puts it back. From what I understand, he was a Frenchman who fought under Napoleon, but his English accent is confusingly thick, without a trace of the French dialect like Joan used. "In any case, since you two are training, this is the perfect time for me to bring up a concern on my mind. Would you care to listen, my liege?"

Without moving my head, I examine Phoebe. She doesn't have to say anything for me to know she's ready to stop the training and hear him out. Good enough for me. "Sure. What's up?"

Neil rubs his hands together. "Have you seen the quality of our military?"

"Yeah. It isn't that great."

"It's terrible," Neil says bluntly. "The monsters have no discipline. Everyone has a signature fighting style, which is disastrous for cohesiveness. I have yet to see teamwork among the different monster species. Have you heard the rumors wandering through the Labyrinth?"

I shake my head.

Neil continues. "The demon Emperors are feeling anxious. They don't like that we've controlled the Core for three months. Without the warp-gates, they can't raid human planets efficiently to replenish souls. They're stuck using the few teleporters located at the corners of Hell, which are less efficient and can only access one planet at a time."

"Replenish souls? Are you referring to the River Styx?"

The middle-aged man's expression turns grim. "Aye. Demons slaughter humans to convert us into souls for the weaker ones, which allows them to mutate into stronger forms. It appears the river has been thinning recently and they're getting antsy. I would expect an attack on the Labyrinth Core within the next month at the latest."

Phoebe bows her head. "We cannot placate them, either. The only appeasement they would accept would be allowing them to use the portals, and that would mean..."

"...More dead humans," I say, finishing her sentence. "Unacceptable."

"Precisely." Neil strokes his chin and nods. "Which is why I'm saying we need to restructure the military. I've spoken to a few close friends of mine, and we'd like to list our concerns in full as soon as possible."

I raise an eyebrow. "How quickly can we pull off something like that? We don't have a formal military right now."

Neil looks away. "During your paralysis, I took the liberty of forming some rudimentary militias. There are four squads of a hundred men and monsters each, but we still have thousands of men and monsters who have yet to touch a weapon. My comrades and I lead each militia. One to guard the Core, one to guard the inner gate, one to patrol the mines and village, and the other to guard your castle."

"Oh. I see. That was a good move. Still, we'll need way more than four hundred soldiers. Alright, fine, let's get on with it, then."

Phoebe sighs again. "And to think, we were finally making progress with your training."

I rub my ass. "Yeah. Progress."

Several minutes later, I summon two slices of cinnamon sugared toast in midair and hand one to Phoebe. The two of us munch our bread as we follow Neil, but he declines my offer for a slice. Walking past the castle, we head down the cliff-side and over to the forest, where several new buildings and a wall now stand. I erected them with Wordsmithing last month, and the lone guard tower has a telescope aimed at the portal at all times so we can keep an eye out for arrivals. There's even a flare system in case of emergencies or unexpected intrusions. If the Core were to fall, we might not know about it in time.

If only cell service could transmit through the portal, I'd have solved several problems by now. The space barrier doesn't do well with energy transmission. I'll have to think about it.

Phoebe polishes off her bread and wipes the cinnamon from her lips. "Thank you, Your Grace. It was delicious."

I chuckle. "Will you ever stop calling me 'Your Grace,' I wonder?"

"It's just habit at this point." Phoebe reaches up and swipes a stray hair out of her face. "What was that food?"

"Cinnamon bread. I just felt like eating something sweet, you know?" Saying this, I finish the last of my toast.

"You should watch yourself. If you keep eating sweets like that, you'll start looking like a hog."

I decide not to tell her that I can change my body image with Wordsmithing — too much trouble.

As we approach the border wall, Neil waves to a group of three men standing over a dead firepit, holding mugs and chatting about something I can't quite make out. The heat of the midday sun is extraordinary, yet they don't look even moderately uncomfortable.

"I've brought our King!" Neil gestures to me. "Sir Jason Hiro, I'd like to introduce you to my three closest friends, and the commanders of your military. Makoto Ueda, Hans Wagner, and Saul."

I nod politely at the three men as they turn around and make different gestures. Makoto bows, Hans raises his metal cup, and Saul merely nods and clasps his hands together. He doesn't have anything in his hands, so I guess he isn't much of a drinker.

"Uh, pleased to meet all of you," I say, bowing stiffly. Phoebe curtsies politely.

"Ja, ees our pleasure," The first man, Hans Wagner, says. While he appears to me only as a red blob, I've grown more adept at telling clothing apart. He looks to be wearing a prim and proper uniform, something with a star pinned over his heart. One thing I've learned is that most people on Tarus II come from diverse backgrounds, and many were born in entirely different time periods. This guy seems Germanic, based on the thick mustache and how his hair is slicked back carefully to preserve a military look.

"I have waited a long time to meet you, King Hiro," The next man, Saul, says. While I'm curious as to why Neil didn't include Saul's last name, there's probably a good reason for that. He wears folds of robes wrapped around his body in various ways, a style I've come to associate with ancient Rome or earlier. He might be from pre-Christ times, even. Based on the thick and long beard and mustache, he either comes from a time when men didn't have many ways to shave, or he loves long hair.

"It is big honor to meet you, kind leader," The final man says. Unlike the other two, I can immediately tell what his accent is. Since his name is Makoto Ueda, it's immediately apparent he's Japanese, though I can't guess in what period he was born. His garb is that of a male kimono, and based on the katana at his waist, as well as the chomage hairdo, he was likely born before the start of the Industrial Revolution.

The Crown is helpful at times like these. It fills in the blanks from extraneous and inferred information, making my life much more straightforward.

I bow once again after they introduce themselves, though I can't help but feel slightly awkward. All of these men are, quite literally, a hundred thousand years old, yet they treat me like I'm a king. I'm not even nineteen!

Turning to Neil, I ask, "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

Saul raises his free hand. "We wish to work on a comprehensive reformation of human and monster society. The sooner, the better. The current structure is ugly at best, and a crippling weakness at worst."

"All of society?" I raise an eyebrow. "I don't follow. I thought this was about the military."

Hans replies, "Ja, the military ees een a sorry state, Mein Fuhrer, but zee eenfrastructure ees-"

"Whoa, whoa, hold up." I raise a hand faster than I expect. "Err, what did you call me?"

Judging from how his face shifts, he looks incredibly confused. "M-Mein Fuhrer?"

Neil nudges me. "It means 'leader' in German, his native tongue."

My stomach roils. "I know what it means. I-I just... I don't feel comfortable being... being called... *that*."

Hans glances at Ueda, who shrugs in response, before looking back at me. "Ja, very sorry zen. Would you prefer being called Mein Lieber? Perhaps Herr Hiro?"

Now I feel sorry for bringing it up. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut. "Uh, Mein Lieber is fine, I suppose. It's just... 'Fuhrer' has a connotation with a particular man that makes me uncomfortable."

Hans cocks his head curiously. "I... I do not understand. Who?"

I swallow hard even thinking his name. "Adolf Hitler. He probably came after your time."

"Oh!" Hans smiles eagerly. "Ja, ja! I knew heem, of course. He vas Mein Lieber."

It takes me a moment to compile my thoughts. "Y-you knew- that is, you worked for... Adolf Hitler?"

Hans nods eagerly, apparently unaware of my feelings toward the man. "Ja. Zee Fuhrer vas a man with ambitions for power. I did not get to see zee end of zee var, but it would not surprise me if he vun. Sadly, such days are far in zee past."

I feel Phoebe's gaze burning into the side of my head. "Are you okay?"

My face turns pale. I can't help my reaction. This Hans guy is a Nazi!

Oh, god. I should have paid more attention! How can I possibly allow a Nazi to establish himself in a leadership position?!

"Ahh..." I try to speak, but the words won't come out. I'm the only person here, aside from Hans, who knows about what the Nazis did. Phoebe and Neil are both from the ancient past, as are Saul and Makoto, most likely. I'm the only one who realizes there's a monster in our midst, one wearing human skin.

Hans begins to notice my feelings of anger. He reaches up and wipes his forehead. "Mein Lieber... have I done somezing to offend you?"

"You worked for the Nazis..." I manage to breathe words out. "You... how many people did you kill?"

Hans' cheerful demeanor lessens. "Me? None! I vas in zee logeestics deeveesion!" He trails off for a moment and tilts his head to my side, staring aimlessly at nothing in particular. "Your reaction does bring a few questions to mind..."

"Did you know?" I ask. "About the death camps?"

Hans's entire face decreases in temperature by a degree or two. "I had heard of zem, but never visited. I assumed zey vere just rumors."

"They were real. People died. Millions."

It takes a long minute before Hans finally responds. "I vas only a lieutenant. I just did whatever zee Fuhrer ordered. It vas zee day when I vas ordered to kill an innocent child zat I couldn't follow orders anymore. I left my post."

Phoebe raises her hand up to her mouth. "W-what? You murdered a child?"

She isn't the only one shocked by this sudden admission. Neil, Makoto, and Saul all take a step back, unsure of what to think. Hans quickly continues, "Nein, nein! I did not kill heem. Eenstead, I joined a reseestance group and began ferrying people out of zee country. For zees, zee Schutzstaffel slaughtered main vife and child."

A clearer picture appears in my head. "You don't think rescuing a few Jews makes it okay that you killed others, do you? You can't possibly atone for-"

"I did not kill anyvun!" Hans suddenly yells, catching me by surprise. "Please do not look at me with such hate-filled eyes. Zings are not so seemple when zee leader of zee military rules with an iron fist! Zee Schutzstaffel vere always vatching! Everyvun vas an enemy!"

My lips turn dry. I wet them before continuing. "I understand. You were merely following orders. I'm sure that helps you sleep at night."

Hans crosses his arms and straightens up to look at me. "I do not ask forgiveness, Mein Lieber. Eef you zink executing me vill make zee worl'd a better place, so be eet. Throw me in prison, if you must. I am not zee man I vas back zen. I vas a young fool."

"To say the least."

The two of us stare at each other for a few moments. I, with my unseeing eyes, and he with the gaze only a monster could understand. What lurks in his mind, I wonder?

I don't know what to do. Hans did save Jews, or so he says. It's been 100,000 years as well. Should I just ignore his tainted past? If he worked under the Nazis, then can I ever trust him not to be tainted by their sins? If I keep him as a military leader, wouldn't that make me as sick as America during Operation Paperclip? They took on Nazi scientists to create new weapons, allowing the men to get away with war crimes.

But... then again... it *has* been 100,000 years. I'm not God. I can't judge a man by a past I don't even know. Maybe I should keep an eye on him but use his potential expertise.

There's no right answer, here. I like to think of myself as a compassionate and forgiving person, though. Jailing a man for ancient sins isn't in my character, especially not executing him.

"Alright. Hans, what you did was despicable. Unforgivable. If you ever do anything that gives me even a whiff of your origins, it's over for you, understand? But, for now, I can't sentence you for a crime nobody

but you remembers. You have to live with the guilt for the rest of your life, so I can only hope that's punishment enough."

Hans nods meekly and bows his head. "You are most gracious, Mein Lieber."

Somehow, I manage to force a grim smile. "By the way, Germany lost the war. We tortured and executed every single person who committed a war crime. None escaped judgment."

The fact that I can tell a little lie here and he won't know the difference makes me feel slightly better. It isn't true, after all. Thousands of SS officers and camp leaders got off scot-free and lived long, healthy lives. Hans doesn't have to know that, though.

To my surprise, Hans smiles back. "Ja. I had hoped zat would be zee case. Perhaps I should have been counted among zee bodies, eh?"

"Yeah. Maybe. What happened, anyway? Why didn't you see the end of the war?"

Hans shrugs. "Unfortunate circumstances. I was fleeing zee Schutzstaffel when I encountered a horrifying monster before zee France border. She was Bahamut, of course. You can guess zee rest."

"Mmm. Yeah."

There's an awkward silence as the other men and Phoebe evaluate Hans. Based on her initial impression, I get the idea that Phoebe doesn't like him, but mostly because I don't. She tends to echo my views most of the time. The other three merely regard Hans with a new level of curiosity. They'll probably be prodding him a *lot* later when this meeting is over.

Saul clears his throat. "That was dreadfully uncomfortable to watch. Shall we get back to the main topic, then?"

I wave my hand absentmindedly. "Sure, sure. Uh, reformation, right?"

"Yes. I've spent a lot of time talking with the people and monsters here. Morale is low because most people live in primitive huts. As I was saying before, I'd like to work on improving our infrastructure. If we can construct additional-"

"Oy!" A voice calls out from above us, interrupting Saul. He angrily looks up in the air at a guard in the tower. "What is it?! I'm trying to speak!"

"Red flare!" The scout yells out two words, and immediately Saul's attitude shifts. Everyone except for Phoebe and I jump into high gear. Neil starts barking out orders. "The Core is under attack! Gather the horses! Riders assemble! Get your weapons ready! On the double!"

Phoebe looks at me, fear in her eyes. "Jason! We have to do something! Fly over there and help, hurry!"

I grimace. *Even if I fly, it will take too long. I need a faster mode of transportation, and stat.*

"I have a better idea. Phoebe, you're coming with me. Grab a sword and shield while you wait. This'll take me a minute at most.

I shoot one last look at Hans as he runs to a nearby stable with several horses. With a shake of my head, I cast aside the disturbing thoughts in my mind and turn my attention to the empty patch of grass at my side.

"Car!"

* * *

A moment later, Phoebe stares at the red metal monster before me. A Ferrari, something I always dreamed about in my youth, but this one is a little different. It packs a fusion engine and can travel at up to 200 miles per hour. It's a four-seater, too.

I crack open the passenger door for Phoebe with my telekinesis, while jumping in on the driver's side. "Let's go! We're leaving!"

Phoebe stares quizzically at the vehicle. "How?"

I pat the passenger seat after closing my door. "There's no time to explain! Get in the car!"

She doesn't question my command. Ordinarily, a Ferrari would be a tight fit, but the Crown allowed me to custom build this one with lots of leg room. As she takes a seat, I gently move her sword and shield to rest at her feet with my telekinesis, then I pull her seatbelt over her and shut her door.

"Oh, thank you, Your Grace. Err, what is this... metal box?"

"It's our ticket to that gate in one minute flat. **Cement!**"

Aiming my mind ahead, I pave the entire path several miles forward to the warpgate, then clear any debris off the road with another word. "**Sweep!**"

A moment later, I press the ignition button. *Heh, no keys needed.*

The car roars to life like a pack of angry lions, and Phoebe's face flushes. "By the gods! What in the Heavens was that sound?!"

"Horsepower!" I stomp the accelerator, and a moment later realize I forgot my seatbelt. I'm thrown backward by the sheer force of acceleration. Phoebe shrieks in terror as we go from a standstill to sixty miles an hour in under two seconds, rapidly jump to a hundred, then a hundred and fifty. The terrified screams from the passenger side of the car only fuel my macho instincts. This is more fun than anything I've done in my life!

It only takes us two minutes of roaring engines before we reach the warpgate, and I slam on the brakes.

Screech!

The moment I hit the brakes, my body flings forward, and I slam against the horn. Naturally, I modified it to blare deep and loud like the horn on a cruise-ship, and the sound makes Phoebe scream in terror even louder.

The car grinds to a stop just a hundred feet from the shrine. Once it halts, the sudden inertia slams me back against my seat, and it takes several moments before the adrenaline stops racing through my body. I

turn to smile at Phoebe, only to see a look of anguish and nausea on her face.

"...out! L-let me out!" Phoebe pounds on the window and holds her mouth, so I open the door with telekinesis and yank her seatbelt off. The moment she's free, Phoebe stumbles out of the car, past the pavement, and onto the grass and begins vomiting.

My smile fades.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I quickly clamber out of the car and run around to her side. "Phoebe? Phoebe! Are you okay?"

"Bleugh! Gwuuh!" She coughs out even more vomit, getting some of it on her white hair. Her entire body shakes, and she starts crying uncontrollably as more vomit bubbles up.

I've never seen her in a state like this. Shit. I quickly lean down and pat her back. "I'm here, Phoebe. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" It occurs to me that now is the time to Wordsmith, so I speak again. **"Settle. Clean. Mints."**

I don't do anything to stop her crying, but I can at least settle her stomach and clean up the vomit. She continues spasming for another minute before leaning against me and crying into my shirt. "Oh... oh god! I was scared! Terrified! That th-thing is a monster!"

"It's my fault, Phoebe. I'm sorry..." I pat her head and let her cry for a moment as I look up at the portal. I can't see anything inside of it with my infrared or sound perception, so I have no idea what's going on in there. Quickly, I pull Phoebe away. "Stay here. I need to see what's going on in the Core. When you feel better, follow after me."

She nods rapidly, but her motions are almost delirious. "Uh... uh huh... huh..."

I pull myself away from her, though prying her hands from my shirt without hurting her is a small challenge. After leaving her behind, I jump up to the portal and notice a single human waiting for me, anxiety written all over his face. He stares at the Ferrari for several moments before looking at me.

"Sir!" The man snaps into a salute. "It's chaos in there! We need the regiments at once!"

"What happened?"

"Shadow-walker attack, sir! Dozens of them! We believe the Demon Lords have rallied together to attack us!"

I push past him, feeling anxious at stepping into a Portal when I can't see anything on the other side for once. "Uh, stay here and help that woman. Phoebe is feeling ill because of... reasons. I'll be back."

I step toward the portal, my senses at the ready.

Whatever's on the other side, it had better be ready to die.

Author notes:

This is Hans Wagner



This is Makoto Ueda



This is Hans, Neil, and Makoto together!



. (Will post actual art later.)

This is Saul



Part 023: Wordsmith Unleashed, An Indecent Proposal

"Summon."

A suit of metal armor materializes and wraps around my body. All at once, over a hundred pounds of weight pops into existence, causing me to slump forward. I catch myself before falling on my face and speak another word of power.

"Strength."

The metal's weight seemingly vanishes as my body's strength increases to heft the added bulk. The only exposed parts of my body are two horizontal slits for my unseeing eyes to pierce through, as well as seven thin vertical openings in front of my mouth. I'm not only protected, but I can also breathe, too.

Metal encases my arms, legs, feet, and hands. My abs, heart, back, neck, and every other part of my body can rest easy knowing that only an incredibly precise attack targeting the tiniest jointed areas could hope to hurt me.

The only problem is how slowly I move. I guess that's the price to pay for impenetrable defense. Based on the tests I've run, even if a rhino slammed its horn into me, full-force, I might get the wind knocked out of me at worst.

In addition to my armor, my fusion backpack appears, automatically attaching to my lightsaber when I yank it into my hand with telekinesis. *It's go time.*

My metal suit grinds together as I step through the portal. The sound is annoying, but at the same time, the noise vibrates the air all around me, giving me a continuous spherical view of the area.

The *whumph* of air pressure change, as always, is disorienting. Immediately, the cries of pain throughout the room, the clanging of claw and blade, and the sound of magi chanting spells transform the room into a fully visible entity, enabling me to see every corner and every individual battle with perfect clarity.

Nobody pays my presence any heed. I can't complain. It gives me time to figure out what's happening. Winged creatures, possibly harpies, fly around in the air, drawing their bows and arrows and firing with deadly precision into the crowd below. At the far end of the Core, bright red spots indicate hot-blooded demons, each one forming hand signs and chanting to cast magical spells. A bolt of black energy sails from the one's hand halfway across the room and strikes a snake-shaped monster in the back, making it hiss in agony and fall over, dead. I don't know what the spell was, but it was moderately powerful. I wouldn't want to get hit by it.

Two monsters jerk their heads toward me, and I recognize the shape of their legs and tails, marking them as kobolds. I've only seen a few, and from what Kar has told me, most are fiercely loyal to demons above other monsters. That makes them likely enemies.

The two kobolds dash at me and raise their swords to strike. My lightsaber blade pops out with a high-pitched wail, causing them to flinch and gaze at it in surprise — the perfect opening.

While they stare in shock at the weapon, I yank the wolf-like monsters toward me with telekinesis and swing the saber up and down in two quick movements, lopping their sword-arms off, then shoving them back with a telekinetic push. *Just like a Jedi, heh.*

I don't want to kill if I can help it, but anyone who attacks me will regret their life choices. The kobolds screech in pain and slam into several other monsters at the bottom, alerting them to my presence. While those monsters look up in alarm and their eyes jump to my glowing blade, I decide to take things to the next level.

Under my breath, I mutter, "**Amplify. Amplify. Amplify. Deepen. Shift.**"

My voice tastes menacing, reminding me of an enraged minotaur at the prime of its life. Without even speaking I can tell my vocal cords have shifted adequately. Now, it's time to make my grand entrance.

"SILENCE! CEASE THE FIGHTING, OR I SHALL ANNIHILATE ALL OF YOU!"

My voice is so loud and powerful that sound waves smash into the far wall and tear a few chunks off. Nearby monsters go flying, and even I stagger slightly under the recoil from my own voice. Luckily, I use my telekinesis to steady my body.

The fighting in the room careens to a stop as my voice echoes for miles in every direction. Everyone falls to their knees and grabs their ears, howling in pain. In fact, the room goes so silent despite all the screaming that it isn't until I feel blood running down my neck that I realize I blew out my goddamn eardrums. "**Heal.**"

I mutter the word as quietly as possible, but it's hard to tell how far my voice travels. Once my hearing is back, I notice everyone scanning the room, looking for the source of the Voice of God.

After a few moments, several heads turn to face me. Then others. Finally, the entire room looks at me.

It's at this point that I notice the downside of spherical vision. I can mostly make out each species of monster and demon, but I can't tell who is on which side. Anyone could be an ally or an enemy.

"Hurgh! Get off of me!" Kar's voice rings out, and he leaps to his feet, throwing two blobs of smoke through the air. I can barely even make them out since they have no heat in their bodies, and when they hit the wall, they evaporate into mist and then reappear several feet away.

Faint splotches dot Kar's body. Despite being stabbed several times, and blood rushing from the wounds, he can still move and fight. What incredible stamina he must possess.

His roar of anger shakes several enemies from their stupor. One demon leaps into the air toward me, runs across the ceiling fifty feet above after inverting his gravity, and begins casting a spell. He looks to be the same one that shot the black magic bolt from before. I don't want to get hit by it.

Oh. A simple solution.

Without moving a finger, I reach up with my telekinesis and yank him from the ceiling, smashing him into the ground. The yelp of fright he makes on the way down is both amusing and also sickening.

"Eeyak?!"

I raise him into the air and smash him against the ground two more times before letting him go. His body flops like a ragdoll and lands with a sickening *crunch*.

Naptime.

A strange sensation washes over me. *I enjoyed that. I held the demon's life in my hands and nearly snuffed it out.*

I've never felt this powerful before. It's... a little intoxicating.

Before I can dwell on the morality of my attack, a group of kobolds rushes forward. One of them hurls three knives at me. I don't bother blocking them. The blades smack against my armor and *tink* to the ground harmlessly. Not one to be deterred by my impenetrable defenses, that same kobold dashes in front of me and delivers a gut-busting punch straight into my stomach...

And breaks every bone in his hand.

For a single moment, a look of shock races across his face before every muscle in his arm pops at once. The poor thing howls in pain, and I lop his arm off with a quick lightsaber swipe. I can always grow it back later if he decides to join my side. If not, the limb was useless anyway.

Shoving him away with my telekinesis, I glance over at the Demon Lords. All of them chant in sync and pool their energy together. "**Analyze.**"

My voice's almost robotic timber booms out, and a series of information floods into my mind as my Wordsmithing breaks down the components of their spell. It's the equivalent of a micro-nuke, but made of dark energy, and if they unleash it, the bomb will probably wipe out every soul in the room. They've realized I'm a significant threat, so this must be their only way to win.

Either way, I can't let them cast that spell. At the moment they fire it, my voice booms again. "**Absorb.**" All the energy from the spell vanishes and floods my body. An odd sensation, like pins and needles, spreads through my limbs. It's more uncomfortable than painful, and it dissipates as quickly as it arrived. It felt as though I had dive-bombed into uncomfortably hot water, then climbed right back out.

Weird.

All of the Demon Lords take a step back in surprise as their ultimate magic vanishes into the breeze. I decide to use my dominant voice one more time, though I tone the volume down substantially. "ALL WHO DO NOT SURRENDER WILL FACE THE SAME FATE AS THE DEMONS WHO DARED TO ATTACK ME."

Saying this, I lift the dozen or so Demon Lords and smash them into the ground before they can react. A few slams later, and they're out cold. "**Normalize.**" I return my voice to normal afterward and smirk.

My proclamation and follow-up attack catch the attention of all the enemies in the room. Every remaining monster and demon peels away and races out the Great Doors, grabbing their Lords hurriedly on the way.

A minute later, a collective sigh of relief washes through the room. "Turtle!" Kar yells out, and when I turn to look at him, the already low temperature in his body has dropped another few degrees. The giant lizard-sphinx stumbles forward and falls flat on his face.

Using my telekinesis, I deactivate my lightsaber and lift my armored form through the air with telekinesis to land next to Kar. He flops onto his back and gasps painfully. "Huh... hurgh... this is... this is it, for me. The shadow-walkers h-hit too many vital areas... I'm a goner."

I fight the overwhelming urge to laugh. "**Heal.**"

Before Kar can continue giving me a deathbed speech, all of his injuries vanish. The lizard-sphinx blinks in surprise and suddenly sits up. "O-oh. You can do that. I forgot."

"Yeah... sorry, I interrupted your dramatic speech."

Kar clears his throat and jumps to his feet. "Ahem, ah, well, this is uncomfortable. I had prepared myself to die. My power is nearly on par with a Demon Duke, but there were too many enemies. You saved my life."

"Hey, no sweat. You saved mine too, remember? Just think of it as me repaying a favor."

Glancing around, I quickly heal every monster in the room that I can see, reducing my internal energy substantially. Some of our allies are already dead, and I consider resurrecting them. *I've never tried it before. Would it work? Now's as good a chance as any to find out.*

Kar interrupts my thoughts. "Turtle. Thank you for showing up. You've saved our lives, but this was just the beginning. Those demons were not ordered by the Dukes and Emperors to attack us. They arrived of their own volition."

I turn to look at him questioningly. "What do you mean?"

Kar grimaces. "All demons must obey the orders given by the Demon Dukes. However, in the absence of an order, they are free to do as they please, even killing one another. There are only a few strict rules demons must follow, and none of those cover our situation. The Demon Dukes and Emperors didn't order those Lords to attack, but they didn't order them *not* to attack. Do you understand?"

Slowly, I nod. "More will likely strike, knowing the first wave weakened us already. And those were just Lords and Monsters. If the Dukes and Emperors decide to attack..."

"We'll lose," Kar replies flatly. "Demon Dukes are not to be trifled with. The lowest-ranked Duke, Mephisto, commands the Labyrinth's undead, and even a few shadow-walkers. He can pass through walls and reap souls from bodies. Little is known of the other Dukes and Emperors since they prefer secrecy, but you won't sleep well knowing they all tower over Mephisto."

I flick my gaze to the Great Doors. "How did they get inside? We shut the doors more than a month ago."

"Hurgh. Several Demon Lords working together have more than enough power to blow the doors off their hinges, let alone merely push them open. Besides that, it appears Bahamut installed demonic codes

into the doors. If one knows the password, they can speak a few words, and the doors will automatically open."

"Oh, fantastic. That's *great* news," I mutter.

Kar shakes his head. "I disagree, but you're free to your opinion."

From behind me, the sound of people exiting the Tarus II portal echoes inside the chamber. Phoebe, Neil, Hans, Saul, Makoto, and their militia come charging through, swords and bows at the ready, but confusion passes over their faces as they realize the battle is already over.

"Excuse me, Kar. I'll be right back." Instead of levitating to them with my telekinesis, I de-summon my armor and jog over.

"Phoebe! Are you alright?"

As I slow to a stop, Phoebe looks away. "I'm fine, no thanks to you. Ass."

"What happened?" Neil asks. He continues scanning the room, as several of our monsters pin down enemy monsters I healed up. I'd be amused at the incredulous looks on their faces if it weren't for my focus on Phoebe. Right now, if all the enemy monsters and demons died, I wouldn't even care.

"I came in and put an end to the fighting. Nonlethally."

Makoto rests a hand on the katana at his belt. "Impressive, Jason-san. Did you heal everyone with your magic?"

"Yes. Even the enemies."

"Most honorable. You are a kind and compassionate leader."

Makoto heaps some praise on me, and I force a smile, but honestly, I couldn't care less. Stepping forward, I reach past everyone to touch Phoebe's arm. "Hey, listen. Can we talk?"

She looks like she wants to pull away, but reluctantly sighs. "Is the situation stable here?"

I've never seen her this grumpy before. It's a little unsettling. "For the most part."

Phoebe jerks her head back and forth to look around for a moment, before gesturing to a quiet spot in the distance behind one of the portals. "Over there."

Nodding, I follow behind her as she takes off.

I'm going to apologize and hope she doesn't hate me. I can't just say what I did was a prank. It was mean-spirited and not like me at all.

I hope she's willing to listen.

Phoebe stares at me icily, keeping her arms crossed and body language closed. Her usual warm smile has turned into a blank facade of half-visible anger. The look on her face makes me feel like a backstabber, someone who intentionally hurt her for my amusement.

"Look, Phoebe, about what happened... I didn't mean... that is, I never intended to hurt you. I didn't think about how you'd feel being trapped in a vehicle you'd never seen before, and-"

She silently holds a hand up. "I've thought about what you did to me, Jason. You trapped me in that metal box, tied me down so I couldn't escape, and unleashed a pack of lions on me. Their roars were unmistakable. What were you hoping to accomplish?"

Phoebe's words make me flinch.

She doesn't know what a 'car' is, let alone its function. All she knows is that I seemingly terrorized her for no reason. I treated her reactions like a joke... and ended up hurting her needlessly.

I'm awful.

"Phoebe, I'm sorry. I screwed up. That's all there is to it. If you hate me, I understand. I want to try and explain what I was thinking, okay? I thought it would be a hilarious prank until I realized how badly I hurt you. I'll never do anything like that ever again."

Phoebe purses her lips. "Never?"

"Never."

Her head turns slightly as she looks past me at the wall. It's only now that I notice her lip quivering. Is she going to cry again? Fuck. Goddamn, I really stepped in the shit this time. I may never live this-

"Hahaha!" Phoebe suddenly laughs, and then the laugh explodes into an uproar as she doubles over and holds her stomach with both hands. "Haahahaha! Oh, my goodness, Your Grace's expression! It's like a puppy caught pooping on the rug for the third time! How could I ever stay mad at you?! Hahaha!"

I'm beyond confused. "W-what? You're not angry?!"

"Of course not! Heavens, no! Oh lord, have mercy!" Phoebe nearly falls to the ground laughing, and this time her laughter is an upbeat new emotion I've never seen her display before. Relief overwhelms me.

Phoebe laughs for a solid twenty seconds, before choking to a stop and wiping her forehead. "Oh, my days! I was so scared at the time, but after you left, I realized what an exhilarating feeling that speed was! I couldn't walk straight until the militia showed up. Hans explained to me what an 'automobile' was but also how he'd never seen one as advanced as yours."

I nod, unsure of how to respond. "Hans did, huh? Well, that was nice of him. S-saves me the trouble, I suppose..."

Phoebe forces herself to look stern. "Nevertheless! If you ever do something like that to me again, I'll beat you senseless during our next training! Do you understand?"

I quickly stand rigid and salute. "Y-yes ma'am!"

A moment passes, and Phoebe relaxes visibly. "Praise God in the heavens above. I must say, Jason, that had you properly warned me about that machine, I might have enjoyed it. I would like to ride in it in the future, if you don't mind." She pauses before quickly adding, "Not now, of course. Later. We've... dead to bury."

The joking mood sobers up between us as I glance out at the cooling corpses. "You've got that right."

An hour later, I move the final body to the right side of the room, as per Neil's instructions. Having divided up the allies and enemies, I now know that over a thousand Central Core monsters died, as well as three thousand monsters and demons on the opposing side. Unfortunately, the fallen from our team were more powerful, higher ranked monsters. A quick estimate tells me we took a three to five loss. Well, the numbers are meaningless anyway, since the demons are an unending horde outside the Great Doors.

We are few, and they are many.

Thinking similar thoughts, Neil exhales. "Huuu... not good, my liege. We'll be lucky to survive the next skirmish, let alone last to the end of the month. I hope you have a plan."

Makoto Ueda gracefully walks over to us, hands cupped in front of himself. "Hiro-sama, before we were so rudely interrupted, we were discussing rebuilding human society. Today has shown that we must continue that conversation and get to work at once."

"I concur," Saul says, as he meanders to us with Hans in tow. "If Demon Lords are already our enemies, I don't imagine it will be long before a Baron or a Duke shows up. Had you not healed Kar, we'd have lost one of our best warriors, and the title of King of Monsters would pass to another."

Glancing at him warily, I ask, "If Kar dies, what happens to the power of the Sphinx?"

"I haven't the faintest clue."

Hans gestures toward the Great Doors. "Vee need veapons. Good ones. Using swords and sticks to battle the demons is entirely useless. Why can't vee make guns? Zey would give us a ranged tactical advantage."

My hand brushes against the lightsaber at my belt. *Hans is right. Advanced weapons and armor would give us a fighting chance. It doesn't matter how much damage a demon's fists and claws can cause if I gun them down before they get close. DOOM taught me that much.*

"Good idea, Hans. Maybe I should add some automated defenses too, like turrets and such. The fewer casualties we suffer, the better."

Phoebe walks up to the group with a spark in her eyes. "Demons are highly resilient. I fought alongside Arthur and slew many in ages past. If you want to kill a demon, you need to pierce their hides."

Hans grunts. "Nnn. If that is that case, perhaps bullets would not vork very vell. Vee might need something more sophisticated than the technology I used during the Great War."

He looks at me pointedly, as if to say, *you're the genius inventor, here. Surely you can think of something.*

My lightsaber and armor come to mind. *If we need raw force to withstand demonic attacks, and the Crown of Solomon allows me to envision complex machinery like my lightsaber, then I've barely begun to tap into its latent potential.*

"Fine. I have a few ideas." I pause to gaze meaningfully at the five people surrounding me. "If my plans work as well as I hope, then I need a promise from everyone here today. My goal is not to conquer and subjugate, but to unify humans, monsters, and demons alike. We have to try not to kill when possible. You can slaughter demons all day long, but every demon you spare will catch their attention and defrost their hearts. I'd like to release the ones I healed today, too, after we interrogate them."

After I finish speaking, Neil glances at Makoto. "Have you been talking to the king recently? His words sound like something you would say."

"I met his majesty only today, when you introduced us," Makoto replies, smiling.

Neil adjusts his jacket. "Mmm. I wouldn't go so far as to call your goals naive, my liege, but demons are not the soft-hearted creatures you believe them to be. Perhaps after you combat them again and again, you will understand how they think. They will slaughter all of us in a second the moment they realize they can end our resistance. In fact, I assume that will be their next goal."

Nodding, I reply, "I know. However, I won't budge on this issue. We have to try not to kill demons where possible. I'll make sure to equip our troops with better weaponry and armor, but we have to lead by example. In the era I came from, only those who stood up against injustice and took risks with their lives changed the world for the better."

"That's admirable," Neil says with a nod. "Very well. We'll try your approach, but you'd better hurry. More demons could attack at any moment. The sooner we fortify our position, the better."

"Already three steps ahead of you," I murmur.

Makoto folds his hands together and bows his head. "It has been long time since I see a leader work hard to spare the lives of his enemies. His majesty, Hiro-sama, is most gracious and kind."

I force a smile. "Thanks, Makoto...san? I'm more American than Japanese, so I don't know honorifics very well."

He cocks his head questioningly. "Did your mother or father not teach you about your homeland?"

"My mother died when I was very young. My father abandoned me. I don't remember either of them."

Makoto's face pales. "Ah, very sorry to bring up sensitive topic. If you ever need guidance, feel free to seek my help, Hiro-sama."

My smile shines more genuinely. "Thanks. I'll keep that offer in mind."

It takes me a minute of concentration to picture the mass of gears, circuits, machinery, and metal in my mind. The Crown works overtime forming mental bridges from neurons to receptors, and finally, when I open my eyes, I speak a word. "**Turret!**"

Attached to the wall outside the Great Doors, a round half-orb appears. Reaching twice the size of my body, with a red iris that stares ahead blankly, the weapon sits at attention, waiting for an enemy to step in range. Bulletproof black glass envelops the iris, protecting it from attack.

A laser turret. It can fire lasers at the speed of light, cutting through most armor and flesh with little to no resistance. If the demons attack, they'll come from the side doors or the end of the hallway, exposing themselves to turret-fire.

"Turret! Turret! Turret!"

I create three more turrets, placing two on each side of the Great Doors. These weapons alone should eviscerate any attack force that approaches us. Good enough for now.

There's still a problem, though. The turrets will run out of energy after a minute of continuous fire. Just like my Lightsaber, they need a sustainable power source. I'll have to build a fusion reactor somewhere.

Neil steps through the still-opened Great Doors and stares at the black bubbles on the walls. "What are these spheres?"

"Automated defensive turrets. They have advanced Friend or Foe targeting systems, and can see a mile in absolute darkness. They're always scanning for threats, so if demons show up, they'll take him down."

Neil nods seriously. "I have no idea what you said, but it sounds good. I thought you were going for a non-lethal approach, though? These spheres seem antithetical to those values of yours."

"They have several settings. I set their attack priorities to 'incapacitate,' though they will switch to a lethal mode if they come under attack. I'll install a broadcast system to warn incoming demons of our defenses, too. If they ignore the warning, that's on them."

Phoebe slips out of the Core and approaches me. "We'd like to close the doors as soon as possible. Are you done out here, Your Grace?"

"Not yet. Soon, Phoebe."

She lingers for a moment and stares at the turrets before walking back inside, a briskness in her step. She seems slightly afraid of them.

I can't blame her, though. They remind me of the computer from an old movie I used to watch. *2001, a Space Odyssey*. They resemble HAL 9000, with his unmoving red eyeball.

Creepy. I can't say I'm a fan of evil AI.

I spend the next several minutes installing a speaker and camera system, along with lights in the ceiling to illuminate the corridor. I can see in the darkness, but the others can't. A lack of light might make some demons think they're sneaky, so it's best to remedy that, now.

Stepping back inside the Core, I create two new computer terminals and beckon for two nearby Knolls to come over. They shoot questioning gazes at me but shrug since they still don't know who I am. *Thanks, Kar*.

They stop before me, and I beckon at the computer terminals. "I don't care who does it, but I need someone on each of these computers 24/7. This one is set to monitor the cameras outside the Great Doors, and this one is for keeping an eye on energy levels of the turrets, as well as a bunch of subsystems. You'll pick everything pertinent up as you operate the computers."

Both gnolls nod, their eyes wide. "Issh asshe you sshay, hooman. You build weaponsh to protect ush, we thank you. Lose many brothersh, we did."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope that, in due time, no one else will have to die."

I leave them behind and walk over to an empty section of the room. It takes a few minutes for the Crown to help me envision a small fusion reactor, but when I finish, I embed the circular reactor halfway into the wall.

The rest of the work involves magically creating power lines inside the walls of the Labyrinth to power the turrets, but that takes only a few seconds.

Once I finish, I pause to sit down. My mind is woozy. Creating complex mechanical devices drains both my mana and my brainpower. It's been a while since I felt this tired.

"Are you unwell, Your Grace?" Phoebe appears beside me, and I flinch. I hadn't even noticed her there; that's how distracted I am.

"I... I'm fine — just a little tired. I can't rest yet, though. I need to start making some weapons too."

She nods and leans down beside me. "For what it's worth, I wanted you to know that your concern for my well-being was very touching."

It takes me a moment to form a coherent thought. God, I'm slow as shit right now. "Yeah? Well, it's you. I always think about you. I never want anything to happen to you, Phoebe. You mean more to me than anyone else. Perhaps even myself."

"Oh, don't say such an awful thing like that," Phoebe pleads. "You have to take care of yourself. Think of how it would make me feel if you were badly hurt. I couldn't bear to see you in such a state again."

A smile spreads across my face. "Yeah, but then you could take care of me again, like you did before. We'd have a lot more time together."

She blushes and looks away. "You don't have to get hurt for that to happen. We could do that now."

"Oh? Are you asking me on a date?"

She stands up quickly. "Gods, guide me. You're always ready with a funny quip, Your Grace."

My smile fades. "I wasn't joking."

For once, Phoebe is at a loss for words. She opens and closes her mouth several times before forming a sentence. "Haven't we gone far enough?"

"You've asked that before. I think you're making excuses." I reach over and gently take her hand in mine. "I don't know if someone hurt you in the past. I know you cared for King Arthur, but I'm not him. If... if you think I can't match up to him or something, say the word. I'll stop prying."

She doesn't pull away. "It isn't that. I... I've lost everyone I ever cared about to the winds of time. Maybe... secretly... I fear developing a deep bond with someone."

"Maybe? You're usually more certain than this. Unlike you, I don't have such fears. When I entered my Cryopod, I knew everyone I cared about would disappear into the past. I felt empty enough that I didn't

care. You changed that, Phoebe. You changed me."

Rising from my chair, I try to hunch down a little to her level, but probably end up looking goofy. Just this once, I don't want to tower over her.

"Phoebe, I told you a few months ago after my paralysis that I cared about you. That hasn't changed. If anything, my feelings have only deepened. Every minute I spend with you gives me the energy to live life to the fullest. I'm not only protecting the other people and monsters, but I'm also protecting *you*. Everything I do, I do it for you."

I'm stunned by the words coming out of my mouth. I used to think I'd die of embarrassment if I opened up like this to someone else, but Phoebe means everything to me. I don't just care about her because she healed me... I... I love her.

Yeah. That's exactly it. "Phoebe, I love you. I want you to be mine, whatever that entails."

She stays quiet for several seconds, the look on her eyes like a deer in the headlights. The expression passes, and her gaze softens.

"I do too, J-Jason. Love you, that is. Maybe I was afraid to admit it to myself, but... if I don't say it now..."

"You'll regret it later?"

"Yes."

"I know the feeling."

Silently, I kneel down on one leg, and mutter under my breath, "**Ring.**"

A shiny silver ring with a tiny red gem inset appears in my palm. I suddenly feel horribly flustered.

"Uh, look, here's a ring. If you, uh, if you wear it, that means you're... well, you and I are, sort of... you know?"

She grins hugely. "Yes! I know exactly what you mean!"

"So... will you wear this?"

Phoebe purses her lips. "What does the ring mean? Say it."

"Uh. It means I'm proposing marriage."

"Oooh!" Phoebe bows down suddenly and wraps her arms around me, taking me by surprise. "You're so cute when you're flustered! I will! I'll marry you!"

With her face pressed against mine, she kisses me on the cheek, and I grin stupidly.

Today is the best day of my life. Nothing can take this moment from me.

Part 024: Violence Begets Violence

Nonchalantly, I step into an interrogation room and walk toward a table. It's a barebones chamber, constructed hastily with my Wordsmithing.

The demon eyeballs me warily as I sit on the opposite side of the table from him. He's a sturdy-looking fellow with decent muscles, standing just over six feet tall. His tangled black hair hangs off his head in clumps, giving him a slightly ratty appearance, but with a shower, he'd clean up fine. Two burly minotaurs stand guard behind him, each armed with a nasty-looking halberd, but I wave them out as I take my seat. I won't need their protection.

My guest is only a Demon *Lord*.

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," The demon snaps. "Do your worst."

I've grown used to the red skin and horns most demons have, as well as their blood-red eyes, but what never fails to surprise me is how smartly they dress. This guy's pinstripe suit is still torn up from the battle, splotted with his blood in several places, but I can tell he enjoys dressing dapper. My mental image of the average demon has always been that they are a lot like rabid animals, keen to tear humans apart, but seeing them like this changes things. Now I have the notion that they're quite sophisticated and more than capable of intelligent thought. It seems Beelzebub and Agares aren't outliers.

"If you say so," I reply. "I want to ask you a few questions before we release you. You don't have to answer, but these aren't particularly invasive."

The demon flicks his gaze behind himself. "You sent the guards out. Don't you value your life?"

"Naturally, I do, but you don't frighten me."

"Uh-huh. What's with the... the glowing eyes?" He squints to examine my face. "Ain't never seen a fleshbag with eyes like those. You some kinda shapeshifter or somethin'?"

"I'm asking the questions here, but... yes. I suppose you could say that."

Truthfully, I'm not lying. I can change my shape, after all. Hell, I wonder if I could change everything about my looks. Might be worth a shot, sometime. "What's your name?"

The demon leans back in his seat. "I guess I can tell you that much. It's Paimon."

"Nice to meet you, mister Paimon." I hold my hand out toward him, but he merely stares at it for a few seconds.

"What the hell kind of spell are you tryin'a cast?"

I retract my hand. *Ugh. Monsters and demons seem to have no concept of shaking hands.* "Never mind. I'm Jason. I want to know why the demons attacked us. Can you tell me that much?"

He squirms in his seat. "You're gonna let me go if I tell you?"

"Whether you tell me or not, after I finish asking questions, you'll be free to leave."

He reaches up and rubs his chin thoughtfully. "What kinda dumb interrogation is this? Everyone knows torture is the best way to make someone talk."

"Do you want me to torture you?"

His face reddens. "N-no."

I shrug. "Where I come from, there have been studies regarding the low correlation between torture and reliable information. Besides, I'll be asking the other dozen of your friends these same questions. I'm playing the odds by assuming someone will talk."

"Huh. Interesting." He crosses his arms again and stares at me stonily for a few moments. "Maybe you are just a fleshbag. Ain't no demon or monster I know who'd say the shit you do."

"Perhaps. Would you like to answer the question, or should I move to the next one?"

Paimon looks at the blank walls around us before sighing. "Hah... you're either dumb or smart as hell. I can't figure you out. Fine. The official orders are to wait for a signal from the Dukes before retaking the Core, but some of the Lords thought it would be a good chance to reap some souls. We decided to gather up a bunch of slayers and attack all at once."

"Worked out well for you," I muse.

"Nobody likes a smartass."

I nod. "Would you care for anything to eat? Drink?"

Paimon's jaw slackens. "Now you're offering me grub? Are you pranking me?"

"No. It's just been several hours since the battle. I'm starting to get a little hungry myself. Thought I'd offer."

The demon smirks. "Guess that settles it. You *are* a fleshbag after all. Demons don't get hungry or thirsty, pal."

"Perhaps. Thank you for your answer, by the way."

"Maybe I lied."

I nod again. "If you did, and anyone else answers the question, we'll have two conflicting answers. I don't think you lied, though. You look fairly honest."

"Oh? Got me all figured out, huh? Maybe I'm planning to jump you and cut your throat open."

"I'd advise against that. If you manage to kill me, you won't get out of here alive. Oh, and you won't win if we clash. Don't press your luck."

Paimon sags slightly in his seat. "I'm just messing around. Doesn't matter; you won't let me go, anyway."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because fleshbags lie."

"And demons don't?"

Paimon licks his lips. "You know what I mean."

"Sure. Next question. Do you hate all humans?"

He blinks in surprise. "What? What kinda moronic-"

"Just answer it, if you want. Yes or no?"

"Yeah! Duh!" Paimon straightens up in his chair and slaps the table. I don't flinch. "You're all pathetic! Weak! Just food for us to eat! Once you were 'sposed to be these unstoppable beasts, devastating everything and ripping us apart, but now you ain't shit!"

I cock my head slightly. "You hate us because we're weak?"

"Obviously! Nothin' worse than a little shit who can't fight back! Even imps gotta fight to prove themselves."

"So, I suppose you'd say power and respect are essential to demons?"

"Obviously." Paimon starts to stand up but pauses. "Err, my legs are cramped. Mind if I stretch?"

"Sure. Go ahead. Don't try anything stupid, though. I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me. Psh." Paimon walks over to a wall and rubs his back against it. "Like that could ever happen."

"You said you value respect and power. Would you respect me if I proved to you that I could crush you without trying?"

He pauses and stares at me. "Is that a challenge?"

"Sure."

"If I attack you, I know how this goes. I kill you; the monsters come in and kill me. I'm outnumbered a thousand to one."

"Didn't you say you thought we weren't going to release you? Maybe you could take me as a hostage."

"What the hell good would a fleshbag hostage be? Ain't no monster that'll care if I have you at claw-point or not."

"You don't find it odd the monsters show deference to me? I'm obviously someone important."

Paimon glances away for a moment. I watch in silence as the gears turn in his mind. Something triggers in his head, and he suddenly bolts for me, but he's far too slow. An invisible telekinetic wave reaches out of my mind and smashes into him from the side, knocking him across the table and battering him against the wall.

"Guhuk!" The demon coughs in pain, then jumps at me again. This time, I calmly lean forward and rest my chin in my palm before delivering another psychic barrage to him, knocking him away from me toward the far wall. He hits with enough force that if he were a human, I'd have broken his spine. Since he's a demon, however, he merely slumps to the ground for a moment.

"W-what the hell?! How... how did you..."

While he breathes heavily, I sigh dramatically. "I told you, didn't I? You can't hope to beat me."

"That was you?! No way! No fleshbag has magic like that!" Paimon rises to his feet and wipes some blood from his lips before cautiously slinking back into his seat. "Maybe you're a shapeshifter after all. Ain't never met one with invisible fists, though."

"Anything's possible, I suppose. Are you okay? I can heal you if you like."

He scowls. "Shut up. I barely even felt those pathetic attacks. At least I know you ain't bluffin' now."

"Your wrist looks broken."

Paimon flicks his eyes down to his hand. "Maybe a little."

"I can heal it. I don't want you to be in pain."

"The hell does that mean?"

Slowly I raise my head and pretend to look at the ceiling. My eyes don't see anything, of course, but he doesn't have to know that. "Not all humans are weak. Not all humans hate demons. I believe, in time, the demons could be convinced to hold similar views. Something tells me I could lead demons and humans to stop their fighting and seek common ground."

Paimon curses. "Devils. Now you're talking like a fleshbag again. I can't pin you down — what a bunch of crap. Demons need fleshbags for souls. As long as that's true—"

"Don't humans who die of natural causes have their souls trapped in the River Styx?"

My interruption catches Paimon off-guard. "W-what? Yeah, sure. They're always old or weak, though. Young, fertile bodies give the most soul power."

"Do you need souls to live?"

He licks his lips again. "I suppose not. We're immortal."

"So the only reason you need souls is..."

"To mutate into stronger forms!"

"Greed, in other words."

Paimon leans forward slightly. A thoughtful expression crosses his face. "Well, yeah. I suppose. Who'd wanna be stuck in the body of an imp?"

"Not me," I admit. "But then, I am blessed."

"Tch. No kidding."

A long minute passes. Neither of us says anything.

Paimon rubs his wrist. "Err, say, is that offer to heal my wrist still on the table?"

"Of course."

"How many more questions I gotta answer before you do that?"

"I told you, Paimon. You don't have to answer any of my questions. I'll heal your wrist right now if you like."

For the first time since I've met him, the demon smiles. He grins, revealing his razor-sharp teeth without looking menacing or threatening. "Shit. Maybe I pegged you wrong, after all. Hit me with more questions, if you've got 'em."

"Certainly. Let me see your hand."

An hour later, Paimon grins at me as the two minotaurs enter the room. His expression is almost like that of a long-lost child returning to his parent's embrace. "Say, uh, Jason?"

"Hmm?"

"You're releasing me, right?"

I nod.

"Do... do I have to leave?"

"For now, yes. I'll release the other demons, too."

He slicks back his hair. "Damn. I hope they give you the answers you need, then. You're different from anyone I've ever met."

"Answers? No, I'm not going to question them. You fulfilled every query, after all. I know you didn't lie. You're all free to go."

"Seriously? Whoa." He glances at the minotaurs, then back to me. "Say, what was that thing you did earlier? With the hand."

"Oh, that was just a greeting. Where I come from, friends press their hands together and shake. We also do that for goodbyes."

"Friends?" Paimon glances away for a moment before bashfully jabbing his open palm across the table. "Th-then I guess if you shake my hand, that makes us...?"

I pause for three full seconds before smiling and taking his hand in mine. After shaking twice, I pull away. "Friends."

Paimon quickly stands up, nearly knocking his chair over. His body language is ridiculously giddy, and he smiles from ear to ear. "Jeez. I... I've never been friends with a fleshb- err, a human before. You're something else, Jason. I wish you the best of luck."

"Same, Paimon. Perhaps in a few months, I'll have a way for you to come back and visit us. For now, I advise staying away... for your safety."

He nods. "I understand. I'll try and talk to other demons I know. You've got the right ideas about unification. I'd never considered another way until I spoke to you. Well, uh, anyway... guess I'll be going, then."

He lingers for a moment before the minotaurs usher him out the door. After he leaves, a minute passes, and Neil enters the room.

"How did the interrogation go, my liege? We're ready to send in the next one."

"Don't bother. Paimon answered every question and didn't lie once. Release all the other demons along with him."

I stand up from the table and stretch, watching as Neil squints in surprise.

"He answered all your questions? Ridiculous. Demons don't talk to humans."

"Maybe not as a rule, but Paimon did. I may have lucked out and found an open-minded fellow, but I doubt that. He seemed emblematic of most demons. He gives me hope in my convictions. You treated the other demons well, right?"

I walk around the table to open the door, and Neil nods. "Yes, my liege. After we send them out, I'll have the Great Doors sealed shut. Is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

"No. That's enough for today. I need to get to work on human society. I want you to start scanning for human worlds. I'd like to concentrate on moving liberated populations to a few core worlds, leaving the old ones behind. If we unite the populations of hundreds of worlds into just a few, that'll give us greater numbers and allow us to focus our efforts on protecting more defensible planets. How many human worlds are out there, anyway?"

"Several hundred. I don't have accurate counts, yet, but I'll order an inquiry at once."

"Perfect."

We leave the interrogation chambers and head outside, down a few hallways, and into the Core once again. After a minute, I sigh. "I just hope Amelia will be so easy to convince."

"My liege?"

"Nothing. I'm making small talk."

Yeah, I think to myself. Just small talk.

Part 025: Battle Against the Black Witch

Recommended Listening

Rosalia slowly cracks open the mahogany doors to my luxurious inner chamber. After poking her head around the corner, she whispers, "M-Mister Beelzebub? Are you in here?"

Everything hurts. I clutch the wound at my side, pressing the cloth covered in a styptic agent against it. Black energy still leaks from the open sore through the fabric and my fingers. "I am."

The door creaks slightly as she cautiously enters the room. Her curly brown hair, a different color from the black that most demons possess, makes her already piggish face that much more unattractive. She's a short demoness, shaped like three balls of dirt smashed together. Still, as a Lord, I'm lucky to have an appointed servant. It's a symbol of my rising status in the eyes of the Dukes and Emperor. Only a few Lords stand above me, and soon I may join the ranks of the Barons and Dukes.

But... after today, I have to confess that I don't feel ready yet. I need more soul energy.

Rosalia gasps. "M-mister Beelzebub! What happened?!"

She quickly shuffles over to me, wiggling her tubby jowls as she gasps for air. Devils. There are many attractive servants available for the Barons and Dukes, but the Council had to assign the ugliest ogre possible to me. Fate is a cruel mistress.

"I'm fine, Rosalia. However, my suit jacket is stained with blood. I expect you to have it cleaned and scrubbed within the hour, and a new one in my claws by tomorrow morning."

She nods quickly but barely takes her eyes off my side. "You must have been in quite a battle! How did it-"

"That's none of your business, insignificant wench." I bite the words off, but as usual, she doesn't even flinch at my scathing words. Pathetic. She's taken so much abuse during her life that insults don't faze her anymore. No self-respect. "What happened was a matter for the Dukes and Emperors, not for an unevolved servant."

Her hand brushes against my jacket, still stained crimson from my injury. "Goodness! The Council assigned you a Duke-level task? I'm thrilled! You deserve it, Mister Beelzebub!"

My nostrils flare slightly, in spite of myself. "Hmm, yes, well, that much is true. I held my own against the she-whore. I'm sure the Dukes were impressed by my courage and resilience in the face of such a foe."

Rosalia slides onto the bed beside me and pulls my hand away from the wound, pressing hers against the cloth. "Oh, it sounds wonderful! I'm certain you were the envy of all the other Lords! Won't you tell me what happened? I won't tell anyone, no matter how secret the information is! Not unless you give me the okay! If you do, I'll make sure everyone knows about your dastardly feats!"

Damn. This flabby fiend knows how to soothe my irritation. I smirk slightly. "Of course, it was a trifle. Hardly anything worth bragging about. Any other Lord might have balked in the face of danger, but when

I was ordered to stand courageously against the Black Witch, I did my duty and fought back. She may have killed Emperor Satan, but I gave her a taste of the power of fire."

Rosalia murmurs something under her breath, makes a hand sign, and touches the flesh above the festering boil. Immediately, some of my pain drains away. She's an amateur healer, hardly anything to write home about, but at this point, I'll take anything to soothe the icy chill. The Blood Pits would cost too much for a single night of recuperation, let alone what's needed to expedite the healing of this injury.

"I imagine so, Mister Beelzebub, and when you-"

"It's *Lord* Beelzebub, Rosalia. How many times must I correct you?"

She continues, ignoring my interruption. "...When you stood up against the Bark Witch, I'm sure she trembled in the face of your flames. How did the fight go?"

I sigh, not bothering to correct her inability to remember names. *This female cares little for social niceties. That's why she'll never rise above the position of an ugly servant.*

"Well, if you must know, I'll regale you with the tale."

"Are your muscles tired, Mister Beelzebub? I can massage them if you like."

"What? No. Keep the physical contact to a minimum, you lecherous troll."

She smiles far too sweetly. "As you wish!"

Many hours earlier.

A Warper demon opens up a portal, and the four of us quickly step through. A moment later, the Warper steps through as well, closing the hole in space behind himself. It will take several hours for his energy to recharge so he can open another one.

The walls of the Labyrinth have always felt comforting to me. Perhaps it's because I grew up in the comfort of the seemingly infinite maze, but whenever I step onto an Outer World, one with greens, reds, blues, and the rest of the rainbow, I always feel a little nervous. The wind too- it gets to me. I don't like the constant sensation of something invisible caressing my body at unexpected moments.

I know from the few times I've reluctantly left the Labyrinth that we're on a 'Planet,' which is a gigantic round sphere with vegetation, water, clouds, and a bunch of other whimsical niceties. Agares, Barbatos, and Mephisto haven't the slightest concern about being outside the Labyrinth, given they used to live on the homeworld, Earth, at one point. Agares won't tell me much about it, but what he has said indicates it was about as pleasant as this dried up husk.

My eyes swivel down to the grass. A slight bit of confusion passes over my face. "Is it the off-season? The grass appears distinctly dry and brown."

Agares shakily kneels and rustles the dead vegetation with his hand. "Mmm. Odd. I recall that this planet's seasons are a little irregular, but not to this level. It's quite warm out, too."

Mephisto sniffs the air. "I sssmell death. Warper, how far are we from the flessshbag sssettlement?"

The Warper points to a tree-line less than a mile away. "The largest village lies over there, Duke of Mist. There are several others scattered within a ten-mile radius, but the population of this planet is only about a million."

"Tch," I mutter. "I thought we didn't allow these vermin to grow their societies to such levels."

Agares chuckles softly. "Heh. The Overlords ensure that the most intelligent humans are picked off. We needn't worry about them developing new technology."

I look at my mentor questioningly. "Overlords?"

The Eldest Demon pales as if he's said something he shouldn't. Barbatos's metal armor grinds as he turns to glower at Agares. "Watch your mouth, Duke of Reptiles."

Agares shivers under the cold glare from the Duke of Steel. He quickly dabs at his forehead with his sleeve. "Oh, oh, right. Silly me. Drop the subject, boy."

I'd rather not risk my neck. I've heard Agares mention the Overlords once or twice before, but he never goes beyond that. Just who the devil are they? Demons of higher authority than the Emperors?

I don't get a chance to ask, not that I'd try in front of Barbatos. Mephisto hisses; a sharp sound like molten metal dropped into water. "Kss... I ssshall travel ahead to the village and interrogate the flessshbagsss... Let'sss meet up there."

True to his title, Mephisto makes a few hand signs, and a moment later, his cloaked form evaporates into the air as he transforms into his Mist-Body Form. He sails away against the wind, reminding me of Vampires and how they can explode into a horde of bats to move from place to place. Well, Vampires don't exist anymore, but Agares mentioned them in passing once or twice.

Agares moans. "Ohh, I'd rather go a little slower anyway. When you're my age, simply walking around can be exhausting. And this dry, cracked grass makes for uneven footing too!"

I force myself not to roll my eyes. The Duke of Reptiles always makes a big fuss about his supposed age, but Emperor Diablo is practically the same age. I wonder why the other Dukes and Emperors put up with his charades?

It takes thirty painful minutes for us to slowly stroll across the plains. I'm beginning to call Agares the *Duke of Turtles* in my mind. He never likes to hurry anywhere, and it drives me crazy.

The Warper stays behind since he might die if he came with us. If the Black Witch is on this planet, as rumors suggest, then losing our only means of returning to the Labyrinth could prove a fatal mistake. Naturally, Diablo would send a search party to recover us, but that could take a month, depending on how lazy the son of a gargoyle is.

We enter the tree-line, and after shoving some dead, brown plants out of our way, each of which cracks and falls apart at the stems, we arrive in the human village.

Thatched hut structures with mud walls elevated half a foot off the ground protect the buildings from rainfall and minor flooding. I know little of the weather on this planet, but what I do know is that rain is

an unpleasant feeling. Droplets of water ripped from large bodies of water and dumped onto the mainland by uncontrollable outside forces make me uncomfortable. Water belongs under the ground, not in the air.

Mephisto's mist-form ripples in the wind. He materializes in midair, landing on the ground in a crouch. I note with interest that he's breathing heavily. His Mist-Body Form must consume a lot of energy.

"Ksss... not a sssingle flessshbag anywhere in sssight. I found blood here and there, but no bodiesss... sssomething took the corpssesss and left."

Agares inhales sharply. "That settles it. The Black Witch must be here somewhere. How many humans lived in this village?"

"Ten thousssand at the mossst." Mephisto's teeth chatter. "Sssome may have fled. We ssshould check the nearby areasss."

"No need," Barbatos says. His metallic voice causes everyone, including me, to flinch. "There. Black Witch." He points to the east, through the tree-line.

Mephisto follows the Duke of Steel's finger. "No flessshbagsss live that way. Are you sssure?"

Barbatos leans forward just the slightest bit and glares at Mephisto, making the Duke of Mist cower in fear. **"Yes."**

Agares yawns, pretending not to care about Barbatos's power-play, nor the venom in his voice. "Very well, then. Let's get this over with."

The four of us make our way in the direction Barbatos indicated, and I nudge Agares as we walk. "Mentor, you don't appear alarmed at all. Weren't you saying earlier that the Black Witch is the deadliest enemy we may ever face? How can you be so calm in the face of danger?"

Agares doesn't answer for a long minute. When he does, he starts with a long, drawn-out sigh. "Haaah... young one... I have never been as frightened in my entire life as I am right now. Even were Belial, Diablo, and Bael beside the four of us, I expect we would still lose a fight against the Black Witch. However, I've long since accepted that death might come for me someday. Sometimes, you have to prepare yourself for the inevitable."

Mephisto, walking in the lead, glances back at the old bat. "We musst ssstand ssstrong againssst thissss menace. Do not falter. Be like Barbatosss, who never ssshowsss fear."

I nod. "Mephisto is right. If we don't keep our cool, we may embolden the little rat. Morale will be key at this point. I'm glad Barbatos is here as a reminder of demonic power."

From behind me, the Duke of Steel's helmet grinds against his armor as he looks up into the midday sun.

"No. I am afraid too."

His reply makes me realize we may not leave in one piece.

* * *

Several minutes later, a rustling noise makes everyone pause. I haven't spotted a single bug, let alone an animal on the planet since we arrived.

"La la la..." Singing, like that of a matured woman, whispers from the trees up ahead.

The four of us freeze in place as her singing draws closer. I can't speak for the Dukes, but my body won't move. Obviously, I'm not scared of a little girl, or a woman, or whatever the devil she is. But if I'm not, then why won't my body move?!

The foliage parts before us, and a tall, slender woman struts forward, her blue sundress dress pressing against her body in many lustful ways. The effect isn't intentional, given her dress looks too small for her. It appears to be child-sized, and has ripped at the sides, exposing a large amount of her skin.

Somehow, the Black Witch has rapidly aged since I last saw her. I've heard of magic that can alter a demon's appearance, but her situation is different. She squirms slightly, rubbing her breasts as she steps out of the tree-line.

"My, my. Four big, strong men, here to manhandle a poor, defenseless woman like me? Wipe the drool off your face, boys."

Her voice is alluring, sexual in nature, somewhat like a succubus. The tiny dress clinging to her body looks like it could pop off and leave her exposed at any moment. My eyes meander lower of their own accord, and it's at this moment that I notice the patches of differently colored blood all over her dress, arms, and legs. Human filth covers her body.

Agares coughs into his fist. "Black Witch, it seems you did come to this world, after all. Where are the humans that lived here?"

The woman yawns and rubs her eye with a hand still crusted in blood. "Black Witch? Oh, *Agares*, I thought we were on a first-name basis, you deceitful grandpa. Can't you call me, Amelia? Or, since I've surpassed my old power, how about... Black Queen? I think it's a better name for my position."

The old man twists his cane slightly as he tightens his grip on it. "You've... transcended? How?"

"Hah!" Amelia lilts her voice menacingly and pulls a black orb from her pouch. I remember seeing it in her hand before, but I don't know what it is. "If you had attacked me when we first met, you might have been able to defeat me all on your own! Unfortunately for you, I've already consumed most of the morsels on this planet. You're too late to stop me."

Mephisto takes a step to the side, eying her warily. "Impossible... there are a million flessshbagsss here... to conssssume that many would be..."

He trails off, and the female yawns again, this time rubbing her jaw. "Oh, it was exhausting, I assure you. I'm ready for a thousand-year catnap while I digest all those souls... but I guess you thought you'd take me out before it was too late, hm?"

Agares' voice cracks noticeably. "N-no! Certainly not, Black W-, err, Black Queen! We merely came to discuss your future in the Labyrinth, and a possible collaboration between yourself and my people."

"Cooperation?" The human takes two steps toward us, causing Mephisto to shrink back slightly. "Like a treaty? You want me to leave you alone, so you don't have to fight me. Is that it?"

The Duke of Reptiles grimaces. "When you put it that way..."

"I knew I wasn't far from the mark. Well, the only problem is that a treaty doesn't benefit me. Perhaps if you agree to hand over half the human worlds under your control, I'll consider accepting."

"H-half?!" Mephisto sputters. "You want half of the flesshbag worldsss?! Ridiculousss! The River Ssstyx will run dry in a week if-"

"Silence, Duke of Mist." Agares holds his hand up to silence his junior. "I am the ranking Duke here. It is my task to consider her request."

I balk visibly. "You can't be seriously considering..."

Agares grinds his teeth together. "C-come, now, Black Queen. Surely you can be more reasonable? The humans you've consumed haven't entered the river at all! We'd have noticed a million new souls by now. If we give you half of the human worlds..."

"Ah, hah hah hah..." She laughs creepily. "You thought I was serious? I assumed you'd understand my jokes by now, old man."

Agares sighs. "Seven Devils... if those aren't your terms for peace, then what are? Please... I am old. My heart can't take-"

"I want all of the human worlds."

Amelia's eyes darken as she takes a step forward.

"Every single one. You thought I'd let you off with only half? I haven't forgotten that you left me to rot in that statue."

Ice creeps through my veins. Agares opens his mouth to speak, but it takes a few attempts before he can reply. "B-buh.. but... we tried! Joan's magic prevented the statue from breaking! It... it couldn't..."

While he falters, a horrible shriek fills the air, and a dark form appears in my thoughts. Judging by how the other three recoil away from Amelia at the same time, they must see it too. A black shadow, hateful, filled with dark power and assuming the form of a shrouded human, materializes in my mind's eye.

"Liars. Every last one of you. I stayed in my Queen's grasp while she wept in silence for a hundred thousand years! Not one demon came within ten feet of her stone prison. You left her imprisoned, and you hoped she would stay that way."

Metal crunches together as Barbatos clenches his fist. "Blaarjiim. Dark God."

"Servant of evil," Agares mutters. "I forgot about that damned orb."

Amelia's tongue snakes out of her mouth as she wets her ruby-red lips. "Mmm, you forgot many things. How about it, then? Give me all of the human worlds, and I'll spare you. Life or death, it's an easy choice."

"Blackheart, the witch liesss," Mephisto hisses. "If we let her conssssume all of humanity, nothing will ssstop her."

"That's adorable," The woman snarks. "If you wanted to stop me, you should have brought along the Emperors. The four of you haven't a chance."

I've known my mentor for a few thousand years. I've seen many emotions on his face. I can tell what he's thinking much of the time. His eyes blink hard and fast, and cold sweat drips down his brow. *I can't give up the human worlds*, his face reads. *We'll die if we fight her now! But then, that'll happen if we fight her later, too!*

Shakily, Agares drops his cane to the ground. "If this is what I must do... then... I will die protecting my children."

In a flash, Barbatos motions with his hands, and a gigantic sword, perhaps ten feet tall, materializes in midair and lands in his grasp. The center of its hilt features a monstrous, lizard-like eye that jerks around wildly, while the curved blade is sharp enough to cut through iron. The black and red sword oozes power and locks my eyes to it, as if it's going to rip the soul from my body if I look away. It appears to be a fusion of two ancient weapons, coalescing into a one-ton blade of incredible striking power.

Mephisto summons an aetherial knife and crouches low to the ground. "It'sss a fight to the death, then!"

"Pupil, take your leave. Send word to Diablo. We need everyone here. Everyone!" Agares makes a motion with his hands, and his body begins shifting. Scales form along his arms, and his face turns green. The teeth in his mouth transform into sharp, white, crocodilian flesh-renders. His robe tears apart in the back. He lowers into a four-legged crouch and a scaled tail sprouts from the base of his spine.

"No. I'll stay here and fight, teacher. I'll-"

A voice whispers in my ear. "Listen to papa, little shit."

The Black Queen! She's right next to- GUHK!

A horrific pain explodes in my left side as she plunges her hand into my ribs, then lightly batters me with her other hand.

The world goes black.

Recommended Listening

My head swims. A moment passes. Perhaps an hour. I can barely think. What happened?

The sound of a woman cackling maniacally jerks me back to my senses. I stiffen and try to sit up, but my neck is killing me.

A minute later, I pull myself together, realizing the Black Queen must have punched me damn near a hundred feet away. Blood and dark energy pour from a wound at my side. I quickly summon the power of fire and blast my gut, searing the laceration shut.

After pulling myself together, I gawk for a moment. The three Dukes don't look at me once. They can't.

The three of them jerk their heads erratically as they try to follow the woman's movements. She zips around like an imp after drinking too much Ganja Juice, attacking all three of them at impossible speeds. Without using a weapon, she swings her hand at Mephisto and passes through him harmlessly, but the air from her attack blows him back and knocks him off his footing. By the time he recovers, she's already moved on to my teacher, Agares.

His reptilian form has always been a closely guarded secret. He's only shown it to me a few times during our mock battles. Even so, I've never seen him exert as much strength as he is right now.

Agares parries some of Amelia's attacks but tries to absorb others by tanking them with his scales. He isn't nearly fast enough to follow her movements, and she delivers a punch with explosive force to his face, sending him tumbling into a tree to his right.

While the first two Dukes try to recover, Barbatos lunges forward and grabs her hair with his hand, then slams her into the ground. I'm stunned by how fast the steel giant can move. An instant later, he raises his gigantic sword and chops down with it.

In one spectacular move, it's over. Barbatos cleaves the Black Queen in half.

Ah, no! He doesn't!

The sword rips from Barbatos's grasp and careens fifty feet away, slamming into the ground with enough force to make the planet shake. Whatever deflected it moved too quickly for my eyes to follow.

"Not good enough!" The Black Queen cackles. She bats Barbatos's palm away, leaps into a handstand, and kicks him in the chest. Fortunately, even with her immense strength, it barely nudges him. He doesn't react as the shockwave from her kick shakes the trees in the forest.

A moment later, something unsettling happens. Barbatos's sword screeches like a rabid animal, and four thin, stick-like legs sprout from the handle. It pulls itself from the ground, and skitters toward the Duke of Steel, then leaps into his outstretched palm, retracting its legs in the process.

The blade is alive?! What demonic inventor created something so vile?

"Dangerous. Death. No holding back. Brother. I am sorry."

Barbatos pets the sword for a moment before raising it into the air. From the heavens above, a bolt of lightning shoots down and strikes the tip, careening down the weapon until it electrifies his armor. Barbatos howls in rage, and he lunges at the human as sparks of electricity explode from his chest.

The look of confusion on Amelia's face as she jumps back is comical. Barbatos swings his sword ten times faster than he did before, and she barely ducks in time. For a split second, I see her head cleave in two, but it's only a hallucination caused by my poor battle experience. The blade sends an arc of wind out that levels the forest up ahead, chopping fifty trees down.

Before the damn things can even begin to fall, Barbatos uses his free hand to form a fist, and a wave of wind surges from his body, sending the Black Queen tumbling away. She rights herself in midair, then

dashes to her side, only to yelp in surprise as Mephisto materializes and swings his knife. He misses, but cuts some of her long, black hair off, sending it fluttering to the ground.

The tables turn quickly. Agares leaps back into the fray, roaring angrily and spitting a blob of venom at the woman. She ducks it, only for Mephisto to knee her in the teeth.

We can do this. We can beat the Black Queen.

I ready myself to lob some fire into the fray, but perhaps sensing my movements, Barbatos holds a palm up in my direction. "Leave. This fight is far from over."

The Duke of Steel dashes forward and swipes the open palm he pointed at me into the female's stomach, slapping her with the strength of a hundred minotaurs. Air erupts from her mouth as she flies through three trees and crashes into the foliage a short distance away.

I don't see what the problem is. The human was bluffing! She had a few surprises at first, but even a million souls weren't enough to compare to the power of the mightiest Dukes in the Labyrinth!

"Kah... kah... h-hitting a defenseless woman..." Amelia spits blood on the ground and glares daggers at Barbatos. "You're not like the others. What the hell are you? There's more than demon blood running through your veins."

Agares doesn't smile as the three dukes slowly surround her. "Barbatos broke a rule and consumed the essence of an Archangel. What should have killed him turned him into our mightiest warrior. You'd do well to give up now."

"As if!" She lunges at Agares, but before she can reach him, Barbatos grabs one of her legs, tosses her into the air, and swings the flat side of his sword down and against her body.

WHUMP.

With a single motion, Barbatos pounds the pathetic little female into the ground. The sound of every bone of her body breaking at once is the most satisfying thing I've ever heard in my life.

"You did it..."

The words escape my lips without thinking. This time, the Dukes don't correct me.

Agares growls. "She lied about her power. Of course. Cut her into pieces, Mephisto. Hurry. She might still be able to heal-"

"Kah... Hah..." A choked laugh escapes the woman's throat. "Haha..."

Mephisto rears his knives in the air. "Thisss will teach you to laugh!"

Before he can stab down, the Black Queen's body vanishes. Mephisto stumbles and jams his knives into the dirt. "What?!"

Several moments pass.

A male voice speaks up from behind a tree. "Hello, chums."

I don't know who it is, but immediately Agares and Mephisto's eyes widen in terror. Their former cockiness vanishes.

"Abhorrent wretch! Putrid worm! Whore of the damned!" Agares screams profanities angrily as he stares into the darkness at someone unseen. "Y-you... you dare blaspheme the dead?!"

The male voice continues speaking. "Blasphemy is something them chickens thought up, Agares. Why not say hello to an old friend?"

Barbatos takes three steps back. "Master... how..."

Mephisto vanishes, and a moment later appears at my side. "We told you to leave! Go! Ssseal this world! Leave usss behind! GET OUT!"

The terror on his face is unlike anything I've seen. I nod dumbly and quickly trip over myself as I stumble away. While fleeing, I catch a glimpse of red skin behind a bush. A demon unfamiliar to me emerges from the forest to face the Dukes.

"I'm sorry it had to come to this, old chums. Mind control. Reanimation. You know how it is."

The last thing I hear as I flee is the defeat in Agares' voice. "Yes, master. We know. Do not blame yourself."

"Mister Beelzebub? Hello?" A voice stirs me from my thoughts. "Are you okay?"

I blink. "What? Where am I?"

"At home, Mister Beelzebub. You trailed off a few minutes ago. Won't you finish telling me what happened?"

I glance up at the fat, loathsome face of my servant. Her eyes betray the emptiness in her brain; an inability to comprehend the evils and dangers of the world around us. I cannot help but hate everything she represents, not just in those beneath me, but in myself during the battle.

I thought I could make a difference in a clash between Titans? Disgusting. I am inferior to the Dukes.

And they... they are inferior to the Black Queen.

"Where did I stop talking?"

Rosalia taps her lips and bobs her head for a minute. "You said your teacher, Master Agares, was morphing into a hellhound. What happened next?"

"A hellhound? I said that?"

I spend a few moments debating the merits of killing this idiot woman and begging for a new servant. Then again, with my luck, the next will be twice as stupid and three times as ugly.

"Never mind. I blasted the Black Queen with my flames, and then I left after I weakened her. She didn't stand a chance against my might. The end. Happy?"

Rosalia nods giddily. "Oh yes, Mister Beelzebub! I knew you were incredible! You always have the best stories! I hope someday you get to rule as First Emperor!"

I smile in spite of myself. "First Emperor? Well, that's- I mean, anything's possible, but it's a bit of a pipe dream."

Hah... First Emperor... what a funny joke. I barely managed to keep it together and tell Diablo what was happening. Compared to the vicious animals I saw fighting the Black Queen, I have a long way to go.

Training. I'll need to train and devote myself to the unholy flames if I expect to overcome my weaknesses. I just... I hope the Dukes made it out alive.

Agares... mentor. I wished to surpass you one day. Survive. Don't let that wicked whore beat you.

Author Note:

This is Amelia after she's aged.





Part 026: Roland And The Shrieking Devil

Every inch of my body trembles as my spiritual energy lowers once again. Dropping to a knee, I pant wildly. "Haah... haaahh..."

"You're doing good, Your Grace," Phoebe says. She kneels next to me and dabs a wet towel against my face, wiping away the boiling hot sweat covering me. I quickly grab the cloth and scrub my face with the cool towel.

"Jesus... how many more?" I ask.

Saul taps the paper in his hand. "Five more, Your Majesty. If you're exhausted, take a break. Nobody demands that you collapse."

Today's project has been a week in the making. While Neil investigates each of the human worlds we can travel to, Saul is having me build housing for the humans and monsters on Tarus II. Each building I create is ten stories tall, with the capacity to house a hundred beings comfortably, and two hundred if we fit two to a room. Winter is months away, but Fall is just around the corner. We can't have people sleeping in tents when the snow comes.

Where did the humans and monsters sleep previously?

I asked Saul that a few days ago, and he said that humans toiled in the mines, while monsters returned to their lairs in the Labyrinth. Since humans under Bahamut were immortal, sleeping in the dirt wouldn't kill them, though their suffering was immeasurable.

On days like this, I'm glad Kar killed Bahamut. She was a despicable animal, a monster who treated everyone else as though they were beneath her. The universe is better off without her around.

Given the current political situation in the Labyrinth, sending allied monsters back into the Labyrinth is a terrible idea as well. Demon loyalists might swarm and kill them. Not only that, but we want allies nearby in case the Core gets attacked again. I think we're okay for now since my turrets already fried a few demons, but one can never be too safe. Right now, upgrading the living quality of the humans and monsters on Tarus II is our highest priority.

I shake my head at Saul and hand the towel back to Phoebe. "I... I'm getting a second wind. I think I can manage at least one more."

"Please, Your Grace, don't push yourself." Phoebe strokes my back slowly, making me pause before I stand up. Using my magic does more than drain my spiritual energy; it fatigues my body as well — especially when my mana reaches a critical level.

"Hey, Phoebe, if I faint, will you carry me back to my room?"

She blushes. "Well, yes. Of course."

"Will I wake up with you next to me?"

"I... I beg your..." Phoebe's blushing increases dramatically, and she looks away. "...Goodness."

"Kidding, kidding," I say aloud, while thinking to myself, *NOT KIDDING!*

Saul gestures toward the structure before us. "Thanks to your efforts, we've managed to assemble more than enough housing for the current inhabitants on Tarus II. Pushing yourself would be unwise."

I nod. "Yeah, but I'm not building structures purely for the people, but also to find out my limits."

Saul's a hard worker. We don't chat often, but I know plenty about him. He was a retainer under King Solomon, the Minister of Construction. He helped build many fabulous and practical structures for his king. From what little I know of Solomon, he was a man who loved beauty and lavishness in all its forms. Gold, gems, architecture, women... the guy was like a medieval-era pimp.

However, when it comes to expensive tastes, Saul is the exact opposite of his former king. He wears drab, grey robes with little to no extra flourishes of color. He usually walks around in a slump, as if dealing with some ancient curse of boredom... or perhaps he's just shy. It's hard to tell.

Pulling myself up, I aim my mind at the next patch of land, one marked by a square drawn in the dirt. Thanks to the wind blowing, the environment around me is much sharper than usual.

"Build!"

My mind rapidly fills in the walls, plumbing, electrical infrastructure, and thousands of other major and minor details as I load the preset template saved on the Crown of Solomon into my mind. Another massive sphere of energy surges from my body as a ten-story building appears in midair one inch above the ground, and *whumps* into the dirt, shaking the land.

The trembling ground knocks me off-balance, and I fall over, gasping for breath. Everything seizes up for a moment until I regain control of my motor functions.

Eight. I can summon eight of those ten-story buildings. The more complex I make them, the more mana they require. The materials inside don't matter. I can form the structures out of gold, steel, wood,

or any other element, but the details involved in their construction are what require the most energy, as well as the overall size of anything I build. I could make a city of gold if I wanted.

Phoebe picks my head up and rests it in her lap, dabbing my forehead with the cloth. "You've done enough today. These houses are beyond anything you've done before, and you're struggling more and more each time."

I can't reply. My throat burns with pain as the cool cloth soothes my aching body. Using spiritual energy, or mana, is not the same as exercising a muscle. I created seven buildings yesterday, and seven the day before. It wasn't any easier today. I only managed the eighth today after forcing the energy out.

Oh god. I feel a stupor coming on. It's so hot outside...

"Fuh... fuh... Phoebe... indoors. Hot."

Despite the cloth on my face, I can see everything around me because of my spherical vision. Phoebe's eyes widen, and she nods. "Of course! Saul, grab the stretcher! Let's get him indoors at once!"

I close my eyes and exhale, as delirium takes me.

"Blurgh..." I try to speak, but what comes out isn't English.

"Oh, the King has awoken! Nurses!" Saul's voice greets me as my spherical vision comes into focus. Unlike my eyes, my Spherical Vision is always active. It sometimes causes strange hallucinations and mirages while I dream.

Usually.

I don't remember falling asleep this time, nor dreaming.

Two women and a man walk over to me, likely the nurses and the doctor. The doctor, a Harpie, presses a feathered claw against my chest. She closes her eyes for a moment as the two nurses walk to each side of the bed. "Heartbeat normal. Chrrr-eck his pulse and temperature." Her beak clicks together as she speaks.

"Yes, doctor," the male nurse replies. He pulls out a device of my creation, a small temperature-sensing pad I made a few days ago to improve medical operations around the city, and presses it against my arm. Within seconds, it beeps, and he pulls it away. "0.3 degrees cooler than ideal, but otherwise nominal."

"Jason? Can you hear me?" The doctor waves her hand in front of my face.

"Y-yeah. Chest hurts."

She stares at my face for a few moments. "Thank heavens. You've been unconscious for three days. You were running a temperature six degrees above normal until an hour ago. I'm surprised you've recovered so suddenly."

"Three days?! Whoa."

Saul shifts past the nurses to the door. "Miss Berthold's been worried sick. I forced her to leave and said I'd keep watch. Hopefully, she rested. I'll let her know you're awake."

The bearded man shuffles out of the room, and the doctor chirps at each of her assistants. "John, you owe me twenty pieces."

I chuckle. "What, you bet I wouldn't make it?"

He shakes his head. "Of course not, Your Majesty. I simply bet the doctor you'd be comatose for a month. You woke up far sooner than we expected."

I start to lean up in bed, but my back pops painfully, so I slump back down. "Ohh, man. Why does my body hurt so much? I've felt worse before... but this is still pretty bad."

The doctor nods at the female nurse, and she scampers away, returning a moment later to hand a pad of paper to the feathered physician. "I have some notes here. A few of our more magically inclined citizens have offered an explanation for your condition. Using as much of your energy as you did caused you to dip into your internal life force. Had you continued casting a spell, you would have killed yourself."

A long moment passes. "Oh."

The feathered doctor squints at my face for a moment. "You're new to using magic, aren't you?"

"I've only had it for a few months."

"You should seek a tutor, then, before you kill yourself. Your energy levels have returned to normal, but I'd rather not see you in my office under the same circumstances again."

"A magic tutor? Those exist?"

She shakes her head. "No. Most beings are born with the intellect to understand how to use magic. Perhaps as a human, you lack the instincts bred into monsters and demons. However, someone who knows magic well might be able to assist you."

"Alright, I'll do that. Thanks, doc."

She nods courteously and gestures to the other two. "Let the king rest for now. I'm certain Miss Berthold will breathlessly race around that corner in a few minutes."

Both of the nurses chuckle, though I'm not entirely sure why.

They leave me alone with my thoughts, and I turn my head to stare out the window. I can't see anything, but the warmth of the sun on my face makes me drowsy. It was midday when I fell unconscious, and three days have already passed. It appears to be morning. I hope Phoebe didn't lose too much sleep over me.

Minutes pass, and I yawn. I've slept enough. "**Heal.**"

With my energy fully restored, my body heals up dozens of torn ligaments, and I rub my head, realizing the damn crown is still on. When I pull it off, there's a circular indent going around my skull, and a slight rash as well. I quickly heal those and stick the crown back in my storage before swinging my legs out of bed.

The cold, tiled hospital floor jars me awake. I reach to my left and find a box full of the things I was wearing when I passed out, including my lightsaber. Phoebe must have left it there, knowing the left side

of my bed is where I usually stash my stuff.

A minute passes. I smile. I can already 'see' Phoebe entering the building a floor below me and running up the stairs. The emotions on her face are a mixture of anguish, joy, and... *anger*.

Uh-oh.

She screeches to a stop in the doorway and pauses for two seconds, taking in my upright, perfectly healthy form.

"Uh, hi, Phoebe. I'm awake!"

WHAM.

The terrifying tiny white-haired woman delivers a bone-crushing punch right to my chin, knocking me to the ground. I land on my ass with a painful *whump*.

"Gurk!"

"I hope that hurt!" Phoebe yells while rubbing her fist. She looms over me and begins yelling frantically. "I thought you were going to die! Do you have any idea how worried I was?! I couldn't sleep! I didn't eat for two days! I'll never forgive you! Ass!"

I try not to let her see a tear of pain slide down my cheek. "S-sahhree." After a moment, I cough out under my breath, "**Heal.**" My jaw fixes itself, but the phantom pain persists for a few moments. Phoebe's fist is like a ball of iron.

Phoebe stands over me for a few moments breathing like an angered bull before quickly clambering to her knees and hugging me. "I'm sorry, Your Grace! I shouldn't have hit you! That was very unladylike of me! I just-"

"Don't worry about it, Phoebe," I say, as I embrace her back. "I shouldn't have pushed myself so hard. You deserve the apology, not me."

After a few moments, Phoebe pulls away and looks into my eyes before quickly swiping a few hairs out of her face. "I'm glad you're awake. Don't screw around with your magic. You almost killed yourself."

"Yeah, I heard. I won't do it again. Promise."

She sighs. "While you were out, I received a call from Neil."

"A call?"

Not long ago, I installed hard-wired telephones at the warp-gate. They link to each of the main buildings and are designed to be as simple to use as possible. Many of the humans here are illiterate and unable to understand mechanical devices, but we'll construct schools soon to remedy that. A few buttons hardcoded to each building allow someone to pop through the gate, phone in any pertinent information, and dart back to the Core.

I tried hard-wiring straight through the portal, but electrical signals die when they pass through the 'Quantum Zone,' as the Core technicians call it. Besides that, if we ever swap the portal from Tarus II and

point it elsewhere, we'll slice the cable apart, and that could cause a bunch of anomalies for the particles trapped in limbo.

Phoebe helps me to my feet. "Yes. Neil scanned hundreds of planets over the last week, and one world was vastly different from the database entries. Something happened in the last few months that reduced its ecology to levels they could no longer detect. A single human male dressed in peasant clothes stumbled through the gate within seconds of it opening..."

She trails off, and a haunted look appears in her eyes. "Jason. The man said that his world was under attack. A human female was devouring all the life on the planet. That man hadn't eaten in two weeks. He was petrified!"

"Amelia," I mutter unconsciously. "Did he say anything else?"

"No. I knew it had to be Amelia and told Neil not to send anyone there. It's too dangerous. We're going to seal the world off and warn the demons not to let her leave. The human population was over a million, and they're all dead."

"A million people?! She killed that many?!"

My head screams in pain, and I stumble back against the hospital bed. I remember when I found Hoarhiim's orb... Amelia was chasing two children. Her body was drenched in blood. That- that couldn't...

"I need to speak to the man. Where is he?"

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "The one from the dead world? He's here, I believe. His body is in a vegetative state. We gave him food and water, but something in our air must have poisoned him, because he fell ill after a few hours. Doctors estimate he won't live for much-"

"Where is he? What room?!"

Seeing the concern in my eyes, Phoebe nods. "Follow me."

Minutes later, we arrive in a room where a thin, bony man lies in a hospital bed. An air pump sits beside him, pushing oxygen through a mask into his lungs.

"His name is Roland," Phoebe whispers. "Can you heal him?"

"I have yet to see Wordsmithing disappoint," I say, though I don't mention my failed attempt to heal my eyes.

"Heal."

My Wordsmithing sends a small bit of magic from my mana into the sickly man on the bed. A moment passes, and he gasps for air.

"Huhhh, hnugh!" Roland raises a hand into the air and swats at something unseen before jerking his eyes open and sitting upright. His face mask catches on something and yanks his head away from Phoebe and me. The moment would be humorous under different circumstances, but the terror on his face makes my heart skip a beat.

Roland scrabbles at the strange device attached to his face and yanks it off with a look of terror, as though it were a monster hell-bent on sucking the organs out of his body. Jerking his head around, Roland spots us and yelps in fear. "Hwah! By the forefathers! Who are you?!" He gazes at my face and jerks in fright. "Those eyes! Y-you must be..."

Phoebe pushes past me and rests her hand on his shoulder. "Roland? Is that your name? I'm Phoebe, a friend."

Roland turns to face Phoebe, and, judging by his expression, he can't take his eyes off her. "Fee-bee? I... who...? Where?"

"You're in a healing chamber. It's a place of great magic," Phoebe says, as she gently pushes him back in the bed. "You were very, very sick."

Her soothing voice makes him nod. He offers no resistance as she gently presses him back against the pillow.

"So, I am not dead? I have not joined the forefathers?"

"Nay, you are quite alive." Phoebe glances back at me before returning her gaze to Roland. "But you might be the only one left."

He swallows as memories pour onto his face. The temperature rises in his chest as his heart pumps more vigorously.

A minute passes as Roland slows his breathing.

"That's right. The demoness. She appeared three months ago." Roland stares vacantly at Phoebe for a moment before looking away. "My wife and children lived in the wealthiest city, the one closest to the Forbidden Mountain. When the reports first came in about the disappearance of an entire village, our Baron sent out several scouts to investigate."

Phoebe slowly sits down on the bed and holds Roland's hand, rubbing the top of it softly. "I see. Can you tell us what happened?"

He nods.

"Three months ago..."

"Roland. I have terrible news." The Baron, Sir McKellan, bows his head as he leans on his tall walking staff. His greying beard and sagging skin betray his encroaching old age. Soon, his son will take the lead in managing the kingdom.

"What is it, my liege?"

The Baron coughs. "As you know, I sent out a dozen scouts a fortnight ago, but only ten returned this morning. The other two are presumed dead."

"Dead?" A chill goes down my back. "How could- those were trained warriors! The two-rider system ensures that at least one should-"

"Neither returned." Sir McKellan raises a hand to silence me. "Of those who did, four reported a disturbing rumor. There is a demoness taking the form of a fair maiden, slaughtering all before her. Many villages have begun evacuating, fearing her attack. I am dispatching a thousand of our finest, but..."

"If she is a demon, then we should look away."

The Baron nods at my observation. "Correct. If we incur the demons' wrath, their culling will be merciless."

"But 'tis not the Year of Sacrifice!" I gesture to a wall listing the seasons. "The next generation is when we must pay the toll. Why would they attack now?"

"You read my mind, Sir Roland." The Baron chuckles. "Heh... but if the rumors we've gathered are true, 'tis but one demon slaughtering our people. Perhaps she is an aberration. Not since the time of the ancestors has such an event happened. This evil demoness kills indiscriminately. The feeble, the sickly, the healthy, even the women and children too."

I gaze out the window at the waning daylight. *The demons know that killing our women will slow our birthrates. Since time immemorial, the pact we agreed was to send brave warriors, picked by raffle, to die at the hands of the demons. Only if we willingly gave our able-bodied men would they spare our villages.*

If they kill our women, then our birthrates will decline, which will mean fewer offerings for the Year of Sacrifice!

"My liege, if she is an aberration, I should travel to the Forbidden Mountain. If I activate the Sacred Arch, perhaps the Gods will save us. We've never failed at giving them our best and brightest! T-they may find favor if..." I trail off as the Baron looks away.

"No, Roland. The Forbidden Mountain is a holy site. Desecrating it would bring the wrath of the gods upon us, not their saving grace. Only if extinction is at our doorstep are we ever to go there. Have faith in our warriors. She is but a single creature. If we kill her quietly, we can bury her body."

A lump forms in my throat. "What if she is an archdemon?"

The Baron smiles, but sadness is all I see. "If they have turned against us, then we haven't a chance anyway. Not even the Gods could save us."

I meet the Baron's gaze evenly. "Blasphemy."

"You are still young, Roland. As the second in line to the throne, I can only hope that you never have to rule. I've seen a great many horrors and lived through several Years of Sacrifice. Many men have knelt at my feet before marching off to give their lives in service of their people."

The Baron turns away and paces to a window. "Let us pray together, young one. Perhaps the Gods will hear our invocations and put down the demoness."

I walk over to stand beside Sir McKellan. "As you will, my liege."

Two months later.

"Mary! Mary!" I howl into the pouring rain, but the distant screams and blistering winds suck my words away into the void.

"Sir Roland!" A young squire rushes to me. "It's awful! The Temple is burning! A hundred villagers are trapped inside!"

"Forget them! We have to save those who are left! Tell everyone to flee! Scatter! The blasted banshee can't follow us if we spread out!" I point toward the direction of the distant screams. "They're already dead! We can't save them! Alert the remaining cavalry to grab any villagers and flee!"

The teen nods. "Yes, Sir Roland! What about you?"

"Don't worry about me, child. Go!"

He dashes away, leaving me alone. I quickly sprint down the streets toward the screams, each one causing my stomach to churn. Every person who howls in pain goes silent midway. *That horrible demon is devouring them whole.*

If I hadn't caught a glimpse of the Shrieking Devil with my own eyes, I'd hardly believe it. A woman, perhaps five years younger than I, wearing a blue dress far too small for her figure. Her long black hair waved about in the wind as she tore through a cavalcade of infantry, destroying the outer defenses with ease.

She isn't human, that much is clear.

As the screams grow nearer, I turn down a side-street and freeze. A woman lays on the ground. Her unmoving form might be hard to make out in the rain under normal circumstances, but the white and purple dress she wears...

"M-Mary? Mary!" I drop to my knee and freeze, spotting the dagger in my wife's back. Someone killed her, but it wasn't the Shrieking Devil.

"Bastards. At a time like this... who..."

I can't weep. Everything hurts. I haven't seen my children all day, so I have no choice but to leave them behind. I pray someone saved them.

Rushing past my wife, I wipe the tears from my face with a muddied glove. The stables are just up ahead.

Three horses remain, so I grab the nearest one and unhook it. The panic on all of their faces is palpable. *Sorry, but you must stay.. Pray for two riders to mount you, brave steeds.*

Hopping atop the animal, I gallop away. The sounds of my countrymen dying to the demoness's unstoppable rampage only fuel my desire.

The Forbidden Mountain! I must go!

To hell with the Baron's orders! He doesn't know what's best for us! I'll not stand idly by and let that blasted monster wipe us all out!

My children... stay alive. Do not meet the same fate as your mother.

* * *

Hours pass. My horse gasps for breath, but I push it as hard as possible. "Hah! Hyah! Don't you slack on me! Everything rests on us!"

The forest around me changes in color. Green becomes brown, then shifts to black. Sticks and roots pop and snap under hoof, and the smell of death fills the air.

The Demonic Gas. That's what we've taken to call the blight on our livestock, crops, and plants. All life perishes in the wake of the Shrieking Devil.

The horse finally slows to a stop, its stamina depleted. It gasps for breath and wheezes, so I hop off and pat its back while taking the bit from its mouth. After removing its saddle, I slap its ass and send it off to fend for itself. "You've done well, my friend. I will continue from here."

I've traveled far enough. The edge of the forest is near.

A mountain rises before me. An ancient staircase wraps around it, winding to the top. Legends say that it took Baron Archimedes ten hours to walk the entire path, but I'll have to make better time. My people need me.

I've done it.

Somehow, I can still breathe evenly, but the narrow staircase gave me several frights. The winds buffeted me the whole way up, and several times I thought I would fall hundreds of feet to my death, but fate was merciful.

Before me, at the top of the Forbidden Mountain, lies the Sacred Arch. Standing twenty-feet tall, it towers above me, two curved arms extending upward to form a semi-circle.

Its stairs lead to a platform with a glowing plate resting atop a small pedestal. Cautiously, I climb the steps, my heart pounding in my throat. The glowing plate seems to call to me. Even with the winds slowing down at the top of the mountain, the bright light it gives off, along with strange letters I've never seen before, tell me it is a weapon of unimaginable power.

A minute passes as I stare at it. I can't read its letters. When I finally gather the nerve, I gently tap the bright tablet, and the letters and colors change. The magical light shifts as more characters appear.

What... what do they mean?! Is this a weapon that only the ancient Gods can understand?!

Calm down, Roland. When you touch it, it responds. Everyone in the village is dead by now, so you're all alone. The worst that can happen is the gods may kill you, but you've little else to live for.

I press one of the words on the screen, and it changes again. I haven't the faintest clue what I'm doing.

Minutes pass. I press more and more changing words, but nothing happens. It defies the greatest magic I've ever seen. How can the tablet glow and change its form so fluidly? Am I doing anything at all?

* * *

An hour later, I slump to the ground.

I failed.

The Forbidden Mountain is worthless. There's no weapon here, no beacon to summon the gods, just a glowing tablet that changes into pretty colors when you press on it.

Worthless.

My eyes lower to the forest, and I stare where my village once stood. I can't make it out through the fog and rain, let alone the smoke from raging fires, but that must be where it is.

Mary... Klein... Igor... my wife and children. Taken from me not by the Shrieking Devil, but by the hands of other humans.

"Stupid! PATHETIC!" I leap to my feet and pound the glowing tablet with my fists. "Damn the gods! Curse the demons! To Hell with humans!! Why couldn't you leave us in peace?! We never once attacked you! We never hurt you! Vile monsters, all of you!"

The glowing tablet shakes and changes as I pound it over and over. "Magic! Hogwash! Invented by tricksters and deceivers to fool the common man!"

A sudden noise erupts all around me.

WOOOO. WOOOO.

I leap backward in fright.

The tablet shifts again, and hundreds of letters and numbers begin scrolling across its surface. A voice speaks from all around me.

"BAATHUN ATHSU'ASAG. AFTA'S. SUGNAFT S'ATHA UNTHUNLFTASA. SANGUNG AFTFT-FTANG GUTS'ATT TUGNAFT NUGH."

I shiver and tremble in terror as the voice continues speaking in a language I've never heard. *The gods! Have they heard my plea?!*

A minute passes as the voice continues speaking.

"SHUT GHU'FTG UT THIA"ANSFTX GATUGNASAG A GHIAA'ANSUNA CTHUNA. GU NUS ASSANLS SU NAKA THUNSATHS. GU NUS UNUSUASA SHA GHA'LGASA L'USUTHUFT."

Finally, the horrible voice goes silent. I fall to my knees and prostrate myself. "Great gods! Please! I beg of thee! I am but a humble servant! My apostasy — please forgive it! I meant no insult!"

The voice does not respond.

Raising my head, I stare at the two metal arms extended into the air.

Have I accomplished something? Will the gods arrive to save my people? Or have I doomed whoever remains with my words of heresy?

Fool. I am a fool.

Forgive me, Baron McKellan. If I had only pressured you sooner, I could have tried this before it was too late.

Now I must wait.

Roland rubs his throat and looks away from Phoebe and I. "And so I did. For two weeks, I lay atop the plateau, waiting for a savior. None appeared."

Phoebe bows her head. "When our soldiers found you, you were delirious and incoherent. Starved, too. I'm surprised you survived atop a mountain for so long."

The thin, gangly man doesn't smile. "Force of will, beauteous one. I needed to stay alive as long as possible if only to hold onto hope. I lived off rainwater for several days, knowing there was neither game to hunt nor fruits to eat below." Roland wipes his eyes. "I know not from what land you hail, only that you are too late. My village was on the verge of extinction when I climbed the mountain, let alone two weeks later."

A moment passes, and Phoebe pulls away from Roland to look at me. "Neil ran several scans of the planet. Its fauna and flora readings were inconclusive."

I've heard enough. I know what Roland saw, or *who*, rather. Amelia. Without a doubt, she is the one who terrorized his world.

But... devouring humans whole? Freakish. Impossible. How could she do it, even with magic? It isn't physically possible.

Or maybe I'm naive. Amelia nearly killed me. She murdered those monsters in the vision Hoarhiim showed me, and I saw her chasing after children with a ravenous look on her face. Amelia isn't an ally of good. She hates Heroes, and I'm a Hero. She is my enemy.

Phoebe brushes back a hair. "Um, Roland, you keep mentioning our land... I don't know how to explain where you are in a way you'll understand, so after you recover, we'll show you around. Is that acceptable?"

He nods. "Indeed. Your graciousness is boundless. I have merely imposed upon you, and I thank you for bringing me back from death. If possible, I should like to repay you for your kindness." He pauses before looking away, a dark expression on his face. "Alas, no matter how far you've taken me, it matters not. The Shrieking Devil will come. Her hunger knows no limits. I fear for your safety."

While Phoebe doesn't know how to explain where he is, I decide to try my luck. Dropping to one knee, I point to my glowing eyes. "Roland, you have nothing to fear. As you may have guessed, I am one of the Gods."

Roland smiles as if my sentence was a perfectly natural thing to say. "Aye... I suspected as much."

Using my telekinesis, I levitate Hoarhiim's brilliantly glowing orb from my belt pocket. The light makes Roland wince, and he shields his eyes.

"I am an agent of justice. I swear to you that the Shrieking Devil will not go unpunished. What she has done to your people is reprehensible."

Roland stares at me, awe on his face. "Of- of course! I believe in you, Sir... err, Mister..."

He trails off and looks away. "I don't know your names."

Oops.

So much for looking cool.

Part 027: The Overlords, Power Overwhelming

"Oh, most splendid, Your Holiness!" Roland gawks as we exit the hospital. The automatic opening glass doors once appeared as wizardry to him, but he's already moved onto bigger things. "By the Forefathers! What are those giant square boxes?!"

Roland points across the street, and I chuckle. "Those are buildings, just like the hospital. Take a look behind you."

When Roland turns around and grasps the scale of the twenty-story hospital, his eyes bulge. "By the Forefathers!"

He says that a lot.

Phoebe quickly covers up her mouth to hide a smile. She's always careful to make sure it doesn't seem like she's mocking Roland. "Oh, Your Grace, don't you suppose we should take mister Roland to the Core? We need to find out what the situation is on his homeworld."

Roland doesn't register her words for a few moments. Instead, he gawks at a Salamander racing past with a Minotaur riding atop it. While it's an occurrence I've grown used to seeing, Roland isn't accustomed to all the different species of monsters here on Tarus II. We convinced him that this planet is one where Gods and Humans intermingle, which seemed reasonable enough to satisfy his questions, but even the Harpy doctor frightened him at first. He thought she was a human, one cursed with feathers and a beak.

When Roland finally comprehends Phoebe's words, he nods quickly. "Oh, oh yes, of course. I should very much like to save anyone from my village, if possible, but..." He trails off as the wonder and excitement drain from his face.

I want to know what happened, but they're probably all dead, his body language says. It doesn't matter now, anyway. Nothing but heartache awaits.

Phoebe notices his gloom and doom and winks at me. A moment later, she steps out to the street and whistles. A small goblin comes running up breathlessly from two blocks away, and when he arrives, he pulls out a pen and pad of paper. "Yes! Ready help you!"

She whispers something in his ear, and the short little monster grunts and jots down a note. "Of course! Be back soon!"

After the lean-mean-green-bean dashes away, Phoebe walks back over, and I raise a questioning eyebrow. "What was that about?"

"You'll see."

We continue to stand out near the sidewalk until a few minutes later, when a rumbling in the distance catches my ear. I immediately recognize it, as does Phoebe, but it isn't until the sound becomes louder

that it grabs Roland's attention. He glances fearfully to the rear of the hospital. "What is that?"

Neither of us answers, and after a few more seconds, the thing making the noise sputters into view. It's the local bus, one of the things I built to speed up transit around the city, though this one's route reaches as far as the warp-gate.

Roland's eyes swell into saucers as the wheeled metallic rectangle takes a hard corner and turns around the lane, heading toward us. Roland grabs for the sword at his side, only to awkwardly realize we didn't give him one, so he instead ducks behind me. "Your Holiness! What is that?!"

"It's a bus, friend. Think of it like a horse made of metal. It will take us to the Core."

He nods, but the distrust on his face is palpable. "It sounds like an angry lion!"

Phoebe glares at me. "Hmph."

The bus slows to a stop in front of us, and the doors slide open to reveal one of the few Kobolds that lives on Tarus II. Most of them stay in the Labyrinth, but a few friendlies hang out here. "Gargh! Hop on whenever yuh pleashe, mishter King, shir!"

Phoebe climbs the stairs and walks inside, but Roland hesitates. "Y-you expect me to enter the mouth of this beast?!"

I nod and slap the metal exterior with my hand. "This bad boy can fit so many passengers. Treat it like a huge tool. It isn't alive at all. Come on, now; you've got a God with you! What do you think could hurt someone as powerful as me?"

Roland nods, even as his eyes rove the bus. "I-it is as you say, Your Holiness."

He cautiously touches the first step, then starts to enter, but the Kobold grins at him, baring its teeth. "Take yer time! 'Aven't got uh thing tuh worry about with me ash yur driver, mishter hooman!"

Roland hesitates when he sees the vicious snarling mouth of the kobold, but I nudge him forward. "He won't bite, and if he does, I'll knock him out."

"If you say so."

* * *

Minutes later, the bus puttters down the streets toward a recently constructed bridge that divides each side of the canyon. However, the kobold driver spins us around and takes us toward a smooth four-lane path meant for vehicles. Right now, the only things on the street are buses and pedestrians, but I figure that given enough time, we may have dozens or even hundreds of cars on the road.

The Crown of Solomon is a wondrous item. Other than the limits of my Wordsmithing, I can create devices of infinite intricacy and push Tarus II's technology lightyears ahead in exponential jumps. When we started, this planet was scarcely at the Medieval level, and now it's rapidly becoming Industrial.

Still, Wordsmithing isn't the be-all, end-all I sometimes imagine it to be. There's a limit to how much I can create, thanks to my internal magic capacity. I have to think of a way to increase my limiter, or the Space Age may never happen.

Roland, sitting across the aisle from Phoebe and me, stares outside as we pass varying monsters and humans of all different breeds and colors. "Your Holiness, forgive my limited imagination, but how is it that all these disparate people can work together when they are so different from one another? Do you not have to deal with infighting, greed, or cruelty?"

I shake my head. "In the world I came from, that was a daily struggle. However, monsters do not judge each other based on appearance, but on their merits. Humans, likewise, having to live among monsters, have forced themselves to focus less on appearances and more on the individual."

My answer satisfies Roland, but as he looks away, a thought swells in my mind. *While that might be the case now, I can't say it will stay that way forever. I can only hope everyone continues to work together.*

An adage appears in my mind as the treeline approaches. *Humanity always requires an adversary. We hunger for an enemy and will invent one if we must. If none can be created or found, then we will fade into nothingness.*

"What are you thinking about?" Phoebe asks. "Your expression is graver than usual."

The bus illuminates the forest around us with waves of sound, allowing me to take in all of the sights at once. "Oh, you know. Dumb, boring stuff."

* * *

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at our destination.

As he exits the bus, Roland yells out in surprise. "By the Forefathers! Another Sacred Arch!" He points at the warp-gate and hops up and down excitedly. "And look, monsters and humans are moving about inside!"

I nod. "The Warp-Gate allows us to travel great distances in an instant. This one leads to what we call 'The Core,' which will have another gate that takes us back to your world."

Roland seems to be growing accustomed to unfamiliar technology and things he hasn't seen before. If I had to guess, he must be filling in blank spots in his experience with an idea like, 'Oh yes, that's just more strange magic!'

This time, he surprises me by quickly stepping through the portal before Phoebe and I. His eagerness to see his homeworld proves infectious. Once she and I step through, however, I smirk when we arrive on the other side to find him hunched over, moaning in pain and rubbing his ears. The air-pressure change can be quite a shock to the uninitiated.

I leave Roland with Phoebe and jog down to the arena below, past rows of computer terminals. Various monsters point me this way and that until I spot Neil, identifying him by the odd 18th-century hat he likes to wear.

"Neil, long time no see."

He ignores me for a moment and mutters to the goblin sitting at the terminal in front of him, "No, not that way. You have to calculate the inverse. Try it again, but make sure you apply the parameters from B-

24L."

The goblin nods and starts poking at the screen again. Neil lifts his head to look at me. "Ah, My Liege! A pleasure to see you up and moving! I heard you overexerted yourself and were undergoing bed rest."

I rub the back of my head sheepishly. "I was in a coma for three days."

Neil's face pales. "What?! Your condition was that serious?"

"Yeah, but no worries, I learned the hard way that my magic has limitations. I can't use it too much, and it doesn't increase the more I do. Unfortunate."

Neil wipes his face. "Yes... yes, I see. Well, it's good that you're back. I suppose you want me to brief you on what's occurred over the past few days?"

I shake my head. "Nah, you've got that covered pretty well. If you needed me, I'd know. I came here because I'm curious about Roland's world. You know, the fellow who was babbling incoherently."

"Oh." Neil's expression darkens. "We conducted several scans, but all results for life turned up inconclusive. Electrical storms plague the planet, and they aren't naturally occurring. I thought it best to disable our connection until you returned."

"Smart idea," I mutter. "Alright. Change one of the portals to that planet. Err, what's it called, again?"

He shrugs. "It's in the Espurn system, Espurn 03. Since it's the only habitable world, I decided to call it Espurn Prime."

"Works for me. Get a connection running. I'll grab Roland."

I turn and walk away, and as I head over to Roland, I notice him and Phoebe talking to Kar and Makoto Ueda. Makoto nods politely and rubs his hands together. "-course, I wouldn't blame you in the slightest, Roland-san. Hmm. It seems possible to me that your boys escaped, though we cannot say for certain. Mister Adams is the one who runs the Core, so he will know more about your world than I ever could."

Kar grunts. "Hurgh. We will do all in our power to help you find your family, Flappy Fish." He notices me walking over. "Turtle! White-hair tells me that you were in a coma! How are you feeling now?"

"Fine, about as good as always. I overexerted myself using too much magic. It turns out I could die if I go overboard."

"Watch yourself, and stride forward with great caution, Hiro-sama." Makoto bows slightly. "Magic is not something to trifle with."

"Oh, you know a thing or two about it?"

He nods. "Of course, as does Mister Adams, Miss Berthold, and all of the humans who lived under Mistress Bahamut's influence. Miss Berthold, for example, can sense the presence of magic nearby."

I glance at Phoebe. "You can?"

She shrugs and looks at Makoto. "I can?"

"Yes, yes, of course! You've done it before but just haven't realized it. Putting your life on the line under His Majesty, King Arthur, would surely have strengthened your spiritual connection to new heights. Bahamut's power increased it further." Makoto gently touches his forehead. "Should you ever wish to explore your inner wells of spirituality, seek me out."

I chuckle. "Funny you mention that. The doctor recommended I seek out a magic tutor. The universe is full of coincidences."

"Very few coincidences, most likely fate," Makoto replies with a sagely twinkle in his eye.

The sound of footsteps behind me makes me turn my attention to Neil as he walks over. "Uh, My Liege... a moment of your time?"

I excuse myself and sigh, walking back to Neil. "That was fast. I expected it'd take you a few minutes to open the gate."

Despite my pleasant smile, Neil doesn't return the expression. "L-listen... err... about... about that world... there's a problem."

"A problem? Like what?"

Neil gestures to the computer screen. "Take a look."

I allow a few seconds to pass before replying, "Man, you *know* I can't read computer screens... right?"

The screams of pain around me cause my stomach to clench. I pace through the darkened Labyrinthian hallways, and Bael stomps along behind me.

"Diablo, where'd they stick him?" Bael asks.

"The blood pits. It will take months to heal his wounds unless Belial shows up." I swallow hard as the smell of healing salts and rotten flesh fills the air.

The healing chambers are a vile place. The few demons capable of restoring life congregate nearby, but demonic magic is meant for taking life, not treating it. Broken stone benches and scratches all over the walls tell tales of demons who lashed out in pain and tore apart anything in sight. Blind rage tends to be the trait many of us share.

I stop before the main chamber, one which branches off into dozens of rooms and tunnels, stairs leading up and down, and a pulley system for raising and lowering the wounded through various levels to get them where they're most needed. A female scream pierces the din, and several voices rush to quiet her so that she doesn't disturb the other patients. I can only imagine the suffering she's enduring.

An imp notices me and skitters over. "E-Emperor Diablo! A pleasure to see you, your wickedness! How may I serrrrve you today? Nyehehe!"

"Where's the Duke of Steel?"

The imp's sneer vanishes. "Ohh, you're here about *him*. Hooo boy. Uhh, I'll get Hellga."

The imp skitters off to grab the magistrate of the Primary Chamber, a crotchety old demon as old as Agares. Her ire is something few wish to draw, in case they ever get injured and end up under her care. While she will heal anyone's wounds without bias... her interest in treating a patient's injuries *gently* will depend on how they've sweet-talked her over the years.

Bael sneaks over to one of the rooms where a Skarnskin drapes over the entrance, but before he can sneak a peek at whoever's inside, I hiss at him. "Bael! Mind your manners! It's dishonorable to gaze upon a demon at their weakest!"

The Duke of Pain bows his head sheepishly. "Oh. Uh. Sorry." He lumbers back over to me, scratching his ass all the while. "It's funny to startle them, though."

"One of these days you'll probably end up in here. Show respect to others so they will respect you." I wave my hand at him flippantly. "Nobody likes a dunce."

Bael is unconvinced. "I doubt there's anyone left in the universe that could hurt this perfect body! Check me out! Wargh! Raww!" He pounds his chest to show off his incredible strength, so I infuse a decent amount of magic into my hand.

"There are Emperors above you, idiot." Saying this, I slap my palm into his chest and bash him against the floor, driving the wind out of his body.

"Kuhk!" He waves to swat my hand away, but I've already pulled back. Watching him writhe on the floor makes me smile for a moment, taking my mind off the sorrow I feel. "Buh-bastard! I wasn't prepared! Tuh-tricked me!!"

"No matter how strong you are, having zero magic means I'll always defeat you. Keep that in mind next time you decide to embarrass me in public."

I ignore the oaf rolling about on the ground. The sound of clacking platform shoes catches my ear. Up ahead, the old bat appears from around the corner, her bedraggled grey hair and toothless scowl displaying her annoyance openly for all to see.

"Ah, beautiful Hellga, it's been a while."

She glares at me. "Flattery will get you nowhere. Whaddya want? I was busy cleaning the Skarn droppings out of a kobold's insides. Damned fool thought they were food pellets!"

My lip curls up slightly. "That's... wonderful. I need to see Barbatos. Can you direct me to his blood pit?"

Her disgust vanishes. Melancholy replaces it. "Ah, him. So that's why the little skeever kept pestering me. Follow me."

Hellga's change in attitude stresses me out. *Barbatos must be in critical condition.*

Bael staggers into place behind me, still clutching his chest. He doesn't say anything, but I feel his glare burning the back of my head.

* * *

It takes us twenty minutes to navigate the maze of chambers and rooms, mostly because of Hellga. She doesn't handle stairs as well as she used to, and she frequently stops to check on patients as we walk. When I ask if we can get a move on, she glares at me. "It ain't like Barbatos will be going anywhere for a long time, boyo."

Finally, we arrive at the Blood Pits. So-named because of the mass of human blood poured into hollowed out pits in the ground, they're the best healing that demons have access to, barring someone of Belial's healing talents. She's an extreme rarity, given she can treat nearly any wound with magic. Her power borders on the Angelic, since it was a standard ability that most Angels and Gods used to possess.

Until we killed them all, that is.

Hellga pulls a Skarnskin away from the door. "Keep it short. Don't bother talking. He's incoherent."

When I enter, my foot clumsily bumps a large, steel boot. The clanking it creates makes me flinch, and then I spot all the other armor pieces lying around the room: a shinguard, helmet, gauntlets, and all manner of other demonstone armor designed to absorb damage.

Bael pauses behind me and leans down. "Boss."

I turn back to see what he's pointing out. It's Barbatos's chestplate. There's a fist-sized hole torn straight through its middle.

"Seven Hells."

Continuing forth, I arrive in the pit chamber, where the smell of iron-rich blood makes my tongue salivate. Human souls power demons, while their blood heals us. A beautiful, symbiotic relationship.

The sound of choked breathing catches my attention. I look down and spot Barbatos lying in the blood, most of his body except for his head submerged. Hundreds of scratches and scars line his face, and based on a small bit of his shoulder poking up through the blood; it's in similar condition.

Bael whistles quietly. "So that's what the harlot did to him. He looks like shit."

I shake my head. "Those are all old scars. He suffered those when he transformed into a Duke."

I remember when we first found him. During the War in Heaven, the deadliest extinction event in demon history, the little fool found a dying archangel and devoured her body. Her holy energy caused him endless suffering over the millennia. He's lucky he survived.

Or maybe he isn't. He doesn't complain anymore, but it took several hundred years before he could walk without assistance. He suffers every moment of every day — the most pitiful of all demons.

A hiss from the other side of the room makes me flinch. I look up to see Mephisto peeking at us from one of the sleeping cubbies. "Let Barbatossss sssleep. Come over here and keep your voicesss down."

I nod. Bael and I walk over to the Duke of Mist, who pulls a skin across the entry to muffle our voices somewhat. "I didn't expect Barbatos to end up this mangled. You fought the Black Witch?"

Mephisto, apparently unharmed, bows his head. "Yesss. Twasss a battle of the agesss. Asss you may know, Agaresss expired."

I swallow hard. "Yes. I never thought I'd see the day when the old man would meet the ancient demons. I can scarcely believe it."

"It wasss a warrior'sss death." Mephisto slinks off the bed and stands to face Bael and me. "Barbatosss held on ass long ass possible. He ussed every one of his powersss but couldn't ssstop her."

"I heard as much," Bael mutters. He glances at me. "Tell him."

"We notified the Overlords, Mephisto. That dead rock exists no more."

Mephisto's eyes widen. "They dessstroyed the planet? What about Agaresss body?"

"We couldn't recover him. I sealed the planet and made sure the Black Witch couldn't escape. Even if she survived its destruction, she wouldn't be a threat anymore. Let her freeze in the vacuum of space forever for all I care. A fitting end."

Mephisto closes his eyes and looks away. "Agaresss wasss one of our bessst Dukeesss. I will sssleep well knowing he wasss put to ressst honorably."

"It's what he'd have wanted," I whisper. "I feel awful for Beelzebub. I haven't told him what happened, yet."

Bael lightly slaps his chest and looks away, a sign of grief. "He's a sturdy lad. I know he'll stand firm for his mentor. Try to tell him softly, Diablo."

Sighing, I pull back the flap to gaze at Barbatos. "We've all lost someone dear. Let us hope we don't count a second brother among the fallen."

Part 028: A Million Voices Cry Out In Terror

"What do you mean?! It's a planet! How do you lose a friggin' planet?" I rest my hands on my hips, nudging my lightsaber and Hoarhiim's orb in the process. "I thought you guys had a constant tracker on its position!"

Neil tosses his hands in the air. "I don't know what to say. We shut down the gate after recovering that Roland fellow since we didn't want Amelia slipping through the gate somehow. Now we can't reconnect."

The goblin Neil was helping earlier pokes a button, then raises his hand. "Ooh! Grumbull have idea! Maybe gate was destroyed on other side?"

"Yeah, that's possible." Neil scratches his head. "I don't get it, though. Why would someone destroy the portal? Hell, who *could*? It must have been Amelia."

"Makes sense, I guess," I reply. "I don't see why she'd trap herself on the planet like that. Can you force open a portal without a gate on the other side?"

Neil shakes his head. "Not a chance. The only way to travel there now is via the services of a Warper, or we could take a spaceship there."

"A spaceship?"

The Frenchman scratches his chin. "Yes, but we don't have technology like that. Even if we did, the galaxy is massive. I don't know where any of these planets are in relation to one another."

An unnerving thought enters my mind. "Say, uh, Neil... I've been wondering, what exactly is the Labyrinth? Is it a cube floating in space?"

His face contorts into several expressions as he looks at me, then the goblin, then back to me again. "I haven't the faintest clue. I believe we exist outside of the Milky Way Galaxy, though."

"What?! Are we in Andromeda, then?"

Someone stomps up behind me. I don't bother turning as I recognize Kar's towering form. "My mother has told me many tales about the universe. The Labyrinth exists in a separate dimension outside of the galaxy, yet we are also within."

Once again, Kar reminds me that his mother exists. "Speaking of which, will you ever take me to chat with Marie?"

The Croco-sphinx sighs. "I do not know, little Turtle. I conversed with my brothers recently. They are pleased that I have assisted you, but not that I am King of all Monsters. Such a title traditionally belongs to the King of a clan, meaning King Ghidorah. Due to the monster hierarchy, I now outrank him. This has caused much friction between my brothers and me.

"Ah, that sounds like it could... cause issues. Haha."

"Indeed," Kar says, before turning away. "Butterfly. Butterfly!"

His voice carries over the room and all around the panels and consoles, so deep is his timbre. A moment later, a tiny flicker of movement in the air approaches us, and I recognize his little fairy assistant, Blinker.

"Heyo! Whatchu want, you big ol' gator?" She flutters down and stumbles onto on his shoulder with a half-drunken *thud*.

"We require the services of a Warper. Would you be so kind as to conjure one for us?"

I almost forgot about what Neil and I discussed. Good thing Kar reminded me. "Do you think we can use a Warper to get to Espurn Prime without using a gate?"

Blinker hops up to her feet and waves her arms. "Of course! Easy peasy impy squeezey! Just gimme time to work my charm, and I'll find a cutie to make a portal for ya!"

She flutters away, squeaking conspiratorially to herself the whole way, and I turn my attention back to Neil. "Keep checking to see if you can connect. I have some business to deal with."

"As you wish, my liege."

A minute later, Kar and I walk back over to Phoebe, Roland, and Makoto. Roland looks up at me, trepidation in his eyes.

"What is the verdict, Your Holiness?"

"We're having some, ah, technical issues." I shrug slightly as if to say, *it can't be helped*. "Kar sent one of his assistants off to find help. Sorry for dragging you out here, but there isn't much we can do today."

Roland's shoulders sag. "Ah, that's unfortunate. Still, I've met many interesting Gods here, and seeing all these magical tablets is exciting as well. I am certain you will do your best, Your Holiness."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I reply. I turn to Makoto. "I don't have anything better to do right now. How about those spiritual lessons you offered?"

He widens his eyes in surprise. "Already?"

"I mean, you don't have to. We can do it some other time if you like."

Makoto shakes his head quickly. "If it is for your sake, Hiro-sama, then I am always willing to make room on my schedule. Come, let us return to my home. I will discuss the different aspects of spiritual energy with you there."

It takes quite the effort for me not to say, *'aw man, but I just got here...'*

Roland decides to stay behind and hang out with the humans and monsters in the Core, so Phoebe and I leave with Makoto. Once we step through the portal, I realize the bus is gone.

Phoebe winks at me. "Your Grace, why not summon an automobile with your magic? I'd like to drive it, if possible."

"Okay. I meant to make you one, anyway."

My flippant announcement catches her off-guard. "Y-you did?"

"Yeah. It's just the model that I wasn't sure about, but I think I've got your tastes pinned down."

Her face twists into incredulity. *Model? What does he mean?*

As the three of us arrive at the bottom of the warpgate's stairs, I aim my mind at the road. "**Vehicle.**"

Gears appear in my mind, followed by an engine, frame, radio, cigarette lighter, dashboard, seats, and thousands of other pieces involved in making a car. My head trembles slightly from the effort of envisioning the automobile, but the sound of air rushing away from the summoning area and a loud *POP* follows, and with a *THUD* my newest creation slams onto the pavement. Ten tons of steel, wood, and plastic hit the ground with tremendous force, startling the nearby spectators.

Makoto stares quizzically. Phoebe gawks with an open mouth. "J-Jason! It's so big! What is it?"

"I got the impression that while you liked the Ferrari, you're more of a big-truck kind of girl. So... I gave you something that can go off-road."

The massive vehicle towers twenty feet in the air, with stairs for easier access to the cabin, three seating rows for passengers, a metal grill in case of a collision, and a reinforced frame. *Safety first, after all. I wouldn't want something to happen to Phoebe while she drives.* The rollbar ensures that even if the whole thing flips, it should end up back on its wheels.

I gesture toward it. "Here you go. It's called a *monster truck*."

Phoebe squeezes her hands into fists. "Eeeeh! Oh my god! It's amazing! I can't believe you made this for me!"

"I've been teaching you to drive for a reason, after all. There's no way I can continue to hog all the fun."

She startles me by leaping into my arms and hugging me tightly. "Oh, Jason! Thank you thank you thank youuu!"

Makoto smiles. "Young love is always wonderful."

"M-Miss Berthold! Slow down! That is a VERY big- gwaugh!" Makoto shrieks in fright as Phoebe races her new toy at an obstacle in the road, bouncing us several feet in the air before landing on the ground with all ten tons of raw steel. She laughs maniacally as the reinforced death machine plows through rows of corn in the local farms.

I hold onto my seat with telekinesis, while also grabbing my door for dear life. "S-sweetheart, I think maybe you're going a little too-"

"FASTER!!!" Phoebe jams the accelerator and turns toward a series of small hills and boulders, pushing the truck's suspension to the test. I can almost hear the poor metal box screaming in pain. Makoto and I toss from side-to-side while Phoebe clutches the wheel with all of her strength.

Minutes pass, and eventually, her excitement wears off as we approach the central city. She slows to a stop after climbing the ramp up the canyon and pulls to the side of the road.

Daintily, Phoebe pulls her medium-cropped hair back in a bun and whistles. "That was fun."

I dab the front of my pants to make sure I didn't wet myself. "Yeah. Fun. Right, Makoto?"

The Japanese man nods silently but conceals a look of terror. He melts into his seat; sweat covering every inch of his body.

I've created a monster.

Before she hops out of the truck, Phoebe points to a button beside the steering wheel. "What does this do?"

I swallow and smile, glad for the moment of calm. "Well, uh, you were scared of loud engines originally, so I added a button to silence it. The engine roar is all fake anyway since it uses fusion to power itself."

She nods. "That's very thoughtful of you. I wasn't scared of the Ferrari's noise though, Your Grace, but of the unfamiliar setting you put me in."

"Well, it's there anyway. Nobody wants to hear a loud monster truck driving through town in the middle of the night, right?"

"Certainly!" Phoebe hops out of the truck and slams the door, and squeals a little as she pats it. "This is by far the best present anyone has ever given me!"

"I'm glad you like it," I mutter, while swallowing the bile from my roiling stomach. *And here I thought I was a speed demon.*

* * *

Minutes later, Makoto shakily leads us to his residence. The adrenaline is finally wearing off, and he's mostly back to normal, but the experience in Phoebe's truck will probably make sleep difficult for him tonight.

He lives in Bahamut's former palace, just as Phoebe and I do. Most of the high-rankers live here, though I hear that Saul built a mud hut a mile away on the outskirts of town. He prefers seclusion.

The familiar walls roll past us, and Phoebe loops her arms around mine and smiles up at me. Even if I was a little scared earlier, it was worth it to see her in such a good mood. She deserves a present occasionally after all the time we've spent together. I love her.

I can't wait to get married.

Makoto stops in front of his door and fumbles with his key for a moment, before pulling it open. He steps inside, and immediately I realize something is wrong.

As we step through the doorway, Phoebe's warm smile shifts to an expression of horror. Makoto's room is piled high with trash, dust, filth, and all manner of other garbage. Plates with food crusted on them tell the tale of a lazy bum living in a slum, not a respectable military man who speaks of peace and harmony.

"Mister Makoto...?" Phoebe trails off as she looks around.

Makoto remains oblivious to our concerns. "Ah, let me get a few chairs for us, just give me one moment. Watch your step!"

My foot kicks a bag of half-eaten stale potato chips, sending some of them spilling out all over the floor. The room is so messy that I'm having trouble seeing around and navigating without bumping into anything.

He disappears into the kitchen, and his footsteps light the place up enough that I can tell the mayhem isn't isolated to one or two rooms.

"I never pictured Mister Ueda as this sort of man," Phoebe murmurs.

I pull away from her and use my telekinesis to shove debris toward the walls, so I at least have a clear path to walk. "I figured a spiritual guru enlightened about Shinto principles or whatever would have a clean house. Can't judge a book by its cover, I guess."

Makoto appears from around the corner, a wooden chair in each hand. He sets them down in the living room, though he has to nudge some books and bags of food out of the way. "I will get a seat for myself."

Phoebe and I slump into our chairs while I try to think of a way to mention the mess without offending him. Already I can tell Phoebe is itching to scrub the place from top to bottom.

When he returns, he comes back carrying not just a chair, but a small table as well, perhaps the size of a TV tray. "Would you care for some tea?"

Phoebe and I shake our heads at the same time. "We're fine."

After setting his chair and table down, he leaves and returns with a pot of cold tea and a paper cup, setting them down on the table before easing into his chair. He finally notices the distress on our faces. "Oh, so sorry about home. It is more cluttered than usual."

"Cluttered," I echo. "I, uh, didn't realize you lived like this."

"Hm?" Makoto cocks his head questioningly. "Like what?"

Phoebe grimaces. "Well, the place is a little messy, you know?"

"Oh, certainly. But look on bright side! It bring me closer to nature."

"Nature?" I echo his words a second time, my mind reeling with disbelief. "What about your home reminds you of nature?"

Makoto folds his hands in his lap and sighs. Leaning back, he stares at the ceiling. "Humans, monsters, demons, everyone... we try to rearrange things and be more orderly. Such is way of individual who has attained self-awareness. Nature, however, chaotic and sloppy. Therefore, to be closer to nature, my house chaotic, see?"

Phoebe forces a smile. "That's an... interesting way to describe a mess. I could clean the place up for you..."

"Bah, there is no need." He waves his hand flippantly. "Will just mess it up again anyway. Now then, Hiro-sama, I suppose you have questions for me about magic?"

Despite how miffed Phoebe looks that Makoto just brushed her criticisms aside, I take his stance in stride. I'm not God, so I can't judge someone else for how they live in the privacy of their home. He isn't

hurting anyone.

"Mister Ueda, I need to increase my spiritual energy limit. Isn't there a way that I can expand my Wordsmithing abilities beyond what they are now?"

He nods. "Yes, yes, of course. However, depends how far you're willing to go. Demons increase limits by ingesting souls of humans. Will you take that path?"

"Of course not."

"Your power allows you speak a word and make it become reality. Have you tried using a spell to increase your limits?"

I quickly search my memories. "Yeah, but it didn't work. I didn't expect it to, either."

"Neither would I." Makoto reaches over and grabs his cold tea and sips it, then places it back on the table. "Demon way is not the only way."

"You mean I can increase my limits without devouring human souls? Sign me up!"

Makoto shakes his head. "Not quite. Angels used energy from prayers. If you are willing to have people pray to you, then it may be possible, but..."

"I'll mark that as a 'maybe.' Anything else?"

He shrugs. "Not know. However, I did wish to speak to you about something..." He falters for a moment. "...have you ever executed someone?"

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. I do, too.

"No. I'd prefer not to do such a thing."

"Are you opposed to killing?"

"I believe there are better ways to resolve conflicts, but sometimes you have to put your life on the line."

Phoebe coughs. "Ahem. Then what are you planning to do about Amelia?"

My seat burns hot under me. "I try not to think about that."

Makoto waggles a finger. "Hiro-sama, she has exterminated entire planet of people. If you can't end her, then you can never justify killing anyone."

"Murder isn't in my nature, Makoto. Wordsmithing seems like a limitless ability. I feel as if I have other options at my disposal."

He nods. "A good point. I respect your commitment to pacifism, but I wonder if you realize that your ideals will not hold up against demonkind."

A few seconds pass as I digest his words.

"Maybe they will, maybe they won't. I won't know until I try. Anyway, I thought you were supposed to be a peaceful, enlightened ascetic. Why are you talking about death and killing all of a sudden?"

Phoebe looks away, and Makoto's expression darkens. "Humans, despite our flaws, are somewhat principled when we wish to be. Humans progressed from barbarism to semi-enlightenment in just a few thousand years. Demons only became worse. It was our good intentions that doomed us. I still believe that many demons are not inherently evil, but I also acknowledge what an incredible enemy they are."

Makoto sips some more tea. "While you were gone for few days, Adams-san received word that several demons and monsters wished to join our ranks. Is very good news, in my book."

"What? They did?! That's great!" Phoebe's eyes light up like the Fourth of July. "So what's the problem?"

Makoto shakes his head. "Right now, we are little more than thorn in Demon Emperor's side. However, once we amass military might, they will turn full attention on us. Either you become willing to draw blood and display ferocious power, or you creatively think of way to persuade trillions of demons to our side."

"Trillions?" I blink in surprise. "That many exist?"

Phoebe rubs her hands together. "Humans have home planets, but so do demons. Half of all demons live in the Labyrinth, but the rest live on worlds strewn across the galaxy."

Trillions. The word echoes in my mind. *We have several thousand people and monsters in the Core. What attacked us before was the tiniest tip of an iceberg. If the demons get serious, we don't stand a chance.*

"Makoto... are you certain there isn't a way I can increase my limit? Anything."

He smiles and shakes his head. "Unless you are willing to strip soul energy from demons as you kill them, I see no viable options, Hiro-sama. Demonic energy is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be unnatural."

I look away from Makoto. "If you say so."

The Japanese man reaches down and grabs an opened bag of chips. He grabs a handful of stale potato chips and holds the bag out. "Hungry?"

I share a glance with Phoebe.

"Pass."

Part 029: Return Of The Monster

A few weeks later.

The specialized computer console before me illuminates its words with heatmapping instead of visible light. Thanks to my infrared vision, I can now make out the letters and shapes onscreen. From what others have told me, all they can see is a white screen. Talk about the ultimate privacy filter...

My goal today is to create new technology blueprints for a machine I built two weeks ago; a Star Trek-style replicator.

Capable of transforming raw electrical energy into objects with mass, the machine is a feat of engineering previously well beyond my reach. The only reason I was able to create it was thanks to the mental acuity the Crown granted me. Of all the things I've owned in my life, nothing comes anywhere close to Solomon's Crown.

The Crown fills in the details in my mind as I build the thirteenth blueprint: an energy rifle. I rapidly type on the Braille keyboard using senses that I've enhanced with my Wordsmithing, and the replicator accepts my inputs once I finish.

The stress on my mind is much worse than when I Wordsmith, but at the same time, the replicator does all the work once I've input my specifications. I built this system so that I could create new tools, armor, and weapons for humanity without having to worry about my spiritual energy levels. Makoto seems to approve, and I know the military is grateful for faster production options.

Still, even with a fusion reactor, it takes a while to replicate new objects. I'll build massive replicators later for tanks and vehicles, but my head hurts thinking about all the mental strain that'll entail.

A slight dizzy spell grabs me as I lean away from the computer. Hans Wagner notices, and he walks over to check on me.

"You are done vith zee blueprint, Mein Lieber?"

I mop my forehead wearily. "Y-yeah. Something like that. You can start synthesizing energy rifles whenever you feel like it."

Hans nods. "Once vee have finished zee personal shield from zee last batch, I vill begin making zee energy rifles. However, I think you should take a break. Your complexion is looking quite ghastly."

"You think so? Maybe you're onto something." I glance down at my hand and notice it's trembling. *Taxing my brain has a bunch of side effects on my whole body. Good to know.*

"Oh, oh, no." Hans squints to stare at my face for a moment, then pulls out a handkerchief from his shirt pocket. "Ah, Herr Hiro, zees is for zee nose."

"Nose?" I echo his words, then feel wetness on my lips. Taking the handkerchief, I dab at my nostrils and realize they're bleeding slightly. "Shit. Sorry, this is a little embarrassing. I'll magic you up a new one so that you don't have to wash the blood out of this."

Hans shakes his head. "Nein, zere is no need. Take zee day off. You've been slaving away day and night! Nobody wants to see you in a coma again."

"Oh, alright. Thanks."

Nodding, I stagger to my feet and stumble through the factory. Not many people work here, and those who do typically help transfer replicated items to other divisions and areas — maybe two dozen staff in total.

Hans's assistant stops when she sees me. "Are you alright, Commander Hiro? You look like you're having trouble walking."

"I'm fine, Debra. I just need some fresh air. Have you seen Phoebe?"

"Miss Berthold? Last I heard she was visiting the Core to discuss our next incursion. She should be back within the hour."

"That's what I wanted to hear. Thanks."

"Anytime, Commander."

She hesitates for a moment before walking away, and I smile to myself about nothing in particular. I technically lead humanity, and everyone knows I'm the Hero who saved them from Bahamut, but I don't have an official title. Phoebe calls me 'Your Grace,' though she's growing out of the habit slowly, while Neil Adams calls me 'My Liege,' and others call me 'Commander.' I really ought to determine military rankings at some point.

Rows of machinery, including a line of sewing machines and a mechanic shop, spread out across the building, their whirrs and clicks telling tales of people and monsters crafting and fixing things for the general population. The door outside radiates warmth as the early Fall sun beams down on the lands.

When I step through, a current of air breathes down my neck, its temperature lower than the glaring daylight implies it should be. Winter is coming; it seems. The shiver down my back wakes me up, and my stupor vanishes. *I guess I really did need a breath of fresh air. Go figure.*

The Factory, or the Rust Bucket as some call it, sits about half a mile north of the palace. Even further north, over the ridge and down in the canyon below, Tarus II's forest stretches out for a few miles before eventually arriving at the warpgate installation.

Lately, Kar has raised concerns about the potential for demons to use Warpers and teleport into Hero City, thus attacking us at the heart of our infrastructure. He's right, of course. I take concerns about security earnestly and am debating deploying mechanized troops for day and night surveillance. With the threat of snow and the bitter cold encroaching on our doorstep, I'm worried about not only a demon invasion, but also about leaving troops out in the freezing weather.

If only I could look into the future, my life would be so much easier. Maybe I should see if Wordsmithing can bypass the boundary of time.

That's a scary thought. The last thing I'd want is to create paradoxes and tear apart the universe by accident.

Messing with time is a recipe for disaster. Marty Mcfly taught me that much.

Minutes pass as I pace down the street, inhaling deeply and kicking my legs out with more effort than usual. I try and shake some life into them, but my actions don't accomplish much. Sitting on a chair for hours is uncomfortable, no matter how much padding I slap down. I am not the office-drone type.

By the time I enter the palace, walk down the lobby and pass several people, I'm about ready to go back to work and start on another blueprint. Such is the curse of a lazy workaholic.

I arrive in front of my room. Once I open the door, my spherical vision illuminates the inside and- uh...

Phoebe lies on my bed, conked out, breathing silently. Her boots are still on, and she hasn't changed into her night-time clothes yet. Her room is right next to mine, so she must have mixed them up. This isn't the first time, and I won't complain.

I kick my shoes off but catch them with telekinesis before they *thud* onto the ground. Once that's done, I set the Crown on my dresser and silently glide over, ease onto my bed, and lay down beside Phoebe to rest my eyes for a moment. I know from experience that my pupils are like miniature flashlights, and on more than a few occasions, I've startled her when she saw my eyes in the darkness.

Feeling the bed move makes Phoebe's breath catch for a moment. She blinks her eyes open and yawns. "Jason?"

"Yeah. Hi."

"Oh. Sorry. I ended up in your room again." She grips the covers and pulls herself closer to me, then flops an arm and a leg across my body. "I hope you aren't mad."

"Exactly the opposite," I murmur, before leaning over and kissing her forehead. "As soon as you stop stalling and marry me, we can do this all the time."

She rubs her nose on my side to itch it, then lolls her head back. "I can't do that. We've barely been together a few months. We have to take things slowly. Besides, there are all these preparations to attend to..."

"Excuses, excuses." I poke her gently in the ribs. "You know, if we did things the way people did in my time, marriage wouldn't even be necessary."

"Not necessary? For shame. Marriage is a sacred vow, Your Grace."

"You're still calling me that?"

"Oops." Phoebe pulls away from me and adjusts her shirt. "Sorry. It's been a long day. Adams received more requests from low-level imps to join our society, along with some Gargoyles, a Succubus, two Sirens, and another Minotaur. None of them appear to be double agents, but you know what Kar says..."

"It only takes one," I say, finishing the sentence for her. "Right. Well, worst case scenario, we-"

Before I can continue, the phone beside me rings, making me damn near jump out of my skin. "Son of a bitch!"

Phoebe plays it cool, but I can tell she was a little startled too. "Want me to get it, or is the big strong man scared of some ringing?"

"I got it, I got it," I reply, before grabbing the phone. "Yeah?"

"Hurgh. Turtle, I hope I am not disturbing you. Gearhead said you had gone home for the day, but this is somewhat important."

Gearhead? Oh, right, he means Hans, I think to myself. Sometimes Kar's nicknames can get a little confusing. "I was thinking of taking a nap, but if you need me, I can pop over for a visit."

Kar clears his throat. "Hurgh. Blinker has returned, along with two demons. You might have forgotten, but I sent her off a couple of weeks ago to--"

"No, no, I remember. Yeah, I'll drop by. Have they said anything?"

I can almost hear Kar shake his head. "Nay. I haven't yet spoken to them about the Black Witch. If you'd like, I can ask them before you hang up."

"Not necessary. I'll be right over." Without saying 'goodbye,' I click the phone down and sigh. "Alright, I'll be back in a bit."

Phoebe rubs her eyes. "Was that Kar or Neil?"

"Kar. He wanted to know how my day was going and if he could set me up on a date with a cute redhead from accounting."

Phoebe slugs me. "Ass."

I smirk. "Kidding! Blinker brought some friends back from the Labyrinth. I'm going to head over there and ask them about Roland's world."

"Oh! Well, that's... wonderful news."

Despite her positive words, Phoebe's expression stays neutral. I can make it out even with total darkness in the room.

"Problem?"

"No, no." She pulls herself into a sitting position, and I mimic her movements. Phoebe inhales audibly. "It's just that once again, you're about to face off against that monstrous little girl. After what she did to you... you're still too kind. I know you haven't the heart to kill her."

Oh man... not this talk.

I pull away and sweep my legs off the side of the bed. "I'm a Wordsmith, Phoebe. I have a trillion different ways to handle any situation. I can freeze Amelia in carbonite or something. Violence isn't the only answer."

Phoebe crosses her arms. "Amelia slaughtered Roland's entire homeworld, Jason. All the humans, animals, and plant-life died because of her. She deserves the worst end possible."

"The guillotine?"

"Basically."

I exhale and climb off the bed. "I'll worry about Amelia when the time comes. I don't agree with capital punishment, morally, at least. It doesn't sit right with me. I believe in rehabilitation and redemption, where possible."

Phoebe jumps to her feet. "That's always your reply. If you'll excuse my impudence, I'll come with you and hear what she's been up to."

"Sounds good. Want me to drive?"

Phoebe pulls her socks and boots on. "No, I'll drive. I'll even take it easy since you're all tuckered out."

"Pff. You were snoring like an avalanche when I showed up."

"N-no I wasn't!" Phoebe gawks at me in the dark, then fumbles around. "Can you turn on the lights? I can't find my other boot."

"Sure."

Twenty minutes later, we cruise down the road, and the engine silently hums as the trees glide past us on the left and right. Phoebe, ever the kind soul, hitched a trailer full of supplies and weapons for the Core to her truck. Using it instead of my Ferrari was a good idea.

She hums along to some tune in her head and taps on the wheel. After a few minutes, she asks, "Say, Jason, your Crown allows you to make blueprints for the replicator, right?"

"Mhm." I touch the Crown, self-consciously checking to make sure I'm still wearing it.

"Well, I was thinking.... why not let someone else use the Crown to make blueprints? Then you wouldn't be cooped up in the Rust Bucket all day. You could use your Wordsmithing to make other items or do other things instead."

"Uhh... I don't know about that." My gut squeezes together reflexively. "The Crown is an ancient artifact. It can't be taken off someone's head unless they consent or die. Hell, even when I was comatose, you couldn't take the Crown off, remember? I had a terrible rash after my recovery."

Phoebe nods. "Okay, I understand. Giving it to Hans would be a bad idea, then?"

I chuckle. "Heh, yeah. To say the least. I mean, the guy used to be a Nazi."

"A Not-see? I think you mentioned it once. Oh! When you first met him!"

I fold my arms together. "Yeah. There's a bit of history involved, and it's kinda lengthy. Let's just say the Nazis gave Amelia a run for her money when it came to the business of exterminating human life."

Phoebe's expression darkens, and she turns to stare at me. "What? You can't be serious!"

"Eyes on the road, sweetheart. And yes, I am. They rounded up millions of humans of a different nationality and exterminated them en-masse. It was brutal. Most people didn't find out until a decade had passed."

She cocks her head. "What is 'a different nationality?'"

"Well, uh, think of King Arthur. Surely he had enemies from other nations?"

"The Saxons, yes."

"Alright. Well, imagine that after capturing hundreds of Saxon prisoners, he then suffocated them all, one by one, including their wives and children."

"Oh." Phoebe relaxes slightly. "That doesn't sound as bad as I was expecting."

"What?!" I nearly break my neck swiveling to gape at her.

She looks at me quizzically before turning back to the road. "Well, if you're at war, then killing your enemies is only natural. If you keep them as prisoners, you'll have to feed and keep them alive, and then you'll have to worry about revolts... at least, that was the case for Arthur."

"Okay, that's a fair point, but the difference is that the Nazis killed people who lived among them peacefully. It would be as if Arthur declared that all people with a different eye color were heretics. Do you see the difference?"

A flash of recognition appears in Phoebe's eyes. "Yes, I understand how that could be disconcerting."

"To say the least," I mutter. "Sometimes you worry me, Phoebe. You can be gentle, yet vicious and cold-hearted at the same time."

"I would argue that I'm merely pragmatic," Phoebe replies, while tugging a stray hair into place behind her ear. "You can't save everyone. Sometimes you have to let someone die to save another life, or give up on idealism and finish off your mortal enemy. War is messy, and pragmatists tend to win, not idealists."

I let silence fill the air for a few moments. "So, which was King Arthur? An idealist, or a pragmatist?"

Phoebe shakes her head. "Neither. He was a Hero. Thus, he did what was needed. I wavered, not him."

Her eyes blank out for a moment. "I should have atoned instead of fleeing and falling into Bahamut's trap."

"Then we wouldn't have met," I counter. "I thought you believed in fate, destiny, and all that other mushy stuff?"

Pursing her lips, Phoebe forces a smile. "That's a good point, Jason."

In the distance, the warp-gate comes into view. I lean back in my seat. "Anyway, going back to the original topic, I wouldn't give the Crown away unless it was to someone completely trustworthy. Like you."

"Me?" She cocks an eyebrow. "What would I do with it?"

"Make blueprints for the replicator. Stuff like that. It's not a bad idea. I'd rather you have the Crown than Hans."

Phoebe doesn't reply for nearly a full minute. The gears turn in her head. "I'm not good at creativity, Jason. You come from hundreds of years after me. You can easily think up crazy inventions, but that isn't my forte. Besides, what if I go power-hungry and decide to keep the Crown? You'll have to kill me to get it back."

I snort. "Pfft. Like that'll happen. I'll seduce you into taking it off."

"Just the crown?"

"Maybe a few other things, too."

She winks at me. "Your mind is always in the pig trough."

"Yeah. Anyway, the Crown does all the work. All you need is to think of a problem, like making a weapon that can cut through steel, and the Crown will help you design something suitable. A vivid imagination helps, but you'll do fine."

Phoebe sighs. "I was only suggesting it, but you're acting as if you've already made up your mind. Don't tell me this is all so you can get out of working at the Rust Bucket."

I cross my arms. "I'd be lying if I said that wasn't a part of it."

Phoebe slugs me in the shoulder. "Ass!"

I smile. "Kidding."

Phoebe reminds me of Amelia sometimes. The two of them aren't as different as they think.

* * *

Minutes later, we arrive at the warp-gate, and thanks to a vehicle access ramp I constructed, along with enlarging the portal somewhat, I've made it possible for her to drive her supplies straight into the Core.

We pass through the gate, and several monsters quickly shimmy out of the way as Phoebe drives down into the arena below. She slows the truck to a stop. "Special delivery from the Berthold Trucking Company!"

Several orcs walk up to the truck. "Ready to work! Something need doing?"

Phoebe hops out of the driver's side and jerks a thumb to the trailer hitched to the back. "Haul the food and weapons where they're needed."

"Be happy to!" The orcs amble to the back of the rig and start unloading.

Phoebe slams her door shut. She and I walk over to Kar, who I've already spotted. His giant blue form stands out in a crowd. A flicker of heat flits around him, revealing Blinker's presence.

"Kar! Sorry it took me a little while to get here."

I grin at Kar, but he doesn't return the smile. "Ah, Turtle, there you are. I have... bad news."

I stop and stare at him. The look on his face, though hard to make out thanks to his cold blood, is rather ominous. "And that would be?"

"We haven't told Roland yet." Kar gestures to two demons in front of him. "These two are Hernox and Fernox. Go on, tell him."

I examine the demons. They appear to be Scythers; demons who have two massive swords for arms. Their blades are sharp enough to slice through steel. While not the most intelligent Variants, they're great at tearing through the frontline of an enemy army.

The first one, I think Hernox, raises a sharpened limb. "I already told the green-skin what I know. The Council destroyed the Black Queen's hideout. The whole planet."

My jaw drops. "What?! When- no, *how* did they manage that?"

"We cannot say. All we know is that the planet is gone. They destroyed it entirely."

Phoebe's expression is numb. "Incredible. How... how could anyone..."

A realization dawns on me. "Amelia may have been on the planet. She might be dead."

Fernox leans forward, his beard spilling past his staff. "Rumor has it that there was an awe-inspiring battle. Emperor Diablo sent out his three mightiest Dukes to duel the Black Queen, but alas, she was the victor."

Hernox continues from his brother's words. "Agares, the Duke of Reptiles, died. Barbatos, the Duke of Steel, suffered gruesome wounds. Only Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, was able to escape unscathed. His ghost-form allowed him to evade her attacks."

"Jesus Christ," I cough out painfully. "Amelia battled *three* Demon Dukes and won? That doesn't sound like the Amelia I know."

Kar clasps his claws together thoughtfully. "The Frilled One consumed a world of human souls. Her power may be greater than that of the Emperors."

Fernox shakes his head. "The Emperors sealed her planet from accessing the Labyrinth and destroyed it. Those are the rumors whispering throughout the gambling dens of late. She is long dead."

It takes me a moment to gather my wits. "Maybe. Let's find out. **Locate.**"

The Scythers stare at me silently for a moment before my eyes seemingly tear from my skull and fly into the sky, then race through a void of blackness. Faster than I've ever traveled before, images of monsters, demons, humans, and far more zip past me as I speed through the Labyrinth. Walls and ceilings don't impede me, and eventually, my eyes slow to a crawl. A portal appears in an unmarked corridor.

Passing through the portal, I appear on the surface of an unknown world. The sun beats down, warming an ocean as it gently washes against a sandy beach. My eyes fly away, over a mountain, through trees, past villages made of wood and straw, and into a clearing where I eventually screech to a stop in front of a familiar face.

Amelia.

I swallow involuntarily.

The child I knew several months ago is gone. She is a fully-grown woman now, one with long white legs, flowing black hair, cherry-red lips, and a torn blue sundress clinging to her skin. The dress is far too small for her, revealing dips and curves where it should hang loose. I smile wryly, realizing that my eyes work. Locate gives me my vision back temporarily.

Seeing her is torture.

She's so beautiful, sensual, in a way that Phoebe isn't. Phoebe's purity is the exact opposite of Amelia's violent sexuality. If Phoebe is the light, then Amelia is the darkness.

Amelia stomps forward and frowns. "Oh, come on! I'll get new clothes later!"

The sword at her side, Dellfingler, chirps happily, "Why wear anything at all? Run free! Clothes are suffocating! Trust me; I'm a sword!"

She swats the weapon. "Idiot! Pervert! You're worse than Jason!"

Hearing her say my name makes my heart catch. I quickly pull away, flying back through the aether to return to my body.

Amelia isn't sexual. She isn't enticing. I can't be a guy... not this time.

She's a monster. I have to kill her.

However, I don't have to like the idea.

Suddenly, I'm back in my body. I stumble slightly and inhale. "She's alive!"

My tone sounds happier than it should. Too late, I notice Phoebe glaring at me. "Don't get all choked up or anything."

Kar shakes his head. "So the Frilled One survived the destruction of the planet. Unfortunate. How could she have done so?"

"A portal." I lean my head back slightly and rub it. "I passed through a portal at some point. She's on a new planet, likely devouring the humans there."

Fernox grumbles. "Perhaps she can open up portals."

Hernox nudges his brother. "Or she has an ally among the Warpers."

"It's unfortunate either way," Phoebe mutters before crossing her arms. "And here I thought we'd been handed a gift on a silver platter. What now? Will you go to face her?"

No need to think of a response. "Not a chance. She defeated three Dukes. I can't hope to beat her as I am now. I need to find that portal. I also need to come up with a way to overcome her new power."

Neil walks over and adds his two cents. "Perhaps you should ally with the demons. Maybe, with the help of an Emperor and Dukes, you could overwhelm her."

"And reveal himself to them? That's suicide!" Phoebe immediately jumps in to shield me. "I won't allow it!"

"Phoebe... that's very sweet of you." I lean over and wrap an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in close. Immediately some of her tension dissolves. *Works every time*, I think silently. "I can handle myself. Obviously, I'm not going to let the Demon Emperors know of my existence. That would be suicidal."

Silently I pull away from her. An idea occurs to me. "I won't kill demons to raise my energy level. However... if I remember correctly... there may be a way I can increase my combat abilities. Something I saw when I first entered Hell. I... I don't know for certain."

"What are you talking about?" Phoebe asks.

"I could be wrong. I don't know. Phoebe, do you remember what we talked about on the ride over?"

She shrugs. "Death camps?"

"The other thing."

"Pragmatism and idealism?"

I sigh. "The Crown! I'm going to leave the Crown with you. I need to move around the Labyrinth covertly. I can trust you with it. Keep helping humanity out and building new things."

"Jason." Phoebe blushes. "I told you I'm no good at that stuff."

"Well, I think you're wrong." Before she can react, I pluck the Crown from my head and slap it on hers. "You are now temporarily Queen Phoebe! All hail her highness! How's that sound?"

She doesn't respond.

"Uhh, Phoebe?" I wave my hand in front of her face. Only now do I notice the blank expression in her eyes. "Phoebe? Phoebe?!"

Phoebe slumps forward. I catch her. "Aaaahnnnn!!!" She howls in pain, and I suddenly remember my first experience with the Crown. The overwhelming information. The mental agony.

A moment later, she stiffens in my grasp and shakes her head. "Aoooo... Jason... Jason, it hurts. My head hurts."

"God, I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me." I rub her scalp gently, but already she's standing up straight again. "Are you better?"

Phoebe nods, and a tear rolls down her face. "You... jerk. I can't believe you. I need a nap now. My brain hurts."

"Sorry. It is pretty overwhelming the first time. You'll get used to it. Probably."

After a few moments, Phoebe blinks hard and waves her hand in front of her face. "Goodness! What is- what is that?! Can you see that?"

"Is it a holographic map of the Labyrinth?"

Phoebe shakes her head violently. "No, no!! It's a map of the-" She pauses, realizing what I said. "Oh, well, yes, I suppose you're right. Is this what you see all the time?"

"You can make it go away. Think really hard about disabling it, and it will vanish."

Neil, Kar, and the two Scythors stare at us silently while I guide Phoebe through the baby steps of using the Crown. Blinker hovers over and lands on my shoulder. "Soooo what's with the Crown? Is it magical or somethin'?"

I nod and explain it to her. The other four listen intently. It occurs to me that I kept its properties secret for a reason, and now these unknown Scythors know about its existence. Damn. The cat's out of the bag. Maybe I should try erasing their memories...

Several minutes later, Phoebe's eyes rove all around as she examines what is likely a series of images relating to chairs. "Wow! So many of them! I've never done wood-work a day in my life, and I feel as though I could become a professional carpenter by daybreak!"

"Imagine how much easier it is with Wordsmithing," I casually remark. "Do you understand now? You can help out humanity in my stead while I leave."

Phoebe pauses. I can immediately tell the heightened intelligence and memory retention the Crown gives is doing its work. "Hey... you didn't know Roland's planet was gone before, yet you must have already been thinking about leaving. What's the big idea?"

"I wanted to go treasure hunting for a while. I can't leave on a dime, though, so ensuring humanity had the Crown would mean you guys weren't defenseless."

"Hmm." Phoebe squints at me, second-guessing my motivations, but doesn't press further. "If you say so, Jason. Oh, also, you should leave Hoarhiim's orb with me."

I glance down at his shining orb in my belt pocket. "Huh? Why?"

"Well, in the darkness of the Labyrinth, you'll draw a lot of attention to yourself. You don't need light anyway, do you?"

"No. Fair point." I reach into my belt and tentatively hand the glowing orb over to her. "Keep him safe... okay? He's a good friend. Even if he is giving me the silent treatment."

"Of course."

Phoebe takes the orb from me, and a feeling of trepidation fills the air. Neil harumphs. "Ahhh, well, this is very sudden! I didn't expect you to leave out of the blue!"

"An occasional change of scenery is a good idea," I say. "Anyway, with the new weapons, turrets, and replicator, you guys can defend yourselves and advance without my presence. When I return, I plan to build a much bigger and better replicator system."

Kar punches his fist. "Damn straight! With several Dukes down, the demons won't know what hit 'em!"

"Strike while the iron is hot," I laugh.

Everyone shares a moment together, but Blinker tugs on my shirt collar and whispers, "Make sure you kiss your girl. She'll miss you TONS while you're gone!"

"Good idea," I whisper, patting the tiny woman on her head. The fairy giggles and flutters away, landing on Kar's shoulder.

Before I leave, I pull Phoebe aside and sweep her off her feet. "A little fairy told me I should."

"Oh, you."

Part 030: Beelzebub's Burning Desire

Rosalia and I stomp down the corridors of the Labyrinth, our footsteps echoing far into the distance. The flame in my hand burns hotter than usual, a result of my rising anger. Judging by the water dripping from the ceiling, I must be close to one of the aquatic areas. I despise water more than anything, given how it stands opposite to fire, but for once, it has little to do with my agitation.

"I'm sure the Dukes didn't mean anything by it, Mister Beelzebub," Rosalia says, as she trots along beside me. Perhaps in an attempt to anger me, she deliberately splashes in every puddle she sees. I'm on the verge of furiously charring her body to a crisp. "The Emperors and Dukes probably-"

"Don't you dare make excuses for them," I hiss. The sound of skeleton feet clinking behind us and orcs stomping along make me acutely aware of my environment. I can't lash out in anger, lest they think less of me. "Agares is dead. I didn't get to kill him and take his place, and even with Barbatos out of commission, they *dare* say I don't have the qualifications to become a Baron. Outrageous!"

Rosalia fumbles around, poking her fingers together. "You said you contributed greatly to the fight with the Black Queen. Maybe they forgot?"

My gut clenches. *I was useless in the fight. I know I was outmatched, but all the Dukes would have to do is give me a few hundred human souls, and I could have handled the wench. She wasn't anything special.*

Cheh. The so-called Overlords blew up the planet after sealing the Black Queen there. She's dead, or so they say. Does the Council know that for a fact, or are they guessing? I bet she's still alive. All I have is a hunch to go on, but I can't see her losing so spectacularly, not after revealing her secret weapon.

"The Dukes and Emperors haven't forgotten. They simply don't think I'm worthy. I'll show them."

Adjusting my suit with my free hand, I expand the fireball in my palm a little more, then lob it down the corridor to light the path up. The flame hits a patch of water and evaporates it, fizzling out a moment later. I quickly light another one and grumble silently.

I know what's going on in the Core. The monsters have found a group of humans with advanced weaponry, and they're taking over our warp-gates. Monsters think they can stand up to demons, but they're worthless. If I take back the Core, I'll prove my worthiness to become a Baron. The Council will have to acknowledge my power.

Fire is a symbol of demonic purity. Human myths once imagined Hell as a place of fire and brimstone. By controlling the element most closely associated with our kind, I put myself on a pedestal above my peers.

I deserve my position. I'm not like the rest of the rabble.

Rosalia and I continue to pace down the halls of the Labyrinth, the sound of orcs grumbling to each other at our backs, when she turns to look at me. "Do you miss your teacher? Agares, I mean."

The flame in my palm intensifies. "Of course not. Agares was a stupid old lizard who never stopped speaking in riddles and platitudes. However, I cannot forgive the Black Queen for slaying him. That was *my* job. I'd sooner-"

I pause mid-sentence and hold my hand out as movement in the distance catches my eye. "Hold. I saw something."

My ability to sense heat and warmth is unparalleled. A figure moves up ahead and ducks behind a corner, but I doubt it's a demon or a monster. They'd have no reason to hide.

"I don't see anything, Mister Beelzebub." Rosalia starts to take a step forward, but I quickly pull her back.

"Idiot. I did. Your eyes haven't half the acuteness mine do. Stay here."

Quietly, I sneak forward, igniting the fire in my palm with more gusto before flinging it at the distant wall. "Show yourself!"

The flame explodes, and for a brief instant, I catch sight of a robed figure illuminated by the fireball, but it pulls away and hides as the light disappears.

A chill goes down my spine as a head peeks around the corner, one with two pure white glowing eyes.

"You weren't supposed to see me."

The voice is masculine. Young, perhaps an evolved demon? No. Demons don't hide from others of our kind. He's much too tall to be an imp playing tricks.

Is he a spy?! Perhaps one of those monsters from the Core is trying to sneak around. But what type? Those glowing eyes are unlike any I've seen before. Hydra eyes can sometimes glow, as can the basilisks, but his humanoid face reveals he isn't one of them.

"Step out of the darkness. If you don't, I'll turn you into ash."

The male slowly rises to a standing position. He's even taller than I first thought, perhaps seven feet in total. He walks around the corner, and I quickly illuminate the area with another flame in my hand. Robes cover his entire body, and all I can see of him are the glowing eyes under his cowl. A massive bulge on his back makes me wonder if he's suffering from a body deformity.

Wait! Those eyes, they remind me of Barbatos! That's right! The Duke of Steel has glowing red eyes, unique even among demons. Is this person one of his servants?

Unlikely. Barbatos is a quiet individual. I heard that he never speaks to anyone, and he barely interacts with his section of the Labyrinth. He has a few of the Lords in the area handle most of the business there.

The stranger takes a step toward me. "I need to pass. Move, and I won't hurt you."

What?! He dares threaten *me*? The bastard. Of all the days for someone to slight me... I won't let him off the hook now.

"You're a fool. A simple apology would have saved you, but I'm in a terrible mood. Orcs, gut him."

The orcs, half-asleep behind me, snort audibly and wake up, realizing I was referring to them. I step to the side and allow ten of them to rush past me, fan-out, and block the intruder from squeezing through.

"Man-filth! Smells like hooman to me!" One of the orcs bellows.

The stranger's eyes aren't like any human I've ever seen. Still, Orcs have an uncanny sense of smell. If they say he's human, then...

"Please, I don't want to hurt you if I don't have to."

The stranger pleads for his miserable life again. However, something about his voice catches my attention. I've heard it before. I can't recall where from, but it was recent. It has a distinct whine to it, as though it belongs to a spoiled brat.

"Attack!" The monsters charge at him with their swords and axes raised high.

What happens next makes my heart stop. Without moving, the stranger closes his glowing eyes, and all of the orcs lift a foot into the air, then violently smash on the ground. Not once, but three times. *WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!*

Orcs are far more durable than the average monster, but not even they can withstand the Labyrinth-rattling force of the stranger's telekinesis. The orcs slump to the ground in defeat, and I gawk as the glowing-eyed 'human' opens his eyes.

"I told you to stay back. I've only knocked these fellows unconscious. Let me pass, and nobody else has to get hurt."

"The Hell I will!" My left-hand raises and forms another ball of fire in its palm. "You brazen little shit. I don't know who you are, but I'll find out when I peel the scorched flesh off your bones!"

The man sighs. "Ugh. I knew sneaking around wouldn't be easy. I'll try to be gentle."

C'mon, Beelzebub, don't waste another word on this maggot, I think to myself.

Quickly, I slap the fireballs in my palms together and spin them around rapidly, building up a scorching ball of flame. Its heat hammers my body, warming my blood as it reaches a thousand degrees. Before the stranger can evaluate its properties, I hurl the infernal orb at him, and it sails forty feet down the hall until it explodes and swallows the fool alive!

The flame smashes into the unconscious orcs and incinerates their bodies, killing them all instantly. It briefly lights up the room, and I catch a glimpse of the human's cloak down that side hallway once more.

The bastard! He hid from my attack! Coward!

After the flames subside, the man steps back out. "What the hell?! Those Orcs were your servants! You killed them! How could you do that?"

"A demon cares little for the lives of worms," I reply. "Who are you? Why do your eyes glow?"

"It's a long story," The man replies. "It involves a lot of alcohol and a party trick gone wrong. I knew I shouldn't have swallowed that disco ball."

"Aren't you the clown," I mutter. "I'm intrigued by your sudden appearance. After I kill you, I'll continue to the Labyrinth Core to slay the monsters who have defied the Dukes. It'd be a shame if any of them were your friends."

"You can try, Beelzebub."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh? How do you know my name?"

"I know all sorts of things," the bastard replies, noncommittally.

"Tell me yours, rat. I don't extend the privilege to any random insect I face, but you intrigue me."

"Oh, how polite of you," The human mutters. "I'm Jason, but you can call me Jason. First name Jason, last name Jason."

"Are you mocking me?"

The human blinks. "I'd never dream of it. Now, let me pass. I'm in a bit of a rush."

The fire in my palms increases in intensity. "Sounds like you have a *hot* date."

Jason narrows his eyes. "I have no interest in fighting you. My target is Amelia."

My body freezes. *Amelia? What? Why would he be after the Black Queen? Who the devil is this human?*

"You're after the Black Queen, hmm? I have bad news for you, vermin. She's dead. The Overlords destroyed her planet."

"She isn't," Jason replies calmly. "Amelia survived, and now she's on a different world, devouring all its life. I've spent many weeks preparing to fight her, but for every minute I waste, she grows ever more powerful. I'll have to face her sooner rather than later if I hope to win."

My heart pounds like a war drum in my chest. *The Black Queen is alive after all? I... I wasn't wrong! The Council doesn't know, yet!*

I calm myself down. "Impossible. How can you be so confident? Every report states that she was trapped on that dead rock when the Overlords destroyed it. How can you know what our greatest Oracles don't?"

Jason crosses his arms. "I have my ways. Now, are you going to let me pass, or will I have to make you kill more of those grunts behind you?"

"You'll regret mocking me, insect," I whisper.

Slowly, deliberately, I reach up and unclasp my jacket, one button at a time. Then, I peel it off and hold it in the air. "Rosalia, take this and fold it. *Neatly.*"

She nods and rushes forward, gently taking it from my grasp.

My long-sleeved black undershirt, of course, looks impeccable. Not like the rags many demons wear, including the Duke of Pain. I smile slightly at the human. "I'll keep the pants. You don't deserve the sight of what's underneath."

Jason smirks. "Wow, you've got quite a sense of humor, *Beelzy*. I hope you don't expect to beat me with jokes."

My jaw clenches. "*What* did you call me?"

"Beelzy. It's short for Beelzebub."

A spurt of flame pops out of my mouth as I exhale. "Maggot. I'm going to beat you to a pulp. I won't stop until you're a puddle of blood."

"Darn. And here I thought you'd go easy on me since I'm new to all this."

The man holds his palm out. Suddenly, a cylindrical, metal object leaps from his belt into his hand.

I frown.

What the Devil is that?

Part 031: Loss

"Seven Devils!" The words blurt from my mouth as a blade of light pops out of the human's metal cylinder. *I've never seen a weapon like that before!*

The weapon hums like a horde of angry bees. My adversary raises it upward, and it faintly illuminates his face. However, I still can't make out his appearance.

"Give up, Beelzy. I'd rather not maim you if I don't have to." Jason lowers into a defensive stance, and the blade illuminates his clothing dramatically. It doesn't escape me that its pure white color matches his glowing eyes.

There must be a connection.

Quickly, I glance back at Rosalia. "Summon the Dukes! I'll fight this worm in the meantime!"

She nods fearfully as her eyes lock onto his light-sword. After a moment, she turns and rushes away, leaving us alone.

"What, are you afraid?" The human smirks, a mocking tone in his voice. "Need backup before we've even fought?"

"Not at all," I murmur, as I gather fire in my palms. "I want the Dukes here to confirm my victory. Beating you will net me a hefty reward in human souls, perhaps enough to become a Baron."

"You talk a lot for someone who's supposedly confident. Are you stalling for time?"

The fire in my hands rapidly heats up to the optimal temperature as I take a step back. "A battle is more than a series of practiced maneuvers, insect. Often, careful preparation will mean a fight is over before it's even begun!"

Instead of hurling a fireball, I aim both palms forward and twist at the same time to summon a cone of flame that instantly expands around the entire hallway. The inferno screams ahead, shrieking like a wild banshee as it races at the human.

He can't evade. Not even his hidey-hole will be any use this time!

Suddenly, as if the gods have decided to mock me, my attack freezes its momentum! The flame halts, almost as if it's hit an invisible barrier, then backfires and reverses its direction back at me. The superheated flames devour my clothing and tear apart the skeletons behind me. The reanimated beings don't stand a chance against my magical flames.

Luckily, fire does nothing to me. Other than my dignity, I suffer no injuries.

Cutting off the fuel, I clasp my hands shut. The wall of flame stops behind me at some point as my clothes transform into ash. *Rosalia would kill to see my naked body*, I muse.

"You reversed my flames. Only magic could accomplish such a feat," I growl. "Humans can't use magic. What are you?"

Embers crackle and pop on the ceiling, walls, and ground. The insect wipes his nose. "I ask myself that every day. Nephilim, perhaps? The son of an angel and a human?"

"Nephilim?!" I can't stop my jaw from slackening. "Impossible! All the angels should be dead! How stupid do you think I am?!"

Jason raises his light-sword until it touches the ceiling. Sparks appear for a moment, and he pulls away, a pinprick burned above him. "You're not the first Lord I've fought. I've already beaten several others. Are you a one-trick pony? Even your size isn't that impressive."

"My size?" I raise an eyebrow. "I'm taller than the average demon."

"I wasn't talking about your height," Jason remarks with a smile.

"How crude of you."

I can't enter the rat's melee range. His light-sword looks extremely dangerous. However, a cord drapes underneath it and around behind his back to that giant lump. If the sword uses energy, then does that mean it has a power source?

Even if it does, what about the attack he used on the orcs? He may have other weapons. Possibly magic, too. But if that's the case, then when did he perform the hand signs?!

Devils! This human is an aberration, just like the Black Queen! Since when did humans grow to be so-

* * *

Oh.

I understand, now.

"I knew I'd seen you before, Jason. You were beside the Black Queen, Amelia, weren't you? She claimed the human at her side was a mighty warrior. Agares thought she was bluffing, but it seems she wasn't. What is your relationship with that wench?"

He bows his head slightly. "My relationship? Amelia... tried to kill me. Or to wound me. After all, I am a Hero. I'm her worst enemy."

"A Hero?" Another shock races through my body. "L-liar! Joan was the final Hero! It's been tens of thousands of years since her death. You claimed to be Nephilim, and now a Hero. I thought Heroes never lied."

"Believe what you will," Jason says, before sighing. "I know you sent your girlfriend to call for backup, so I'd like to get this over with." He disengages his weapon and closes his eyes. Then, he speaks a single word. "Seizure."

"Excuse me? What do you mean by 'Seiz-'"

Before I can finish my sentence, horrible agony erupts in my mind. My skull seemingly shatters and twists, lancing into every part of my brain.

"Aaaaauughhh!"

A vile scream escapes my lips, but I can't control myself. Fire erupts from my mouth and hands. At some point, I end up on the ground, but I don't remember falling. Spots dance all over my vision.

"-should only last an hour or so. Sorry for the trouble," The human says. I can't understand his words.

Oh, Devils, the pain! THE PAIN!

* * *

A moment later, I blink — sweat bubbles from every pore in my body. My chest heaves and falls, and my mouth fills with the taste of sand. I need water! Thirsty!!!

"Mister Beelzebub! He's awake!"

Rosalia's irritating voice cuts through the fog obscuring my vision.

"About time," Bael's voice replies. He sounds distant, yet close. I raise my head to look for him, only to realize his feet are inches from my face. The stench of his rotting toe fungus makes me gag. "Face-down and ass-up! Bahaha! What a way to land! Whatever that human did to him, he left the Lord of Fire in the funniest position I've ever-"

"Quiet, Bael," Diablo says, lightly slapping the other's chest. "We don't even know what happened. He's been screaming in pain ever since we arrived. The humans may have developed a new weapon."

Bael grows quiet. "Hmm. A human, huh. Hey! Girly! You sure the intruder you saw was a human? Seems mighty unlikely."

While the Second Emperor and First Duke converse, I pull away from Bael and stagger backward to sit on my butt. My head swoons from the brutal attack the human unleashed on my mind. I can barely focus my thoughts.

I open my mouth to speak, but my voice rasps painfully. "He- hummun, Jay-sun... Heee-ruhhh..."

"Eh? Wassat?" Bael leans in closer and cups a hand to his ear. "Can't talk straight?"

"His throat sounds dry. Here, give him some water," Diablo says, as he reaches into his robes and pulls out a small flask of liquid.

The cool water pours into my mouth. I cough a little but immediately feel life return to me. A moment later, I haggardly pull myself into a sitting position. Rosalia hands me my suit top she took earlier, and I use it to cover my lower regions.

"Sh-shameful. I shall never live this down," I whisper under my breath.

"What happened?" Diablo asks. "We came as soon as Rosalia told us about the light-sword."

I stare at Diablo for a few moments as I try to make sense of the preceding events, but several thoughts bubble up all at once. *If I tell Diablo and Bael what befell me; they'll laugh. After getting my posterior handed to me by the Black Queen, I already look unworthy for the position of Baron, let alone Duke. I can't let it appear as if some random human easily beat me. Besides, he spoke one word, and I collapsed! Pathetic!*

"It was horrible," I begin. "First, the man pulled out his sword of light. It was a weapon unlike any I'd seen before, seemingly able to slice through everything in its path. I dodged it for as long as I could and struck back with my flames. He kept pulling back and evading my attacks like a coward. As I put him on the defense, I tricked him into revealing his name."

Bael nods, his cockiness from earlier gone. "Whoa. I don't even remember weapons like that during the Energy Wars."

"I've seen a few in my lifetime," Diablo muses. "Continue. Who was he?"

"His name is Jason. He's a Hero!" I blurt the words out quickly, capturing their imaginations with my intricate wordplay. "Agares and I both met him when we first encountered the Black Queen! He was the little runt who stood beside her. She claimed he was a mighty warrior, but Agares didn't believe her, given her past lies."

Diablo's eyes widen. "Ah, yes, Agares told me about the encounter with Amelia. He mentioned she was keeping a human at her side, but Agares thought the boy was just for food."

"Precisely!" I jump to my feet, causing the shirt covering my demonhood to fall to the ground. Rosalia nearly faints at the sight of my oversized meat-log. "He's a Hero! She trained him for the Devil only knows what purpose!"

Diablo glances at Bael, then back at me. "So how did he defeat you?"

I pause, quickly thinking up a brilliant explanation that will win them over with a tale of my bravery. "Jason unleashed a variety of awesome powers on me. We fought for over thirty minutes before he used a psionic attack. My vision blurred, and he knocked me out when my defenses were down. He must have run away in the chaos."

"Wow! I'm glad he didn't kill you, Mister Beelzebub!" Rosalia wipes her forehead, relieved. "You must have scared him good!"

Bael narrows his eyes. "Yeah, I betcha did. Say, why *did* that human spare you, anyway? He sounds like one tough cookie."

Damn. Bael acts like an idiot, but he can be unusually perceptive when it comes to matters of war.

I pause for a moment, before answering, "He kept mentioning my backup. He must have wanted to leave before you showed up. I don't believe I was out long."

Diablo scratches his chin. "We only got here about five minutes ago. Any idea which way he went?"

I quickly glance up and down the hallways, remembering my positioning. "Well, Jason wanted to pass Rosalia and me. Ah! He said that Amelia was still alive! He said he wished to fight her!"

"The Black Queen is alive?" Diablo chews his upper lip. "This tale grows stranger by the minute. I thought you said he worked for her?"

"Aye. Amelia must have attacked Jason. The two of them had a falling out. I believe he holds a grudge."

"Tch." Bael crosses his arms over his bare chest. "He can't have gone far. Beelzebub, you go 'n find an Oracle. Tell them to contact Diablo 'n me. With the Oracles' help, we'll gather the other Dukes and kill this

Hero once and for all. We'll hunt the runt down and find out what he knows about the Black Queen."

My eyes blink reflexively. "You want me to find an oracle? No, I should assist you."

Diablo chuckles. "Haha. You've exerted yourself enough for today, young one. If this human is involved with the Black Queen, then he's too dangerous for you to handle. Besides, you barely survived by the skin of your teeth."

Rosalia nods energetically. "They're right, Mister Beelzebub! I don't want you to get hurt again! You should go to the healing chambers and-"

"I'm fine, woman!" My teeth gnash at her constant annoyance. "You should find the Oracles! I can help the Dukes!"

Bael snickers. "Hehe, you couldn't handle one human, Hero or not. I don't need you draggin' us down, pup. Now hop to it, like a good little imp. This Hero stuff is Duke and Emperor business."

"What he said," Diablo adds. "Come on, then, Bael. Let's track him down. If we're lucky, maybe the Lord of Fire scratched him. A blood trail would make our jobs a lot easier."

Bael scoffs. "Tch. I can smell a fleshbag anywhere in the Labyrinth. Just follow the stench of weakness."

Without waiting for my reply, both demon leaders turn and walk down the path, leaving Rosalia and me together, alone. The last thing I hear is Bael's voice, as he says, "Guh! To think, we might've missed him by just a few minutes! He probably slipped right past us!"

* * *

Anger swells in my chest.

Despicable insect. Now humans have shamed me twice! First came the Black Queen, and now the so-called Hero. Thanks to this 'Jason,' the Dukes look down on me even more than they did before!

Curses. How did the human beat me? All he did was say a word! 'Seizure.' Somehow he attacked my mind and rendered me defenseless, yet he didn't kill me. He didn't kill the orcs, either. Perhaps he's soft? He might be someone who believes in peace or some other Skarn droppings. Maybe this is a weakness I can exploit!

A minute passes as I breathe slowly and think about several things. Rosalia clears her throat, interrupting my thoughts. "Um... M-Mister Beelzebub, sir? Shouldn't we do as Diablo ordered?"

"Yes, yes. I know."

The human must be from the Core. There's been too much suspicious activity there. I should continue my original plan to restore my standing. In fact, I need it now more than ever. While I attack the Core, the Dukes will defeat the Hero. It will be a two-pronged attack that will crush the monster insurrection and demonstrate my worthiness for all to see.

"Rosalia, I have plans of my own. You must find an Oracle and pass Diablo's orders along. I will attack the Core just as I originally planned."

She shakes her head. "No! Beelzebub, you'll get in big trouble! Besides, your contingent was wiped out by that human! You can't go to the Core alone!"

"I'll figure something out. Do as I say!" My teeth grind together as I strongly consider backhanding the worthless woman. *Just what I need, an underling questioning my orders. Heh, come to think of it, that's what I'm doing to Diablo and Bael. Oh well, it can't be helped. I'm far smarter than either of them.*

Turning away, I head the opposite direction that the Duke and Emperor went. "Begone with you, Rosalia!"

She sniffles. "I'm... I'm worried! Fine! I'll do it, but don't expect me to be there for you when you get in trouble!"

She stomps away, her boots echoing off the walls as she leaves.

I smirk. *Like I care what a fat, ugly she-orc thinks.*

Glancing down at my stripped body and filthy suit top, I sigh.

First, I need new clothes. I refuse to enter a battle in the nude.

Part 032: Specter of Death

I run down the hallways, darting left and right, all the while thinking to myself, *that Beelzebub guy was a loon.*

Not having the Crown of Solomon was a bad idea at first until I realized I could say 'Map' and have a chart of the Labyrinth appear in my mind. The downside is that it only outlines places and corridors I've been to, but at the same time, it does allow me to keep track of my route.

Sadly, the last two months were for nothing. I found several divine artifacts, but they were worthless. Amelia has grown stronger during all that time, while my gains were sparse.

Keeping in contact with Hero City is easy enough. I can say 'Call,' and speak to Phoebe, Neil, or anyone else as needed.

Despite suffering some setbacks, I'm surprised at how smoothly things have gone. I ran into a Demon Lord, Beelzebub, but the guy was such a pushover that now I'm worried I may be the single person who stands between Amelia planet-level hunger. I've only faced Lords up to now, while Amelia defeated three Dukes at the same time.

If I can't stop her, I don't see how anyone can.

Slowing down, I wipe my forehead, realizing I'm feeling quite tired. "**Water.**"

A jug of icy cold water pops into existence before me, and I plop down for a moment to catch my breath. The liquid of the gods tastes incredible when I'm running around in the Labyrinth. Something about the ambient temperature here is always just a little too warm to be comfortable. I can cool myself down with Wordsmithing, but that unpleasant heat always comes creeping back.

And of course, thinking about the heat gets me wondering about other things too. What produces oxygen in the Labyrinth? I know plants exist, but they're all in the upper and outer sections.

"**Pizza,**" I say, giving myself a slice of pepperoni deep-dish with stuffed crust. Mmm. Pizza on Earth never tasted so perfect. It's cooked exactly the way I like.

As I chow on the food, a thought occurs to me. *It's funny how I can use my internal spiritual energy to create food, water, and external sources of power. Then when I rest at night, my spiritual energy completely refills.*

The more I think about them, the more I realize how utterly broken my abilities are. If I keep experimenting, I'm sure to find new ways to use my Wordsmithing.

After drinking my fill, I jump to my feet and Wordsmith again. "**Vaporize.**" The jug of water vanishes from existence, leaving no trace behind for anyone to find. Gotta cover my tracks.

I've been reflecting on Amelia a lot, lately. I haven't stopped thinking about how I can put an end to her inhuman rampage since I left the Core. What if I vaporized her with my Wordsmithing? I could kill her, just like that. I could do the same to all the demons.

But... should I? Is it right for me to pass judgment on others?

My power is abnormal. It's not something that should exist. Godlike, incredible potential shouldn't be in the hands of any random human. So why do I have it? Was I chosen for a reason? Am I somehow superior to everyone else? What about Einstein? Wouldn't he have made better use of Wordsmithing if God had given him the ability?

No. It's random luck that I was the one bestowed with Wordsmithing. I may be a Hero, the descendant of mythical warriors, but I don't consider myself legendary. I might be the last hope for humanity, but I feel like a child playing with a gun. My ability is a dangerous thing, something that might backfire and hurt the people I love.

My footsteps echo off the walls as I start walking down the corridor again.

I wonder if Phoebe thinks about me when she sleeps, my mind wanders. I know I like to dream about her, though I can't sleep in the wilds of the Labyrinth.

Indeed, over the past two months, I've not slept even one time, instead choosing to use my slowly depleting mana reserves to keep myself awake. I don't feel any aftereffects, so it must be working, but I can't keep it up forever. Sooner or later I'll need to catch a catnap and hope the demons don't-

What was that?

A noise behind me makes me stop and listen. *Is that... clicking?*

Moments pass. Nothing. Neither my sonar nor my infrared vision show any blips.

God, I'm getting jumpy. Maybe I should take a nap after all.

A chill goes down my back as I continue walking. There's nobody around, but I feel naked and defenseless. An eye watches me.

One or two minutes pass. The feeling intensifies. A sensation like a finger presses against my back, and I immediately jump forward and spin around. "Who's there?!"

A male voice replies. "Ksss, I was carelesss."

I can't see any part of the man at all. There's no heat, and he doesn't show up in a way that my sonar can detect.

"I've found you, flessshbag. Your glowing eyesss are quite remarkable. I look forward to adding them to my collection."

"What... what the hell are you? A ghost?!"

"Sssomething like that. I am Mephisssto, Duke of Missst. A pleasssure to make your acquaintance, keh keh keh." Mephisto coughs like a chain-smoker. I can only assume he's laughing. "It sseemsss you're having trouble ssseeing me. Looksss like thossse eyesss are jussst for ssshow."

My heart pounds in my chest. This... *thing*... is a Duke? It has an entirely different presence from that Beelzebub fellow. The killing intent ripples from it and spills around, creating a sense of dread in the back of my mind.

While the Duke of Mist hisses and titters to himself, I quickly jerk my hand out. My Lightsaber flies off my belt, lands in my palm, and ignites. My backpack's cord attachment snaps onto the lightsaber, and I swing wildly in front of me, trying to hit whoever the hell this new guy is. My slashes cut into the walls on either side, slicing out paths of molten dirt and stone wherever my weapon strikes.

I jump back and stare silently, but I can't tell if my attacks had any effect.

"Oh no, you got me," The Duke of Mist says, a mocking tone in his voice. "Ohh, the pain. It hurtsss, I'm dyiiing." He drags the last syllable out, cranking his sarcasm meter to max levels.

While Mephisto laughs to himself, I send out a wave of telekinetic energy, yanking rocks from the ceiling down and onto where I think he's standing.

Crash! Crash!

The ceiling collapses on Mephisto's position, only for the Duke to laugh even more uproariously.

"Keh keh keh! Good effort, flessshbag. Ssstill, perhapsss Beelzebub wasss telling the truth. You appear to be a Hero, after all."

"I can't hurt you? Not even a little bit?!"

"You may attempt to ssstrike me if you pleassse, but..." The Duke pauses for dramatic effect. "Allow me to ssshow you how it'sss done."

Suddenly, from the point on my back that I felt his touch a minute ago, a violent pain erupts, sending me sprawling to the floor, my lightsaber just barely missing my face by inches. Agony jolts up my spine in waves, as if currents of electricity are coursing through my internal organs.

"Gaahg! Hnnngh! Fuck! Shiiit!"

I nearly bite off my tongue as my body reflexively curls into the fetal position. I can't make the pain stop at all!

After a few moments of writhing, I blink back tears and remember my Wordsmithing. "**N-Neutralize! Heal!**"

The pain stops. I freeze and shiver on the ground for half a minute as nausea roils around in my stomach. Using my telekinesis, I deactivate my lightsaber so that I don't kill myself by accident.

"Sssussspiciousss." Mephisto's voice holds a note of caution. "Ssstopping my Pain Inducement without making hand sssignsss... very unussual."

With a force of will that makes my head spin, I leap to my feet and quickly dash away. *Jesus Christ! Mephisto isn't fucking around! I can't see him, and I can't hurt him either!*

Scarcely have I made it fifty feet, when Mephisto's voice appears in front of me, making me screech to a halt. "Foul flessshbag! I wasn't done ssspeaking! Ssshow ressspect to your new massster!"

"Fuck that!" I yell and wonder how the hell he got in front of me. "**Wall!**"

The entire Labyrinth shakes as a foot-thick barrier forms between us in less than a second, and I quickly rush back in the direction I just left. I don't want to head back toward Beelzebub, but maybe if I

put some distance between myself and Mephisto, there will be a side tunnel or two that-

"Insssolent human!"

Mephisto's voice appears in front of me yet again, making me scream in fright and stumble backward, landing on my ass. *This Duke can move through walls?! Who the fuck am I dealing with?!*

Before I can get up and run away, an iron fist pounds me in the chest. It knocks the wind out of me and sends me tumbling back head over heels.

My vision spins. The nausea from a few moments ago reappears in violent form, and I vomit all over, only to realize I'm on my back. The bile erupts and lands all over my face, neck, and chest.

"Kuh-clean! **Clean!**" I belch the words out, and the vomit disappears, leaving me feeling minty fresh, yet still horribly sickened.

I can't see him. I can't sense him. He's a goddamn ghost, able to move faster than me and pass through walls. Compared to Beelzebub's little fire-show, this Duke is unspeakably dangerous. Forget Amelia! If I can't beat the Duke of Mist, I'm done for!

A familiar sound catches my attention. Clicking. The sound I heard before. Staggering to my feet, my jaw drops as a massive wall of skeletons shambles toward me. These aren't like the weak little buggers Beelzebub controlled. Their intricately shaped armor, enormous steel shields, and swords all speak to a level of power I haven't seen before.

Even so, skeletons usually wouldn't be a problem, but with Mephisto lurking around, I can't afford to treat them lightly. They'll distract me while he circles around and jams a knife into my back.

"Keh keh keh... do you like my creationsss? I am the massster of Death in the Labyrinth." Mephisto's voice is still a little ways away. He must have punched me and stayed in his spot. "Reanimation isss trivial for one assss powerful assss I. The other Dukeesss don't undersstand the ssskill and danger involved in reanimation, but sssoon they will."

My breath comes in gasps. I need to escape, but the Duke of Mist moves faster than me. I can't hurt him with ordinary attacks, nor can I slow him down with barriers.

Think, Jason, think!

I can't. My head is still spinning from that spinal attack. I'm out of breath, exhausted, and facing a Demon Duke; one of the most powerful beings in the Labyrinth.

Amelia beat him in combat?!

Yes, that's right. She killed that Agares fellow, but Mephisto was one of the other two Dukes that were there. If the Scyther brothers weren't lying, then that means he managed to escape unscathed. Perhaps Amelia couldn't hurt him.

FUCK!

How do I get out of this situation?!

An idea appears. *It's worth a shot!*

"Speed! Speed! Power! Power! Perception!"

If the Duke of Mist is fast, then I have to be faster!

Spinning on my heel, I dash away, racing toward the fake wall I created. Unlike last time when I was with Amelia and I hyper-speed-dashed into the Great Doors of the Labyrinth Core, this time, my mind manages to keep up with the speed increase.

I pound through the fake wall without stopping, rushing with all my might, occasionally yelling **"Heal!"** whenever the power threatens to tear my limbs apart.

Minutes pass. I continue tearing down the Labyrinth halls at speeds approaching a hundred miles an hour. Left, right, through this path and that, I ignore my heart screaming in pain. Ultimately, I can't maintain my mad dash and slow to a stop. My body aches as if death is moments away.

Gasping for breath, I speak again, **"Normalize,"** returning my body to its original state.

"Wa... Water."

As the jug of icy water appears in my hand, I lift it to take a drink.

A voice whispers in my ear.

"Oopsss, you almosst lossst me."

Part 033: Stab and Seek!

"How?! How do you keep finding me?!" My head jerks around wildly as I strain to listen for the slightest hint of Mephisto's position. Sometimes I can make out a scraping sound against the wall, but I think he's fucking with me at this point.

Mephisto continues to stand about thirty feet away. He's allowing me to put some distance between us, but any notion of escape is an illusion at this point. "Ksss... My minionsss include not only the dead, the damned, and the decrepit... but the bugsss ass well. While you flee, left and right, through thisss passage and that... the wallsss part for me. I sssee you, no matter where you run. You will be mine..."

He can communicate with insects?

A quick stomp of my foot illuminates the room around me. Here and there, tiny imperfections on the walls display various bugs crawling around.

Damn! This bastard never lets up! While I run up and down the hallways like a chicken with its head cut off, he can travel through the walls and show up right in front of me!

Okay... okay... if that's the case, then focus! I can escape him! It isn't impossible!

Several ideas appear in my mind. *Slay the bugs. Distract him. Fake left, but go right.*

However, there's an even better idea. I don't have to kill Mephisto's spies if I can turn them against him.

Under my breath, I whisper, "**Mirage. Shimmer. Illusion. Smoke.**"

All around me, copies of my body appear. They're hallucinations, fake Jasons to distract him. A cloud of smoke erupts, and my clones and I take off, racing away from the Duke. I shift left and right, dashing between each of my copies and shuffling them around.

To my surprise, I hear Mephisto hiss in anger. One of my copies registers a hit as he swings to hit them, his knife passing through their illusory body. I don't look back, but instead smile as I hear him yell, "What?! Foolisssh worm... you can't ssstop me with tricksss! I'll cut all of them to piecesss!"

Each of the mirages shares a mental link with me. When a path split appears up ahead, I run left with several hallucinations, while the others go right. *Every time you encounter a junction, break off from each other*, I order them.

The mindless incorporeal copies don't respond, but a tingle tells me they understand.

Good. I continue running, and grumble as Mephisto lucks out and follows my crew and not the others. He continues to stab mirages one by one. When the next split appears, I whisper, "**Waypoint.**"

It's only a hunch, but if this works, I might be onto something. Sometimes it's almost funny how the threat of a demon chasing after me can get my almonds rolling.

Wordsmithing has infinite possible effects. Having played many video games in my life, I hypothesize that if I set a waypoint, I might be able to jump back to it. Teleportation is something I've strongly

considered, but it also terrifies me. What if I teleport inside a wall and fuse into it? I could die!

But as everyone always says, there's no time like the present. This Demon Duke won't leave me alone!

A split appears a hundred feet ahead. I scowl as the Duke of Mist slashes at yet another of my illusions, dissipating it into nothingness.

I have only a dozen mirages left. He'll hit me soon. I don't want that knife touching me. The sensation of a million volts of electricity slamming into my spine was more than a *little* unpleasant.

When we split this time, I continue moving with only two clones. For a split-second, Mephisto pauses behind us and curses. "Devilsss... what if thisss isssn't even the right one?!"

He relents a moment later and chases after me, making me grimace. *I almost lost him.*

One slash, my rear mirage falls. Another slash, the final copy falls.

Under my breath, I choke out, "**Waypoint. Return.**"

Boom.

I vanish while running and reappear at my first checkpoint, slamming against the wall. The change of scenery only disorients me for a moment, and I quickly spot the bugs crawling on the walls. *Mephisto will figure out what I did within seconds. There's no time to lose!*

"Invisibility. Stealth."

Transforming my body in a way similar to Mephisto's, I take off down the opposite corridor that I first went, heading left toward what I hope is freedom. My shoes become noiseless, neither squeaking nor scuffing the floor as I run. Without my sonar, I have no choice but to rely on my infrared vision to see.

This time, I spend an hour fleeing for my life. Left, right, up, down. Corridors and hallways pass me by the dozens.

I slow down once I enter an area with several puddles splashed across the floor. My mental map tells me this biome is most likely a marine area, one with vast reservoirs of water.

Fireflies buzz about, here and there. The ones in the Labyrinth are significantly brighter than the ones I knew about on Earth, and they illuminate rooms like twenty-watt bulbs. They don't do anything for me with my current vision, but seeing a lot of them means I must be nearing an area with a high monster density. Demons and monsters aren't allowed to eat the fireflies.

Creeping forth, I avoid puddles and squint at the ground, unable to make much out. My shoes produce no noise, and the cool temperature in this marine biome makes my infrared vision nearly worthless. My best bet is to follow the fireflies since they produce a small amount of heat as they buzz around and crawl on the Labyrinth's walls.

"Normalize," I whisper, returning my body to its original loudness level. I keep the invisibility active, just in case. It's slowly draining my energy, which is terrible, but at the same time, I don't want to take any chances. Better to lay low and pray the Duke can't find me.

Using my Telekinesis, I hover over the ground, slowly moving forward without splashing in puddles. Every so often, I grab a rock and tap the walls to light the way, but otherwise, I remain entirely silent.

Splashing sounds in the distance, along with the voices of incredibly cute women, make my heart flutter. *Not this time*, I think to myself. Sirens can go to hell.

"Oooh, hehehe..." One of the girls coos to someone out of sight. As I draw closer to one walled-off alcove, a large opening reveals a massive demon with hulking armor sitting silently before a pool. Located before him is a giant pool of water, one where dozens of creatures splash around playfully. After a moment of observing them, I realize they aren't sirens, but instead, mermaids.

"Barbatos, sweetie, are you feeling okay?" One of the mermaids pulls herself out of the water and splashes onto the land beside the iron giant. I slow my hovering for a moment to observe their interaction. "You were gone for over a month! Come on, take off all that armor, and we'll show you a good time!"

The demon shifts slightly, his heavy plates of steel grinding together. "No need."

"I heard that nasty Black Witch hurt you! I can't believe it, love! I thought you were invincible!" While the mermaid crows at him, two others swim over and stop at the edge of the pool.

"Defeated. Yes. Agares, dead. I was lucky."

The demon's voice is deep and ominous, yet tinged with sadness and melancholy. Only now do I remember his name.

Barbatos! He's one of the Dukes of Hell! Shit. I can't stay here. I barely escaped the last guy. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Continuing past the entrance, I start to hover away, only to freeze as Barbatos speaks. "Intruder. Reveal yourself."

My heart slams. *Fuck that! This guy is the size of a mountain!*

I land on my feet and start running, only to gasp in alarm. Without so much as disturbing the air, the metal monster appears in front of me.

Red flag! Danger! My mind screams at me to run, but I hesitate, unsure what my best move is.

Barbatos stands, arms crossed. "Show yourself."

Guilty, I mutter under my breath, "**Reveal.**"

As my body reforms, the Duke's helmet shifts slightly. "Human?"

"If it's a fight you want," I say, raising my tiny fists and striking a pose, "I'll give it to you."

Barbatos is several inches taller than me. His armor adds to his size, making him appear nearly eight feet tall. However, despite his intimidating appearance, the Duke makes no motion to fight. "Sacred place. Leave. Never return."

I stare dumbly. "W-what? You're letting me go?"

"Fighting. War. Unending. Not for me. My creed. Protect friends only."

"Ohhh. O-okay then, big guy. Well, uh, th-thanks."

Slowly, I take a few steps away, careful not to turn my back on him. The Duke doesn't move. Returning from the direction I came, I creep past the mermaid alcove.

Two of the mermaids hiss at me. I ignore them.

Once my spherical vision can no longer make out Barbatos's form in the distance, I turn and quicken my pace, vigilantly ensuring I don't step in and puddles of water.

Never return, echoes Barbatos's voice in my head.

My teeth grind together as I shiver in fear. *Hey man, no problem. I'm sorry I bugged ya, pal. Have fun with the mermaids!*

Sigh... today is getting worse minute by minute.

"Gwahaha! You lost him?! What an idiot!" Bael roars and slaps his knee while guffawing at Mephisto. I stare Bael down until he realizes his laughter is annoying me. He tapers off and rubs his nose. "Err, sorry, boss."

"Mephisto," I begin, turning away from Bael, "Where did you last see the human?"

The Duke of Mist twitches his boney fingers impatiently. "Ksss. Emperor Diablo, the flessshbag wasss only inchesss in front of me, and then he disssappeared. Hissss copiesss sssplit up and made it difficult for me to follow."

I nod slowly. "So when you say he vanished, you mean you slashed the copy, and then it dissolved like the others?"

Mephisto bows his head. "Nay. The flessshbag vanissshed before I could ssstrike hisss back."

"Teleportation, then, in addition to illusory magic and a blade of light that can cut through anything. This Jason fellow has a veritable grab bag of powers. Damn. I should have questioned Beelzebub more about the human's abilities. Defeating a Lord isn't a small task, even if he is a Hero."

Bael rolls his eyes. "I've seen some weak heroes in my life. Remember that guy with no legs?"

"How could I forget?"

"Dunno."

A moment of silence passes while I contemplate how to capture this newly awakened Hero.

Bael glowers at me. "Hey. Boss. Do... do you think that the sword Beelzebub saw was..."

"Excalibur? Not a chance. If the human possessed Excalibur, we'd know by now. Hell itself could be rent in half if that weapon fell into a Hero's hands."

Bael chuckles slightly. "Hehe. Okay, good. I was a little worried, ya know?"

"So am I," I mutter. "A Hero and the Black Queen. One alone under ordinary circumstances would be an emergency, but both at once..."

Mephisto's head twitches. "I ssshould contact Umi. Ssshe is our bessst Oracle. Ssshe will help us find that flessshbag, and then-"

"No. We have bigger problems to worry about." I hold up a palm to silence Mephisto. "So far, Jason hasn't caused us any problems. I'm much more worried about what he said regarding Amelia. If she's alive and devouring another planet, we may be too late to stop her. We've already lost Agares, and the Overlords won't take kindly to us requesting the destruction of a second planet. They'll think me incompetent."

I pause for a moment to consider my options. "Mephisto, I want you to scour the Labyrinth and find out where that damn Belial is hiding. If she doesn't help us, we'll never defeat Amelia."

Bael's smile melts away, and a look of worry crosses his face. "Say, boss, what if when you fought the little witch, you used-"

"No. Don't even whisper what you're thinking out loud. I'll never unleash that power again."

Mephisto cocks his head curiously, but I don't answer the question in his eyes.

I only used my power once. I damn near killed every other demon in existence. If I lose control like that again, nobody here will be able to stop me.

An Emperor's job is to oversee all the other demons. I have to keep them alive, happy, and healthy... not necessarily in that order. Matters of war should almost always be for the Dukes. Besides, if I die, who will lead? Bael? Belial?

No. A recluse of a First Emperor, a whore of a Second, and an idiot for my First Duke. I'm the only remotely capable demon here.

I wish it didn't have to be that way. *Ruling is such a devil-damned pain in the ass.*

"You heard me, Mephisto. Find Belial. No second-guessing my orders. Bael and I will hunt that human down. With luck, he'll lead us right to the Black Queen... and checkmate."

"Keh keh keh... ass you command, Emperor Diablo." Mephisto says with a bow. A moment later, he turns around and fades into the wall.

Bael and I start walking down the passageway opposite where the human vanished. He nudges me. "C'mon, boss. If you use your transformation when other demons ain't around, there shouldn't be a problem, right? The Black Bitch will be on a human planet! Nobody will get hurt but her!"

I nod. "I know, Bael. However, that sick taste in my heart was something I never wish to experience again. It's not something I can put into words."

Bael nods, and for once, he takes a moment to think before he speaks.

"Well, if that's the way you feel, ain't no way I'm convincin' ya. Anyway, I can't wait to wrap my hands around the little bitch's neck. Agares owed me three blood pies! Now I'll never get 'em!"

"I'm glad you have your priorities in order," I mutter.

"Thanks, boss."

Sighing, I avert my eyes. *If Bael ever ran the Labyrinth; our kind would go extinct within a hundred years.*

Count on it.

Author Note:

This is Barbatos with the mermaids.



This is Barbatos with the mermaids, but an outdated character design.



Part 034: The Sweet Life of Phoebe

I step out of my room and click the door behind me, adjusting my leather chest armor to a better angle. I don't need to wear it around the city, but I always feel exposed without its protection enveloping me.

Stepping outside, I look up into the sky and smile. Snow lightly sprinkles down on the environmental shield above. Thanks to Jason's Crown, I've made a device that stymies the weather from disturbing Tarus II's populace. With Jason gone, we've had to construct new buildings ourselves, and a few people still sleep in tightly packed lodges. At least with the environmental shield, they can sleep on a bench outside without freezing to death.

Saul has been helpful when it comes to planning out the city. It turns out he used to work for a Hero too, just like me! King Solomon, the sort of guy who liked to build big, fabulous things everywhere. I do find it interesting that Saul possesses the opposing tastes of his former king. He prefers drab uniform layouts for buildings. He despises flashy bling and jewelry and deliberately wears the same brown leather clothing every day.

"Oh, hello, Miss Berthold!" A woman yells out my name as I exit the palace. I glance at the building across the street and wave.

"Hi, Debra! Lovely weather out!"

She winks at me. "Oh, you! Haha."

Debra is Hans Wagner's assistant. She usually helps out at the factory. I don't know much about her, but she seems like a nice lady.

"I'm off to the Core. I'll see you later."

"You too, Miss Berthold."

As she enters the store across the street, I step out and head in the opposite direction, toward a newly constructed garage. My heart races with excitement as I spot my truck. *Oooh! I can't wait to go driving!*

I love driving. I was terrified the first time Jason threw me in his Fur-rawr-ree, but once he apologized, I realized speeding around was incredibly fun! I get to travel faster than a cheetah!

Walking into the garage, I glance past the row of buses toward my truck and wave. "Mister Ogie! Are you here today?"

"Ah! Dammit!" A gruff voice and the sound of a salamander striking his head on the underside of a bus makes me wince. "Dagnabbit, woman! You scared the daylights outta me!"

I glance down at the basket in my hand. "Oh, jeez! I'm sorry. I have these sweet rolls, and I just wanted to offer you one."

From the other side of the bus, the salamander freezes for a moment, then skitters around on his back legs, landing on his front with a thud as he screeches to a stop. "Ohh! Sweet Rolls! I love those! Why didn't ya say so, honey?"

Reaching into the basket, I pull one out and hand it to the ruby-colored lizard. "Here you go. I hope the mate and eggs are doing well."

Ogie's slit-eyes expand as he lunges his tongue forward and snatches the pastry from my grasp, wolfing the whole thing in one bite. "*Om-nom*. Oh, sacred saints! It's divine! Opening a shop next to you musta been the best decision of my life!"

"Second best," I say, chidingly. "Tell Jeera I said hello. I'm off to the Core to deliver these to our hardworking boys."

He stares longingly at my basket before shaking himself out of his stupor. "Oh, yeah, that reminds me! Truck's fixed. You did a number on the fender and the rear axle, but I got it all bent back into shape for ya."

"Oh, sweetie, I knew you would." I lean down and give the top of his head a little kiss before walking over and climbing into my truck. "Thanks for all your hard work."

His scales turn violet as he blushes madly and rubs the spot where I kissed him. "Aw, shucks. Anything for you. Hardly any trouble at all. Just don't forget me when you bake something."

"I won't!"

My truck instantly turns on, and I slam the door shut. After waving goodbye to Ogie, I pull out of the garage and go on my way.

Buildings swish past, and pedestrians of varying backgrounds all look up and smile when they see me. My giant truck always turns heads. I wave at several people and monsters I recognize, beaming my happiest grin at a few patrolmen as well.

The situation in Hero City has improved dramatically over the last few months. Armed guards walk our streets, crime is almost nonexistent, and everyone lives in harmony. It's a dream come true.

I'm sometimes surprised by how little conflict we have. In the world I was born, humans attacked each other for the pettiest reasons. Brutal fights broke out in bars, men would rape the wives of their fellow man, and not even King Arthur, with all his heroic powers, could unite humanity for even a few moments at a time.

But Jason did. Whether intentionally or accidentally, he created a stable society, one we steadily seek to improve.

My smile fades. *How long will our peaceful coexistence last? Humans and monsters have hardly lived together for half a year. What if winter drains our stores and people grow desperate? What if a fight breaks out and someone says something vile, permanently damaging the community?*

Humans aren't stable creatures. We grow bored. We become restless. We seek adventure, expansion, and new horizons. Nothing lasts forever, in my opinion.

I smack my face several times. *No, Phoebe! Think positive thoughts! Stop with the pessimism!*

Driving down the cliffside and past the border wall for Hero City, I continue through the forest, which now has several huts sprinkled among the trees. Twenty minutes later, I pop out of the woodlands and zip

past several military encampments near the warpgate. We've increased our fighting presence dramatically, and the environmental shields are nearly at a point where we can create a protective anti-snow bubble from Hero City all the way to the warpgate.

I slow to a stop as a male Kitsune, (a fox-man) jogs over to a barbed steel gate surrounding the portal. His uniform is pristine and ironed, with a little badge indicating his rank of Lieutenant. Neil's been sure to focus on military discipline a lot these days.

A uniformed human man appears at my window. "Good morning, Miss Berthold! Here on business?" He smiles, and I note that the gate is already cranking open for me.

"Oh no, not particularly, Henry. Say, have you been a good boy lately?"

His change in posture is hilarious! Henry snaps to attention and jerks his hand up to salute. "Yes, ma'am! Reporting for goodies! I mean duty!" I can almost see the drool building up in his mouth.

"Alright, I have two sweet-rolls. One for you, and one for Piper over there. He's always so quick with that gate!"

Piper, the Kitsune fox-man, woofs at me and waggles his tail excitedly. He can probably smell my treats from here. "Oooh, thank yooou Miss Berthooold! You're too goooood for us!" He howls and draws out a few of his words.

Kitsune's are a lot like minotaurs, in that they have fox heads and lower bodies, but human torsos. It allows them to grip weapons and guns with ease, while also giving them cute, pettable heads. I do have to wonder where these strange demihumans come from, since most of Bahamut's demonology books don't go into any detail on their origins.

Handing Henry the two goodies, I wave goodbye again and drive through the gate, up the ramp, and through the portal.

My excursions are well known, and once I arrive in the Core, I drive down into the arena and park my truck in a spot people have made for me. There's a little platform that spins, and it helps me turn around and face the right direction, so I don't have to back into the portal when I leave.

Poking my fingers in my ears, I yawn to make them pop, then jump out of the truck. The sound of heavy footsteps come thudding toward me, and a moment later, Kar pops into view, along with his little fairy assistant, Blinker.

"Hurgh. White-hair, I am always pleased to see you."

I nod politely, then dip into my basket. "Would you like a sweet roll, Kar?"

He shakes his head. "Butterfly insists I go on a diet. My sincerest apologies."

"Darn right I do! This fatty barely leaves the Core!" Blinker flutters around and lands on my shoulder. "I'm always on a diet, but I might cheat today! Can I have some?"

I nod, then tear off a small chunk of the roll. "Here you go."

Despite how small it is, Blinker can barely wrap her tiny arms around it. "Goodness! So generous! This will feed my entire extended family for the rest of winter."

I smile at the tiny woman. She's stunning, though one would only notice if they squinted carefully. Her long, red, flowing locks are the opposite of my short, straight hair. They bounce and curl all over the place. Even better is her taste in clothing. She wears a pretty green satin dress that adheres to her body and shows off her curves.

Blinker grunts and pants, as she flaps hard and flies over to land on Kar's shoulder. I can barely make out any details about her from this distance, but I'm certain she's sweating.

She puffs up her cheeks and glares at Kar. "Hey! Don't say it! I know what you're thinking!"

Kar's lip trembles as he holds in a chuckle. "Hu... huhu... I doubt I'm the only one who needs exercise."

"Kar!!" The fairy jumps to her feet and smacks his scaled face. "Jerk! Ass! I told you not to say anything!"

The Sphinx doesn't feel Blinker's slaps at all. Her body is physically weak, but her enchanting spells are quite formidable. If she went all out with her magic, I don't think Kar would remain unmoved.

* * *

An hour later, I plop down beside Neil at his office desk as he adjusts a monocle over his eye and squints to examine a piece of parchment. I don't like to pry, so I won't examine it closely. Knowing Neil, it's probably something related to the military.

A minute passes. Neil flicks his eyes up. "Yes, Phoebe?"

"Is that any way to talk to a friend?"

He smiles. "I'm just kidding. I thought you might pester me if I didn't say anything, but you have the patience of an owl."

"Well, that's one nice thing about me," I muse aloud. "I brought you a sweet roll. Last one!"

"Saving the best for last? Or did the good ones with icing already get picked?"

"Nope! I made sure you would get the drippiest wettest sweetest roll I baked."

Neil raises an eyebrow. "Miss Berthold. *Drippiest* is not a word. What have I told you about inventing terms?"

"Umm, that it's quirky and cute?"

Neil smirks. "If God wanted that word to exist, he'd have created it."

"That's not how words work."

"Says the absent-minded peasant."

"To the stiff, uptight general."

I try not to laugh as Neil frowns at me. "I-I'm not uptight."

"Of course not. Eat your treat, Neil."

He shrugs, immediately disregards my playful poking, and snatches the roll from my hand. "Mmm. Remind me again why we don't enslave you and put you to work in the bakery all day long?"

"For the same reason that nobody challenges you to a swordfight."

"Because it's dangerous?"

"Because it's dangerous."

Another nod. Neil takes a considerable bite out of the roll and looks away for a moment. "So, are you doing okay, Phoebe?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

He takes another bite and chews for several moments before swallowing. "Well, Jason's been gone for two months. I know he occasionally calls and speaks to you with his Wordsmithing, but, surely you're-"

"Oh, Neil. That's sweet of you to wonder, but I'm fine. I'm not a little girl who needs a big strong man around to keep me from bursting into tears."

Slowly, Neil licks his lips, then fans his wavy brown hair further up his forehead. "Well, one of the men told me he saw you staring at a wall with a blank look on your face recently. I just thought... you know..."

"I'm fine, Neil. I was lost in thought, that's all."

"I see." Neil pauses before quickly throwing the rest of the roll in his mouth. *Three bites and it's gone, wow*, I think to myself. *He's unstoppable.*

I raise an eyebrow. "Is that all?"

"Yup. If you say you're fine, then you're fine." Neil smacks his hands together and brushes the crumbs off, then adjusts his ponytail. "Those mobile rice replicators were a good idea, Phoebe." He says, changing the subject. "I've heard that many of our soldiers love them. Fairly light on power consumption, too."

I nod. "The miniature fission reactors don't generate much power, but they were enough for my needs."

He continues, "Mind if I make a request, though? I've been thinking about developing a helmet that can see different bands of light. It'll help our exploration efforts immensely if we don't need flashlights."

My nose crinkles. "Mmm. A helmet? Okay. I'll ask Hans. I'll need a few more specifics, though."

From outside the office, an alarm blares. *Intruder detected at turret perimeter. Single demon. Rank: Lord. Threat level: Low. Deploying non-lethal countermeasures now.*

Neil rolls his eyes. "They never stop trying, do they? How many times are the turrets going to wipe out a platoon of skeletons before the demons wise up?" He sighs, then grabs a paper out from under the one he was reading when I entered. As he pulls it free, I notice it's a drawing made in pen. "I sketched a mockup for Hans. It has the specifications I need for the helmet. Think you can get this to him?"

Slowly I nod. I can't understand the technical aspects, though if I were wearing Jason's Crown, I could. "The design looks simple enough. Shouldn't take more than a day to get a prototype working."

Neil blushes. "Thank you, Phoebe. You're an angel. Honestly, with how hard you work, always making new devices for us, delivering us sweets, visiting the wounded in the hospitals... you should take a vacation."

I flinch inwardly, surprising even myself. "N-no, Neil. That's fine. I like working hard."

Neil sighs. "Ahh, I knew it. C'mon, you can't lie to me. It's written all over your face. You're only working so hard because it takes your mind off Jason."

I shake my head quickly, feeling a tinge of panic as I try to come up with an excuse. "No, no, it's not that, Neil! It's... uh... it's..."

"It isn't that you miss him, right? It's that you're worried he'll get into trouble." Neil nods knowingly. "I understand. You have the same look my wife had before I left to fight in the war. She would always get that anxious look on... on her..." Neil trails off, and a ghostly expression passes over his face. "Though... I suppose she was right to worry."

The memory of what Bahamut took from him turns Neil's pleasant expression into one of bitterness. "I can't ever see Melia again. Shit. I was worried about you, and now look at me."

Quickly, I reach over and rest my hand on his. "Don't feel bad, Neil. I know you care. That's all that matters to me. Let's drop it, okay?"

Neil uses his free hand and wipes a tear from his eye. "Yes, an excellent idea. Well, I ought to get back to work."

Outside, the alarm blares again. *Intruder detected at turret perimeter. Single demon. Rank: Lord. Status: Continuing to engage defensive perimeter. Requesting permission to deploy lethal countermeasures..*

"Ugh," Neil groans. "That fella is a persistent one. I might as well escort you to your truck and see what all the fuss-"

BOOM!

A terrific explosion shakes our room, causing the two of us to jump in fright and gasp involuntarily.

"What in the name of God was-" Neil doesn't finish his sentence, instead opting to jump out of his seat. "Ph-Phoebe! Are you all right?"

I nod, my heart racing. "Yes! Let's check on the soldiers!"

By the time we make it to the doorway, the sound of blaster fire and screams of anguish rush to our ears. I gawk and stare as a single demon stands by himself, the Great Doors thrown open, and blasts waves of fire from his palms into the crowd of panicked monsters and humans.

"B-battle stations!" Neil yells. "Form a line! He's using flame abilities! Get the hoses- gwaugh!" A jet of flame races at us, causing Neil to leap back and shove me inside his office. The fire barely nicks his back. He lands on top of me, accidentally slamming his elbow into my stomach and knocking the wind out of me.

Kahk!" I gasp, unable to breathe.

"Phoebe! Oh god, Phoebe! I'm sorr- shit!" Neil leaps to his feet, quickly confirming my injury is anything but fatal.

I croak out, "Guh-go! Lee-heeeave me!"

Neil nods and dashes out the entrance, while I roll around and writhe on the floor, gasping for breath.

All the while, the screams of my friends turning to ash fill me with rage.

Part 035: Battle For The Core; Beelzebub Unleashed!

[Recommended Listening](#)

The alarm blares overhead. *RED ALERT. ALL SOLDIERS TO COMBAT POSITIONS. ENEMY FORCES HAVE BREACHED THE ENTRANCE. RED ALERT. ALL SOLDIERS TO...*

Breathe, Phoebe! Inhale! Get up! What would Arthur say if he saw you in this state?!

My mind shrieks at me as I stagger to my feet. Neil doesn't look like a heavy man, but he exercises regularly. His elbow hit just the right spot to knock me for a loop.

The screams outside rapidly decrease in volume. A horrible cackling fills the air as the demon newcomer laughs maniacally. "Filthy insects! Beg for mercy! This is your comeuppance for humiliating me! Rue the day you crossed my path!"

A second wind hits me, and I dive out of the doorway, landing behind cover. The demon sprays fire from his hand at someone in the opposite direction, so I poke my head out to survey the room. Bodies of humans and monsters lie crumpled in every direction. Despite this, I stare in confusion at the fact that no fires rage anywhere. The entire room should be ablaze with the flames he's putting out, but-

No! That's not it! His flames, rainbow-colored, rapidly shift hues from red, purple, and white to green. Ducking back, I close my eyes for a moment and focus, remembering all those months I spent researching demonology.

Fire that doesn't burn, but kills instantly. Soulfire! That must be it! It's a rare ability that only Emperors should have access to... but... this demon is only a Lord! He's not a high enough rank to wield such a powerful ability!

My eyes spin under my eyelids as I focus and remember the exact text. *Soulfire is potent magic. It tears the souls of humans right out of their bodies. A small amount will kill an unprotected human instantly, but against entities with higher magic abilities, such as monsters and angels, it will consume the user's energy and that of the enemy as well.*

There's more, though. Soulfire weakens the user if they don't actively hit anyone with it. High risk, high reward.

I quickly look back. The demon, despite his cackling, already appears fatigued. He stops blasting the soulfire for a moment and wipes his forehead. *Chance! I can attack!*

Suddenly, the demon's body begins to secrete visible red energy. His eyes bulge. He sinks to one knee. The two small horns on the sides of his head slowly grow in size, gaining a few inches. His red skin deepens in hue, and a look of delight spreads across his face.

Mutation?! I didn't know Soulfire could absorb the souls directly into a demon's body!

The alarm, as if hearing my question, pauses for a moment before continuing with a slightly altered message. *ALL SOLDIERS TO COMBAT POSITIONS. ENEMY THREAT LEVEL REVISED: BARON-LEVEL DEMON DETECTED. INCREASING ALARM LEVEL TO ALPHA.*

The demon jumps to his feet and clenches a fist. "Hahahaha! Yes! That's right! I am Beelzebub, the Baron of Flames! Bow before me, weaklings!"

Beelzebub's horns aren't the only part of his body that changed. Below the black suit, his muscle mass increased dramatically, as well. Not only that, but he grew several inches taller.

Damn! Beelzebub must be a pureblood demon. No wonder he was able to breach our defenses without the help of any other forces. If he has Soulfire, then he might be significantly mightier than an average demon of the same rank.

My eyes swivel around the room. *Weapon... I need a weapon!* My eyes jerk to a trooper in the middle of the room, his limp corpse resting atop an energy rifle. Beelzebub's eyes swivel to someone else, and I take my opportunity to leap out of cover and dive for the weapon.

My heart catches as the demon turns his gaze toward me. His smile widens, and he snaps his fingers, forming a narrow cone of soulfire. As it shoots at me, my mind yells, *don't let it touch you, girl!*

I try to grab the gun, but it's wedged under the soldier's body. Rolling to the right, I narrowly avoid Beelzebub's attack as his soulfire explodes on the man's corpse. I pause for a second, then jump back and yank with all my strength, hefting him off the gun and grabbing the weapon.

Beelzebub narrows his eyes and points his full attention at me. "Tch. Aren't you the agile little water-flea? This attack will put you in your place." He raises his thumb, points his index finger, and curls the rest of his fingers together, forming his hand into the shape of a gun.

My pulse quickens as a tiny burst of fire shoots past my head, much faster than anything Beelzebub has used until now. A console explodes behind me, and Beelzebub's smile widens again. "Dance for me, rat!"

I rush forward, ducking and dodging as he fires bullets of flame, each one missing me by inches. Every time he moves his thumb, he shoots another fire-bullet.

Damn! How is Beelzebub shooting at the speed of a machinegun?!

From the other side of the room, Neil yells out, "Foul demon! I won't let you get away with this!" I take cover behind a computer console, even as three more of Beelzebub's bullets impact the side opposite me. The entire panel shakes from the force of his bullets, but the attack stops. Beelzebub turns his attention to Neil.

A high-pitched whine squeals through the hangar, a sound I recognize as one of Hans' prototype experimental weapons. *The railgun!*

Two seconds later, Neil activates it. A whine fills the air, then a shockwave races around the room as the gun fires a sliver of metal.

PIFF.

When I look back, my eyes widen.

One of Beelzebub's arms tears from his body and drops to the ground. Behind him, a tiny hole in the wall reveals the spot the shrapnel entered. Based on previous tests, the sliver of metal will travel for over a mile before slowing to a stop.

Beelzebub doesn't grunt in pain, and instead ignores his missing limb. He cocks his head and points his finger-gun at Neil. "An admirable effort, human. I see the rumors of human weaponry were true. After I dispose of you, the Council will reward me handsomely."

A moment later, Beelzebub fires one of his bullets. Neil tries to duck behind cover, but screams in pain. "Gaaaugh!"

I can't see what happened, but Beelzebub's shot must have met its mark.

Taking advantage of Neil's distraction, I level my weapon and aim down the sights. "This is for my friends, you despicable bastard."

Ten shots of plasma leave the weapon's barrel, one after the other. *FWU-FWU-FWU.*

My blood chills. Beelzebub swivels his palm without looking at me and blocks all the bullets- no, that isn't it. He's absorbing the plasma! Shit! *Phoebe, you idiot! His elemental affinity is fire. That much is obvious. Superheated plasma won't be any use against him!*

"You again," The demon chuckles. "Leave it to a stupid wench to shoot the Baron of Flames with tiny balls of fire."

Beelzebub inhales. A moment later, the stump where his arm used to be trembles. A new limb sprouts from the shredded skin and bone, sending blood spraying over the floor as it reforms. Within five seconds, the arm finishes regenerating, and he smirks. "Oh! What a delightful new ability."

"Graaaah!" A roar shakes the room. Kar leaps from the far side of the chamber, smashes into the ground beside Beelzebub, and slaps the demon's chest. Beelzebub yelps and impacts the wall like a cannonball. Kar forms signs with his claws, causing the wall to transform into a massive earthen jaw and clamp onto Beelzebub.

I evaluate the ability in an instant — *Earth manipulation. Kar can alter the Labyrinth's walls since they're made of densely packed dirt.*

"You can do it, Kar!" A little voice squeaks. Blinker floats in the air twenty feet above him, waving her hands and forming magic signs, increasing Kar's strength bit by bit. "Give him the ol' one-two! And the new one-two! Give him all the one-twos!!!"

Kar doesn't reply but seems happy to oblige. He delivers a volley of punches into Beelzebub's trapped form, pounding the defenseless demon without mercy. "Graaahh! Bastard! Honorless scum! I'll make you pay!"

Kar rears back to punch the demon's face, but when he swings his fist, Beelzebub counters. The Baron of Flames unleashes a terrifically bright light like the sun from his body. Spots drown my vision. I stumble

back and scream in surprise. Judging by the roar of confusion, it must have stunned Kar too, but I can't see anything!

Fumbling around, I strain to hear what's going on as Beelzebub screams in rage. "Pathetic reptile! You'll never compare to Agares!"

The sound of crackling flames fills the air.

Blinker yelps in fright. "Aaaiee!"

Gunshots.

Kar howls in pain as something strikes his scales over and over.

By the time my bleary vision comes trickling back, the battle has practically ended. Beelzebub flies in the air by pouring fire through the soles of his boots. He delivers a highly concentrated blazing inferno at Kar's body, pinning the crocodile against the wall. Kar pants frantically as he holds his scaled arms up to defend himself, but the heat is blisteringly intense, to the point I can feel it from here. He's going to die!

"You forgot about me!" Neil staggers out from behind cover, his left arm hanging limp. Blood drips from his mouth as he flops to the ground and uses all his strength to heft the humongous railgun onto his lap. The weapon fires, and Beelzebub gasps, as his entire chest cavity explodes, sending guts everywhere. My eyes follow his form as he falls and- OH NO! Blinker!

The fairy woman lies on the floor beneath him, wheezing in pain. She must have gotten stunned and fell earlier when Beelzebub used his blinding- look out!

Beelzebub's body slams into the ground, crushing her tiny body instantly.

I cry out helplessly. "Blinker! No!"

Kar, his entire body glowing from the heat of Beelzebub's flames, wheezes. He stumbles forward and falls. Hearing me call out Blinker's name, his eyes follow mine, and he connects the dots.

"What... n-no... B-Butter... fly..." Kar gasps for breath and stretches both arms out toward Beelzebub's collapsed form, over thirty feet away.

I quickly rush over to the crocodilian sphinx, wincing as I close the gap. The heat in this area feels like stepping into an oven. Kar must be in agony!

"Hu... hurrgh... White-hair..." Kar's eyes track me as I approach. The visible veins inside his pupils tell me they're bloodshot from the heat. "Butterfly... where..."

I can't touch Kar or get close. He's damn durable, but my body is merely flesh. I nod at him and quickly grab a sword lying on the ground nearby, tossing my gun to the side. "I'll avenge her, Kar."

He nods weakly, then goes still.

I don't know if he's dead. Gods! How powerful is Beelzebub? How can a mere Baron be this unstoppable?!"

Shaking the fear out of my head, I quickly run over to Beelzebub's collapsed body on the ground and swing my foot with all my strength, driving my boot into his face. The impact knocks him off Blinker and

rolls him a few feet away. I glance down at the fairy's unmoving form. Her glowing aura is almost gone.

My hands tremble as I scan the room around me. Faces of men and women, friends of mine, all who will never see the light of day ever again, whisper to me. *You failed us, Phoebe... just like you failed Arthur.*

I glower at Beelzebub. *No. He did this.*

I squeeze the hilt of my sword, pressing its cold steel against my palm. Beelzebub coughs. Already, the hole in his chest is healing up. His regeneration is overwhelming.

Before the demon can reform his chest, I lunge at him and plunge my sword into his heart. Beelzebub's body spasms uncontrollably. He tries to swipe at me with his hand, but the motion is weak and pathetic. I wrench the sword, twisting it around and opening the hole deeper, then I yank it out and begin swinging. *CHOP! CHOP! CHOP!*

Over and over, I put my anger into every swing, hacking his worthless, shitty, pathetic, evil body into as many parts as I can. I lop off his arm, bite into his neck, and spray his innards all over my boots. Even so, his wounds continue to close. He stares up at me and smiles, a look of hate in his eyes. Wordlessly, I kick and hack and chop, sending gouts of blood everywhere, only for them to close seconds later.

Minutes pass. Sweat pours down my face.

His regeneration is speeding up!

There were over ten thousand human and monster soldiers in the Core when Beelzebub attacked, but his ambush wiped most of them out! Even as I try to beat Beelzebub's regeneration, a sense of dread overwhelms me.

I can't win! Beelzebub is going to regenerate before we can kill him!

My arms ache. Again and again, I chop. In the distance, I can hear coughs as survivors manage to rally together. I spare a glance back at Kar, but his form continues to lie still. When I return my gaze to Beelzebub, I yelp in fright as his hand lunges out and grabs my ankle. Red-hot agony explodes in my ankle, causing me to jump away. I stumble and fall on my side, unable to walk.

My leg burns. A quick examination reveals a handprint seared into my skin. The flesh bubbles for a few moments as every nerve fizzles in the immediate area.

Then, the real pain hits.

My back seizes as something awful burns in my stomach. The electric, molten sensation courses through my limbs and into my head. By the time it stops, my hand aches from how hard I've gripped my sword.

I flick my gaze to Beelzebub. His suit is in tatters and covered in blood.

The Duke rises to his feet and glares at me. "Satisfied? It's my turn now, wench. I'll take my time peeling you apart. Soulfire is too good for the likes of you."

Beelzebub fires a flame bullet into my arm, tearing it off and sending it flying. "Aaaahhh!" I fall on my back, writhing and trying to push away. The loss of my limb causes pain like I've never imagined in all my

life to cripple my mind. I can't think! I can't fight back! I'm powerless!

Beelzebub takes two steps closer, a wicked grin on his face. "You think that hurts?" His voice hisses cold as ice.

FWUMP.

A second bullet blows out my right knee.

The agony threatens to break my mind.

"Foolish woman. You haven't a clue how much your steel bit me. I'll pay you back in spades, mark my words. But first..."

Beelzebub turns to Neil. The commander fumbles with a cartridge, trying to reload the railgun with one arm. Each round is the size of a sword, and quite heavy. Neil panics as the demon looks at him. He drops the cartridge. It rolls down the steps and toward Beelzebub, who smirks.

"Oops. There goes your little toy? Now, then, hold still while I kill you."

Beelzebub raises his finger and points it at Neil's head.

WHUMP

A flash of movement.

Something moves far too quickly for my eyes to follow. Beelzebub's body vanishes.

An impact against the far wall, near where Kar fell, catches my attention. I struggle to turn my head to look.

Beelzebub stands, calmly, his suit fully repaired. At his feet lies... Beelzebub?! What?! There's two of them! The one on the ground has a torn-up suit, but the one standing is good as new.

Who... what's going on?!

The new Beelzebub glares at the beaten-up one. "Greedy child. Had I known someone like you was planning something, I would have stayed in the Core. You will leave, or I will *make* you go.

A stunned expression fills the injured Beelzebub's face. He tilts his head up to look at his attacker. "Who the devil?!"

"LEAVE!" The new one grabs the old by the neck and hurls him at the Great Doors with such speed and strength that the moment he hits it, dozens of bones break in multiple gruesome ways.

The former Beelzebub struggles on the ground, writhing and gurgling blood. The new one turns his back on his crumpled doppelganger and looks at Kar. "You're fine. Get up." With a motion of his hands, New Beelzebub touches Kar's cooling body, and the lizard gasps, swinging his claws wildly. "Buh-Butterfly! Butterfly!"

After a moment, Kar's confusion wears off. He spins to look at Blinker, then jumps over to her, clearing the fifty-foot gap in a single jump. Ignoring his savior, Kar's claw trembles as he carefully scoops up her tiny lifeless form. "No... no... Butterfly..."

Satisfied with his good deed, New Beelzebub paces to Old Beelzebub and towers over his trembling form. "You've made quite the mess. All I wanted was a little peace and quiet, but you couldn't let me have that, could you?"

Old Beelzebub cranes his neck to stare at his clone. "Who...?"

"The Core is under *my* protection. If I ever see you here again, I will not spare you. Is that clear?"

Old Beelzebub nods dumbly. "Uh... uh huh..."

I can barely sense the auras of magical beings. What I notice now is the ridiculous difference in the power of their auras. Old Beelzebub, while a roaring fire compared to any human, is a drop in the bucket compared to the new one. If I concentrate my mind, I can't see an aura, but instead, an overwhelming wall of blackness. Measuring the two is like comparing a lizard to a dragon.

Old Beelzebub must see his copy's aura as well. After his body regenerates, he crawls to his feet and hunches over. "Of... of course."

"No." Kar's voice growls out in the air. A sinister rage enters his eyes. "I won't let him leave alive."

"You will," New Beelzebub says. "I've resolved everything."

Delicately, Kar places Blinker on the floor, then rises to a standing position. His eyes turn hollow as his pupils fully expand.

"I said... I won't... let him leave... *ALIVE!*"

Kar balls his reptilian claws into fists. A heartbeat as loud as a drum booms from his chest. The scales on his body shimmer and melt away. Feathery fur takes their place. His reptilian face and body morph into that of a lion as he eases down onto four limbs. Then, two wings sprout from his back.

The Sphinx. Only twice did I see Bahamut's Super Form. It was considered her ultimate technique, one that transformed her into a lithe killing machine. However, her transformation was nothing compared to Kar's. His already massive body ripples with power, causing him to double in size.

"Easy now, big guy," New Beelzebub says, raising a palm. "Don't do anything you'll regret."

Too late. Kar hunches down and roars, a primal sound that rattles the nearby consoles. "GROOOOH!*"

He leaps at one server, then bounces off and pounces at Old Beelzebub. To my surprise, New Beelzebub steps aside and sighs, rolling his eyes. "*Men.*"

Old Beelzebub sees the attack coming, but is far too slow to dodge it. Kar's claw swipes across Beelzebub's chest and eviscerates him, ripping out his innards and throwing them all over the walls. Two more swings later, and Beelzebub can hardly move. The Baron of Flames opens his mouth and chokes out a blast of embers into the lion's face, and Kar howls in pain, recoiling to rub his eyes.

While those two fight, New Beelzebub shuffles over to me but pauses in front of Blinker's limp body. "Oh. She isn't dead." With a motion, he sends a wave of healing energy at the fairy, then walks over to me. "Are you okay, Phoebe?"

I clutch my bloody stump and cough. "Y-you know... my name?"

"We haven't met, but I know who you are. Everyone does." He flippantly makes a few hand signs, and the burning pain in my body fades. A minute later, while Old Beelzebub screeches in pain, New Beelzebub finishes healing everyone nearby, including me. I gasp in amazement as my beaten and battered body returns to pristine condition, mimicking the healing magic I've only ever seen Jason use.

"Heavy losses. Damn. For a Baron, Beelzebub has quite the potential. It'd be a shame for him to go out like this."

New Beelzebub scoops up Blinker, and she winces. "Ow... owwiiee... uwah!" Noticing who's holding her, Blinker scrambles to fly away, but New Beelzebub closes his palm gently, holding her tight. "Don't be frightened. I'm not the one who attacked you. Is that unpleasant crocodile a friend of yours?"

Blinker nods. "Uh.... um... yes! But... aren't you Beelzebub?"

"I'm not. Can you tell your boyfriend to calm down? I'd rather not have to stop him with violence."

Blinker glances over and notices Kar's rampage right as he chomps down and tears off one of Beelzebub's legs. "Why? That demon deserves to die! Didn't you see what he did?!"

"There's been enough killing, today. Tell your boyfriend to stop, or I'll *make him*. I'm not warning you again."

Blinker nods, a look of trepidation in her eyes. When New Beelzebub uncoils his hand, she quickly flies into the air. "Kar! Kar! Hey, idiot! Stupid! I'm up here, you big lunk!"

Hearing her voice, Kar freezes just before taking Beelzebub's head on the Chomp Chomp Express. "Butter... fly?"

"Yeah! Duh! Of course, it's me! I was resting my eyes for a bit, you big dope!"

Kar entirely disregards Old Beelzebub and immediately bounds over to the tiny fairy as if he were a giant kitty-cat. "Raww! I can't believe it! You're alive! It's a miracle!"

New Beelzebub facepalms. "Yeah, a miracle," He mutters under his breath. "*Hey, thanks for saving my life and everyone else's*. Yeah, no problem, it was all in a day's work. Anything for a cool dude like you, buddy."

The copycat walks past the two joyfully united friends over to the mangled figure of Old Beelzebub. Beelzebub's regeneration is much slower than before. His spiritual energy must be at its limits.

"Here. I'll heal you. Consider it a freebie. Now beat it, and tell everyone my warning."

Another wave of healing energy passes over Old Beelzebub. This time, New Beelzebub grabs the old one by the neck and lightly flings him outside the Core, then slaps the hundred-ton doors shut. He does it so effortlessly that only now does it dawn on me just how powerful he is.

Those doors weigh several tons each! Not even Kar could open them without help from Jason!

New Beelzebub walks over, and slowly, his face begins to change. The clothes follow, and what's left is... a scantily clad, red-skinned demon woman with long, smooth black hair. Two huge horns erupt from

just above her ears, and a cute little tail flicks around suggestively. The black leather strips I'd hardly call clothing manage to cover her private regions, but that's about all.

"Well, after that, it'd be impolite not to introduce myself!" Warmth enters her voice, and she smiles at me sweetly as she bends down. "I'm Samantha!"

I pull myself into a sitting position. "Oh! Uhm, hi, Samantha. We owe you gratitude."

Her smile diminishes. "No. Don't worry about it. I hardly saved anybody."

Slowly, I scan the room filled with dead bodies. Scattered survivors pop up here and there, but they're nothing compared to the mountains of corpses.

"Neither did I."

Author notes:

This is Samantha





This is also Samantha



Part 036: Aftermath, Agony, Accusation

[Recommended Listening](#)

Carrying dead men and women around shouldn't bother me. Heaven knows I've done it enough in my life. Easing myself down, I heft a bearded soldier down next to a line of other dead men, then stand up, rubbing my sore back. For over an hour now, those who survived Beelzebub's attack and the reserves from Tarus II have been lining up the thousands of dead in the Core wherever we can make room, identifying them, and noting their names down. My lip trembles as I spot a familiar Kitsune, one I spoke to not three hours ago. "Piper... you were a good boy." I sit down next to him and stroke his soft, red fur.

He and Henry must have rushed in when the fighting began. From the reports I've heard, Beelzebub directed his soulfire at the gate when the soldiers started funneling inside, creating a killzone and blocking the path for the rest. Piper was one of the first to run inside. *Of course he was*, I think, as a tear rolls down my cheek. *He was a good boy.*

Henry sits nearby, rocking back and forth on his feet. He's one of the younger men, an offworlder who wasn't part of Bahamut's legions. Heck, he's older than Jason, at twenty, but still only a kid.

Just when he thought he had started making friends and getting used to a world without demonic oppression...

Henry meets my gaze but quickly looks away. He chokes awkwardly and tries to pretend he doesn't want to cry. I want to say something, only to hesitate when the succubus, Samantha, appears at his side. Ever since her arrival, I've noticed her walking around and comforting as many soldiers as she can.

"Do you want to talk about anything, sweetie?" She wraps her arm around Henry comfortingly. Henry's eyes dilate as her succubus aura works its way into his mind, but the grief from losing his best friend overpowers any urges he might have.

Henry bites his lip and shakes his head. "I want to cry... but I can't. I can't feel anything. There's a hole."

Samantha kisses his cheek and pulls his head closer, resting it on her shoulder. "I know, little one. Losing the person you love hurts more than anything in the world. Here, let it out. Nobody will judge you."

Henry resists for only three seconds before her aura overpowers him, and finally, he succumbs and buries his face in his hands. "Uwaaah! It's not fair! Piper didn't deserve to die! He never hurt a fly! He was the nicest fox in the whole world!!"

Samantha nods soothingly, and slowly her eyes meet mine. She doesn't say anything at all.

The Kitsune, Felaris, and Wolfkin are some of the most peaceful creatures in the Labyrinth. Comprised of foxes, cats, and wolves, they're animalistic demi-humans often hunted for their fur. While territorial, they only guard and fight in self-defense. They've survived because they remain neutral, no matter what

conflict happens. Even so, sometimes vile beings will slaughter and capture their citizens for nefarious purposes.

They're beautiful creatures that don't deserve a senseless death. Nobody does, of course, but especially not them.

Henry's sobbing intensifies. He hiccups and sniffles, all while choking down burning tears. After a while, Samantha pulls away from him, laying him on the ground to curl up in a ball and release his emotions. The poor man is in such anguish that he doesn't even notice her leave.

Samantha slinks over to me and holds out her hand. "Get up. Come with me. Being around all of your dead friends is killing you inside."

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

"Don't lie to an empath," She warns.

After a few moments, I relent. Taking Samantha's hand, I pull myself up and eyeball her. We've barely spoken since the cleanup began. She's been going from man to man, helping out with carrying bodies, usually two and four at a time, while stopping every so often to speak with anyone in distress, including the women.

She's several inches taller than me, perhaps a little over six feet tall. Her horns add to that, making her more imposing and menacing looking, yet somehow, perhaps by virtue of her scant clothing and beautiful smile, she manages to appear smaller and less intimidating than the average demon.

Samantha is incredible, I think to myself, averting my gaze. *Better than me. She's nowhere close to the verge of tears.*

Samantha rubs her right arm. "Your inner aura is in turmoil. It's been a long time since I met a human so conflicted. Come, leave the rest to the men, they can handle it. You need alone time."

I don't argue, allowing her to lead me off to a far corner of the room. The empty looks in the eyes of many men as they drag and carry former comrades from here to there makes me want to cry, but also to punch something.

Dammit. If only Jason were here, he could have defeated that demon in seconds.

Phoebe, stop! You can't expect Jason to do everything! He can't be everywhere at once!

But what if he wasn't gone? He could have-

"Phoebe? Are you enjoying the view?" Samantha's voice startles me. I look up and realize I'm standing in front of a wall, staring at my shoes, blankly.

"Uh, n-no. Sorry. I have a lot on my mind."

Samantha sighs and plunks down against the wall, crosses her legs, then pats a spot to her right. "Sit here."

"Do I have to?"

"No. But you should."

She has a way with words. Maybe it's her succubus aura, though I don't think it's supposed to work on females. Maybe I want someone to talk to, so I'm just following her orders.

Crouching down, I sit beside Samantha, wrap my arms around my legs, and rest my head on my knees.

Neither of us says anything for a full minute.

My anxiousness gets the better of me. "So... you're a succubus, huh?"

Samantha edges a little closer and wraps her arm around me. "Mhm. I wasn't expecting small talk, but that's decent for a conversation starter."

I smile, in spite of the pain in my chest. "S-sorry. I'm not... I don't know how to handle..."

Samantha surprises me by reaching over and putting a finger to my lips. "Shh. I understand. I've lost those I care about too. I've watched idiot men run off and start war after war, getting themselves killed and leaving me behind. You get used to it after the first hundred times, but it never stops aching."

Her finger on my lips stirs up odd feelings in my chest. I quickly turn my head away to clear my thoughts. "I knew so many of the people who died..."

"Have you ever lost the person closest to you?"

"No. Not really." I pause.

A face appears in my mind.

Percival.

"I lied. Yes."

"I can see the look in your eyes. We're birds of a feather." Samantha strokes my cheek, then pulls away from me, fluffing her hair out and fanning it across her chest. "You're a woman who cares about everyone around her, Phoebe. I've heard rumors of your kindness. It's no wonder the Hero finds you attractive."

"J-Jason? The Hero! You know about him?"

When I turn to look at her, Samantha caresses her lips with the same finger she used to touch mine. "Well, I *have* been living here for over two months. I'm not especially sociable, nor bright, but I can at least determine who runs the place."

My eyes raise to her horns. "But... you're... a high ranking demon. Certainly higher than Beelzebub..."

"So? Do you hate me because of my skin? My horns?"

I shake my head immediately. "No. Jason always says we can't judge others based on their appearance. He learned that lesson from someone important to him."

"That's wonderful!" Samantha leans against me again, sticking her tongue out and licking my cheek. "I do love those who are open-minded about the world."

I yelp in surprise and fall back. "Wh-what are you doing?"

She smiles coyly and pulls back. "Just having a bit of fun. Sometimes, when things hurt the most, you have to force a smile. Did it bother you?"

Shaking my head, I sit up again. "No. I was- it was a little shocking. A woman's never done something like that to me before."

Samantha folds her arms over her chest. "Ah, I see. I'm sorry, I'm terrible at respecting personal boundaries. When I see someone I like, I take a risk with my heart."

"Someone you... like? Me?"

"Yes. I like you. Do you like me?"

I shake my head, pause, nod, then shake my head again. "I... I don't- you saved us, but I barely know you. As an acquaintance, yes, but- do you mean..."

"As a companion, of course. Nothing more." Samantha rubs her back against the wall. "I'm just teasing, Phoebe. Let's move past my bad manners. The reason I wanted to talk to you... well, erm..."

She pauses and looks away, averting her eyes from mine. I crane my neck to look at her. "What reason?"

Samantha blushes, her red skin deepening noticeably. "Mmm. Well, I've seen you walking around, and there's a tremendous feeling of loneliness emanating from you. Have you slept well, lately?"

The succubus turns to look at me, scrutinizing my expression as I consider my answer. "No. Not very. Some nights are better than others."

"Because of Jason, right? The Hero?"

"Yes. Jason calls me every so often with his power, but we don't talk long. I usually sleep well for a night after, but then insomnia ruins me again. Why are you asking?"

"I have a sense about these things. Phoebe, have you considered visiting him?"

"No." I shake my head. "He's deep in the Labyrinth right now, on a personal mission to... well, it's private."

A thoughtful look crosses Samantha's face. She rocks left and right, resting her arms in her lap as she gazes at the ceiling. "He could have defeated that power-hungry Lord in a snap. How unfortunate he wasn't here."

I nod sullenly. "Yes. Err, you let Beelzebub go... can- can you tell me why? Did you know him?"

Samantha waves a hand. "No. It's more that I hate killing, even if someone else is a mass murderer. Violence has consumed demonkind since our creation. There's only one person I'd ever kill, but I'm satisfied by her punishment."

A question pops into my head. "Who are you referring to? I mean, if you don't mind my asking."

Samantha's smile vanishes. Her face hardens into steel as she lowers her eyes. "The Black Witch, Amelia Greyheart. She brutally murdered the demon I loved. I hate her with every fiber of my being. However, someone locked her away. Forced to scream and cry for all eternity. I'd be happier to flay the skin and meat from her bones, but the current punishment will suffice."

My lips quiver as I stare at Samantha. *She doesn't know about Amelia's release! Oh my god! She'll be enraged when she finds out!*

Samantha continues before I can interject. "I owe the Hero a lot, you know. 'Twas a Hero who mercilessly attacked and violated Amelia. Joan drove the Black Witch back, pounded, stabbed, and sliced her for days on end before finally freezing her in stone for all eternity. Jason isn't Joan, but... toward him... I feel..."

"...Gratitude?"

"Yes."

I nod slowly. "If... I... well... you should know... about Amelia."

Samantha glances at me. "You know her?"

"Something like that. Ahh. I don't know how to tell you this, Samantha... but she escaped. She isn't in that statue anymore."

I clench my teeth together, not wanting to tell her, *and it was Jason who released the Black Witch, through no fault of his own.*

Samantha stares at the ground silently. Several long seconds pass, and her hands curl together, tearing her black pantyhose as they scrape against the delicate fabric. "No. No, no, no. You must be lying. She can't- that's..."

"I'm not. Jason is planning to fight and kill her. She devoured an entire planet full of humans."

"She what?!" The succubus whips her head to glare daggers at me. "An entire planet?! Do you know how dangerous she is?!"

"Yes. Amelia maimed and nearly killed Jason."

"Haah... haah..." Samantha's body shakes as she inhales and exhales audibly. Her voice trembles. "I can't believe- I mean... he's going to fight.... can he win? Does he know what he's up against?"

"I believe so," I say. However, in my mind I think, *I'm not sure he does.*

"I didn't realize things had changed this much." Samantha unclenches her hands, exhales one last time, and releases her anger silently. "I'm something of a free soul. I hate working hard. I don't pay the slightest attention to anything that doesn't interest me: politics, demon rankings, none of those things. Ever since the man I loved died, I haven't cared about much. And now the one who tore him to pieces is roaming free, terrorizing millions."

Without thinking, I throw myself at Samantha, wrapping my arms around her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you! I didn't-"

Immediately, she reciprocates, twining herself around me. "D-don't apologize, Phoebe. I'm glad. You're kind and honest. You'll tell me the truth, even if it hurts. Living among demons, I rarely have such a luxury."

My hands stroke her long hair as we hold each other. Me, thinking of Jason, and her, thinking of Amelia.

After a minute, we pull apart. Samantha smiles cheerfully, even as a tear rolls down her face. "I haven't cried for several millennia. I don't even know why I'm sad!"

"You're not sad, I say, touching her cheek. "You're happy. Jason is going to tear her apart. I know it!"

She averts her gaze, and the look on her face echoes my thoughts. *I only hope Jason is up to the task.*

[Recommended Listening](#)

"Neil?"

I whisper as I enter the army commander's office. According to the soldiers, he's in here, but... they said that after carrying all the bodies he wished to be left alone.

Stepping inside, I find him sitting in his chair, laying onto his desk with his head in his arms. Neil doesn't reply to my call.

"Neil? It's me. Phoebe."

Slowly, he raises his head and turns to look at me. "Oh. Phoebe. I see you've finished speaking to that succubus."

His voice has a spiteful edge to it.

"Yes. Her name is Samantha. She's the one who saved us from Beelze-"

"I know who she is... and *what she did*." Neil snaps. He grinds his teeth together. "She let him go. The one who killed my men. Five thousand and four hundred of them. Good men. Honest men. They wanted nothing more than to be left alone... and Beelzebub slaughtered them like dogs."

Cautiously, I approach him and examine the grief on his face. "I know. They were all my friends too. Samantha had her reasons."

"Reasons? REASONS?!" Neil leaps to his feet, knocking his chair over and startling me. He grabs the desk and flings it to the side, sending mountains of papers and ink flying. "I don't give a damn about her reasons! She let a mass-murdering psychopath walk free! There's no excuse! She's working for THEM!"

I quickly back away. "N-Neil, please. I know you're angry. I'm angry too — but at Beelzebub. Samantha saved us. If it weren't for her, he would have killed you, then me, then-"

"I don't care!" Neil kicks the chair at his feet, sending it flying across the room and into a sword display. The metal weapons inside crash to the floor with a bang. "Where the hell was Jason during all of this?! Where was he when my men died? Why did we have to be at the mercy of a she-devil?! That whore allowed another of her kind to walk free!"

Neil turns away from me. "And there you were, snuggling in a corner with the harlot. She didn't even have the decency to allow Kar to gut Beelzebub. Why did she interfere, I wonder?"

"It's not like that, Neil." I put force into my voice this time. His anger is pissing me off. "Stop misunderstanding. You haven't even talked to her yet. Think of all the men she healed and saved."

"Think of all those she didn't!" Neil spins to face me, clenching his hand into a fist. "She hung back and laughed while Beelzebub tore us to ribbons! I bet she let him in! She laughed and allowed him to escape! That temptress is manipulating you!"

"Neil!" I shout back, resisting an urge to slap him. "That's enough! She wasn't even in the Core! She heard the commotion from our encampment and came as soon as possible! You're making up facts to paint her as the villain!"

The commander glowers at me. "Then why did she let him leave?"

"She hates violence. She didn't want to see anyone else die, not even Beelzebub."

Neil's tongue snakes out of his mouth. "Oh? You're ignorant, Phoebe. She's playing you like a fiddle." He cocks his head. "Tell me, how do demons grow in power? You're the demonologist around these parts. It should be a simple question to answer."

I already see where he's going with this. "U-usually, they have to consume souls."

"I see. And pray, tell me, have you noticed the size of the succubi's horns?"

"Yes."

"And did you notice how easily she defeated Beelzebub? I could see him begging for mercy with just his eyes. She's quite powerful, after all. Wouldn't you agree?"

I lower my eyes. "Y-yes. But..."

"*But* nothing. *Samantha*, if that's her real name, is a goddamn Demon Duke. Maybe higher. We have a *fucking* Duke of Hell in our midst. Do you think a Duke, one who has consumed an order of magnitude more souls than a Lord, is a pacifist?"

I don't reply.

"Give me a break," Neil hisses under his breath. He walks over and swings his desk back into a standing position, slamming it on the floor and making me flinch.

"What... what do you want to do, then, Neil? Kick her out?"

The commander sets his jaw. "No. There isn't anybody, not even Kar, with the power to stand up against a Duke. A single Lord ripped apart our Core forces. All we have left are the reserves. Only Jason, if anyone, could put up a fight against her."

Neil paces back and forth like a mad dog. "That bitch. That *fucking* bitch. Letting him go. Unforgivable. Now I have to grovel and grin while pretending to thank her. The men think she's a savior. They're all enamored. How *convenient* that we let a succubus enter our ranks. I wonder how many loyal warriors she's corrupted with her demonic influence? We could have dozens of traitors in our midst, ready to ram a knife in my back."

"If she is our enemy, Neil, then we've already lost. We couldn't beat a single Lord turned Baron. If she wants to destroy us, we're already dead."

"Tch." Neil waves his hand flippantly. "As if. The Duke doesn't want to kill us. Her goal is to frighten us into submission. She'll turn the soldiers to her will and tear us apart from the inside-out. She wishes to restore the status quo; to reduce us to peasants under her boot. I see now that I shouldn't have freely allowed demons to enter our ranks. Monsters are bad enough, but demons are a thousand times worse."

I shake my head slowly, but can't offer a counter-argument. *Truthfully, from what I know about Samantha, that isn't who she strikes me as... but Neil could be right. What if he is? Gods... she might be the villain here, but my naivete is blinding me. How do I explain my thoughts?*

Twining my fingers together, I look up and meet Neil's gaze. "I'll... I'll keep an eye on her. You make good points, Neil. Succubi cannot use their powers to influence someone of the same gender, so you can trust me if nobody else."

Neil stops pacing and turns to meet my eyes. He says nothing for a few moments, but then his shoulders sag. "Of... of course. God, I'm sorry, Phoebe. I know you're trustworthy. Everyone does. You would never do anything to betray humanity."

The commander takes a step forward and rests his hand on my shoulder. "Be careful. I could be wrong, but I doubt it. If that woman is here to infiltrate and tear us apart, she might even get to me and make me a mindless slave. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Slowly, I shake my head and rest my hand on his. "No. I wouldn't. I'll... I'll do my best, Neil. I won't let you down."

Neil smiles, and the tension drains from his face. "I know I can count on you."

As I leave the room, my mind twines back to King Arthur. *I can't let people down ever again. Everyone's counting on me.*

I continue heading to my truck, ready to go home, and I spot Samantha already sitting in the passenger seat. She waves at me. "Hey, Phoebe! Mind if I get a lift back to the city?"

I nod. "Sure."

Neil. I hope you're wrong. I pray you're wrong.

Part 037: Irredeemable Evil, Unlimited Regret

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Laying on my back in the grassy field, I trace my finger against the clouds in the sky. "La la la... la la la..."

A hot, stale breeze blows across the plains. The breeze pulls dried leaves into the air, blowing them past me one by one. Each leaf drifts forward for a while, only to float down and land amidst an endless sea of cracked, dried grass.

A few birds fly overhead. They'll perish by week's end, as will the rest of Polaris's wildlife.

I sit on a barren rock orbiting a star.

This world is dying, and it's all my fault.

Blaarjiim grunts at me. "My queen, you seem gloomier than usual."

I wait a moment before responding.

"Do I?"

Blaarjiim nods. "Aye. You haven't smiled in days."

"He's right! Does that jaw of yours still hurt or what?" Dellfingler pipes up, interrupting my train of thought. "It ain't like you to lay around. Not that I've seen, anyway."

Lowering my arm, I rub my chin thoughtfully. "I don't know. There's a void in my heart. Emptiness. I can't explain it."

"Is that so?" Blaarjiim lays on the grass beside me, appearing in my mind's eye as a blackened mirage. "Perhaps you need a new thrill. Why not find someone worth battling? Use your new power and-"

"No. I don't want that."

My interruption annoys him — Blaarjiim sighs. "Now I know you aren't in your right mind. You're thinking about the mortal, aren't you? Ever since Hoarhiim vanished..."

The mention of Jason makes my throat catch.

"Yes."

"There's no other way, my queen. You'll have to fight the mortal sooner or later. He won't forgive you for leaving him to die. He'll be angry; out for blood."

"I know."

Dellfingler snorts. "Honey, you ain't got nothin' to worry about. You beat him real easy last time, and you're a hundred times stronger now!"

"Sword, please. I'm not in the mood for your comments."

Dellfingler sighs. "Alright, geez, fine. I'm just saying."

Blaarjiim forms in my vision, appearing as a dark, smoky form against the backdrop of the white clouds. "The sword speaks truth, my queen. If I may be so bold... you are moping. The sooner you finish devouring this planet, the sooner we can move to the next-"

"I don't want to."

"Pardon?"

I stare at Blaarjiim's form silently for a few moments before raising my arm and pressing it against my eyes. "When does it end?"

He grunts. "I am not sure what you are referring to."

"The killing. The hunger. When will it end? Am I destined to spend eternity consuming everything in my path?"

It turns out the sword didn't learn his lesson. He chuckles. "Getting cold feet after everyone you've killed? Honey, I may be a weapon designed for bloodshed, but I'd go dull long before I could amass your body count."

"I don't care about the opinion of an *object*," I mutter.

"You don't? Then why ain't you moving on to the next batch of food?!"

Several moments pass. I sigh. "I liked you better when all you did was hit on me."

"Sweetie, I'm a sword. The only way we'd be an item is if I entered you, and it would be quite painful."

I groan. "Ugh."

Thoughts rage in my mind. *The more powerful I grow, the more trapped and unfulfilled I feel. I don't know why this is the case. Has slaughtering the weak and helpless transformed me into a pointless existence? Jason. What would you say if you saw me in this state?*

Blaarjiim speaks suddenly, his voice tinged with surprise. "Oh? Well, well, well. Look who showed up."

My heart pounds in my chest. I jerk into a sitting position and gape at the mountain of a man standing in the distance.

Jason.

His eyes glow white, a color not unlike Hoarhiim's orb. He looks the same as when I left him, standing seven feet tall, but his posture seems more confident than before.

Jason walks forward and stops about fifty feet away. "Yo. What's... uh... cracking, Amelia?"

Immediately my elation deflates. *His body may change, but the mind stays the same.*

I pull myself to my feet and dust grass off the back-side of my black dress. I forced a village to sew it for me, since the blue one was in tatters. They didn't do the best job, but it's serviceable.

I wonder if Jason... likes it?

"I knew you'd show up. When Hoarhiim's orb vanished from my purse, only one culprit came to mind. What's with the eyes?"

He stares at me silently for a few moments. "How many have you killed?"

"I asked a question first."

He continues to stare at me unblinkingly. Something about his hollow gaze makes me uncomfortable. "I don't know why my eyes are like this. After you maimed me, I lay immobile and paralyzed in a bed for a full month. They glowed the whole time."

"You healed yourself." I don't phrase it as a question.

"No thanks to you." Jason's voice has an edge of bitterness to it. "Why, Amelia? Why did you attack me? I never wanted to hurt you. I... toward you... I felt..."

"You felt nothing." I cut him off before he can continue. "You're a Hero. You're my enemy. It's that simple. Angels created demons. Demons razed my birthplace and took my best friend from me. But Heroes? Heroes hurt *me*, several times. You're all the same."

Jason shakes his head. "I remember a time when *I* was the one preoccupied with appearances. You're beautiful, Amelia. If you weren't a monster... if you hadn't attacked me and left on that day... I wouldn't be here now, nor would you."

"Where would we be, then? On a beach, sipping lemonade?!"

Jason cocks his head slightly. "Perhaps. There's good in you, Amelia. I'm not just saying that. You can say you healed me twice and that those acts of kindness were part of some nefarious plan to turn me to your side, but you didn't have to become a world-consuming monster. You could have made a different choice. You could have made *several* different choices."

My right hand slowly curls around Dellfingler. "How dare you judge me. Do you think this world and the one before it were my first time committing genocide? I've devoured millions, Jason. Don't pretend I'm redeemable. Just because you wanted me to dance around in a cute little dress for you doesn't mean-"

"So what if I did?" Jason grits his teeth. "Is there something wrong with only using your powers for good? Healing the sick? Where I come from, there's a saying. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. When you attack, hurt, maim, and kill everyone in your path, you ask for the same to be done back ten times worse. I gave you a fresh start, Amelia. You could have used your powers positively and helped the universe. Instead, you became a blight. A disease."

"Well, well," Blaarjiim whispers to me, a grin on his face. "Don't those words sound familiar?"

Slowly, I lick my lips. "Yes, Blaarjiim. They do. Self-righteous. Judgemental. I was right about you, Jason. You're like all the other heroes, but you won't admit it to yourself."

"I never wanted us to grow apart." Jason says, raising his palm at me. "Maybe I should thank you. I live in the Labyrinth, now. A place of pain, torture, and death. You hurt me badly enough to shake away some of my naivete. Now, the only thing left is for me to abandon my childish ideals. I have to atone for releasing you and unleashing your evil upon two unsuspecting worlds."

"Oy, oy..." Dellfingler mutters. "Can't you two kiss and make up? Jason, are you planning to kill this beautiful temptress? This sultry goddess? Come on... don't be petty."

"This isn't about revenge. I'm not angry because you hurt me, Amelia." Jason pulls his palm back and touches a scar on his neck. "I know why you did it. I understand the choice you made. It was wrong, but I don't blame you. However, I do blame you for the deaths you've caused to innocents. Compared to you, the demons look like angels."

Jason closes his eyes and inhales. "You're toxic. You're the forbidden fruit. I've found someone better now, someone I love and respect. I loved you once, Amelia. It was childish, immature, and surface-level. I projected my loneliness onto you, hoping you could fill a void in my chest. I sensed we were birds of a feather, two souls who were alone and lost in the world. However, that was not the case. I was wrong. There is no longer anything inside of you; only emptiness and hatred remain."

Something crawls down my cheek. I quickly try to brush it off, only to pause and examine my hand. *A tear? Why am I crying? I'm not sad. Jason can say anything he wants. A Hero will say anything to make me lower my guard.*

I wipe my eyes angrily. "I don't need you, Jason. I never did. I only spared and healed you because you released me from my prison — not for any other reason. You may have someone you care about, but so do I. Blaarjiim is all I need. Spare me the theatrics. If you think you can kill me, then do it."

Jason's lip quivers. A tear rolls down his face as well. "I don't want to hurt you, Amelia. I never did. It's you who left me no choice. You decided your fate. Now I will make it happen."

My entire body begins to shake. Rage floods my vision. "I won't kill you, Jason. I'll make you my slave. You'll live to regret becoming a Hero. I promise you that."

Jason lowers his arm and stands limply as I draw Dellfingler. "I'm sorry, Amelia. I have failed you. I'm sorry for everything."

A ripple of power pulses from Jason. Pebbles and rocks slowly hover off the ground, and the planet begins to shake.

Then, he speaks a single word.

"Die."

Part 038: Hellfire And Brimstone

The Duke of Pain and I, the Emperor of Annihilation, wait patiently for Mephisto's return. The Duke of Mist left not long ago on a mission to visit the Oracles, beings who possess the means to see all corners of the Labyrinth at once. Bael and I sit at a section of the Labyrinth not far from the River Styx while we await Mephisto's return.

"Come on, Mephisto... come on..." Bael paces back and forth, a look of annoyance etched into his face. Most of the light surrounding us comes from glowstones embedded in the walls. Every so often, Bael's bare arm scrapes against the rocky wall, chipping some of it away. It will regenerate, though. The Labyrinth always heals its wounds.

Satan, the original First Emperor, was the greatest of our species. He formed the Labyrinth as a place to protect demons from humans and angels. Our home, isolated in a pocket dimension, grows as time passes. It leeches minuscule amounts of spiritual energy from all its residents and continually expands its borders. These days, the Labyrinth's size increases so slowly that it's scarcely noticeable. However, long ago, the Labyrinth was an exploding fortress of intricate hallways that confused any who dared to invade it.

Satan was one of my best friends. Together, he and I fought long and hard against not only the angels, but the humans as well.

I miss him.

"COME ON!" Bael punches a wall, sending a wave of pressure flowing throughout the hallway. "Gah! Deebs, it's been weeks! When's that fucking ghost gonna get off his ass and come back! Why I oughta..."

"Calm yourself, Bael," I reply. "Mephisto barely left a day ago. You need a better sense of time. And patience."

The Duke of Pain glowers at me. "I wanna tear that skinny broad apart. How can you be all calm and shit after what she did to Barbatos?! She's gettin' stronger by the second!"

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh? Are you scared? I thought you liked it when women fought back."

Bael rolls his eyes. "You know what I meant." He pauses. "Ehh, come to think of it, maybe you're right. Waitin' around sucks, though. Ain't nothin' happening. We could at least go to the torture pits or the Slaughterseum!"

I curl my lip up in disgust. "That's *your* fetish, not mine. Mephisto should be back soon. Umi will know where the Black Queen is."

Bael stands up straight, and his horns scrape the ceiling. He crosses his arms and starts pacing back and forth. "Umi, Umi, Umi. How do we know these Oracles are any good? What makes Umi so special?"

"You don't know? I thought I told you about her before."

Bael shrugs and etches a circle into the stone with his finger. "Ehh, you prolly did."

"And you forgot?"

"Maybe."

He did, I sigh internally. A yawn takes me for a moment as I stretch and bump the ceiling with my arms. *This damned hallway is too narrow. Maybe Bael has a point. I'd like to relax somewhere rather than stand around waiting.*

"Umi is our best Oracle. Her predictions have never failed, and her findings are accurate. Marie assured me of that much."

"Marie? You mean that redheaded bitch?"

"Yes. *The redheaded... bitch.*" My tone frosts over noticeably. I'm not a demon that regards females as inferiors, partially because Belial has flattened me out a few times. Bael, however, isn't sophisticated enough to treat the female demons, let alone humans, with any dignity.

Bael ignores my annoyance. "Big whoopee fuckin' deal. Oh wow, she has an Oracle of her own. We should kill her and use our Oracles instead. You can't trust a human, as they say."

"We can't kill her, even if I wanted to... which I don't. First Emperor's orders."

Bael's attitude worsens. "Oh, sure! The First Emperor! Who does he think he is, anyway?! Some upstart who won't even show his face! That's who he is! He's too scared to come out and reveal himself!"

"Bael. You'd do well to calm yourself." My frosty tone turns to ice. "The Overlords are terrified of the First Emperor. That's enough evidence of his power for me. Any more insubordination, and I'll break your jaw. The last thing I want are rumors floating around that we aren't pleased with his performance. As long as the Overlords aren't increasing their demands-"

I pause suddenly and look down the hallway. "Who's there?"

Bael, confused, turns to follow my gaze. Moments pass with no response. "You going crazy? Ain't nobody-"

"I can sense energy down that hall. Demonic."

From the darkness, someone coughs. A flame ignites, and I immediately recognize Beelzebub's face as he winces and clutches his side. He squints at us. "Ah... Emperor Diablo? Duke of Pain? I'm relieved to see you."

Beelzebub walks toward us with a look of distress etched into his face. His suit, usually in excellent condition, is torn to ribbons. It hangs off his body in strips, barely concealing his demonhood.

Bael snorts. "The fuck happened to you?"

I raise my hand. "Silence, Bael. I'll ask the questions. Beelzebub, where have you been? I sent you to fetch an Oracle. Last time I saw you, you were naked, yet now you wear half a suit."

Beelzebub nods. "I traveled with Rosalia... kah..." He coughs and slows to a stop in front of me. "Out of nowhere, a hundred humans attacked us. I told her to flee, and I took out the wretched filth myself."

During the battle, I captured one of them and forced him to tell me where they were from. He said they were a commando force from the Core."

"The Core?" I rub my chin thoughtfully. "I've heard rumors. Nobody can approach it due to a powerful weapon protecting the Great Doors."

Beelzebub nods. "The human commandos were heavily armed. They had armaments I'd never seen before... like something from the Energy Wars."

Bael smirks. "How would you know about weapons from those ancient times? You're still a whelp."

Beelzebub scowls at Bael. "My mentor taught me a great many things. I listen and learn, unlike you."

"Hey!" Bael starts to clench a fist, but I stop him.

"Easy, Bael. You deserve that." Turning back to Beelzebub, I ask, "What happened next?"

"They had four automated turrets guarding the entrance. I blasted them apart, then smashed the Great Doors off their hinges. Assaulting the Core and wiping out the majority of their reserves was a simple task for one as powerful as I. Even their Energy War weaponry wasn't enough to slow me down."

Bael leans against the wall. "Not bad. A whole bunch of Lords went there a few months back and got torn apart. Only a few survived."

"Yes, Bael is right," I add. "Still, if you had such an easy time, then... why are you so disheveled?"

Beelzebub lowers his gaze. "As I said... everything was going perfectly according to plan. However, out of nowhere, a demon appeared. He assumed my form, copying my looks exactly, and defeated me swiftly. It all happened so fast... I don't know his identity, but he warned me that the Core would be under his protection."

"A shapeshifter?" I stare incredulously at Bael. "And a high-ranking one by the sounds of it. Only a few individuals come to mind."

"You know damn well who it was!" Bael replies, a snarl in his voice. He slams his fist into the wall. "That floozy skank whore! Belial! I knew she'd join the humans! She has no loyalty to our kind!"

"Now, now..." I quickly move to calm Bael down. He's a handful when he gets pissed. "You don't know it was Belial. Even for her, this is stooping a bit low."

Beelzebub rubs his chest and stands up a little straighter. "We're fortunate I entered the Core. Now we know the humans are planning to fight back. If that copycat was Belial, then they have a powerful ally working alongside them."

I nod appreciatively and pat the Lord of Fire on his shoulder. "You did well to bring me this news, Beelzebub. You should go and rest in the Blood Pits. I will have Mephisto deliver a message for Hellga when you arrive, so she knows I'm authorizing your treatment. Entering the lair of the enemy alone is quite remarkable."

"Did sssomeone sssay my name?"

Mephisto's voice hisses from the wall. A moment later, he appears, popping out and floating toward us. "I have ssspoken to the Oraclesss. Asss usssual, Umi hasss provided me with the location of the portal."

"Excellent. Mephisto, you'll need to bring your A-game. I want all of your undead legions there. We'll take no chances against the Black Queen. I've just learned from Beelzebub that Belial won't assist us in this battle."

Mephisto's red eyes jerk to Beelzebub. "At leassst you're wearing more clothesss than lassst time."

"Shut up," Beelzebub replies, glaring at the Duke of Mist. He turns to me. "Diablo. I ask that you allow me to join you. I wish to fight the Black Queen."

Bael smirks. "You did well, little Lord. But taking out a bunch of humans and monsters ain't like fightin' the Black Queen. It ain't a battle for weaklings to get swept up in, not unless you like dying."

Beelzebub bristles. "Weakling? That word no longer describes me. I am a Baron now, on par with President Ose. I have evolved."

It takes me a moment to hide my surprise. Looking up, I notice Beelzebub's horns are slightly bigger than the last time I saw him. "You evolved? When? How? I never authorized you to receive souls from Styx."

Beelzebub chuckles for several moments. "Heh heh heh... You're not dealing with the average demon warrior anymore, Diablo. I've risen beyond the limits of a normal demon. I possess Soulfire, a secret power belonging only to the most legendary purebloods. I used it to reap the souls of humans and monsters as I slew them, and achieved the rank of Baron in a matter of seconds."

Bael and I share another moment as we eyeball each other. He speaks first. "You're too dramatic, kid, but I'm still impressed. Only a few purebloods I've known could summon it. They're all dead, now."

I smile politely at the young demon. *Beelzebub is cocky; overconfident. Then again, maybe he deserves to be. Something about him reminds me of Satan. It might be his attitude, his willingness to take risks for the good of demonkind. Charging into the enemy base to gather intel may have been foolhardy, but damn if I'm not impressed.*

It would be a shame if we lost him.

"Beelzebub. You're in no condition to fight. If you want to come along, we'll have our hands full battling the Black Queen. We can't protect you."

Beelzebub nods and straightens up. He stops holding his gut, and inhales. "I know. She murdered my mentor. I owe her fire and retribution in response. Besides... I can handle myself."

With that little speech, Beelzebub grabs his left arm's bicep with his right hand, grunts, and tears the limb off without blinking. His shoulder stump erupts into a fountain of blood.

Bael takes a step back. "W-what the hell?! You're crazy! What are you doing, idiot?!"

Beelzebub's expression darkens. Flames erupt from his stump. "I am the Baron of Flames. Born of the primordial inferno, I have unlocked the power of the Phoenix. My strength will only increase as time passes."

Slowly, I inhale.

Seven Devils. It's... it's just like Satan. I can't believe what I'm seeing.

Several moments pass. Beelzebub's stump seals up, and bone and skin begin rapidly expanding from it, forming a new arm.

I stare at his regenerated limb. *How many demons have I seen with such an incredible regenerative ability? Too few... not nearly enough. The Archangels wiped them all out. But... without the Archangels around, he might become an invincible warrior.*

"Very well. You may follow. I look forward to seeing your performance on the battlefield. Don't die, Beelzebub. Someday, you may end up standing where I am now."

Beelzebub smiles. "I will reach even higher."

Mephisto glares at Beelzebub's back. "Tch. We'll sssee about that."

Part 039: A Forbidden Power Emerges

My heart stops for three seconds. Amelia stares at me silently. The wind sweeps across the plains, blowing dead leaves and grass between us.

"Die?" Amelia asks. "Are you trying to kill me with Wordsmithing?"

One of my fingers twitches. A bead of sweat drips from my forehead to my chin. I yell again. "**DIE!!**"

The word of power fades into the wind. Amelia draws Dellfingler and loosely holds him at her side. "Well. How about that? The Creator has a sense of humor. It seems whatever godly abilities he gave you; an easy killing word wasn't one of them."

My right foot slides back slowly. *What the hell?! It wasn't supposed to be like this! I should have been able to kill her with one word!*

Amelia notices the confusion on my face. "Jason, *sweetie*, I know you're a little baffled, but try to keep your head on straight. After that preachy speech, I didn't expect you to act like a little chicken-shit."

Slowly, I nod, forcing myself to accept the outcome. Raising my palm, I telekinetically-yank my lightsaber to my hand and shift the backpack around to adjust its weight.

I don't know if I can beat her. I wanted to end the battle with one word... but now I have no choice.

Blaarjiim appears in my mind. "I pegged you as many things, mortal. A coward was never one of them. Of course, I can hardly blame you. You are no Joan. You will be unable to beat my Queen in physical combat. When she finishes, she will crush and consume you... forcing you to be her slave for all eternity."

"Slave?" I echo his words. "What's that about?"

Amelia crouches down, bundling power into her legs. "You're about to find out!"

She jumps at me. The fifty-foot gap between us diminishes frighteningly fast! With a twitch of my unencumbered left-hand, I send a telekinetic shockwave down from the sky, smashing her into the ground mid-dash. Amelia's quick yelp of surprise as she swallows dirt gives me enough time to jump back and raise my lightsaber defensively. The blade pops out as she staggers to her feet.

Amelia spits soil and wipes a few blades of grass from her face. "More cowardice. Do better!"

She leaps at me again, but when I send another wave of telekinesis at her, she vanishes, and only Dellfingler's voice yelling, "Look out, kid! From the left!" allows me to dodge right.

Her fist slams into my kidney, sending me sprawling in the opposite direction. I right myself in midair, cushioning my landing with telekinesis and saving myself from a bone-crushing ground-slam, just in time to hear a verbal facepalm as Dellfingler yells out, "No, stupid! MY left!"

You should have specified!! I mentally scream at the sword.

"Above!" Dellfingler yells again, as Amelia slices at me from the sky. I telekinetically shove myself to the right, barely dodging as her attack smashes the ground.

Amelia pauses for a moment to yell at Dellfingler. "Stop telegraphing my attacks, fucker! You're making me hurt him!"

I frown in confusion. *What the hell does she mean by that?*

Amelia doesn't give me the time to ponder that question. She sheathes Dellfingler and balls up her fists. "Whatever! I don't need a sword anyway!"

I leap to my feet and Wordsmith again. "**Speed. Speed. Enhance. Perception.**" I can't match her with my current speed, but maybe if I enhance my physical abilities, that will change.

Amelia hears me Wordsmithing and scowls. "Finally resorting to Wordsmithing boosts? Maybe now I'll have some fun!"

My ribs are killing me. Where I got punched feels like she jammed a hundred knives inside. I heal myself and grimace as my energy drops a little bit. *The damage was extensive.*

Amelia hunches down, assuming a new combat stance that keeps her low to the ground. She fakes left, then rushes right, closing the thirty-foot gap in a second. She skitters around like a spider, causing her movements to become erratic and difficult to follow. This time, I send out a telekinetic wave in all directions away from my body, which is weaker but provides me better protection from all sides.

Amelia tries to swing her fist at my right side, but my telekinetic wave knocks her off-balance. I quickly dodge her attack and grab her with my telekinesis, then throw her straight up into the air.

Chance!

I yank Amelia downward, flinging her into the ground with my telekinesis.

Whump!

She strikes the dirt like a sack of potatoes, gasping in surprise as I knock the wind out of her.

I lunge forth; lightsaber aimed downward to drive through her. The blade of holy energy slams into Amelia's stomach, piercing through her and impaling her body into the ground. She opens her mouth to scream, but nothing comes out.

"Whoa, boy! Brutal!" Dellfingler offers a few words of disapproval as I deactivate the lightsaber and hop away. Just in time, too. Amelia's flailing legs miss me by an inch.

She writhes on the ground, clutching her stomach and gasping. "Nnng! Ahh! J-Jason! It... it hurts! Ahh!"

Her pitiful cries nearly wrench my heart in two.

"Imagine how all the humans felt as you tore them apart," I reply, steeling myself.

Amelia isn't my friend. I can't pity her. It's like Michael said: Heroes have to sacrifice their ideals.

Before she can try another trick, I send a continual wave of telekinesis at her, pressing her body against the grass and pinning her in place. My lightsaber activates, and I take a step toward her.

Amelia squirms, trying to stand up, to move, to flee. "Jason! No, p-please! Don't do this!"

I falter, pausing for a moment. "If I don't kill you here, you'll continue ravaging the cosmos."

"I won't! Please! I promise... I'll be a good girl... Jason..."

No. I can't listen. She's... she's trying to manipulate me.

I press a little harder with my telekinesis, easing my body down onto her wriggling form and holding the tip of my lightsaber to her forehead. Amelia goes still and stares up at me. She inhales sharply. "Fine. Do it, then. I knew all along... you're as evil as Joan. All heroes are. You c-can pretend to be righteous agents of justice... but you're no better than me."

"I haven't killed millions, let alone billions," I retort, gritting my teeth. "You have. Don't pretend we're the same."

"I'm a hundred thousand years old, Jason." She doesn't flinch as the energy from my lightsaber nicks her forehead. "You don't know how I've lived. Joan was a mass-murderer. You haven't killed anyone yet... but I'll be your first. And after me, how many more? You think you can stop after killing me?"

My hand twitches. The saber pulls on my arm like an anvil, threatening to fall and impale Amelia's head. I raise it an inch.

Dammit. She's lying. She has to be.

Her body shifts under me. It's distracting. I start thinking about other things and- *focus! Even if Amelia is a woman, that doesn't mean...*

Amelia's chin trembles. "Why do you hesitate? Do it. Be a *Hero*. Claim your first victim, just as Joan did. She slew countless demons, telling herself that her actions were in service of *God*. That's how it always begins. You start off doing the right thing, trying to put an end to evil, but-"

"Shut up, Amelia!" I force my jaw to set, moving the lightsaber close enough that her forehead starts to warm. She whimpers, and a tear rolls down her face.

"Jason... you're hurting me. Why are you so cruel?" Slowly, Amelia raises her hand, trying not to provoke me. She touches my chest. "We don't... have to be enemies."

I can't take it anymore. Rage boils inside of me. With a flourish, I lunge the lightsaber down, chopping off her arm and jumping away. Amelia screams in pain and clutches her stump.

Bile forms in my stomach. I want to vomit. Her touch sickened me. But... I lashed out at her.

"It burns!" Amelia whimpers and clutches her wound. "Stop hurting me! Finish me or leave!"

* * *

Fuck. Now it comes down to the wire. I don't want to murder Amelia. I know she's manipulating me. Maybe it's years of conditioning from public school. *Don't hit girls*, the teacher would always tell the boys. It was drummed into me from kindergarten to adulthood.

No. I'm making excuses. Not only does killing violate my ideals, but I secretly think Amelia doesn't deserve to die. What if she has lived a painful life? What if she's right about Heroes? It isn't my place to pass judgment on her actions.

You can't let her murder anyone else! Another voice yells in my mind. If not you, who will stop her? Who will prevent her from killing millions more?!

Maybe the demons will, I retort. How should I know?!

I can't make up my mind. The voices within me conflict, making it impossible to direct my blade.

Sighing, I press a button and deactivate my lightsaber. It slides back into my belt, and I stare at the girl lying helpless in the grass.

"I can't kill you, Amelia. Nor do I want to maim and torture you, either. I don't know what to do. **Regenerate.**"

Her arm begins growing back, sans a sleeve. To my surprise, the hole in her stomach appears to have already healed. *When? No. That doesn't matter.*

I hold my hand out. "Are you okay?"

Amelia's face, appearing as a series of colors and heat shapes, forms an expression I don't recognize. "You're healing me?"

"I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to kill you. I don't even want to fight you. When it comes down to it, I don't know if it's my right to deal with you at all. I believe, however, that no matter the awful things you've done... you can redeem yourself."

She stares at me incredulously. "What? *How?*"

"I don't have an answer, Amelia. If you've devoured ten million souls, then perhaps you need to save ten million others. You're immortal. It... it could be possible."

Scoffing, Amelia pulls herself into a sitting position and rubs her arm, staring at the ground. "You're a hopeless romantic, Jason. Maybe I was wrong about you. You're not like Joan at all."

Dellfingler pipes up. "Aw, wow! This is great. I hoped you two would kiss and make up."

Amelia stares silently at my shoes for a moment. "You know, Jason... when you pulled me out of the statue, I was thrilled. It only lasted a few days, but I enjoyed our relationship. I remembered what Joan did to me, but her torture felt like an eternity past."

A crow cries out across the plain. "*Caw! Caw-caw!*"

Amelia continues. "That was months ago. In a lifetime of a hundred thousand years, you're a leaf on the wind. Here one second, gone the next."

Something about her tone catches my attention. "What do you mean? Do you think you can't redeem yourself?"

"I'm not you, Jason," Amelia retorts. She looks up at me, and her eyes narrow. "There isn't a shred of goodness in me. Thank Joan for that."

"Amelia... if you-"

The grass behind me shifts. Before I can react, several objects leap up and lance through my backpack, piercing my chest organs all at once.

"Wh...?"

Amelia stands up. "Shadow-bending. A power only those unified with darkness can use. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The invisible objects retract, yanking me onto my back, unable to move. Beneath me, my backpack's power source noticeably cools as the safeguards kick into place, and its fusion cells die off.

I cough blood. *P-paralyzed... again?! No... oh no... this can't be happening!*

My spherical vision begins to flutter. Something about the shadows sucks the energy right out of me. *I'm running low... on... mana...*

Amelia draws Dellfingler and points him at my chest. "I know you have feelings for me, Jason. You're too childish to admit it. Luckily, that was a weakness I could exploit. You had me worried for a moment."

"Don't do it!" Dellfingler howls in protest. "You don't have to be evil, darling! Save him! Do the right-"

"Shut up!" Amelia stabs Dellfingler at me, aiming to plunge him into my heart.

"Nooo!" The sword screams in protest.

I close my eyes.

Goddammit, Jason. You're a fucking idiot. Amelia's going to kill you.

Your ideals failed, once again. You shouldn't have opened up your heart.

Michael was right.

With my last ounce of strength, I grind my teeth together.

"CATHERINE!!!"

Amelia stops, holding Dellfingler an inch from my heart. The heat drains from her face.

"What... what name... did you say...?"

An object begins to form in my right hand.

I stare at her emotionlessly. My back rapidly heals as energy pours into my body.

"I trusted you, Amelia. You have no-one left to blame but yourself for this."

Her eyes darken. She gazes in horror at my new weapon.

"Im... impossible. That sword... is..."

Part 040: Joan - The Maid of Orleans

[Recommended Listening](#)

1423.

The young girl bows before an altar, prayer beads in hand. She sends her thoughts to the man on the cross above her.

Dear God in Heaven, holiest of the holy... I ask for good fortune upon my family. I ask for your blessing upon my village. I ask that the demons fall back, and that momma and papa love each other, and that...

Nearby, her parents and their local pastor watch her.

"She's a good girl, that one." Father Miles nudges the man next to him. "You're lucky to have such a pious daughter. Little Joan will make a fine wife someday."

Jacques, Joan's father, nods to the pastor. "Prays five times a day, she does. Wish her sister would devote herself to God, but Catherine ain't that kind of girl. Still, Cath's a wonderful child... in her own way."

"Jaq, dear." Isabelle, the mother, lightly pushes his arm. "Don't go comparing our children. Heaven knows the Creator won't like a parent who picks a favorite."

"I'm not, I'm not." Jacques smiles and kisses his wife on the cheek, then turns back to Father Miles. "Say, we've got to go, but tearing Joan away from church is like prying a dog off a bone. Would you mind...?"

Miles chuckles. "Oh, yes. Of course. When she wakes from her trance and wonders where you went, I'll tell the child a bunch of hellhounds carried you off."

"You, men!" Isabelle smiles, despite their crude humor. "Don't scare the poor dear. I'll go home and cook some supper. You're free to share in the meal, if you like, Father Miles. There's always a place for you at our table."

"Oh, no, that's quite all right." Miles rubs his scalp and glances at the girl. "After Joan finishes, I'm going fishing."

The waning midday sun shines through the paned glass at the entrance of the church, casting a shadow of Saint Mary upon the young girl. She doesn't notice.

Jacques nods. "Thank you, Father. I owe you."

Six years later.

"Mother! Catherine is coughing again! She's coughing!" Joan rushes in and grabs her mother's sleeping arm. "Wake up! It's dreadful this time!"

Isabelle's eyes flutter open. After a moment, her adrenaline kicks in. "Catherine? Oh! The tea! I forgot the tea!"

Minutes pass. Joan's mother quickly warms the herbal tea over the fire, crossing her heart as she rushes into her daughter's room. The sound of a cat screaming in pain outside makes her flinch.

Accursed animals. They brought this plague upon us. I pray the Father and the Holy Ghost will cleanse them with fire.

She pulls the sheet back. Her youngest, Catherine, hacks and coughs uncontrollably. In between coughing fits, she whimpers and holds her stomach. "Hurts... m-mother... hurts..."

"I know, love. It's okay... I'm here, now. Drink this tea. Drink it slowly." Isabelle hands the brew to her teenage daughter, glancing behind herself to see Joan standing sullenly in the doorway.

Isabelle forces herself to smile. *It will be okay, Joan. The Black Death is survivable. As long as we pray to the Lord, everything will work out. He knows what a good girl you are.*

Silently, Isabelle looks out the window. *Is Jacques still out in the fields? I hope he comes home soon.*

The bitter tea inflames Catherine's throat. She coughs uncontrollably for several seconds. When Isabelle leans over to comfort her daughter, she freezes.

Catherine has three black spots at the bottom of her neck.

Half an hour later, Isabelle shivers as she puts the teenager to bed. She closes the door and forces a smile when she sees Joan's downcast eyes.

"Your sister will be fine, sweetheart. Come sleep with me tonight, okay?"

A tear rolls down Joan's face. "Cath's dying. It's my fault. I only prayed twice yesterday."

Isabelle's hand trembles. She quickly lowers herself to Joan's level. "It's not that at all, beloved child. God giveth, and he taketh away. He puts trials down to strengthen us. When your sister gets better, she will be immune to the plague. That's what Father Miles says."

"She will?" Joan's lip trembles. "But... what if she doesn't get better? What if-?"

"Don't say such things. You must be strong for your sister. God loves you, Joan. You are his precious daughter, just as your sister is. Continue to pray, and he will save Catherine. I know it!"

The young woman nods weakly. She's only seventeen, and already a heavy burden weighs on her heart.

She wipes her tears away and beams at her mother. "Oh... okay! I'll do my best, mother!"

Three months later... 1429.

Father Miles pauses a moment to eyeball the young blonde lady standing at his side. She stands next to her sister's casket, dressed in black. Joan gazes emptily at Catherine's final resting place. Her few dozen friends and family try to offer comforting words, but their platitudes fall on deaf ears.

How tragic, Miles thinks to himself with a sigh.

"We gather here today in memory of the departed..." Miles begins. "Catherine d'Arc, third in line for the d'Arc lineage, passed away just two days ago. She was a wonderful child, one who everyone knew to be courteous, kind, and generous. I remember her first day in Sunday School when she gave all of her food to a less fortunate classmate. The young man was born an orphan, with no family to love him. She always spoke to him kindly and compassionately..."

Miles swivels his eyes around the crowd. *Her brother, Pierre, couldn't be here today. I doubt he's heard of Catherine's passing. The lad is off in the military, serving his country like any brave soldier. I hope he doesn't learn of her death during a moment of weakness. It could shatter his mind.*

Joan sniffles now and then, but cries no tears.

The Black Death. Nobody understands where it comes from, but I do... not the cats. The Demons. They created the plague. They killed my sister.

Foul monsters. Enemies of God. They sully his world with their evil.

Miles watches while speaking, as the look of grief on Joan's face shifts into a new emotion. *Rage.*

He nods knowingly to himself. *Gabriel. She is ready.*

One week later.

Joan kneels before the altar once more; her favorite rosary clutched in her hand. The one that her sister gave her. The one she lost two years prior and spent three weeks searching until she found it.

She mutters quietly under her breath so that only God may hear her words. "Father in Heaven, Holy Ghost, and The Son. Why have you forsaken me? What wrong did Catherine commit? I have prayed since I was old enough to speak. I have given my material possessions. Why did you take my sister? She was blameless. She was innocent."

Joan closes her eyes and listens, but no response meets her ears.

The church, empty on a Saturday, dulls the sounds outside. Lately, however, her hearing has become sharper. She can perceive things she didn't notice before. Her muscles, too, ripple with power. Sometimes, when she gazes at the lake, the reflection staring back at her is that of a stranger's.

Footsteps echo outside.

Joan raises her head and turns to the door. It creaks open, and Father Miles steps inside. He wipes his forehead. The summer heat is much more intense than usual, and it shows in his body language.

"Joan? Ah, of course, it's you. Make sure you don't lose the key, now."

She nods, barely hearing Miles' words. "Father... I have... questions."

Miles closes the door and bars it, then sighs. "I imagined so. I expected them several years sooner."

A curious look spreads across the young woman's face. She rises to a standing position as he passes the pews and climbs the steps to the altar.

"What do you mean, Father?"

Miles chuckles. "Ah, Joan. Before that..." He raises a finger. "Do you believe in Karma?"

The young woman twines a finger through her braided blonde hair. "I... suppose? What is Karma?"

"Karma is a term that means all things have already been set in motion. Nothing is an accident."

Joan swallows quietly. "You're referring to God's plan?"

"Yes."

Slowly, she raises her eyes to stare up at the statue of the Crucifixion. "Was my sister's death in his plan?"

"Perhaps. You are the most pious young woman I know. What do you think?"

Joan nods. "I... yes. I believe in God's Will."

"And why, then, did God take your sister?"

The young woman's lip trembles. "I... I don't know. He wanted another... another angel in Heaven?"

"No." Miles takes a step toward her and wraps his arms around the trembling youth. "God tested you, Joan. He found you exemplary, just as I do. Even now, you have not wavered in your faith."

"I... I can't..." Joan pulls away from Miles' embrace. "I don't understand. I thought he was testing my sister! I thought he would heal her and make her stronger! Why did she have to die?!"

Miles wipes his nose and glances at the sun radiating through the windows. "Joan. Let me ask you a question. If someone prays for strength, do you think God gives them strength? Or does he give them the opportunity to be strong? If they pray for courage, don't you suppose he will give them a chance to show their courageousness?"

Joan nods, tears in her eyes. "W-well, yes."

The Pastor smiles. "It hurts. You've lost your sister. But now that you understand what loss feels like, you will grow more empathetic. You know how people suffer because of the plague."

Realization appears in Joan's eyes. "The Creator allowed my sister to die... to strengthen me? But why?"

"You're special, Joan. You aren't an ordinary human. I've known that since you were just six years old." Father Miles lowers his hand. "There's something I want to show you. The Lord, Jesus, conceals it. Help me move his image."

Joan nods. The two of them take a few steps toward the twenty-foot-tall carved image of the Crucifixion. Sunlight radiates onto Joan's back from the stained-glass windows, as she hefts the statue a few feet to the right. Despite weighing nearly half a ton, it proves no more cumbersome than a pail of water to the teenage girl. Father Miles reaches inside a hidden compartment behind the statue and pulls out a sword and sheath, allowing Joan to return Jesus to his former position.

"What is that?" The young girl meekly crosses her fingers together in front of her as the Pastor holds the weapon flat across both of his palms.

"There are no coincidences, young one. This blade is the Sword of Heaven. A mighty angel once wielded it, one known as... Saint Catherine."

Joan's heart catches. "C-Catherine?! The same name as-"

"Aye. Karma. Do you understand, now? An angel appeared before me on your sixth birthday. Camael, the Archangel of Divination. She spoke of a child who would rise to cleanse the evil from this land. That warrior is you."

Miles extends his arms, holding the sword out to Joan. "You are a Hero. You serve the Gods now. They will favor you and bring blessings to your family."

Joan meets the pastor's eyes. "The Black Plague. The Demons caused it, didn't they?"

"I wonder about that," Miles replies, noncommittally. "You are the Hero, Joan. You will find evil wherever it hides... and exterminate it. That is your divine calling."

The blonde woman pulls the sword from Father Miles' grasp. "I understand. Thank you, pastor. You've given me... hope."

Miles shakes his head and caresses her cheek. "No, Joan. It is you who has given everyone else hope. That is what it means to be a Hero."

"Joan is here! The Hero! Tell Satan! Tell Bael! Tell every- GHAK!"

The fire-type demon sprays across the wall as the young woman lightly backhands him.

Joan takes a few steps into the cave. "Ah, another den of evil. It's my lucky day. Agents of Satan the Devil cannot hide from my Divine Vision."

Joan concentrates, and piercing white light emits from her eyes, shining through dirt and rock as she searches for her prey. "Guard the entrance, men. I'll flush out the fiends who dwell in these foul pits."

A thousand soldiers outside the hidden den nod, raising their weapons. "Aye! Return in one piece, Daughter of God! We're counting on you!"

Joan doesn't respond. She continues hiking further into the crudely dug cave, just big enough for her small frame to fit. Her light-armor rattles as she walks. The sword in her hand glows fiercely whenever a demon draws near, as though it's excited for the meal it will soon enjoy.

Terrified demons rush up to her, weapons both natural and artificial held at the ready, though none wish to be in her path. After all, the *Maid of Orleans* has yet to suffer a scratch in her year of conquest.

"Filthy fleshbag whore! Your head will roll!" A massive berserker-type howls.

Joan waves her hand, and stone spikes erupt from the earthen walls, lancing through three dozen demons and monsters in her path. The evil fiends perish instantly, unaware of the fate that befell them moments prior. The rest of the demons charge at her.

"Get her! The boss will make us Dukes if we gut this bitch!"

Joan smiles, but she feels no joy. "Aye. *If*."

She crouches down and delivers a gut-busting punch to one big fellow, tearing the demonic energy from his body and knocking him to the ground. With a flick of Catherine, the sword tears him into hundreds of pieces with its magical abilities.

Several demons burrow into the walls and burst out behind her, hoping to surprise the woman with a sneak attack.

Their efforts fail.

Joan spins on one toe, using her blade to cleave all her assailants at once. Then, using her light manipulation, she begins forming spears of pure Holy Energy and hurls them down the corridor with explosive force, tearing apart everyone in her path. The Divine Javelins erupt into shrapnels of light each time they impact a wall, killing dozens more.

"Sh-she's unstoppable! Fall back! Fall back!!" A demon Duke in the rear howls in fear, but for daring to speak up, he's rewarded with a missing head when Joan dances over to him and lops it off with a single strike.

Minutes later, Joan kneels in the blood of her fallen enemies and prays. "Thank you, Father in Heaven, for this massacre of evildoers. I have purged thy unholy enemies, as always, in your Divine Name. May you bless this world with favor."

Then, she continues moving. Her rampage is nowhere near complete.

"Renounce thy beliefs," Bailiff Massieu hisses. "Sign this paper. Admit you are a heretic. We will banish you from the army, but at least you will be allowed to live."

"Ptuh!" Joan spits at the man, causing the crowd of onlookers to gasp. "I'll never renounce my faith! I was called by God to slay demons, and that is what I've done! You are the servant of evil here!"

Massieu wipes his face. "You're nothing but a witch, a sorceress. The soldiers spoke of your supernatural powers! "

"Given to me by God!"

"An unlikely story!" Massieu hisses. He holds a paper up, one that would allow Joan to survive if she signed it, and tears it in half dramatically. "Consign yourself to the fires of Hell! Let none say that I offered you no mercy!"

The Bailiff smirks as he walks away. "Tie the witch where she stands. Burn her. She will serve as a warning for all who drink from the fountain of demonic power."

Joan stands valiantly, her back to the pyre. *Massieu. A demonic collaborator. I trusted in the purity of humanity, but I should have realized that weak-minded men might sink so low as to seek power from our enemies.*

A tear rolls down her face. *Is this why I fought? To protect those who cared nothing for their people?*

From the heavens, a light shines down. A voice appears in Joan's mind.

Young one. I am Raphael, a messenger from the Creator. We cannot save thee in thy time of need, but He has foreseen that thy life will not end here. Thy sword shall protect thee. Thou shalt enter it and someday be called upon once again. When that time comes... thou shalt know what to do.

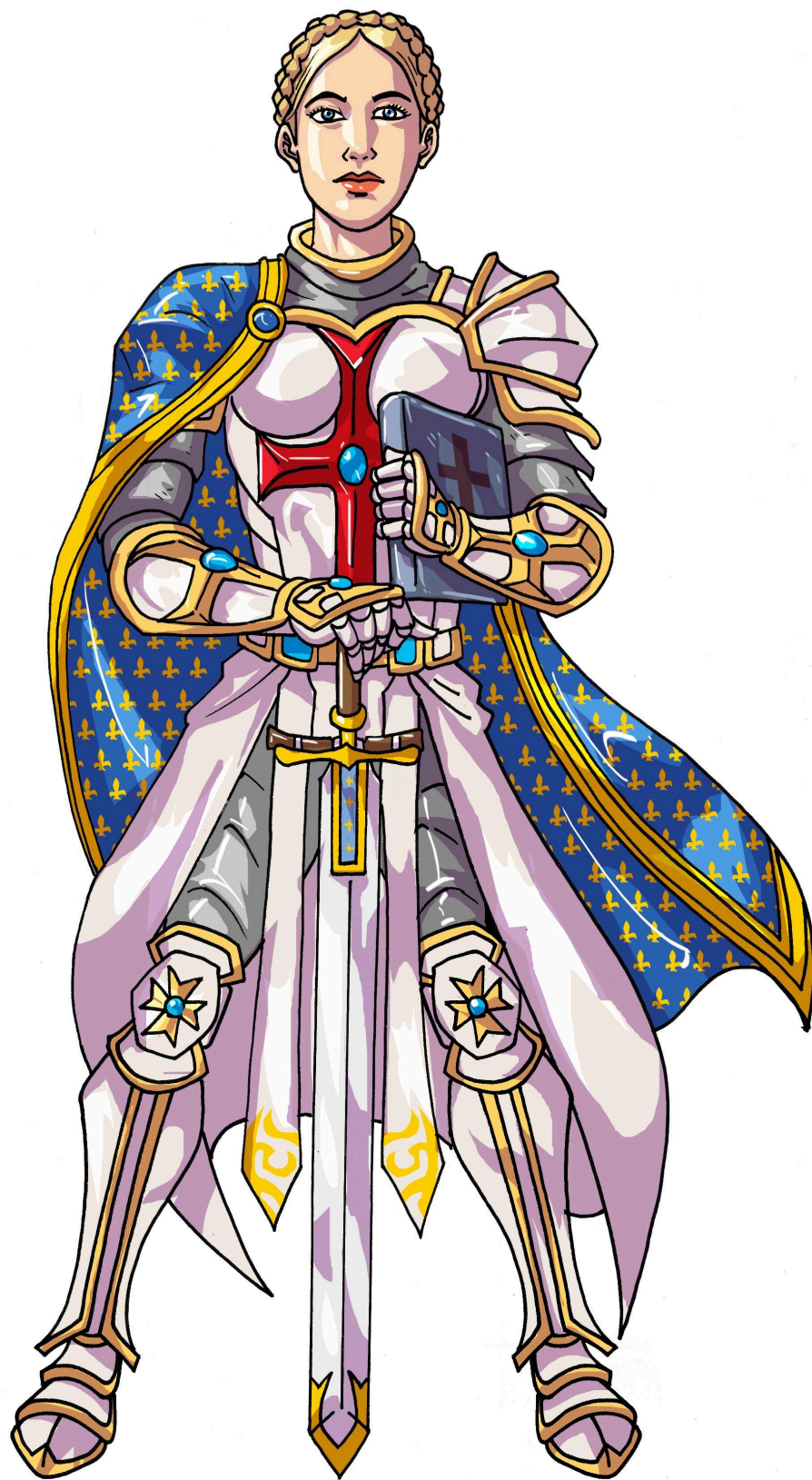
Joan gazes into the sky. She smiles, as the men approach with torches held high. "I... I understand. I will never doubt you, my Lord. My sister... Catherine? Is she...?"

She is an angel, here in Heaven. Thou hath done well, Hero. Thy sacrifices and struggles will never be forgotten.

Joan's smile radiates like the morning sun, even as flames begin to lick at her feet. "Thank you. Never forget that I served you to the very end."

Author note:

This is Joan



Part 041: When Heroes Become Villains

Recommended Listening

Jason stares blankly at Amelia as she takes a step back. "You brought this upon yourself."

In his hand, a sword of pure blackness forms. It's a weapon familiar to Amelia, one she saw long ago when Joan tore her to shreds.

Catherine. The Sword From Heaven.

"No! No!!" Amelia shrieks as she backs away even further. "How can you- where did you get that?!"

The Wordsmith rises, and his wounds heal. Dark energy rushes into his skin, and his eyes shift from white to grey to black. "**Achilles. Orion. Hermes.**"

Several pieces of armor appear in midair, wrapping around and encasing his body in darkness. "The Armor of Achilles, the Belt of Orion, and the Boots of Hermes. All legendary treasures from on high, all of them ruined by this godforsaken hell. If I must wear them to defeat you, I will."

The Black Queen raises Dellfingler defensively. Her nervousness and fear threatens to paralyze her. "W-what are these artifacts, Blaarjiim? I've... I've never seen anything like them."

Blaarjiim shakes his head. "Neither have I, my queen. If they're even close to the level of the Sword of Heaven, then this battle won't last-"

Jason leaps at Amelia, screaming with a pitch similar to a minotaur. "**GROOAAR!**" He swings his sword down, and Amelia barely raises Dellfingler in time to block. The impact of their weapons flattens the grass around them.

"Ow! Oh god, that hurt!" Dellfingler cries out in pain, but barely gets a second's reprieve before Jason's sword turns into a blur of motion. *TING-TING-TWANG THUD!*

Amelia deflects three of Jason's attacks before dodging the fourth and jumping back. The Wordsmith smashes his sword into the ground, spraying dirt in a wide arc. After a moment, his tongue snakes out. "**Where do you think you're going?**"

Blaarjiim assesses the situation. "My queen, something about those artifacts is corrupted. They're poisoning the mortal's mind. He's not fighting like he normally does."

Jason cackles evilly. "**Hahaha! You don't say! Oh, Amelia! I haven't forgotten what you DID to me!**" He stands up straight and aims the sword away from his body, as if lowering his defenses. "**For thirty days, I lay in that fucking bed! Paralyzed, unable to speak, barely able to think!**"

Jason vanishes, startling Amelia and Blaarjiim with his speed. A moment later, he reappears behind the Black Queen and licks his lips. "**I'll make you SUFFER!**"

Jason grabs Amelia by the hair. He ignores her scream of fright as he flips her over his head and slams her into the ground. Thanks to Amelia's enhanced body, the attack barely hurts her, but fear still appears

in her eyes. She swings Dellfingler and slices the back of Jason's legs, but he doesn't even wince in pain. The Wordsmith releases Amelia for a moment, falls forward, and heals the wound with his Wordsmithing. **"Heal."**

Dellfingler yells, "W-watch out, honey! He's strong as the Devil himself! That dark energy's messing with his head!"

Amelia dodges another grab as Jason swipes at her. He grows enraged, and his hands turn into the claws of a werewolf. He grips the corrupted Sword of Heaven more tightly and spins to face her. **"I released you from that statue, and look at how you repaid me! You split my throat, broke my back, and left me to die!"**

Amelia's hand trembles as she grips Dellfingler. "That's not true! I healed you! I even made sure everyone knew you were lying outside the Core!"

"LIAR!" Jason stomps toward her, and his dark energy shifts around him, transforming him from a man into something resembling a Shade. His body becomes slightly fuzzy and indistinct, and then morphs into a shadow of a woman.

Amelia's eyes widen in terror. "N-no! Joan! Stay away!" She takes a step back, fails to notice a rock, and trips. At that moment, Jason lunges forward, clearing the short gap instantaneously.

"My queen!"

The Sword Of Heaven swings up, lops off Amelia's right arm with one movement, then reverses direction and cuts off her other arm. She flops onto her back and screams in pain. "Aaie! No, Joan, please!! It hurts!!"

Jason grins devilishly, and yanks Dellfingler out of her dismembered hand.

"You'd better stop this right now, you little punk!" Dellfingler roars.

Jason ignores the sword's protests and plunges Dellfingler into Amelia's stomach, then stabs the Sword of Heaven into her heart, pinning Amelia to the ground.

"Aaaah! Uwaaa! It hurts! Hnnngh!"

It takes several seconds before she can do anything other than cry and choke for breath. Jason leans over her body and smirks. **"Not so tough now, are you? Fucking bitch. Do you think this ends here?! I've barely begun!"**

The Black Queen wiggles and tries to kick Jason, but he wraps his legs around hers, pinning her completely. She whimpers in return. "Joan... please... I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"I'm not Joan! Stop calling me that!" Jason gnashes his teeth. **"You hated me because I was weak, but now I'm unstoppable! It takes a monster to kill a monster! Beg for mercy!"**

Jason leans imposingly over Amelia's helpless body. His expression changes slightly as his eyes travel from her legs all the way up to her face. **"Maybe I've been doing this all wrong. There's a way to get out of your little predicament, Amelia. If you stay by my side and promise to be my**

whore, I'll make sure nobody hurts you. Not the demons, not Joan... nobody but me. You get to live; we get to be together..."

His face approaches hers. Amelia squirms and glances down at her arm stumps. They still haven't grown back yet. Catherine's holy energy, driven straight into Amelia's heart, prevents her body from regenerating.

Jason caresses Amelia's thighs. Slowly, his werewolf-like claws roam up her body to her breasts, only to come to a stop on her bloody arm stumps. The mortal presses her against the ground, digging into her wounds.

Amelia cries out in pain. "Eeeyahh!!"

Jason softens his voice. **"We don't have to hurt each other anymore. Just say you want me, Amelia."** He leans down to kiss her, but Amelia wrenches her head away.

"Stay away! You're not Jason. I hate you." Tears form in her eyes as she tries to avoid his touch. "I knew it. You're no better than Joan."

Her voice shakes, despite her attempt to dampen her terror. "I cared about you. For a day or two, maybe it would have worked. But I knew, once I found out you were a Hero, it was over between us. I finally understand what that armor is. It's not making you evil, Jason... it's drawing out your deepest desires."

Jason falters, pulling back a few inches. He scowls. **"Lies. The armor is evil, not I."**

"No, you are." Amelia turns to face him defiantly, their faces separated by inches. "If I'm wrong, then kill me. Don't turn me into a plaything. Take the sword and cut my head off, then destroy the rest of my body with your Wordsmithing."

The Wordsmith stares at Amelia for several long moments, taking shallow breaths. **"I... I don't want to."**

A moment passes.

Amelia nods knowingly.

"You said the armor would give you the strength to kill me, but that's not true. The last thing you want is for me to die. You want my body; nothing else. Admit it. The corrupted armor brings out your selfishness, your repressed thoughts. That's all it does. It isn't *making* you evil, Jason. Those thoughts were there all along."

He jumps off her and takes a few steps back. **"Y-you're wrong! All wrong!"**

"I'm not!" Amelia doesn't kick or try to stand. Instead, she glances away, across the field and into the distance. "You could have been honest, Jason. If there was even a drop of love in your heart or a pale shadow of empathy for others, you could have told me you loved me."

She inhales painfully, the swords still impaling her feminine form to the ground. "But now you can't. You've done the unforgivable. Look at yourself. You wanted to be a righteous Hero who fought for truth and goodness, but you're as much of a failure as all the previous ones were! It's true, Jason. I wanted to

enslave you, make you into a weapon against the Emperors. The difference is that I have no path to redemption. I'm evil. Stained."

"**Amelia...**" Jason whispers, his eyes downcast. "**I... I didn't mean to hurt you.**"

Amelia stares up at the sky, the sun waning in the distance. "I deserve what you've done to me. But... you were supposed to be better." She chokes and tears up. "You were supposed to be better! You were supposed to be a good man! Why did you have to change?! I hate you! I hate everything about you!!"

Amelia kicks and squirms violently for several seconds, futilely trying to break free of her impalement. She fails.

The Wordsmith says nothing for several moments, as Amelia sobs and gasps. Despite his demonic, monstrous appearance, his aura shrinks until it's no longer recognizable. The intimidating monster fades away, revealing a broken husk of a man.

Jason raises his head and walks to Amelia, then slowly kneels beside her. His voice normalizes as his negative energy fades. "You're... you're right. I can't apologize enough. I don't know what to say."

He reaches over and yanks the swords out of Amelia's heart and stomach, sending blood flying. Then he tosses the weapons to the side. "**Heal.**"

Amelia stares at him silently as he sits beside her. Her arms rapidly regenerate. Despite their battle only a minute before, she lies still and doesn't move to attack him.

"Jason?"

He avoids her gaze. "Don't look at me."

"I'm not mad."

"You should be. I am."

Jason leans over and starts yanking on the Boots of Hermes. He struggles for a solid minute before sighing. "I can't... can't get these fucking things off." His voice cracks as he fights back tears.

Amelia pulls herself into a sitting position. She silently takes Dellfingler and sheathes him inside his scabbard. "Jason. I've never seen you in as much pain as you are right now. Look at me."

He turns away, putting his back to her instead. "I don't want to. Everything you said was right. All your fears... all your suspicions. You were right to hate me."

"That's not what I said," Amelia replies, chewing her lip. "I never hated you, Jason. Not until today. Not until you attacked me. Not until you brought out the evil within yourself. Still... I would be hypocritical if I acted like you were the only one at fault."

His voice is numb. "I suppose."

Amelia pulls herself a little closer and wraps her arms around Jason. "You love me... don't you?"

He doesn't answer.

"You can say it, Jason. Now is the time for honesty."

While she wraps herself around Jason's back, he rubs tears from his eyes and stifles a sob. "I.... I did. I do. Maybe. I don't know. What I did wasn't loving at all. If this armor brings out my inner thoughts, then I'm just a sick, evil man. I'm worse than the demons."

"I wouldn't go that far."

The Black Queen pulls away from Jason. She sits and stares at his back for an entire minute. Already, the waning sun casts long shadows across the plains. She looks up at the darkening sky and sighs.

"Jason. I want you to kill me."

The Wordsmith snuffles, then turns to look at her. "What? I can't. I won't."

"You need to. I'm a mass-murderer. I won't stop until I've devoured the universe."

Another minute passes. Jason strokes the dead, brown grass. "Don't ask me to hurt you."

Amelia narrows her eyes. She climbs to her feet and walks over to Catherine. The sword lies on the ground a dozen feet away.

With a light kick, Amelia sends the sword clattering over to Jason. "Pick it up. This time, finish what you started."

"I won't." Jason turns away again and stares into the distance.

"Pick the fucking sword up."

"No."

Amelia shakes her head. "You almost had me. Goddamnit Jason. I told you to stop hurting me, not to spare my life! There's a difference!"

He doesn't reply for a few moments. "To me, those are the same thing."

"They aren't."

Blaarjiim watches silently, trying to understand his queen's thoughts. Never before have they been so chaotic and disorganized. Confusion and contradictions swirl around in her mind.

"My queen, please, stop and think. Take the Wordsmith's life. Enslave him like we planned. Then, you can--"

Amelia mutters under her breath, "No, Blaarjiim. I won't. I've made up my mind."

"You wish to die? Why?! Don't throw your life away!"

She ignores him. "Goddamn you, Jason. Finish me off. You're a Hero. I'm a monster. It's your destiny. Your job."

He crosses his arms. "Fuck destiny."

Amelia inhales. "Fine. I'll beat you to death. How about that?"

The Wordsmith shrugs and looks away. "Go ahead. I don't care anymore."

His apathy pushes her over the edge. "Argh!! One little failure, and you fall to pieces. Pathetic! If you won't fight me willingly, then I'll make you!"

Amelia unsheathes Dellfingler, then rushes at Jason. She strikes the front of his chest armor, punches his stomach, and sends him careening head over heels several feet away. He lands in a patch of dirt and lays limp.

Jason rolls over and shakes his head, unharmed by her attack. "I won't fight you."

"Bastard! Stop mocking me!" Amelia forces anger into her voice, but her heart isn't in it. She wants to fight him, but only because she doesn't know how to deal with her feelings either.

Jason pulls himself up. "Your attack lacked conviction. Hurry up and kill me, Amelia. I know you want to."

"Ooooh!" She howls in frustration, then stabs Dellfingler into the dirt. "I can't! I can't do it if you won't fight back! Come on! Summon Joan again!"

Jason doesn't reply. His emotions fade away, leaving nothing behind. He becomes little more than a sailor floating atop an ocean of despair.

Amelia sinks to the ground. She buries her head in her hands. "I can't do it, Blaarjiim. I can't kill him. What changed? Why... why?"

Begrudgingly, the orb of darkness offers his opinion. "You wanted honesty from the mortal. Despite the unhealthy way it manifested, you got what you wished for. Haah... perhaps Dellfingler was right. Kiss and make up, or go your separate ways."

Time passes. The young woman and man sit across from each other, a fifty-foot gap separating them. Neither looks the other in the eye.

Amelia blinks and raises her head. "I can't kill Jason. He won't kill me. There's only one thing I can do."

She forms signs with her hand and whispers. Beside her, dark energy coalesces into the form of a familiar red-skinned demon. His short, stocky body, and strangely ill-fitting suit combine to give him something of a comical appearance.

The newcomer yawns. "Aaah, geez. What's the big idea? Why'd you wake me up?"

Jason, hearing the unfamiliar voice, looks up. "A demon...? Who?"

A twinkle of recognition appears in the newcomer's eyes. "Oh? Is this that guy you were telling me about?"

Amelia stares sullenly at the ground. "Yes."

"Great! Might as well introduce myself, then. 'Sup, kid. I'm Satan, the former First Emperor of the demons. You must be the Wordsmith. The Black Queen kept *blubbering* about you."

Jason jumps to his feet and looks at Amelia in confusion. "The First Emperor? You're allies with *him*?! But... but he's supposed to be dead! You killed him!"

Satan rubs his muscular bicep. "The reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated."

The Wordsmith eyes the First Emperor cautiously. While Jason towers over Satan, standing seven-feet tall to the Devil's below-six-foot stature, the demon's stocky body and nonchalant attitude gives him a far more intimidating presence.

Amelia touches Satan's leg. "I can't fight Jason anymore. Please... finish the job. Leave him almost dead so I can-"

Satan rolls his eyes. "Steal his soul. Duh. I know the drill."

The former First Emperor raises his wrist to stare at a strange-looking analog wristwatch, one without any moving parts. Then, he crosses the field, closing the gap between himself and the Wordsmith. "I don't get out often. Give me some fun, chum. If you don't, I'll hurt ya ten times worse than you could ever imagine."

Amelia turns away and closes her eyes.

"I can't watch."

Author Note:

This is Satan the Devil.



Satan's alternate suit.



Satan's original design.



Part 042: The Invincible Satan!

Satan. The former First Emperor of demonkind.

I pull myself to my feet shakily. My spherical vision gives me a good look at the Devil as he approaches. Huge, seven-inch horns stick out of his head. A suit similar to Beelzebub's, but unbuttoned and missing a tie, gives him a much more casual and relaxed appearance than the former. His slicked-back hair and general demeanor make him look like an Italian mobster. The suspenders and goatee, however, give him a sleazier aura. I always wondered if the Devil was a cross between a lawyer and a used-car salesman, but I didn't expect to be right.

Satan is also far shorter than other demons I've met, at well under six-feet. Hell, he's only a few inches taller than Amelia in her adult body.

This guy is the most powerful demon who has ever walked the mortal plane? That doesn't seem right at all.

The former First Emperor strides toward me, pulls a cigar out of his pocket, and lights it with a tiny flame from his thumb. After inhaling, he waves his thumb to put out the fire, and his eyes scan me up and down. "Oh? You're a tall one. Enhancement magic, I'd wager. The babyface gives it away."

I glance past him at Amelia. She peeks through her fingers at me, then quickly wraps her arms around her legs, pulling them up to hide her face.

Amelia summoned Satan to fight me. Is that because she hasn't the heart to kill me? I thought she hated me. I assaulted her and nearly... I nearly...

Dammit. How could she hesitate? Why? I don't deserve her mercy, not at a time like this.

Satan stops, ten feet separating us. He looks up at me. "Nothing to say? Just gonna stand there like a piss-ant?"

A female voice appears in the back of my mind. I recognize it as the echo of Joan. Sometimes the Sword from Heaven makes Joan's voice appear in my mind.

Demon. Kill demon. Enemy of God. Kill demon.

A different male voice speaks. *Fight. Kill. Kill. Kill.*

A third voice wails in pain. *Please, god, don't let him live! It hurts! My body hurts!*

The same voices were screaming at me only minutes ago, telling me to hurt Amelia. I listened to them then... but maybe I shouldn't now-

FIGHT. KILL DEMON. FIGHT.

Damn, they're getting louder again!

Shaking the voices from my head, I use telekinesis to yank Catherine back to me. I don't want to fight Amelia, but it isn't her standing in front of me; it's a Demon Emperor.

"Satan, is it? You're shorter than I expected."

He sticks his left hand in his suit pocket. "Yeah? I didn't expect anything from you, and I'm still disappointed."

"Sorry I let you down. Are we going to fight, or what?"

"No need to rush to your death, idiot." Satan nods at Catherine. "Nice sword. Know how to use it?"

"I've trained," I reply while thinking to myself, *kinda*.

Satan inhales and glances down at a stupidly colorful watch on his right wrist, one covered in gems and other tacky bling. As he looks at it, I frown.

Wait, that's not a watch... it's a fucking wrist-mounted sundial.

He evaluates it for three seconds, cocking it around as the sun dips below the horizon. "Never mind; time's running short. Look, I'm a nice guy. If you can land a hit on me in the next five minutes, I won't break every bone in your body before I kill you. I'll handicap myself too. I won't use my arms or my legs to attack or defend. Sound fair?"

My eyes narrow. "What? Are you fucking with me?"

A shrug. "Depends. By the way... that whole dark energy thing? Tacky. You're overcompensating. Like I always say, if your name ain't Valac, put that edgy evil look back."

My mind argues with itself. *Is this guy serious? He's weird! But then, maybe he's unthinkably powerful. Or, he could be bluffing! I defeated Amelia with ease. She beat him, so he must be weaker than her, right?*

No, dumbass, it's never that easy. You don't know how their battle went. Maybe he was already weakened. Take it slow. Assess him cautiously, then go for a killing blow!

Satan, his eyes still closed, sighs. "Those five minutes started ticking, kid. If you don't hit me by the time this cigar's gone, you're gonna regret it."

Fuck it, attack!

I lunge forward, using my Telekinesis to shove myself to the side, before jumping back at the last second, sword held defensively at the ready.

Satan stands still. He opens his eyes. "The hell was that? Are you dancing? Get a move on, boy!"

A bead of sweat drips down my forehead. *He didn't flinch. It's like he knew I was going to play it safe for the first round.*

Not bothering to answer, I jump at him again, this time rearing my sword back to slash at him.

My blade swings at Satan's backside.

WHAM!

It stops a millimeter from his skin, as if striking a wall of iron.

"What?!" I quickly pull back again, scanning him to look for damage. There is none. "I hit you!"

Satan rechecks his sundial. "Afraid not. Four and a half minutes left, chum."

"The sun's already dipping past the horizon! A sundial can't tell time if there's no sun!"

Satan shakes his head. "Not with that attitude. My beloved Bertha is never wrong. Better hurry up."

My teeth grind together. *If Satan isn't going to attack, and I get four minutes of him only playing defense, I might as well use my advantage.*

"Speed. Speed. Strength. Strength. Perception. Stabilize."

I glance down at my boots. *The Boots of Hermes allow the wearer to teleport rapidly at short range, and they offer enhanced speed, but they're difficult to control. Orion's Belt already augments my strength, and Achilles' armor protects me from damage, so I should be able to pierce the Devil's defense with ease!*

This time, I don't hold back. In an instant, I cross the small gap separating us, delivering a flurry of stabs and jabs, each one striking an invisible barrier surrounding Satan's body. I begin teleporting around him, slashing, stabbing, and sending rocks and pebbles flying at his body with my telekinesis.

My flurry continues unabated for what feels like an eternity. Suddenly, I jump away as Satan pulls his left hand out of his pocket. He raises it to his mouth and... *covers a yawn*. "Aaahhn... Mmm. Three minutes. Don't go easy on my now, y'hear?"

My breath comes in short gasps, though I stifle the noise, not wanting to look pathetic in front of the Devil himself. *I gave it my all. Something invisible surrounds Satan's body, and I can't get past it. A barrier?*

Satan glances at Amelia, then back to me. "Look, I know it's poor form to give an opponent tips during a battle, but I feel a bit bad for you. Tell you what, kid. You should probably avoid using melee attacks. Only a few people have ever pierced my Ultimate Defense with a weapon, and their lives ended quite horribly." He sticks his left hand back in his pocket. "I'm trying to help you out, boyo. Oh, and don't forget the timer."

This little fucker, I think to myself. *I can't stand his smug grin!*

The echo of Joan's voice whispers in my mind. *Don't hold back. Use my full power. Catherine knows the Devil's weakness.*

My eyes drift to the sword. I've yet to use its secret abilities. I don't want to break my mind again... but... against Satan, holding back would be a bad choice.

I set my jaw and lock my mental vision onto the Devil. *Catherine. Give me enough strength to crush this smug asshole!*

A shadowy image of Joan's face appears in my mind. She smiles, and her grin grows sinister. *Use it.*

Suddenly, my body sucks underground. The sword activates, giving me Joan's power of earth manipulation. I burrow rapidly, erupting from under Satan, and the sword twitches with anticipation, dragging me around behind it. *One Thousand Cuts*, it yells into my mind.

The weapon slashes and slices rapidly, each attack swiftly blocked by Satan, attacking his legs, arms, chest, every part of him all at once. However, Satan takes two steps back and frowns. "Hm?"

My arms bulge with power as Catherine summons strength into my body. While she cuts, I lunge my unencumbered arm out and grab Satan's left leg. To my surprise, I manage to pierce through whatever's protecting him. His eyes bolt down. "What? How?!"

I teleport fifty feet into the sky, then use my momentum to hurl the Demon Emperor down. My suddenly freed hand summons a magical spear of light, one that's nearly four-feet long. Before Satan can hit the ground, I hurl the holy weapon at him. It races forward at the speed of sound and creates a sonic boom when it impacts his body.

BATOOOM!

I teleport to the ground with the power of Hermes' Boots. Unlike before, my breath comes steadily. The dust around Satan settles and...

Shit.

Satan stands in a shallow crater with his lit cigar resting lazily in his mouth.

"Not bad. The grab caught me off-guard, but then, I am a little rusty. A hundred thousand years locked inside the Black Witch's vacant mind will do that to a fella."

"I didn't hurt you?" I ask. "But... the light-spear."

Satan grunts. "Nice touch, that one. The thing is, you're supposed to use a flashy attack like that to finish a target with style, not as a desperate attempt to hurt them. Doesn't look very badass. Two minutes left, by the way."

MOTHER FUCKER! My teeth grind together as I try to assess the situation. *If only I had the Crown!*

Satan chuckles. "Oh, incidentally, I've been meaning to say... love the boots. Hermes. Great guy. I killed him. Long story."

"You did?"

A nod. "Yup. I didn't want to, but I was young and needed power. He wasn't an Archangel, though I killed a few of those during my heyday as well. Hermes was one of the better messenger angels, and that was back before the telephone and email and a bunch of other human inventions." Satan taps his sundial. "The good old days. Dunno why I'm bringing that stuff up now. Must be my nostalgia gettin' the better of me. Anyway, one-point-five minutes left, lad."

I can't keep letting Satan stall for time! My hands start to shake as I consider my options. *I can't kill him with a single word. Maybe I should summon a black hole. However, that would cost a lot of energy, which I don't have. I can't make a gun without the Crown, nor can I make anything else that's mechanically complex...*

Catherine whispers to me again. *I defeated the Black Witch. Use the secret power. Steal his energy for yourself.*

Secret power?

Something clicks in my head. Focusing my mind, I form a giant invisible hand out of telekinesis. The psychic palm reaches out and grabs Satan, pinning him in place. Judging by the surprise on his face, he didn't expect the move.

I lunge forward and activate *Blade of a Thousand Cuts*. As before, Satan quickly blocks all of Catherine's attacks, but this time, with him pinned in place, I release the sword, teleport behind the Devil, and grab him by the back of the neck.

"Drain!"

Immediately, Satan's demonic energy rushes into my body. The Demon Emperor gasps for breath. The cigar drops from his mouth, and a rush of mana swells in my chest. Before he can take a swing at me, I teleport back, grab Catherine before she hits the ground, and put all my power in an upward strike. The sheer force of my attack cleaves the Demon Emperor in two, but I quickly follow up with a flurry of other attacks, chopping, cutting, and slicing him into a million pieces.

Satan falls to the ground and becomes a puddle of flesh.

I gasp wildly as my vision wavers.

I did it! Holy fucking shit! I can't... I can't believe it!

"Amelia! Did you see that?"

I turn to look at the place she was sitting.

She isn't there anymore. Only a hole in the ground and her two severed arms remain.

Suddenly, the wind begins to hiss around the crimson puddle which used to be the Devil. Blood-colored energy pours from Satan's corpse, dissolves into mist in the air, and the Emperor regenerates atop his remains. His bones appear first. Then, his muscles and skin.

However, unlike before, when he emerges from the bloody mist, all of his clothes are missing.

I gawk in disbelief at the First Emperor. Never, not even in my worst nightmares, did I expect he could return from the dead, and certainly not without a scratch on his skin!

Satan stares down at his exposed self, then gingerly bends over to pick up his sundial before tying it back onto his wrist. "I didn't expect you to mix things up. You're more inventive than I gave you credit for."

"I killed you! How did you survive?!"

He sweeps his hair back with one hand and strikes a pose with the other. "Oh, that? Easy. You see, I've formed contracts with many souls, and each one allows me to regenerate from death exactly once. Unfortunately for you, I have ten thousand, four hundred and sixteen souls banked up."

The blood drains from my face. "No... you're lying. You must be."

He leans forward with a smile. "I hope you've got more of that inventiveness left. Less than a minute left to make me regenerate ten thousand times! Hop to it, pal!"

All my confidence vanishes. *Satan's unstoppable. He's invincible. It took everything I had to beat him once. How am I supposed to do it ten thousand times?!*

My eyes jump to where Amelia sat. *Why did she leave? Where did Amelia go? What's that hole in the ground?!*

Not long before.

"The mortal won't last much longer, my queen," Blaarjiim says, a touch of eagerness in his voice. "Why not take a peek? Satan is toying with him."

I've since shifted to wrapping my arms around my legs and burying my face in my knees. "I don't wanna. I've had enough of this day. Once Satan's done, I'll enslave Jason. That's all there is to it. Okay?"

Blaarjiim crosses his arms in my mind's eye. "Come now. Don't be sad. It's obvious you care for him. Soon he'll be with you forever. You can summon him whenever you want. You can make him do *anything* for you. Think of the fun times you'll-"

"Blaarjiim. Please. Don't." I cut him off before he can continue.

I don't want that kind of relationship with Jason. I don't want to think about it. Using him like he nearly used me would be horrible. Sickening.

Once he's under my control; he won't disobey my orders. Even if he wants to, he won't. But that's awful! I don't mind using my power on the others... they all hurt me in different ways. Jason is different, though! He's different!

The ground shakes, and I force myself not to peek. Blaarjiim turns away. "Ooh, I didn't see that coming! He summoned one of Joan's light-spears!"

"Don't tell me, Blaarjiim. I don't want to listen."

My closest friend in the whole universe sighs and looks at me. "I hate seeing you in this state, my queen. I've seen you weep before, but never to such a degree. I won't enjoy seeing the mortal get torn to shreds at this rate."

"You poor thing," I mutter bitterly. "I'm sorry I ruined *your* day."

Finally, Blaarjiim becomes more self-conscious. He materializes and lightly touches the back of my skull. He tries to reach out and caress my hair, but his body has no substance. It's all an illusion in my mind.

"I apologize. I should not prod you so. Why do you have feelings for this mortal? He descends from your greatest enemies, after all."

"Dunno," I mumble. "It's not like I can help the way I feel."

Blaarjiim lowers his voice to a whisper. "Once you enslave Jason, he will never hurt you again. If you still hold feelings for him, you will both be able to trust each other in the same way as you do me. Won't that be nice? Please cheer up. Smile."

I shake my head. "I can't. I don't want to. I-"

The ground shifts beneath me again, and I flinch, knowing Jason and Satan are clashing.

Blaarjiim's eyes widen. "My queen! Under you! It's-"

Something erupts from the ground underneath me. Too late, I start pulling my head back from my legs, and a hand wraps around my mouth.

"Mgmm?!" I try to say something, but the hand silences me. Then, ten more appear and grab all of my limbs. They wrap around me, and a second later pull with all their strength, dragging me underground.

Oh god! What the hell?! Get off me!

Blaarjiim yells in alarm as the surface vanishes, and the darkness of the underground world takes me. Tens of tons of dirt and stone envelop my body and crush me, making it impossible to breathe or move. Pitch black darkness surrounds me. I can't even whimper or cry out as they start squeezing my throat.

"They're Ghouls! Undead monsters! Fight! Break free!" Blaarjiim yells frantically, and I struggle to move, but their strength is incredible!

The further the undead creatures drag me underground, the more unbearable the weight of the darkness becomes. No matter how I struggle, I can't break free.

Suddenly, blinding pain erupts through every part of my body. I open my mouth to scream, causing dirt to surge into my mouth, gagging and panicking me.

Shik, Shik, Shik!

Something horrible starts stabbing my stomach, chest, and back. A voice cackles as the ghouls drag me further and further, their hands grabbing and groping every inch of my body.

"Yesss, thisss isss my moment to ssshine!" A phantom face appears before me, as a ghostly figure continues stabbing me over and over.

I can't break free! Jason! Jason!! HELP!!!

Blaarjiim screams into my mind. "Fight! Don't you dare die to a low-level Duke! Use your power! Unleash it!"

The horrible pain continues for several minutes. The Demon Duke of Mist, Mephisto, hovers in front of me, rubbing his hands with glee as his awful monsters bite and chew me all over.

"Now you will sssuffer for your sssinsss, ssshe-beassst! I will hold and torture you here for the ressst of your daysss!"

He continues stabbing, but the pain isn't as unbearable as it was when he first grabbed me. Blaarjiim's energy enters my body. The fear rushes away. Even while the pain blinds and sickens me, I clench my fists.

The hell you will! I don't need Jason to save me! I'll kill you myself!!

"Bleaagghh!" The dirt blasts from my mouth as rage swells within me.

MEPHISTO! I'LL TEAR YOU TO PIECES!

Author Note: . !

This is Satan



So is this



This is his original b/w design



Part 043: Calm Before The Storm

I finish soldering a new component onto the front of my truck right as Samantha bounces over to me. She beams me a smile filled with sunshine and kittens. "Hey, Phoebe! What are you up to?"

Standing on a stool hunched over my truck, I glance through my welding mask at her scantily-clad figure only to quickly avert my eyes a moment later. *Lord have mercy.*

"I've been working on a new project. Ever since that demon attacked the Core, I realized I needed a way to contact Jason."

Samantha's smile vanishes. "Beelzebub won't bother you again. I made sure of that."

"So you say," I reply. "If it's alright with you though... I need to see Jason. I built a device to monitor his spiritual energy..."

Samantha leans against the truck, standing on her tiptoes to see the Temporal Modulator I've built. "A device? You aren't snooping on him, are you?"

I shake my head and pull Hoarhiim's glowing orb from a bag at my side. "This is his orb-friend. The two of them have a spiritual connection. I'm using Hoarhiim's energy to locate Jason. I have a gadget that can track him anywhere, and see when his spiritual energy levels dip. That should mean he's in a battle, or worse..."

Samantha narrows her eyes. "So you *are* snooping on him. Can't the man have a little privacy?"

I activate my solder again. "I suppose. I'm... I'm a little worried. I haven't seen Jason in two months. What if demons took him prisoner and all his messages proclaiming his wellbeing were lies? What if he gets in a bad fight and dies? I won't even know!"

Samantha slides her body from the side of the truck over to me, hunched over the hood. "You worry about him a lot. What do you get out of your relationship?"

I pause and hold the soldering iron away from my newest creation. "Um... I don't know. Nothing, I guess?"

Samantha eases a little closer to me and my stool. She reaches up and touches my back. "Nooothing at all? Not even a little fun on the side?"

"Fun? What do you mean?"

Her finger starts tracing a circle on my back, sending a shiver down my spine. "You two are an I-T-E-M, right? Come on, tell me a little about your relationship."

Sighing, I set the solder down and pry my mask off. "Ahh, well... it's a long story. Um. Jason defeated Bahamut, and afterward, when her magic dissipated-"

Immediately, Samantha interrupts me. "Wait, hold on. I thought Kar killed her! Isn't he the Sphinx?"

I wince, wondering if it's okay to tell Samantha what happened.

What if Neil's right? She might be gathering intel. I shouldn't answer all of her questions, should I? Well, I've already said too much. Can't stop now...

"Kar is the Sphinx, yes, but Jason solved the Sphinx's Riddle. He did it quickly, too. In under a minute."

"I see." Samantha creeps a little closer, wrapping an arm around my legs. Since I'm standing on a stool, she can't reach higher comfortably, but...

"Err, getting a little close, aren't you?"

She winks. "Men are always causing trouble and getting in fights... but we ladies know how to treat each other with compassion and tender loving care. Don't you think so?"

"Uh... um..." I fumble with the soldering iron for a moment. "I'm, uh... I don't really..."

"You don't swing that way? Are you suuure?" Samantha's tail flicks around as she cocks her head questioningly. "How do you know if you've never tried?"

"Nngh... I can't, though. I love Jason."

The succubus pulls away, a sad expression clouding her face. "Oh. It's like that, huh? With a heart as big as yours, I thought maybe you'd have room for two in there."

"Two? A-at once? God forbids polygamy!"

Samantha taps her soft, red lips. "Mmm. I'm a demon, so I don't care what 'God' has to say. Besides, I've met a few 'Gods.' They were nothing special. Neither were the Archangels."

"I beg your pardon?"

Samantha turns and leans back against the truck, crossing her arms. "Aren't you aware? The Gods and Angels were flesh and blood beings. I met several of them. My only impressions were that they were all corrupt and power-hungry."

"I thought there was only one God. No, forget that, even if there were several, how could you *meet* a god?"

"Unless you're referring to the Creator specifically, several gods existed. Zeus, Cronos, Athena, to name a few. They called themselves Titans, but humans referred to them as gods."

Her words don't register properly in my mind. "But... when I went to church as a little girl, they said-"

"Oh, yes, *church*. That explains it." Samantha nods knowingly, her smile gone. "Full of liars and con-artists. I met a few Popes in my lifetime. Slept with them, too. Try and disregard anything you ever learned from a church. Most of their crap beliefs were designed to suck you dry - in more ways than one."

Feeling uncomfortable about the topic, I don't bother pressing further. Instead, I grab the blowtorch and lower my faceplate. "Right. Well, I need to finish soldering this modulator. I'm leaving soon."

"Leaving? To where?" Samantha immediately rebounds, smiling sweetly at me. "Going to see your man?"

I nod. "Mhm. Jason's spiritual energy has been fluctuating dramatically over the last few days, and before that, it was on a steady downward decline. I'm worried about him."

Samantha eyes me for a moment. "I'll come with you."

"Huh? Why?"

She waves her hand flippantly. "I don't care at all about this Jason guy, but you're different. If you're going to see him, that means you'll be in the Labyrinth." Samantha lowers her voice. "It's dangerous to go alone, especially for a pretty human woman. You don't know the things a demon will do if he finds you."

My throat cracks. "I can imagine."

"Your imagination isn't good enough." Samantha looks away and fans out her fingernails. "You know... I'm older than almost any other demon alive today. I remember the Ancient Era, the War in Heaven, and the time before that. I've seen things I try not to dwell on."

"Like... like what?"

"Do you want to know?" She quickly turns her head to look at me. "Answer truthfully."

A moment passes. I turn back to my soldering iron and start putting the finishing touches down. "I do."

Samantha shudders and looks away. "Succubi and incubi were and still are the weakest of demons, even pureblood ones like myself. Powerful demons would capture and ravish my friends. Humans, once they began developing more efficient weaponry, would raid demon dens. They would slay any inside... except for succubi."

She pauses. "I remember when we found the body of one incubus. He'd been tied to a table and violated for a month straight by the women of the court. The soldiers gutted him and left him there to rot afterward. He was unlucky, though many females had it worse."

Samantha steels her face as unpleasant memories come flowing from the past, unbidden.

"Sam... I'm sorry. Humans are..."

"Don't say that." Samantha forces a smile. "Humans were hardly the only ones at fault. The demons were just as bad, sometimes worse." She swallows hard. "One thing I'll give the angels and gods, at least they never defiled succubi and incubi as the other sentients did. There's always a silver lining. All you have to do is search carefully."

I don't laugh. Neither does she.

Setting aside my solder, I hop down from the stool and face her. I feel slightly awkward, but eventually, I reach over and wrap my arms around her.

"I'll never hurt you, Sam. If anyone here does, I'll tear them apart. Okay?"

The succubus shudders slightly, but forces a laugh as she embraces me back. "Hah. F-finally. All I had to do to get you in my arms was drudge up all those horrible memories."

I laugh too. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

As we hold each other, a thought sprouts in my mind.

Sam smells nice. Like the salty breeze on the coast, or a field of flowers on a mid-summer day.

Pulling away, I blush. "Say... um. Succubus powers don't work on people of the same sex... do they?"

"Hm. I wonder."

"Sam!"

She shakes her head and smiles innocently. "I don't believe so, Phoebe. I'll let you get back to your truck. Tell me when you're ready to go."

"I will," I reply.

I start to turn away, but she leans over and pecks me on the cheek. "For good luck."

It takes all my willpower not to kiss her back.

God have mercy on me, a sinner.

Part 044: The Devil Wears Ill-Fitting Suits, Surprisingly

Dammit! Why did Amelia leave? Where did she go?

A spark of worry goes through my mind as I warily glance at where she was sitting only a minute before. *Where did that giant hole in the ground come from? I'm worried about her.*

Satan begins stretching and pops his vertebrae. "Mmm, aah, that's the good stuff right there. Well, I'm a demon of my word, kid. You not only rendered me naked with that ferocious attack, but you even took one of my ten thousand lives. As promised, I won't break every bone in your body. I'll knock you out nice and painlessly."

"Wow, thanks," I grunt. "But I've got more tricks up my sleeve."

"Yeah, sure, tricks. I wonder about that." Satan makes a motion with his hands, and a brand new grey suit and dress shoes appear on his body. At my look of surprise, he adds, "Suit-summoning. It's my most Metro ability."

"I don't care."

Satan shrugs. "I didn't think you would. By the way, not to change the subject or anything, but where did the Black Queen go? Wasn't she sitting around, bawling her eyes out a few minutes ago?"

Satan's attention shifting to Amelia grants me a moment of reprieve. I cough under my breath, "**Loca-**" But suddenly, the planet shakes, knocking me off balance!

Rumble.

Everything bucks and kicks like a million mad broncos, as if Polaris's moon had fallen into its opposite side. I lose my footing several times, eventually opting to hover with my telekinesis. The cataclysmic earthquake barely affects Satan. He holds steady, not even flinching from all the tremors.

God, I hate him.

"Bit of a bumpy ride today," Satan remarks blandly. He suddenly stiffens. "Oh, shit! That's why!"

Before I can ask what he's talking about, the planet shakes one more time. Hundreds of dark tendrils erupt from the ground and leap toward the sky. A mental warning screeches in my head before an explosion similar to an atom bomb erupts from beneath the planet's surface. A volcano of black energy sends the Devil and I flying into the air.

The world spins around me. I fight nausea as my body twists in the air, only to realize the ground is rushing at me.

WHUMP.

Every part of me throbs as the sickening impact of flesh against dirt settles into my bones. My corrupted armor rapidly regenerates my torn muscles and broken bones, then finishes with my skin.

Blinking back dizziness, I reorient my spherical vision to find a massive crater where Satan and I stood only moments before.

Amelia leaps out of the pit, along with three strange humanoids wrapped around and chewing her body violently. She shrieks in pain, and lashes out with Dellfingler in her right hand, severing the grotesque monsters from herself in midair. She strikes the ground feet-first and pivots to face the center of the crater.

I cry out, "Amelia! Are you okay? What happened?!"

She ignores me. A moment later, I find out why. Hundreds of undead monsters burst out of the dirt from every inch of the abyss, running and jumping up the sides of the hole toward her. Zombies and ghouls mix together, their decrepit bodies seemingly removing the limiters on their strength and speed. Amelia clenches her fist, then opens it, aiming her palm at the incoming monsters. Rapid-fire lasers of pure blackness shoot out, piercing through dozens of the human-shaped beasts. She grits her teeth and jumps back as the unending torrent of monsters pours over the lip of the crater to rush at her.

A familiar voice makes my skin crawl. "Keh keh keh, no matter how fassst you run, my minionsss are unending."

It's Mephisto! I have to help Amelia! There are too many enemies for her to handle!

Hardly has the thought appeared in my mind before Satan appears in front of me. I jerk back reflexively.

"You don't have time to worry about the Black Queen, *Hero*. You've still got me to deal with."

I jump to my feet and quickly put some distance between us. "You're Amelia's summoned servant, right?! You should protect her!"

Satan pats his shirt looking for a cigar, only to realize I probably destroyed all the ones he had left. He sighs. "You don't understand how this works, do you, chum? I only have to obey that cunt's direct orders. She told me to beat the living shit out of you, and that's what I'm going to do. I don't give a shit if she dies. Hell, I hope she does. Until she gives me new orders, *you're* the only thing I care about."

Amelia screams, pulling my attention away for a split-second. Several rotting arms lunge out of the ground and grab her legs, preventing her from moving. A faint shimmer in the air appears behind her, and a stabbing motion follows. Amelia howls in pain and flops forward, landing on her arms. Even more ghoulish limbs grab her and pin her body.

WHAM!

Something hits my head, impacting me with the force of an anvil. My vision blurs for a moment as I stumble and flail around. Shaking myself to my senses, I focus on Satan again. The Emperor stands perfectly still, both hands on his hips.

"I've noticed something about you, Jason. Your eyes. You never track anything with them. You always move your whole head in general directions. If I had to guess, I'd say you were using echolocation to see your surroundings. I'm guessing you're blind."

He leans forward. "How about it? Am I close to the mark?"

"I'd never tell-"

WHAM.

Another invisible object strikes Achilles' armor, catching me off-guard. The powerful strike launches me back and sends me sprawling on my ass.

Satan laughs. "Oh, this oughta be fun! It's been a long time since I fought a Hero who relied entirely on artifacts. Say, why don't you try some of that Wordsmithing on me? Amelia told me all about it."

She did?! What the hell, Amelia?!

I quickly jump to my feet, using my vision to scan around me. *Satan keeps beating me with something, but I never see it coming. Whatever it is, it hits like a firetruck-*

"Ahhh!" Amelia shrieks again as her body gets dragged underground. A moment later, she bursts out, swinging frantically with Dellfingler to try and kill as many of the monsters as she can. Despite this, they're frighteningly fast and impossibly tough. I don't know how much longer she can last.

I have to defeat Satan! I need to freeze him, or stop him long enough that I can get to Amelia and save her!

Satan cocks and tilts his head around. An ominous smile stretches across his face. "Well, well, well. I can't believe it. Amelia's luck just got ten times worse."

My heart sinks. I turn around and gape at an incredible sight.

I was so busy worrying about Amelia and Satan that I didn't notice other demons had arrived.

Across the field, three of them appear, but I only recognize one. Beelzebub. Based on the horns for the other two though, they're a much higher rank than he is.

Fuck!

"Satan? Satan, izzat you? Holy sweet Lucifer's tits!" The biggest one, a stupid looking troglodyte wearing a codpiece and no shirt, waddles over and stops about twenty feet away. "Mephisto and Barbatos weren't lying! I can't believe you're alive!"

"Master Satan." A shorter demon, but one with much bigger horns and a regal appearance, nods politely. "I had hoped to meet you again, though after what happened to Agares..." His flowing robes and red cloak contrast with the gold chains decorating his body, along with a pentagram pendant on his chest.

He must be a Demon Emperor too. Damn!

"Bael. Diablo. It's a pleasure to see the two of you once again, along with that runty one. I apologize for Agares' fate, but Amelia ordered me to attack. I had no choice," Satan sighs. "I'm keeping this human occupied. Mephisto's over there having a bit of sport with the wench. Why not join in on the fun? It stuns me that the weakest Duke is managing to hold her down, but she'll summon the others eventually."

Bael, the biggest demon, slaps his chest. "I'm glad I don't have to fight you, big man! I'd lose for sure! Gwahaha! Enjoy tearing this little shitstain apart!" He smirks at me and rattles chains wrapped around

his body. "Stupid little human. You're dead, and you don't even know it yet."

Diablo, the second biggest newcomer, frowns at me. "You must be the Hero Mephisto spoke of. I'm surprised you managed to evade him, but, unfortunately for you... your time is up. You haven't a chance of defeating Satan. I'm sorry you had to die young, but you won't be the first."

Before the two of them can walk away, Satan grabs Diablo's shirt sleeve. "Say, chum. Do me a favor. Keep the dragon's whore busy for me. Make sure she can't call out my name. I'd rather not put any more friends in caskets."

Diablo nods. "As you command."

Bael and Diablo lumber off, and I study the remaining demon, Beelzebub. He looks different compared to when I fought him. He had smaller horns when I beat him down, but they've grown an inch or two since then. He's taller, too.

Beelzebub adjusts his tie. "Oh, insect, I'm afraid I won't be able to finish you off this time. That honor goes to Satan. However, be at peace, knowing that I took care of most of your forces at the Core. They won't trouble us again. After we eliminate you and the Black Queen, your impact on the Labyrinth will be little more than a smudge on our glorious history."

"You... you attacked the Core?!"

Beelzebub smirks. "All by myself. It was a bloodbath. I think I exterminated every person guarding the portal-gates. They even pulled out some experimental weapons, but those were no match for my power."

"You son of a BITCH!" My blood explodes as the corrupted armor amplifies my rage. "I'LL TEAR YOU TO SHREDS!"

Lunging at Beelzebub, Catherine swipes out, cleaving the Lord's body in half. Before I can execute the *Thousand Cuts*, Satan's invisible anvil attack pounds into me again, but this time it hits me several times rapidly. *WHAM WHAM WHAM!*

I stumble and flop, going left to right, as ten attacks smash and batter me from side to side, rendering me unable to retaliate.

After several seconds of ferociously tossing me around like a ragdoll, the attacks stop, and I slam down on my skull, damn-near breaking my neck. The armor rapidly regenerates my body, but it still takes a few moments before I can shake the stupor off.

Amelia screams in the distance, and Bael's laugh follows. I can't focus my mind on her, though; my head is swimming.

Glancing at Beelzebub, my jaw drops as he presses the two halves of his body together and they seal up, healing him as good as new. Beelzebub jumps to his feet and chuckles, dusting off his coat. "I left the place in ruins. And unlike last time, my ascended abilities ensure you won't be picking me off with that wretched weapon of yours. Toodles."

Beelzebub casually strolls away, and I pick myself up again.

I'm getting my ass beat. At this rate, these demon fuckers will kill Amelia, and then they'll come for me. I can barely manage Satan, let alone the rest of them. How the hell am I supposed to win with odds like these?! Should I try creating a thermonuclear bomb and detonating it? No, dammit. Not only will that devour energy I don't have, but I also don't have the Crown. Even if I did, and could, Amelia might get caught in the crossfire!

I eye Satan cautiously. Maybe I should try anyway. What would Michael do? He'd tell me that a Hero never falters. A Hero always self-sacrifices. I have a chance to wipe out all of these top-level demons at once.

My heart pounds. Oh god... Phoebe! Phoebe!! What if Beelzebub killed her? What about Neil and the rest of the forces? Jesus fuck, I haven't contacted the Core in several days! I was so worried about Mephisto finding me that it never crossed my mind!

Satan cracks his knuckles. "I see the marbles rolling around in your noggin, Jason. You're possibly the weakest Hero I've ever faced, so I have to force myself not to pity you. However, I'll give you one warning. My ultimate defense is also my ultimate attack. When I go on the offense, you'll lose instantly. I'm taking it easy on you for some sport."

Gears spin in my mind. *This Satan fucker is always telling me something new. Why is he so confident? And what the hell was he using to defend himself? It seemed impervious to damage, but I managed to grab his leg! Was that a fluke? Why am I sometimes able to bypass his defenses, but not others?*

Think, Jason! Think!

Satan twitches. A ripple in the air rockets toward me. Before I can dodge, it smashes into Achilles' armor, flinging me against a boulder in the field. The impact of my body shatters the rock and sends me sprawling to the ground.

Think!

All at once, pieces click into place in my head. *This armor is weakened! It was corrupted by demons or possibly the Labyrinth itself! But I have Wordsmithing! Maybe I can undo the damage and restore it to full power!*

A surge of adrenaline hits me as I jump to my feet. Aiming my mind at Catherine and the rest of the armor, I rapidly Wordsmith. "**Purify! Purify! Purify! Purify!**"

Satan pauses and raises an eyebrow. The pitch-black demonic energy encapsulating the armor hisses away with the rage of a thousand demons, sucking into the air around me and dissipating into the wind. All at once, light reflects off my armor, causing it to glow golden in the rapidly waning sunlight. Catherine, once a weapon of rage and hatred, glows fiercely with the power of Holy Energy.

A voice appears in my mind. I recognize it immediately.

Joan.

"Jason, I thank thee. You've freed my soul from the clutches of evil. Someone placed a powerful spell on Camael's artifacts, but thanks to your Wordsmithing, the spell is no more. Don't back down in the face of evil! A Hero never surrenders! A Hero always gives their all! No matter how powerful the demon, the divine power of God will prevail!"

Achilles' armor begins to surge with energy, glowing brightly like the midday sun. Satan holds up his hand and staggers a step away. "W-what the Devil? What did you do?!"

I don't answer. Instead, I focus my mind on the chestplate. The energy continues to swell, until...

A cone of light shoots from my chest, blasting Satan with the condensed power of a solar flare. The demon opens his mouth to scream, only to dissipate into mist. The wave of light flies off into the horizon, and at the edge of my spherical vision, I can barely make out the other demons as they turn to stare incredulously at me.

After the light finishes firing, a few moments pass. To my dismay, Satan reforms again, naked as before. This time, however, he's visibly winded.

"Haah... haah... You can manipulate Holy Energy?!"

"I'm a Hero," I growl under my breath. "Divine power from the Gods is mine to use as I see fit!"

Focusing my mind, I aim my palm at him, imagining the power of Holy Magic condensing itself. **"FIRE!!"**

Another colossal blast of divinity sears Satan's body away, eradicating him from the world of the living. When he reforms again, he stumbles slightly and gasps for breath.

"Lucky... lucky little bastard. I won't go easy-"

"FIRE!!"

Recommended Listening (It's an AMV, so feel free to watch, too.)

Several minutes before.

"Fight, my queen! Do not let these fetid abominations tear you apart!"

The black orb hisses into Amelia's ear as she struggles with all her strength to break free, but still, the Duke of Mist slices, stabs, and carves out chunks of her backside.

"Sssatan won't sssave you thisss time!" Mephisto grabs Amelia by the back of her neck while his ghouls hold the rest of her body in place, parting to allow him access to her spine. Glee fills his undead aethereal body as he stabs her beautiful pale figure repeatedly. He doesn't derive quite as much pleasure from torture and killing as Bael might, but for him, *it's personal*. After all, she murdered a fellow demon and enslaved the former First Emperor.

Amelia swallows dirt, ignoring his excruciating Pain Inducement ability, an attack designed to ravage the nervous system and make it impossible for his prey to remain cognizant. Amelia's rapid-regeneration allows her to heal after each of his attacks, but she'll still lose mana as he stabs away at her reserves.

Amelia squeezes her eyes shut. *Jason can't save me! I have to get out of this myself!*

Summoning as much willpower as possible, she forces strength into her rapidly withering arm muscles, ignoring the pain as ghouls chew her flesh to pieces. Bringing her hands together, she forms a simple hand-sign, willing all the energy in her body to condense in her chest.

A few moments later, Mephisto senses her building up power. His eyes widen, and he turns incorporeal, racing away through the ground.

Without his knife plunging into her back, Amelia's mental fortitude returns in a rush. *Release the shadows within!*

Above-ground, while Jason and Satan face off, the planet rumbles angrily as Amelia's energy transforms her body into a tactical nuke. She explodes with the force of ten monsoons, blasting the dirt and ghouls around her sky-high. Moments later, Amelia leaps out of the crater and heals her wounds. With her free hand, she uses Dellfingler to slice apart three ghouls somehow still wrapped around her and lands superhero-style at the rim of the newly formed crater.

However, her suffering is far from over.

From the abyss below, ghouls burst out of the ground and race up the cliffside. Amelia ignores Jason's cry of alarm, unable to think clearly after the volume of energy she just expended. She aims her palm down and fires a barrage of dark energy, wiping out a hundred ghouls in seconds. Unfortunately for her, Mephisto has spent tens of thousands of years summoning each member of his undead army.

They number in the millions.

She jumps away to get some distance, only to stumble into a trap as even more ghouls lie in wait below the surface, grabbing her legs and holding her in place for the others to arrive. She starts to swipe at them with Dellfingler, but Mephisto appears, slapping his palm against her back and using his severest Pain Inducement yet. Amelia cries out in pain and stumbles forward. More ghouls leap from the ground to grab her arms.

They're going to pull me underground! I can't let that happen! I have to- augh!

Between the stabbing and the grabbing, Amelia can't hold her focus at all. Blaarjiim tries to help her, telling her what attacks to use, but she can barely even hear him. Sometimes her rage returns with a vengeance, but Mephisto swiftly drains it away with his mental pain attack.

"Yesss! Sssuffer in agony!" Mephisto grabs the wretched human by her throat and twists her around, smiling as he eyes her chest. He plunges his knife into her heart, twisting it brutally. "I watched asss you forecced Sssatan to tear apart Agaresss. They were clossse friendsss, but you gave no mercccy. You dessserve every moment of blissstering agony!"

Amelia's eyes widen as she makes out the forms of three demons approaching. She recognizes them instantly.

Diablo, Bael, and that weak one who escaped along with Mephisto. Oh, devils! I can't beat them like I am now!

Blaarjiim clenches his fist in her mind's eye. "My queen! Before it's too late! Summon the others!"

She forces tears down. *I can't! I already have Satan summoned! If I summon another, I'll be too weak to counter anyone!*

Diablo stops several feet away, melancholy on his face. Watching Mephisto brutalize the Black Witch brings him no glee. Indeed, despite her horrendous crimes against demonkind, he pities her somewhat. *Satan killed her closest friend, all those eons ago. I warned him that his callous disregard for life would lead to his death someday. Her berserk rage was unstoppable.*

As for Bael, the massive brute salivates at the sight of her torn clothing and pinned form. Unlike the Third Emperor, Bael is a disgusting demon, one who derives great pleasure from the torture of others. *That's why they call me the Duke of Pain*, he thinks to himself.

And Beelzebub. Fire burns in his blood-red eyes as he grinds his teeth together. He's the first to speak, despite arriving last. "You killed my mentor. That was *my* goal in life. The four of us will rip you apart. Satan isn't here to protect you anymore, wretched witch."

Bael punches his palm. "Heh, Mephisto. Lemme have a go at her. I'm gonna break her arms and legs one by one. After that, I'll have a little fun with what's left."

Mephisto glares at the First Duke. "I wasss here firrsst! Wait your turn!"

"My turn?! Who the hell do you think you are, *lowest Duke*?! I got seniority, pup!"

Mephisto gnashes his teeth together. "You're a ssslow, fat oaf! I will be Firrsst Duke sssomeday! I-"

"Enough!" Beelzebub screams angrily and begins forming a highly concentrated ball of fire in his hands. Already, his ability to generate heat has tripled since he was a Lord. "I won't listen to the two of you bicker! I'll finish her off myself!"

Mephisto's glowing pupils dilate. "No! Beelzebub! Don't! Ssshe'sss immune to-"

Beelzebub ignores his elder's protest and unleashes his hottest flame upon the form of the young woman.

Amelia, however, smiles. *Chance!* She wraps herself in a thin shield of shadow and allows the superheated flames to wash across her body. Mephisto pulls away before Beelzebub's flames can evaporate his misty-form, and Amelia, suddenly finding herself unencumbered, leaps into the sky.

Amelia takes a deep breath, the first painless one in fifteen minutes, and cackles wildly. "Hahahaha! That pathetic flame was colder than ice! You call yourself a fire-type?! You can't even warm a cup of tea!"

She begins forming seals in midair as she falls to the ground, and Beelzebub snarls. "What?! That filthy rat! How dare she insult my fire! I ought to-"

"Beelzebub!" Diablo roars angrily. "She's immune to fire, you dolt! You'll have to use other attacks to hurt her!"

Beelzebub doesn't get to contemplate his life choices, however. Amelia slaps the ground as she lands, and two demonic pentagrams appear. Her immense energy reserves plummet instantly, draining the remaining mana from her body with frightening speed.

Still, she smiles as she wipes away blood from her mouth. Two figures form in the air before her, gently landing in the field with a thud.

Diablo gasps. "So, this is what Satan meant!"

"Again?!" Bael roars angrily. "You sick, nasty bitch!"

"Mentor!" Beelzebub's rage intensifies as the two figures materialize.

Agares, the former Second Duke of Reptiles, hunches over as he lands. "Nnn. Oh! Diablo. Bael. Beelzebub. Where am I?"

Beside him, however, is a figure that sends shivers down Diablo's back.

Arthur. King of the Celts. The Greatest Sinner.

The Hero King stares ahead blankly, as Amelia pulls his arm behind him and slaps Dellfingler into his grasp. "Arthur. Take this sword. It's no Excalibur, but it will do. You and Agares, battle the demons. I... I need to regain my energy."

The Hero nods emptily, holding the blade without complaint. His eyes blankly examine the demons before him.

Agares turns to look at Amelia. A spark of recognition appears on his face. "Ah. So that's what happened. I should have known, Black Queen. Your desperation has no limits."

"Stuff it, grandpa. I beat you, fair and square. Now, pull out all the stops and protect me. That's an order."

Agares eyes glow for a moment as he receives his command. Sighing, he cricks his neck and turns to face the other demons. "As you wish."

Diablo stares at Agares for only a few moments, but icy sweat forms on his skin when Arthur's empty eyes meet his.

The Legendary Hero King, Arthur Pendragon. He slew a million demons, a thousand Lords, and two Barons with a single attack, ignoring the collateral damage in the human encampment. Merciless. Violent. Psychopathic. Unlike that boy Satan is fighting, Arthur is a seasoned warrior.

Diablo licks his lips. "Beelzebub. You'll have to hold off Agares as long as possible. The rest of us will fight Arthur."

Bael balks. "You think Beelzy can battle a Duke?! The hothead is only a Baron! Mephisto should help him! You and I can handle one Hero!"

Diablo's hand trembles as he closes it into a fist. "You don't understand. We're up against the Hero King. We'll have to change our strategy."

In the rear of the battle, Amelia trembles as her weakened body falters. She slumps to her knees and wheezes for breath.

I summoned three powerful minions at once. My mana is nearly gone, so I'll have to cocoon myself for a bit. H-hopefully these two can at least slow the demon leaders down until I restore some energy.

She flops to the ground, curls into the fetal position, and exhales as a shield of darkness envelops her, solidifying into something with ten times the hardness of diamond.

Blaarjiim nods, and a hint of pride appears in his eyes. *Even if the ghouls drag my queen underground, they will only protect her from the battle raging on the surface. She'll be nearly invincible until she exits her cocoon of darkness. The downside is that she won't be able to protect herself and must rely on her summons to do so.*

Dellfingler watches as Amelia hardens her defenses. Glancing at the face of his new wielder, he begins to notice strange new energy entering his blade from the hilt. It takes him a moment to recognize the sensation. *Holy Magic. So this is the legendary Hero King. Oh boy! I hope he cuts these bastards to pieces! Nobody hurts my girl and gets away with it!*

A blast of light surges from the horizon. The Demon Leaders whip their heads back just in time to see Satan's body vaporize as a wave of Holy Magic turns him into a fine, bloody mist.

Diablo clenches his fist. *The boy has Holy Magic too? Damn. This situation is turning nasty, quickly. Luckily, that attack won't be enough to stop Satan, but...*

All the contenders lean into their fighting stances, weapons at the ready.

Suddenly, Arthur raises two fingers to his forehead.

The Hero King vanishes.

Diablo's eyes widen in surprise as Arthur materializes in front of him an instant later.

Shit!

Author Note:

This is Arthur.



This is an older design for Arthur.

Part 045: Hero-King Unleashed, Battle For Survival

Recommended Listening

Amelia presses Dellfingler into her summoned vessel's hands. "Arthur. Take this sword. It's no Excalibur, but it will do. You and Agares, battle the demons. I... I need to regain my energy."

Arthur doesn't respond as his blank eyes assess all of his opponents in an instant.

Orders. Protect the Black Queen. Kill all of her enemies.

He raises two fingers to his temple and grips Dellfingler tightly, then transmits at lightspeed from his standing location to the right of the Demon Emperor. Diablo turns his head slightly to gape at the incoming threat, but he's far too slow to react.

Arthur rapidly transmits himself here and there, surrounding the Demon Emperor at blinding speeds. Arthur's lightspeed clones slash Diablo a hundred times in two seconds, then he blasts Diablo with a wave of holy energy.

However, all of Arthur's attacks reflect off a barrier surrounding the Emperor's body.

The Hero-King ignores his failed attack and transmits to the other two Dukes. He appears beside the Duke of Pain and pounds Bael's stomach with ridiculous strength, then transmits behind him, driving Dellfingler's enhanced blade into Bael's back, piercing his lung and slicing open his heart. Bael gasps in surprise and tries to grab at the Hero-King before he yanks the sword back out, but misses.

The King of the Celts transmits to the Duke of Mist and slashes at him several times, but the attacks pass through the Undead King's incorporeal form. Arthur jumps away to a distant hilltop for a few moments to examine the panic on his enemies' faces with his farsighted vision.

Ten miles away, on the battlefield where Arthur had just attacked, Bael staggers forward and drops to a knee. "Huhk- w-what?! He was- where'd that rat go?!"

Diablo sets his jaw. *Those attacks didn't pierce my kinetic armor, but if Satan was telling the truth about his battle against the Hero-King all those eons ago, then Arthur has a supernatural ability to intuit his foes' powers.*

The Third Emperor blinks and spins around, searching for the Hero-King. *Satan couldn't come close to putting a scratch on him when they fought, and I can't follow his movements with my eyes. How in the hell did the Black Queen manage to defeat and enslave him?!*

Mephisto glances around uneasily, then swoops over to Diablo and whispers, "What sssort of Hero isss thissss Arthur? He fightsss like a wild animal!"

"I don't know," the Emperor growls, holding his arms up to protect his chest. "Satan never mentioned Arthur was the strong and silent type. Be on your guard. His ability to manipulate Holy Energy is unparall-"

Diablo doesn't get to finish his sentence. Arthur transmits beside him again and rapidly slams his newly powered-up Dellfingler against the Emperor's body with the force of a tornado. *WHAM WHAM WHAM!*

The weapon, now imbued with Holy Magic, knocks the Emperor to his knees but continues to bounce off his kinetic shield. Mephisto hisses in fright and jumps underground, fearing for his life. Fortunately for the Duke of Mist, the Hero doesn't consider him a threat.

Bael rushes to Diablo's side, but Arthur appears in front of him, temporarily transforming the sword into a ten-foot-tall Warhammer of light. Bael opens his mouth to howl in surprise, but the weapon pounds him into the dirt before he can speak, forming a massive crater. The Hero-King continues pulverizing the Duke of Pain with savage fury, not letting up for five full seconds. Each strike drives the Duke deeper into the planet until Arthur transmits to Diablo once again to continue his onslaught.

The Third Emperor grimaces as the King of the Celts encircles him with lightspeed clones, hammering and bashing him from left to right. Finally, Diablo punches the planet surface, increasing his kinetic force by a factor of fifty while causing an artificial earthquake. Arthur stumbles slightly, and at that moment, Diablo lunges his hand toward the Hero's foot.

Gotcha, bastard!

But no, he misses. Diablo grabs nothing but air as the Hero-King transmits away.

Gasping for breath, Diablo jumps to his feet and looks over at the crater where Bael fell only moments prior. The Duke of Pain bursts from underground and screams in rage. "I'll kill him! I'll fucking tear him apart! Lemme at 'im!"

Diablo wipes dirt from his eye as he quickly spins to try and find the Hero-King. "Hey! Bael! Something's screwy about Arthur's personality! He hasn't said a word!"

"Yeah? Maybe he IS the strong silent type after all!"

Diablo scans the area. "No. Not from what I remember."

Mephisto pokes his head out of the soil, unease written all over his skeletal face. The skin he usually wears is rapidly peeling off, thanks to the frantic battle. "Arthur sseemsss to lack a sssoul. I sssenssse no tracesss of thought from hisss mind. Hisss movementsss appear ssstilted. There might be a pattern we can exploit."

Bael jumps over to the Third Emperor and wipes a bead of sweat from his forehead. "A pattern? How in the hell're we sposed to see it! The sunnovabitch moves so fast that I can't even follow him!"

Diablo bites his lip. "You two have to find a way to hold him still for a second or two. If I can land one punch, it's over. If he bypasses my kinetic shielding, I don't want to think about what we'll-"

FWISH. Arthur transmits behind Diablo again and stabs down. His sword strikes Diablo's back, and the Emperor instantly reverses the kinetic force, multiplying it by ten and sending the Hero sprawling backward.

"There! Grab-"

The Hero transmits away before even hitting the ground.

"Shit!"

Diablo gnashes his teeth. *Almost had you. Let's try that again. I won't miss next time.*

* * *

Elsewhere, Beelzebub ignites his foot-fire-thrusters and flies into the sky. His mentor, Agares, shifts into his reptilian form. "I'll redeem myself. Prepare to die, Agares!"

The old man below him smirks as the scales finish covering his skin. "You've never come close to scratching me before, child, and today I'm under orders to kill you. Don't expect me to hold back!"

The power concentrated in Agares' form-shifted body ripples together into his legs as he coils down and instantly calculates his jump trajectory. He pounces at his pupil with frightening speed, clearing the two-hundred-foot gap in a second. His three-clawed hands lunge out, swiping at his disciple. He gashes open a chunk of Beelzebub's left side and sails past the youth further into the air.

When Agares checks back over his shoulder, he gasps. Beelzebub doesn't even flinch as his body instantly begins healing. He spins around in midair and forms his hands into the shape of guns, then unleashes a duel stream of Heat Bullets from the tips of his fingers, blasting Agares' exposed backside.

The reptile winces in pain, though the superheated projectiles only sting a little. He plummets to the planet's surface below, lands deftly on his legs, and burrows underground.

Beelzebub touches his side and smiles. *I haven't managed to injure Agares before, that much is correct, but I have new abilities. My old master doesn't know about them.*

The Duke of Reptiles pounces out from under Polaris's surface, his cheeks bulging. He spits a concentrated jet of water at his fire-affinity student, and Beelzebub ignites heat from his scalp, jet-blasting himself down in midair to duck the attack. Aiming his palm at his mentor, he envisions the fire in his body concentrating in a way it never has before.

Solar Manipulation. The power of the stars!

A flash of light shoots from his hand, hitting Agares in the chest and slamming the old man into the dirt below. However, it deals little damage.

Beelzebub snarls to himself. *Damn. Solar power packs a dynamic punch but lacks piercing strength and heat. I'll have to try something else.*

Agares grunts and jumps to his feet, popping his back in the process. "Good, good! You've improved! Judging by the size of your horns, you must have reached a higher form!"

"Baron," Beelzebub replies with a smirk. "The difference between us is not as vast as it once was!"

"We'll see, pup." Agares glances behind himself at his posterior and concentrates. His lizard-tail changes and morphs, shifting into a harder, bonier shape. "I never told you why I chose to stay as the Second Duke, did I?"

Beelzebub narrows his eyes. *A spiked tail? I thought he could only transform into that lizard form. Can he selectively shift his body in other ways as well?*

The Baron of Flames shakes his head. "You did not, Master Agares."

"To ensure weaklings never make it past the rank of Lord!"

Agares clasps his claws together to form a seal, and his body shifts into the same color as the ground, making him indistinct and difficult to see.

Chamelon mimicry? Not as potent as invisibility, but in the heat of a battle... Beelzebub flicks his eyes around, as the Duke of Reptiles dashes back and forth, his body shifting rapidly to blend in with the scenery wherever he moves.

Agares voice appears from here and there as he increases his speed, forming a blur of motion. "I know your lust for power, Beelzebub! If you defeat me today, you will surely merit the rank of Duke! Don't settle for slowing this old man down! Earn your place atop the demon hierarchy!"

A blur leaps at Beelzebub from the ground, and the youngster smiles as a whip made of fire forms in his hands. "That was always my intention, Master."

* * *

"FIRE!!"

Jason gulps air desperately as he yells again, feeling the energy in his body diminish once more. Satan screams wordlessly, vanishes into mist, and then reforms. As bad of shape as the Devil is in, Jason feels equally terrible. *I can't feel my throat at all!*

Satan coughs once his naked body reappears. Blood covers his skin. "You're looking worse for wear, little kitten! Keep it up! I've well over ten thousand lives left!"

"I'm making a dent!" Jason responds defiantly.

"It's a war of attrition, boy! That's my specialty!"

"FIRE!!"

Jason blasts the Demon Emperor with animalistic fury, blowing him out of existence, only for the Devil to reenter the world of the living moments later.

Fuck. Satan's right. At this rate, I'll be lucky to drop him below ten thousand lives before I collapse of exhaustion! There has to be another way.

Joan speaks in the Hero's mind.

Jason, don't give up. You're wasting too much energy on him with that attack. Try a frontal assault.

Jason sets his jaw. *That won't work. I can't pierce Satan's invisible barrier. His Ultimate Defense is too strong!*

Use the Boots of Hermes. You've enabled their sacred power. Transform yourself into a living weapon. Hurry, before the foul demon regains his stamina!

Jason glances down at his boots, a look of realization on his face. *Right.*

Focusing his mind, the young Hero increases his energy flowing into the boots. They begin to glow, just as the armor did, and a moment later, he races at Satan.

"Imbue!"

The Sword of Heaven instantly coats in Holy Magic, as Jason transforms himself into a living railgun. He smashes through Satan's so-called Ultimate Defense, piercing the Devil's heart with a single thrust and driving him back toward the edge of Amelia's crater.

Satan smiles. "Gotcha."

Jason's eyes widen in alarm. His arms and legs freeze in place. Then, something grabs him by the throat and shoves him away from Satan.

Jason struggles to move, but whatever has him won't let go. *Telekinesis?! No, Satan's using something else! It feels like invisible arms! What is-*

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

Three powerful attacks strike Jason in the chest at the same time. The sound they make illuminates the world around Jason for a moment, and he catches sight of eight faint trails branching from each of his limbs and neck, originating from behind Satan's spine. Three blurs race at Jason's chest, and he steels himself for what's coming.

WHAMWHAMWHAMWHAM!

A flurry of invisible assailants pounds and bashes every part of Jason's body, each one striking him with the force of a hundred sledgehammers.

"Kah! Guh!" Jason gasps and wheezes as Achilles' Armor strains to protect him from the worst of it, but some of the damage still hits his vital organs, causing his heart to tremble and shudder.

Satan chuckles as he pounds on the helpless human. He plucks Catherine from his heart and tosses the blade to the side. "I don't know what possessed your idiot self to close the distance between us, but my Vectors will tear you apart. I've grown tired of you. I'll end this now."

The Devil pauses his assault for a split second, then slams Jason into the ground. Raising the youth up again, he repeats the attack, over and over.

Jason gasps and wheezes, stumbling in and out of consciousness for moments at a time. His limp body offers no resistance as Satan cackles with glee.

"Now, you see the error of your ways! I'm pleased Amelia brought me back, if only so I could take out one last Hero!"

Satan pauses to lift Jason's body fifteen feet above his head. Blood drips from Jason's mouth onto the demon's skin below. The Emperor shivers slightly as he glances over at the battle in the valley. "Seems it's taking them a while. I can't kill you until Amelia gives the order... shit. Now that I've rendered you helpless, my fun has run out. That's my reward for ending the battle quickly, I suppose."

Satan waggles his finger. "But worry you not, chum. After my troops dispose of Amelia's minions, they'll kill her. After she disappears, I'll be set free... and you know what that means, don't you? You

guessed it! The First Emperor will make his glorious return!"

His smile turns sinister. "And... with that wench disposed of, I'll be able to kill you. That Wordsmithing seems quite valuable. It'd be a shame if I didn't take it for myself."

Jason's body slumps as he stares at the Devil below him.

Can't think. Head hurts. Fight back. How? Can I heal and hit him with holy magic? Can't keep that up. Everything hurts. What do I do? Joan? Are you there?

The Maid of New Orleans offers no response.

Fuck. I lost Catherine. Ah, it's over there on the ground. G-gotta get hold of it somehow. Maybe if I use telekines-

WHAM!

Satan pivots around and pounds Jason into the side of the crater Amelia made earlier, then raises him into the air, far above the abyss. "I see those marbles rolling around. Better beat the tar out of you before you get any wise ideas. Hahaha!"

The Emperor laughs triumphantly, but as he does, an odd sound appears behind him.

Fwoomp.

A portal appears in midair, and suddenly a massive monster truck races through, its engine silently puttering.

"What in the name of-?!" Satan whirls to face it, only for the ten-ton vehicle to slam into him, making him lose focus and drop the Wordsmith. The truck drags Satan as it flies over the crater's edge into the abyss below.

Inside the truck, Phoebe's eyes widen. "OH, SHI-!"

BOOM.

The truck smashes into the ground, crushing Satan under ten tons of steel. Phoebe and Samantha slam into their airbags.

Moments pass.

Phoebe coughs weakly, then rubs her head. "O-oh god. I... I think we hit someone."

Samantha winces. "Owie... I didn't see. Are you okay, Phoebe?"

Phoebe rubs her head under Solomon's Crown and mumbles, "Yeah. Jason. Gotta find Jason."

Phoebe looks to her left at her driver's side door. Now missing, the door lays at the bottom of the crater fifty feet away. Pulling herself away from the airbag, Phoebe flops out of the truck and stumbles backward, falling on her ass. She checks to make sure Hoarhiim's orb is still in her bag. Luckily, he is.

Samantha, on the other hand, quickly recovers and kicks the jammed door on her side away, blasting it into the crater wall and embedding it in the dirt. She deftly leaps out and adjusts the thin strips of cloth covering her body. "Where are we?"

The truck shifts slightly, then rockets away as Satan violently flings it into the sky with his Eight Vectors.

Samantha spins on her heel in surprise. "What?! Who did-"

Her breath catches, as she recognizes the demon rising from the dirt. Satan brushes off his exposed body and spots her. "Lilia? Well, I'll be damned."

"Satan? Is that... is that you?! B-but you... you..."

"Died? So I've heard." The Demon Emperor climbs out of his pit and swaggers over to her, summoning his grey suit once again. "I don't know where you came from, but how about a kiss for your old flame?"

Part 046: War For The Labyrinth

"Jason? Oh my gosh! Jason!" Phoebe stumbles away from Samantha's joyful reunion with Satan and over to Jason's limp form. His armor, cracked from Satan's vicious assault, slowly heals his body as the magic inside draws from his mana. She rubs her temple and winces while leaning closer to the man she loves.

Jason blinks his eyes deliriously. "Fuh... fee-fee-bee? Phoebe...?"

Phoebe quickly kneels and elevates his head. "Don't move. Recover your strength. Can you Wordsmith? Try and heal yourself."

On the other side of the crater, fifty feet away, Satan eyefucks his succubus wife for a moment. Her nearly-six-foot form towers multiple inches over him, but he doesn't seem bothered by the size difference. Satan sweeps Belial off her feet with one of his invisible arms and presses his lips against hers.

"Ogmm?!" Belial, surprised by his slick moves, resists only for a moment before returning his passionate embrace. He puts her back on her feet a moment later, leaving her to swoon in surprise.

"You... dead. You were dead! How-?"

Satan winks at Belial and smacks her ass, making her flinch in surprise. "Heh, you'd be surprised what you can live through. That Witch-Bitch tore the soul from my body and enslaved me, but my boys have her all tied up in a fight right now. At least, judging by those sounds in the distance."

Belial cranes her neck to listen. At the top of the crater, the distant echo of swords clanging and muffled shouting barely make their way to her ears.

"Oh. You're fighting Amelia?"

Satan smirks. "Nah. Some punk kid. New upstart hero. Didn't take me long to tear him apart. Forget him; what're you here for?"

Belial ignores his question, turning around to see Jason's sprawled body and his head lying in Phoebe's lap. "Oh- oh no! Satan! You can't! He's Phoebe's fiance!"

The First Emperor raises an eyebrow. "'Scuse me? Who the Hell is Phoebe?" He finally looks over at Jason, noticing the woman beside the Hero. "You mean that white-haired flower lady? The Diva?"

Belial turns and scowls at her lover. "Yes, the 'diva.' Phoebe's a close friend of mine. Why are you battling Jason? What's even going on here?!"

"Hades, guide me," Satan mutters to himself. "Leave it to women to slam you with questions. Look, baby, Amelia told me to, alright? I'm under orders to beat that guy until he's unconscious. I ain't gonna kill him. Can't. Not unless the Witch-Bitch dies first. Of course, when she does, I will."

"You beat him senseless? Satan!" Belial stomps her foot, causing the entire crater to shudder. "Gah! I forgot how vicious you are! You're always getting into fights and starting wars! Can't you come back to life for one day without-"

"Lilia! Sweetie! Lucifer's tits, always with the nagging!" Satan rolls his eyes and glances up at the sky. The darkening horizon rapidly shifts to black as the planet rotates around, hiding the sun from view. Satan sighs and lowers his gaze to his lady's level. "It's like I said; Amelia ordered me to! Even now, there's a lingering impression in my mind telling me to get back to work and beat that little upstart's ass!"

He starts to push past her to walk over to Jason, but Belial hops in front of him again. "Jason is important to Phoebe. Phoebe is important to me. She lives for his sake! I won't let you hurt her or him!"

Satan pauses and stares up into Belial's eyes. Their difference in height has never been a thing he thought about before, but now, seeing her towering over him, several thoughts emerge in his mind.

"Lilia. Are you... are you telling me... 'no?' Me? The one who gave you everything?"

Belial looks away. "It's not like that. You haven't been around for a long time, Satan. The galaxy has changed. I've changed. The days of endless war have been firmly behind us for-"

Satan holds up his right hand to silence her, flicking his eyes to his sundial. "Do you know what time it is?"

She frowns. "Time for you to emerge from the shadows of the past."

The Devil's teeth grind together as he eyes the sweet, lusty succubus before him. Her flesh calls to him, but he closes his eyes and exhales. "No. It's time you remembered your place. I am the First Emperor, the rightful leader of all demons. My authority trumps yours, no matter how much time has passed. You'd better knock off that back-talk, woman."

Belial crosses her arms. Her eyes narrow. "*Or what?*"

Slowly, Satan rubs his palms together. "The ancient devils know I despise laying a hand on a woman."

"You're... you're *threatening* me? We finally see each other after a hundred thousand years, and you're gonna pop in here and swing your demonhood around and think I'm okay with it?"

"That's where you're wrong," Satan says, wagging a finger. "I don't care what your opinion is. My word is demon law. Period."

WHAM.

One of Satan's invisible vectors pounds Belial's head. She careens to the left and smashes into the side of the crater, embedding several feet into the hardened side-wall.

Satan reaches for his suspenders and gives them a good tug, thinking to himself, *Sometimes a man's gotta teach a mouthy broad a lesson.*

The sounds of a raging battle echoes in the distance, and a massive *WHUMPH* rocks the planet, sending pebbles and rocks flying down into the crater. Satan ignores them.

Jason coughs a word out. "**Heal...**" His body slowly begins to mend.

Satan wipes his hair back and scowls at the white-haired human woman as she turns around and stares up at him, enraged. "Y-you bastard! You hit Sammy! What- I thought you two were lovers! How could you do that to her?!"

"Love takes many forms," Satan murmurs. "In our case, it takes a slight physical correction. She's hardy. I doubt she even felt it. Now, step aside. I ain't in the mood to slap around some human wench."

Immediately, Phoebe staggers to her feet and draws her sword. Still injured from her truck-crash, she barely manages to keep her footing as she eyes the First Emperor warily. "Like Hell, I will! If you want to get to Jason, you'll have to go through m-me!" Her voice quivers slightly as she examines the short but muscular demon, all while wondering, *how did he hit Sammy? I didn't see anything move!*

Even as she wonders, her eyes pick up a slight movement behind him. Focusing her spirit with the power of Solomon's Crown, she enhances her aura-reading ability.

Invisible arms. Eight of them. Five fingers each, with sharp claws at the ends. I've never seen anything like them in my life! The Devil must have hit Samantha with those invisible limbs!

Satan holds up his fist and coughs into it. "Kah! Devils. Two stupid dames in one day. Just my luck."

He quickly lunges one of his hands over, intending to bat Phoebe away with a light slap, perhaps even knock her unconscious. Instead, she does the unthinkable.

She dodges it.

Phoebe dives into a roll and slashes at Satan, catching him completely off-guard. Her razor-sharp sword chops into his leg, and Satan yelps in surprise. "Gah! What in the-?!"

Immediately, he jumps from casual confidence to angry suspicion as he limps back a step, using his Vectors to pull himself away. "You... you saw it? My attack?"

Phoebe glances back at Jason as his weak healing magic continues to repair the damage. He mumbles and rubs his eyes.

Soon! I just have to hold out!

Phoebe grits her teeth and taunts the Devil. "Th-that's right! I won't let anyone hurt my friends! If you think that's good, wait until you see the surprise I've got in my pocket!"

Satan narrows his eyes, and Phoebe swallows hard. *Shit! I forgot to bring my toolbox! If I'd known I was going to battle a Demon Emperor I'd have at least packed a few flashbangs!*

The Devil points at her, slowly, and nods. "I like that fire in your eyes. I was gonna leave you be, but you're a cutie. Perhaps another wallflower for my collection ain't a bad idea."

"I'd sooner die than submit to a demon!" Phoebe slams her foot down, kicking a loose rock at the Devil. The slight movement barely fazes him. One of his vectors bats it away with terrific force, smashing it into the wall of the pit. Satan smiles as she charges at him.

Suddenly, Phoebe's vision blurs. She stumbles slightly and falls to her knees, clutching her head.

Satan doesn't hesitate. One of his vectors lunges over and grabs her by the neck, hoisting her into the air. She swings her sword at it, but the weapon passes through the ghost-limb as if it doesn't exist.

Four more of Satan's vectors lash out, grabbing each of her limbs. He wrenches the sword from her grasp and spreads her out so she can't move. Phoebe chokes and gasps as the Devil examines her body.

"Funny story, I had your boyfriend in this exact pose a few minutes ago. I won't hurt you like I did him. I'll only twist a few bones. It'll hurt a lot, but maybe that'll make the fire in your eyes burn a little hotter."

Jason, finally awake, pulls himself up. "Wh- what?! Phoebe? Satan! Let her go!"

He starts to aim his palm at Satan, but the Devil waggles a finger. "Ah-ah-ah. You picked a bad time to wake up, little Hero. Make one wrong move, and I'll do a little twisty-snappy on this broad's neck."

Rocks crumble away from the side of the pit. The hole Satan sent Belial flying into crumbles away as she leaps out, landing on her feet. However, her appearance has dramatically shifted. Two spindly, leathery wings sprout from her back. Her newly sharpened teeth glint, and her hands, now claws, clench together in rage.

Belial hisses through her teeth. "Hurt a hair on Phoebe's head, and I'll kill you. Put her down."

The succubus balls her hands into fists. In the encroaching darkness, her body, no longer shiny and red like other demons, has morphed into a faded grey color. Scales sprout along her arms and legs, giving her a certain degree of natural body armor.

Something shifts on Satan's face. A look of unease appears. "Pure Succubus Form? Come on, Lilia. You're not one to swing your fists around like a savage."

The succubus growls deep in her throat. "I told you, Satan. It's been a *long* time. I've changed. Put. Her. Down."

I have nothing to worry about, Satan thinks to himself, as he looks from Belial to the hero and back again. This Jason kid is a pushover. Lilia can't hold a candle to my powers. Admittedly, I've never fought her before, but she's a weak little succubus. Even in her transformed state, I can hold Lilia off with three- no, four Vectors to spare.

Belial takes a step toward him, and Satan hardens his gaze. "Are you challenging me, Lilia? Have you forgotten which of us wears the pants in our relationship?"

The sun creeps ever further below the horizon as night's darkness slithers into the sky.

Satan's raises his voice, a note of warning embedded in his tone. "I am the original demon. Superior. Perfect. If you wanna tussle, don't expect me to hold back."

Belial unsheathes her claws. "Now I remember why I hated the time when the humans ruled. Your bigotry forced us into constant war. Your hatred of humans, your lack of compassion, and worst of all, your inability to use reason, were always your worst qualities. You're a creature of instinct, Satan. You won't learn unless someone beats a lesson into your skull!"

Belial lunges at the Devil. Satan uses two Vectors to yank himself back, sighing dispassionately as her eyes follow their movements. *So, Lilia can see them as well. Perhaps, after years of being near me, she learned to pick up the trail of my Vectors. I suppose if it comes down to a battle, I'll have to end things quickly. Despite Lilia's stupidity, I'd prefer not to leave a scratch on her perfect skin.*

Belial swipes at the Devil, and he dodges it as if her movements were the slowest thing in the universe. *It's been a long time since I used this technique. However, she's thoroughly earned it.*

Satan lunges out with two Vectors, grabbing at Belial from behind. Her enhanced speed allows her to dodge toward Satan's body, closing the distance between her and her lover. Satan reacts by slapping her with his right hand, stunning her for a moment.

Perfect, Satan thinks to himself.

His eyes shift in color. The right one turns blue, and the left one green.

He focuses his left eye, creating a localized telekinesis field. While weak, the effect is enough to catch Belial off-guard and make her stumble. Satan chuckles inwardly. *I stole this power from Alexander the Great. One of my favorites to break out in a pinch.*

Satan's right eye freezes time around the succubus for a second, long enough for his Vectors to lash out and grab her limbs. Satan hoists Belial up in the air in the same way he did to Jason and Phoebe, then smashes her into the ground, stunning her momentarily.

Over and over, Satan balls his Vectors into fists and pounds them against Belial's body. However, each time, she manages to deflect and dodge at the last second.

Eventually, the succubus surprises her lover by shoving herself to the side and diving into the dirt. Like a freakish mole, she burrows into the ground and disappears. Rumbles travel through the crater as she swims through the planet's crust at high speeds.

Suddenly, Belial bursts out from under Satan's feet and swings her fist. She strikes the Devil's face, transforming his head into bloody meat paste and spraying it all over the back of the canyon. Before Satan can react, he perishes.

The Devil's Vectors fade away, causing Phoebe to plummet from teen feet in the air. She screams in fright, but Belial flaps her wings, rushes over, and catches the white-haired woman before she hits the dirt.

"Gotcha."

Phoebe blinks in surprise. "Th-thanks! You saved me. But... your husband... you killed him..."

Belial rolls her eyes. "*Trust me*, he'll be fine."

Sixty seconds later, Satan's corpse reanimates. His blood swirls into the air and wraps around his neck, transforming into a head and returning him to the realm of the living.

"Gah! Fuckin' Hell!"

Satan curses at Belial. A look of rage appears in his eyes.

"Whose side are you on, lady?! I'm your devil-damned husband! Why are you protecting some stupid human slut?!"

Belial bares her teeth. "That *stupid human slut* is Phoebe. She's my friend!"

Phoebe backs away. She stands protectively with her back to Jason, but he pulls her aside. "Don't. This is my fight."

"You're badly injured," Phoebe replies. "How much mana do you have left?"

"Not enough," Jason admits. "I kept using it to attack Satan, but he's immortal in the truest sense. Every time I killed him, he came back, just like when that, uh, demon lady did the same. Who is she, anyway?"

"A friend," Phoebe replies. "I'll introduce you after we make it out of here."

Both humans gaze at their succubus protector. Belial stands her ground and doesn't take her eyes off Satan.

"I can do this all day, lover. If you so much as try to harm a hair on Phoebe's head, I'll rip yours off and shove it up your ass."

Satan narrows his eyes. "Somethin' *did* change about you, Lilia. I ain't stupid. I see it in your eyes. You ain't just protectin' a *friend*. Who's your new man? Is it him? That runty boy over there? What's he got that I don't?"

Satan gestures toward Jason.

"What, I go missing for a little while, and you find yourself someone else? I didn't realize how little I meant to you."

"How absurd," Belial mutters. "Everything you just said was wrong. I'm not doing this to protect a man, idiot. When did I ever mention Jason?"

Satan blinks in surprise. "Oh. *Oh*. So it's like *that*..."

"Yeah. It is."

Hardly has Belial finished speaking, before suddenly, an earth-shattering roar makes everyone jump in fright.

"GRAAAAAAAAAUUURRGHHH!!!"

A horrible noise, something like a thousand tigers howling at once, explodes in the midday air. Satan and the others jerk their heads toward the top of the crater. In the night sky, an odd, orange light glows in the distance.

That sound came from the direction of the other demons, Satan thinks to himself. What are Diablo, Bael, and Mephisto doing? Why haven't they finished off the Black Queen yet?!

Several minutes earlier.

Agares leaps from the ground, aiming at his pupil. "Earn your place atop the demon hierarchy!"

Beelzebub, flying in the air, forms a whip made of fire. "That was always my intention, master."

Agares narrows his eyes as he rears his claws back to strike. *A fire-whip? That's a new ability.*

Beelzebub jets to the side, flicking the whip at lightning speed toward his mentor. The edge of it slices down the old man's armored chest with a *hiss*, cutting deep into his body and boiling Agares' blood.

Agares gasps as sharp pain erupts in his stomach. This time he plows into the dirt below and ends up with a big pile of debris covering him.

Beelzebub lowers the intensity of his flame-boots to hover a little lower. *There's no chance that my attack severely wounded Agares. No, the old lizard is resilient. His reptilian-blood gives him a high regenerative factor, especially when he hibernates.*

The Baron of Flames steals a quick glance to his right. Half a mile away, Bael and Diablo fight against Arthur's constant flurry of attacks. At one point, Diablo punches the ground so hard that he rumbles the tectonic plates.

What power! Beelzebub thinks.

He quickly turns back to his master, but the mound of dirt is noticeably smaller.

I only looked away for a moment! That damn lizard must have burrowed again! I can't allow myself to be distracted.

Beelzebub considers focusing his eyes on looking for heat underground but quickly realizes the prospect is pointless. *After all, lizards are cold-blooded.*

Agares doesn't surface. Beelzebub scans the plains in every direction, but nothing happens.

It's hard enough spotting my mentor in the dark of night, but with his camouflage active, he's practically invisible. I should light the fields on fire before it's too late.

Suddenly, a bat flies into Beelzebub's face, startling him. "What the hell?!"

The animal screeches and plummets to the ground a hundred feet below, landing with a *thud* and dying instantly.

Why would a bat hit me?! The flame should light me up like a beacon in the sky! Don't animals know better than to-

"SQUAW!" A massive fowl, over ten feet wide, screeches and claws at Beelzebub from his blind-side. All at once, he realizes the plains have grown much louder as distant *caws* fly toward him at alarming speeds.

Animal-calling? Agares can control the minds of birds and other beasts of the field? He must be planning to wear me out. As if a few hundred birds have a chance of-

Beelzebub turns toward the distant sounds of birds cawing, and a chill runs down his back. The sky shifts noticeably as tens of thousands of fowl and bats screech toward him. Their numbers, seemingly infinite, transform from pests into a veritable flood of living weapons.

"COWARD!" Beelzebub bellows at the top of his lungs and begins to summon the aura of fire from within himself, cloaking his body in its essence. Before the birds can strike him, Beelzebub blasts the heat out in every direction. *Explosive Fulmination!*

The wave of flame shoves the flood of animals back, sending them careening into one another.

Beelzebub laughs maniacally. "Hahahaha! Puny animals are no match for me! Show yourself, old-"

WHUMP.

Agares's lizard form slams into Beelzebub from behind. The old man wraps his claws around the youthful demon, grinning as the extra weight makes Beelzebub lose control and plummet to the ground.

"As you wish, child!"

BOOM.

The two of them slam into the dirt, but Agares ensures his pupil's face absorbs most of the damage. Keeping one claw wrapped around his student, Agares uses the other to stab and tear every organ he can, gutting Beelzebub like a fish for dinner.

"Gah! NEYAUGH!" Beelzebub gasps in pain, writhing desperately to try and fight off the old man's ridiculous strength.

"In a world where people die young, always fear the old man," Agares howls with laughter. "Bahaha! You've still much to learn! Protect your vitals! Stabby-stab-poke!"

Beelzebub, in a moment of desperation, hatches a hasty plan. He drops his flame whip and forms seals with both hands, then unleashes his solar flash, discharging the brightness of the sun from his body.

Agares yelps in surprise, recoiling away as waves of pain surge in his eyes. At that moment, Beelzebub explodes fire outward, expanding the space between himself and his mentor with a wave of heat. He jumps away and sears his wounds shut, then allows his body's natural regeneration to take over. Gasping for breath, Beelzebub immediately holds a palm up and aims it at his former teacher. He inhales deeply and breathes a fiery torrent on the lizard-king.

Still clutching his eyes, Agares spins to put his back to the flame, silently activating his ultimate defense: dermal armor. The thick, cutaneous bones erupt over his backside, protecting him from most of the fire's damage, though not all of it.

Beelzebub grins.

Instead of physically damaging and burning him, these flames are among my new abilities. They'll drain his strength and weaken him every second he stays in their path.

Agares sucks in what precious oxygen surrounds himself, and blinks hard.

No matter how he tries, Agares can only see pure-red all around him. His reptilian eyes, much like Beelzebub's, are attuned to detecting heat. The flames pounding into his back make it impossible to see. After taking Beelzebub's solar flash straight to the face, Agares can't see a damn thing.

Agares wheezes. "Hah... not a bad way to go out... it was a good run... but now the young can take-"

In the distance, a massive *WHUMPH* shakes the planet. A wave of energy follows a sonic boom. It slams into Beelzebub and Agares, flinging the two of them like rocks across a pond, and halting Beelzebub's fiery assault. The ground and trees tear away and fly into the air as if an atom bomb had exploded.

Both demons tumble and twist across the plains. They land in a field, well over a mile from their starting point. Agares survives thanks to his armor, but it takes Beelzebub a while to heal.

Several minutes pass. The two demons groan simultaneously.

Agares rubs his eyes. *Damn. Now I have to keep fighting. There's always someone interfering...*

He immediately jumps back, his spiked tail at the ready, and lances it through Beelzebub's heart when the Baron jumps to his feet. The attack catches Beelzebub off-guard, and Agares follows with a dozen more rapid strikes, his tail puncturing and piercing his pupil in various places.

Jumping away, Agares chuckles. "Haha... This tail has a terrible neurotoxin in it... You'll be paralyzed and dead soon, young prodigy. I must kill you, even if I do not wish to. The Black Queen's orders compel me."

Beelzebub slumps to his knees and touches his trembling hands to each of the wounds, one-by-one. "C-constantly, you underestimate me... t-teacher."

"Do I? A Baron hasn't a chance of beating a Duke. I invite you to prove me wrong!"

Beelzebub coughs and glowers at Agares. "Poison has no effect on... on one who descends from the Phoenix. Toxins... begone!"

Slapping his palm against his chest, Beelzebub screams in ecstasy as he boils the blood in his body, killing the toxins in the process and sealing all of his wounds. Moments later, his body regenerates, and he pants like a wild animal, eyeballing his mentor.

"You look awful, Agares."

"And you look like Skarn droppings," the old man replies, his shoulders sagging. "Damn me to Hell... I ain't got nothing left, pupil. Let's get this over with!"

Beelzebub rights himself. Making a quick motion, he summons another whip. "Mentor. I'm... I'm sorry I wasn't able to save you. From the Black Queen, I mean."

Agares raises one of his reptilian eyebrows. "What's this? A moment of introspection? From you?"

Beelzebub grits his teeth. "I was weak. But I will not be forever. I will lead demonkind, someday. We will prosper. I will not forget your teachings."

Agares exhales and closes his eyes. "Perhaps. We shall see. The future has yet to be decided."

The Baron of Flames raises his whip. "You are the only demon I've ever respected. Know that it pains me to do this."

A crocodile tear rolls down Agares' face. "Aye, boy. I know. I always have."

His hand twitches for a slight moment before Beelzebub begins the lashing. Keeping his movements quick and precise, he tears open his mentor's throat, heart, and any other vital organ he can. Within seconds, his armor-cutting whip has ripped the old man to ribbons. He closes his eyes as the crocodile falls to the ground, a look of peace upon his face.

Beelzebub drops the whip. "Damn you. You cheated me. You were holding back the whole time."

Agares gurgles silently as he draws his last breath.

No, my beautiful pupil. I fought well past my limit. You won... fair... and...

* * *

Several minutes pass as Beelzebub holds back emotions he didn't know he could feel.

I don't care. Agares was little more than a foolish old man who rushed to his death. He doesn't matter to me at all.

The young demon shakily stands up and looks around at the night sky. He takes a few steps toward Agares' corpse, intending to bury him, only for a horrific, agonizing scream to pierce the night.

"GRAAAAAAAAAUUURRGHHH!!!"

The monstrous roar shakes the land. Beelzebub spins to face it, and gasps as an ominous orange glow illuminates the blackened sky.

What... what in the name of Satan is that... that THING?!

Several minutes earlier.

"There! Grab-!" Diablo jumps at the apparition of Arthur yet again, his motion appearing slow and clumsy compared to the blinding speed of the Hero-King. The human transmits away, and Mephisto pops out of the ground.

"Emperor Diablo, there iss a way to trap him. He alwayssss targetsss your ssspine. Ssstay ssstill, and I'll grab him!"

Diablo flicks his eyes over to Bael. "Bael! Use that flail of yours. Mephisto has an idea. I want you to bind the Hero with chains the next time he strikes my back!"

The Duke of Pain grunts. "If you say so, boss. But uh... you know Big Bonk's worthless against fast types like Arthur, right?"

Diablo's head darts back and forth as he waits for the attack. "Just do it! And stop calling your flail that dumb name. It's Mjölnir!"

Bael rolls his eyes. "Can't say that word. Too hard. Anyway..." Bael shifts the mass of chains wrapped around his chest and quickly unravels the modified artifact hanging behind himself.

Mjölnir, Camael's divine weapon.

Once an artifact used by the Archangel of Divination, Bael found it during the War in Heaven by chance, repurposing it into a weapon for himself.

The massive spiked head of the weapon, half again as big as Bael's upper body, unjams from his backside as he pulls it out and rubs his spine. "Sss, ahh. Oughta rename Big Bonk to somethin' like Poker. It's always a thorn in my side."

"Enough with the shitty jokes!"

Diablo starts to say something else, but a *whiff* of movement behind him makes the Emperor steel himself. The always-silent Arthur reappears and slashes at the demon's back again, but this time, Mephisto is ready. A ghoulish leap from the ground and grabs Arthur's legs, pinning the Hero in place.

Mephisto yells, "Diablo! Now!"

"Bael! Now!" Diablo jumps a foot away and pivots on his heel as Bael sends his flail chain spinning around Arthur, then yanks himself over and grapples the Hero, yanking his hand away from his forehead.

Bael crushes the silent Hero with his brutish strength and yells, "Got 'im, boss! Do it!"

Arthur pauses for a few seconds to evaluate his predicament. He tries to raise his hand to transmit away, but Bael holds his arms down, restricting the Hero-King's movement. "Nuh-uh, you little shit! Stay put! It's nap time!"

Dellfingler yelps in surprise. "Wrassle him, Arthur! Come on, fight!"

Unlike his other punches, when he didn't have time to prepare, Diablo spends a full ten seconds increasing his kinetic energy, pouring as much mana as he can spare into his fist. His eyes strain as gravity condenses and spins around him.

Five times... ten times... twenty times... fifty times... one hundred times... five hundred times...! Aaaargh! I'm ready; here it comes!!

Diablo's eyes flash with power. He lunges forward, pulls his arm back, and swings it toward Arthur's chest.

With one punch, he strikes the Hero King with the strength of an atom bomb. He batters Arthur with a thousand times the kinetic force of his unenhanced melee strike. Bael's eyes bulge in panic as the wave of energy instantly passes through Arthur and slams into his body.

A moment later, the Hero and demon vanish, along with the ghoul's arms.

WHAM, SLAM, BAM BAM BAM... WHUMPH!

Bael and Arthur's bodies smash and crash across the landscape, spinning and twirling whenever the ground so much as taps one of the hairs on their heads. They fly for over ten miles before wildly careening into the side of a distant mountain, hitting it with enough force to make a distant volcano blow its top.

A colossal wave of reverse kinetic energy explodes out from their impact point, shooting back toward the exhausted Diablo, as well as Mephisto, and even Beelzebub and Agares a half-mile away. The surge tosses Diablo back, and he collapses onto his rear, ready to vomit blood.

Got... him... hngh.

The Emperor of Annihilation's body screams in fatigue.

It's been so long since I used that much energy... Bael... did Bael survive? Id...iot. He wasn't supposed to grab the Hero. Not even Bael can emerge from a 1,000x multiplied kinetic punch unscathed.

Across the plains, Bael's arms limply wrap around Arthur's body. Several long minutes pass as the Hero and Demon lay against each other in the hundred-foot deep hole.

The Duke mumbles something about drinking tequila by the beach and how fun that would be, but the Hero-King eventually tosses the demon's arms aside and steps out of the rubble, dusting himself off.

A faint white glow surrounds his body.

The Crusader Aura.

An aura that Arthur can extend and retract at will, shielding him from damage so long as he has mana to spare. Arthur's godlike mana reserves put him atop the pyramid of Heroes before and after, growing even more ridiculous when he holds Excalibur in his hand.

His current weapon, Dellfingler, dizzily coughs. "W-whooooaaa partner! You okay? You took that hit like a champ!"

Arthur doesn't respond, instead opting to stare into the distance.

The Demon Emperor's mana is depleted. He will not be able to retaliate.

His eyes glow as he transforms Dellfingler into a warhammer of light once more. Bael stirs and shakes his head, wincing as he struggles to orient himself. He spots Arthur standing and gapes. "Whu- how? You... you're alive? But... that punch..."

Arthur doesn't respond. Instead, he raises two fingers to his temple.

A sudden realization hits Bael. *The boss! No way he's still standing after using that much power! If Arthur teleports over there, Deebs is a goner! I've gotta grab this goon...*

He leaps from the pit, every bone in his body screaming and cracking in the process, and grabs the Crusader. "Oh no, you don't! Worthless fleshb-"

Arthur transmits to Diablo and flicks Bael to the side effortlessly. The Demon Emperor, flopped on his back, stares emptily at the Hero-King as the human raises his massive warhammer.

No...!

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Over and over, Arthur smashes Diablo with his holy warhammer. The Emperor's bones turn to pulp. Diablo barely raises a hand in protest for the first strike, let alone the rest.

"Boss!!!" Bael leaps to his feet and lunges at the Hero, but Arthur pivots to face the incoming threat. He fires a wave of Holy Magic from his free palm, which doesn't hurt Bael, but does violently fling him backward. Arthur then morphs Dellfingler back to his sword form.

"Oh, jeez! Being a different weapon is disorienting! It's like when you forget your car keys, but you have to climb inside a washing machine to get 'em! Great work, though, Arthur! You really showed that bloodskin who's the boss!"

Mephisto sends more undead minions leaping from the ground at Arthur. The Hero-King ignores them and transmits over to Diablo's other side, raising Dellfingler high.

Swish, slash, chop!

Arthur slices and dices skin and muscle, carving up the Emperor's limp corpse to ensure his death.

Bael staggers to his feet and watches in horror as the Hero turns Diablo into mincemeat.

Tears swell in his eyes. *Boss. Diablo... no! You were... always there for me. I can't... I can't let this go! I gotta avenge him! I gotta tear that human to pieces!*

Anger fills the Duke's mind as he forms hand signs into the only magical seal he can use.

His teeth grind together with enough force to chew steel. *I shouldn'a got in the way, Boss. But... I won't let Arthur win. I'll beat this bastard! For you!*

Bael's flesh and bones rapidly regenerate as a new, primeval power boils in his body. The power of a Duke. The power of the Ancient Demons. Armor begins to form over and around all the skin on his body. His cherry-red body rapidly fades, and charcoal black replaces it.

Cracks appear in the blackness, and sparks of fire emerge from those cracks. Bael rapidly expands in size, from almost eight feet tall to well over fifteen. His body doubles in size. His horns morph and deform, transforming from upward spikes into forward-facing spears.

Fire explodes in Bael's belly as Arthur turns to face the demon.

"GRAAAAAAAAAUUURRGHHH!!!"

Bael unleashes a mighty roar, releasing the pent-up power of the hottest Hellfire from his stomach. His mouth erupts with the energy of a volcano, creating a bright enough light that he illuminates the land for miles around.

Mephisto peeks from the ground and shudders.

The Balrog.

Legendsss ssspeak of Bael'sss fearsssome power... his featsss during the Great War in Heaven, where he cemented himself as the mossst powerful Duke without quesstion. They sssay only Diablo hasss ever held back Bael'sss unssstoppable battle power.

Mephisto slowly lowers again, transferring under the surface.

But the Hero-King took Diablo'sss mightiessst attack. Can he be ssso easssily ssstopped, even by Bael'sss ultimate transssformation?

Across the plains, Beelzebub gazes in horror at the monstrosity bellowing on the battlefield. *Seven Devils. Whatever that thing is... I'm not willing to fight it. I'll keep my distance, for now.*

Bael grabs his massive flail, now an average-sized weapon for a monster of his size, and screams furiously at the human below him.

"PUNY! SMALL! ME CRUSH! ME SMASH!"

Part 047: Balrog VS Hero-King, The Onslaught Begins

I'm tired. I want to sleep forever. I don't want to deal with reality or the fate of the universe. Everything sucks.

* * *

"My queen."

Blaarjiim's voice appears in my mind.

"My queen. It is time. You must awaken."

I don't wanna.

"Your life is in danger, my queen. While you rested, the demons unleashed a fearsome power. Presently your safety might be assured, but I suspect it will not be for long."

Sigh... just five more minutes.

Blaarjiim sighs. "My queen. Despite your... reservations... you must battle the Hero. You must kill him. His power will make you unstoppable."

A tear crawls down my face.

I don't want to be unstoppable, and I don't want to kill. Jason said I could be a good girl. Why can't I live a peaceful life? Why must I walk the path of blood?

"Haah... You make everything difficult. The mortal is young, naive. He has not lived for three thousand years, nor had a powerful enemy seal him inside a stone prison for a hundred thousand more. You've slain many. He is but one among innumerable others."

I know, but I don't want to kill Jason! I don't want to enslave him! He's... important to me.

"You ordered Satan, your mightiest summon, to tear him apart. Whether it was an act of cowardice or a stroke of malevolence, the mortal hasn't a chance of defeating the First Emperor. Do not lie to yourself and claim that you pity him. He is nothing more to you than a false promise of a quiet life. You gave that up long ago."

More tears trickle down my face.

Blaarjiim... when did you become so cruel?

"Cruelty can be a form of compassion. I merely speak the truth. Despite what the mortal may claim, you are irredeemable, the same as all evil beings."

I... I won't. I won't attack Jason. I'll stay here. I'll-

Blaarjiim interrupts me, a hint of anger in his voice. "Yes, lie here and cry. I had worried you might bring out your inner child. Fortunately, I've found a way to *motivate* you."

Motivate me? W-what do you-?

Blaarjiim's hand draws close to my face. I can almost feel it brush my cheek.

"You lack the strength to finish the job, but not I. Sleep, my queen. I will take over for now."

What? No! Blaarjiim! Don't- ah! Stop! It hurts! You're hurting me!

The last thing I see is a look of dismay on Blaarjiim's face as he shakes his head.

"You will thank me for my kindness later."

Something dark and misty enters my nose, mouth, and ears. I can't breathe. I can't think.

Blaarjiim... he's... hurting me...

[Recommended Listening](#)

"GRAAAH!"

Bael's mighty roar sends a wave of burning force at the Hero below. The heat reaches several hundred degrees, but Arthur doesn't flinch as he stares at the demon towering over him.

"Whoa! Holy moly! Arthur, you better watch out! This guy's off the charts!" Dellfingler yelps in surprise as the Hero makes a sign and forms a shield of light in his grasp.

Bael, the Balrog, launches his attack immediately. His power and agility triple as he unleashes the full might of his flail.

The spiked-ball swings around above his head. The Balrog roars, slamming it onto the ground. Despite aiming for the Hero with perfect precision, the flail misses when Arthur transmits to the side at the last second.

Arthur lunges toward the fifteen-foot tall demon. He drives Dellfingler up, stabbing the ultra-sharp blade inside Bael's chest.

"Ahh! Hot! Hot!" Dellfingler yelps. "It burns!"

The moment Arthur yanks the sword out and prepares to strike again, Bael's left claw swoops down with frightening speed and bats the Hero aside with the power of a two-ton wrecking ball.

Arthur sprawls head over heels for a few hundred feet, bounces off his light-shield, flips in the air, and executes a perfect landing. Luckily, his Crusader Aura absorbs the brunt of the attack.

"Good moves!" Dellfingler yells.

Arthur ignores Dellfingler's cheerleading and opts instead to eyeball the Balrog and size him up, looking for a weakness.

"YOU WEAK! ME STOMP! ME SMASH!"

The First Duke of Pain pauses a moment, gathers intense heat in his chest, then unleashes a torrent of Hellfire, spitting ten-thousand-degree flames at the Hero. Arthur doesn't flinch, instead opting to raise his shield and pour energy into his Crusader Aura.

The fire impacts his aura with the force of a hurricane, grinding his boots into the dirt and liquifying the soil and rocks around him into magma as the Duke stomps ever closer.

For thirty seconds, the Duke of Pain unleashes his Hellfire, but still, Arthur resists with unflinching resolve. He neither complains nor gasps for breath as the heat surrounding him begins to boil him inside his aura.

"W-we gotta get out of here! Bael is too powerful!" Dellfingler says. Unlike Arthur, he feels intense pain as the heat warms his blade near to the melting point.

Finally, Bael pauses to take a breath. Arthur slumps slightly as the fire pauses for just a moment, then he takes his chance, transmitting above the demon and stabbing down into a fiery seam in his back.

Dellfingler screams, "AHH! IT HURTS! PULL ME OUT!" His body, still in pain from the heat only a moment before, reaches its breaking point as his metal form begins to warp.

Arthur pulls the sword out and transmits away, ignoring the roar of the Balrog as Bael swats at the Hero no longer on his back.

Pausing for an instant, Arthur glances at the sword in his hand, now beginning to cool but visibly damaged. Dellfingler wheezes and gasps. "It... burns... pain... agony..."

Discard.

Arthur thinks only one word to himself before tossing the sword aside, letting Dellfingler land in the dirt. The poor, deformed sword offers no protest, as his mind begins to break.

Arthur closes his eyes for a moment and summons a Warhammer of light into his now-freed hand. Once he collects himself, he raises his shield and races over to the Balrog.

"WANT MORE? BAEL GIVE PAIN!"

The Balrog pounds his chest and inhales, and two massive wings of fire erupt from his spine, stretching twenty-feet to each side. Additionally, a clubbed tail appears, both to help balance him, and to assault anyone who tries to attack from behind.

Bael drops his flail and lands on his front claws, assuming a four-legged stance as he scratches the ground and prepares to charge the Hero-King.

Arthur smashes his Warhammer across Bael's face, deflecting a claw with his shield when Bael tries to scratch him, then uppercuts the Balrog's chin as he swings the weapon up. Bael damn-near flips onto his back from the force of the attack, but he rights himself with his newly formed wings.

"YOU KILL BOSS! ME NEVER FORGIVE!"

The two of them trade blows. Arthur batters the Balrog savagely, mostly managing to deflect the massive demon's attacks whenever he counters, while Bael returns the attacks in kind.

Every so often, one of Bael's attacks land, smashing Arthur away and visibly weakening his aura and lowering his mana in the process.

Finally, Arthur coughs and glances down to spot a gash in his armor. Bael must have landed a blow at some point, but the Hero doesn't know when it happened.

Bael stands upright again and laughs maniacally. "HAH HAH HAH! YOU WEAKEN, BUT ME GROW STRONGER! ME BIGGEST, BADDEST DEMON!"

Arthur's eyes rapidly calculate his odds of winning. Even as the Balrog proclaims his inevitable victory, the Hero-King realizes Bael isn't wrong. He'll win if the fight continues.

Suddenly, a dreadful feeling encapsulates Arthur's body. He shivers violently and stumbles to a knee. An ominous, unthinkable dark energy surges across the battlefield. He jerks his head over to the pit where he defeated Diablo, and the Hero-King's eyes widen.

Red mana bubbles from the pit with fiery rage. The ground shakes, and even Bael turns to look at where his Boss fell.

A claw bigger than Bael's entire Balrog form erupts from the abyss and slams into the dirt with the fury of fire and thunder.

Arthur shakily jumps to his feet as his soulless eyes scan the rising cosmic-sized demon.

Chance of total victory: Zero.

Satan stares at the lip of the crater for only a few moments before lowering his gaze. The sounds of a battle ten times more intense than before, complete with blows that make the crater shake, only serve to give everyone in Jason's party anxiety.

The Devil smirks. "By now, the Black Queen should be quite exhausted. It won't be long before she dies, and I walk free."

Jason glowers at the Devil. "You're awfully confident in your minions. I think today will end terribly for you. Amelia isn't as weak as you make her out to be."

Phoebe slides up beside Jason and looks at his face worriedly, but he keeps his eyes fixated on the First Emperor. Belial, in return, takes several steps back and sandwiches Phoebe between the Hero and herself.

Satan chuckles. "Two whores and a boy against the most powerful demon to ever live. And over that ridge are four demon generals against one weak, sobbing woman. Honestly, I couldn't stack the odds in my favor better if I tried."

Jason's spherical vision flicks to the cliff above. The ground shakes again as a battle of the ages continues, but his vision doesn't extend nearly far enough to make out who is fighting or under what circumstances. Still, every ripple makes his heartbeat quicken.

Amelia. Please. Don't die. I believe in you.

As if he had suddenly gained the power to summon people with a thought, Amelia appears atop the cliff within his spherical vision's range. Despite her tattered clothes and disheveled appearance, Amelia

exudes a powerful aura as she clutches Blaarjiim's black orb firmly in her hand. She gazes at the group below with a mixture of pity and disgust.

"Oh? Who are the two women? Ah, right. Belial and Flim-flam, as I recall."

Amelia's voice, noticeably deeper than before, echoes inside the bowl. Satan jerks his head up at her. "What? I thought you were fighting my min- err, those demons!"

"No. I summoned King Arthur and Agares to battle them. Arthur is holding up quite well."

Phoebe blinks in surprise. "Arthur? His Majesty? But... but how?!"

Amelia ignores the question and leaps into the crater, sliding down the steep dirt incline and jumping to a stop as she arrives. "You're still fighting them, Satan? I thought you'd have weakened the Hero by now. I can't consume his soul unless he's nearly broken."

Satan scowls at the woman. "He has reinforcements! Besides, you've been-"

"Excuses." Amelia cuts him off, then swivels to face the other three. "Mortal, we meet for the last time. At my queen's request, I will ensure your demise is swift and painless."

Jason blinks. "You're not Amelia? ...Blaarjiim?"

"I see you can put two and two together. My queen and I came to a joint resolution. She lusts for the power of Wordsmithing that you hold in your breast. I will ensure we put it to better use."

"But... but Amelia..." Jason's voice falters. "She said she didn't want to fight me. Why would-"

"Silence! I do not question my queen's orders! I merely obey!" Blaarjiim pours darkness from Amelia's lithe form. "Long has her compassion for you been a thorn in her side. I will please her at any cost. Once she has control of your power, she will be able to use you as she wishes. We will reform this weakened, pathetic Labyrinth into the purest expression of darkness."

Before anyone can respond, the ground begins to tremble and quiver. An earthquake, more concentrated and intense than ever before, rumbles and shakes the planet. Within seconds, the feeling intensifies, as if the world were suddenly furious at the battles taking place on its surface. Even Satan finds it difficult to right himself, and the others stumble and flop around, trying to maintain their footing during the upheaval.

Phoebe loses her footing and gets thrown back and forth, crying out in alarm. Samantha manages to catch her by the wrist, but even the succubus stumbles and trips.

"What the Devil is going on?!" Satan bellows. "Black Queen! Are you responsible for this cataclysm?!"

Blaarjiim growls. "No. Your damn minions must be causing it. What are they doing?"

Jason, still exhausted despite all of the healing, coughs out a word. "**Stabilize!**"

Immediately, the local area ceases its shaking, though the surrounding planet doesn't. The sudden stop disorients everyone at once, causing all five humans and demons to take a tumble.

Satan quickly rights himself with his Vectors, and the others follow, though it takes Phoebe several moments. He launches himself into the air, grabs the cliff-edge, and pulls himself up to see. He freezes at

the top and stares in stunned silence.

"What is it? What's going on?" Belial asks.

"No... no no no..." Satan mutters to himself as a demon of absurd size emerges from the bowels of the planet. "He didn't... he wouldn't..."

It only takes a moment for Satan to regain his bearings. He launches himself at the ground and Belial yelps in fright as he stops right in front of her.

"Lilia. We must take our leave. Diablo has transformed."

Samantha stares at him in disbelief. "What? Transformed?! But- but I thought he promised-!"

Satan reaches forward, grabs her arm forcefully and pulls her close. "We may have our differences, but I love you, Lilia. I won't let you die to his rampage. I'll take us far, far away from here. Then we'll-"

"Not so fast." Blaarjiim's voice rings out in the din. "You're not going anywhere, coward. If your demon leaders have transformed, then you will go and fight them. Assist Arthur. Tear them apart."

"What! No! I refuse!" Satan whirls in rage to face Blaarjiim. "Never again! The last time Diablo transformed, he slew millions of angels and demons! He's unstoppable! I damn-near died myself!"

"It sounds like you have experience fighting him. Perfect. Do it anyway. That's an order." Blaarjiim's eyes turn black for a moment, and Satan releases Belial, falling to the ground as blinding pain wracks his mind.

"Ahh! Nnn! C-curse you! I can't battle the Archdemon! He's too powerful!"

"You couldn't defeat the mortal, either. It seems you can't do much of anything," Blaarjiim says.

The sky starts to glow red like the morning sun. In the distance, the sound of a massive footstep shakes the continent.

Blaarjiim smiles. "Hop to it, slave."

"I... I won't forget this. I'll end you!" Satan snarls viciously and pulls himself to a standing position. Forcing himself to endure the mental pain, he turns to Samantha. "Get out of here, Lilia. Flee. Don't cast your life away. None have the power to defeat Diablo as he is now."

Samantha, despite her anger at Satan from earlier, stares at him longingly. "S-Satan... don't... don't die. Take care! Use your powers! You prepared to battle him in case he ever turned again."

Satan gnashes his teeth. "No matter what... I'll survive. And when I return, I'll rip this worthless Witch-"

"Go!" Blaarjiim bellows. His amplified voice drives Satan's mental pain to eleven.

Without another word, Satan gnashes his teeth, leaps away, and climbs the crater.

Blaarjiim smiles, his expression tainting Amelia's beautiful face. "Ah, now that the loathsome weakling has left... I will return to business. Jason Hiro... your soul is already mine, as is Satan's; you just don't know it yet. Submit peacefully, and this won't hurt."

Jason clutches his chest armor, wincing as a stabbing pain bubbles in his chest. *My broken bones haven't fully mended yet. Satan beat nearly all of the energy out of me.*

"D-demon-lady. Take Phoebe and go. I can't fight if I'm protecting both of you."

"Jason, don't!" Phoebe pulls herself to her feet and stands between him and Blaarjiim. "You're too weak! We'll stay and help you!"

The Wordsmith ignores her plea and turns to the succubus. "Please. Protect Phoebe... no matter what."

Samantha glances at the top of the crater, where Satan fled, then back to Jason and Phoebe. "Okay. I won't be gone long, Hero. I owe this bitch a beatdown. Satan may not be the greatest man... but he's mine. She took him from me."

Jason nods. "Go."

The succubus ignores Phoebe's pleas, grabs her, and clears the top of the crater in one jump.

"Jason! Nooo!" Phoebe cries. She watches as the gap between herself and the crater multiplies instantly. Belial leaps skyward, her powerful Demon Emperor body giving her unparalleled agility. The inertia from the ascent makes Phoebe's head swoon.

A minute later, she blinks. Samantha comes to a stop a few miles away.

"Where are we?"

"You're safe now. Look. Over there..."

Samantha points in the distance. When Phoebe follows her finger, she gasps.

"What in the name of Heaven..."

Samantha shivers. "Diablo. It's... it's his Archdemon Form. I wouldn't worry about Jason. We're all doomed now."

Part 048: The Ultimate Battle; The Archdemon Awakens!

[Recommended Listening](#)

Arthur and the Balrog cease their battle and turn to gape as a massive, monstrous claw erupts from Polaris's bowels. A hand, the size of a small office building, grabs the ground and lifts.

Awe gives way to horror. Arthur, having never seen such a monstrosity in all his years, begins to shake. Despite his soulless vessel, terror floods his mind.

Impossible... impossible... what ungodly fiend could ever reach such a height...?!

Another limb bursts from the ground, and another, and another. Four huge, clawed arms spread out. Fire and thunder arc from every pore of the Archdemon's body. Diablo flings himself out of the ground with the force of a volcano and thrusts himself into the sky.

His legs, now a mass of one hundred writhing tentacles, beat and batter the landscape around him. Each whip-like tentacle ends in a mouth of razor-sharp teeth, ready to devour beings smaller than the Archdemon in one gulp, transforming them into a puddle of flesh. The Archdemon finishes rising and towers over the specks below him, standing well over five-hundred-feet tall.

Diablo's head, an eyeless aberration, twists and tilts around, as if trying to perceive something unseen. Two massive, curved horns, each over fifty-feet tall, sprout from his skull, as do thousands of spines that cover his body.

"BAAAEELLL!"

The Archdemon bellows with a volume that rattles the eardrums of everyone nearby.

The Balrog, a tiny, insignificant demon compared to his master, howls in delight. "BIG BOSS! YOU ALIVE! ME WORRIED! ME THINK-"

"SILEEEENCE!" The supermassive demon lunges one of its clawed palms down and snatches the tiny Balrog up, hoisting the Duke of Pain high into the sky. **"That human tore me apart, and all you did was watch!! WORTHLESS BASTAAAARD!"**

"BOSS! NO HURT! ME SORRY! ME-"

The Archdemon inhales for a moment, then begins to vomit a fire ten times hotter than what the Balrog spit before, blasting Bael's body with the heat of the sun. Bael writhes and squirms in his master's grip before the temperature makes him pass out and go limp.

Diablo pauses his fiery assault to lift the Duke into the sky. Then, he slams Bael's tiny body into the ground with enough force to shatter the continental plates. Somewhere, on the other side of the planet, an earthquake rips apart several mountains.

Again and again, the Archdemon pounds the Balrog into the dirt. Finally, he flings Bael into the horizon like a baseball. Bael flies over a hundred miles, his body careening helplessly as he sails toward the planet's surface below.

When Bael lands, he crashes into Polaris's crust with the force of a small tactical nuke, blowing away everything in his path and eradicating all life for several miles around.

* * *

Diablo turns his unbridled rage to the other specks below him. One glowing white form catches his attention.

"ARTHUUUR!! You won't live to see another day!!"

The Archdemon's tentacles lash out, spin around, and pound the ground where the Hero-King stands. Arthur instantly raises two fingers to his temples and begins transmitting left and right, up and down, all in an effort to evade the Archdemon's attacks. Diablo's transformation more than rivals that of Gabriel, the legendary Archangel whose ultimate ability would only allow him to fight on par with the Archdemon.

Arthur transmits to the Archdemon's chest and adheres to Diablo's body with the power of Holy Magic, then quickly modifies his Warhammer into a ten-foot spear of light. Arthur uses all of his strength to jam the spear deep into the goliath's chest. Then, he activates a pulse of Holy Energy, surging his mana deep into the demon's body.

"You have no power here, HERO!! I'm immune to your so-called Holy Magic!" Three tentacles pounce from the ground and lunge at Arthur, but he increases his Crusader Aura to its maximum level and deflects them without turning back.

Somewhere nearby, Satan trembles in fear. He rushes away from the pit where his mate and the Hero-boy prepare to battle the Black Queen.

Damn you, Blaarjiim! I have to fight Diablo for the second time in my life, only now, I have no backup at all! This time, I'm going to die for good!

Satan comes to a stop and clutches his head. Despite his protests, Blaarjiim's orders force him to obey. Still, he has autonomy over *how* he will fight back. His eyes follow the Hero-King dashing all around the Archdemon, stabbing and jabbing here and there.

It's at this moment that a face bubbles up from the ground. "Massster Sssatan! Diablo... he'sss... changed! What manner of devilry isss thisss?"

Satan glances down at the ethereal Duke. "Mephisto! Diablo's Archdemon form means the end-times have arrived. He's unstoppable. It took the combined power of the Archangels, myself, and every demon and angel in Heaven to suppress his power long enough for him to deplete his energy and transform into his base form. After he did, though, he went comatose for a hundred years. If we're lucky, the same thing will happen again."

The Devil swallows. "If."

Mephisto hisses. "Isss he truly that powerful? If ssso, then... we mussst flee! Let him rampage and desstroy the land! We care little for thisss world!"

"If only it were that simple," Satan snarls. He glances back at Blaarjiim's crater. "The Black Queen has ordered me to fight Diablo. I have no choice!"

A thunderous *boom* blows away every cloud in the sky. Diablo discharges a concentrated stream of fire at Arthur. It misses and instead lasers into the distance, where it obliterates a mountain and sends millions of tons of debris careening into the atmosphere.

Mephisto glances at Satan, then whirls to face the Archdemon. "Ssslow down Diablo assss long assss you can. I have a ssspecial tool for jussst thisss sssituation. Leave it to me."

Satan eyes the King of the Undead for several moments. "I don't care how many servants you have. He'll erase them all. Far be it for me to order a demon to flee, tail tucked between his legs, but... leave. Take Belial and Bael, and go. There's nothing you can do here."

Mephisto raps his fingers together. "I've been sssaving thisss for agesss, massster Sssatan. Asss your greatessst pupil, I will impresss you. I will earn the possition of Firssst Emperor with thisss feat. At the leassst, I pray you will ressspect me for defeating Diablo."

Satan eyes the young demon for a few seconds before shaking his head. "I've always regarded you with high esteem, Mephisto. If it weren't for you, we'd never have defeated the humans and angels, all those millennia ago."

The Devil turns to stare at Diablo's Archdemon form. "Alright. If you think you can defeat him, don't hold back. Unleash everything you have. Show me how you've grown."

He turns his back on the necromancer and runs toward the Archdemon, leaving the Duke of Mist by himself.

Mephisto's gaze hardens. "Fear not, massster Sssatan. After thisss, nobody will quessstion my powerssss ever again."

"My bag! I dropped it!" Phoebe panics and turns away from the Archdemon toward the crater where Jason faces off against the corrupted Amelia. "We have to go back! Oh my god! I'm an idiot! I shouldn't have-"

Samantha pats Phoebe's back gently. "Calm down, Phoebe. A bag hardly matters. Look at me. Will you be okay? If anything happens to you-"

"I'm fine, Sammy! But my bag, it's-" Phoebe is interrupted when the firey Archdemon lights up the night like a miniature sun. His dreadful *roar* of rage tugs at her attention for a moment. "Never mind. You have to help Jason. He's weak. He can't fight the Black Witch, not as he is now!"

"I know. I'm going back. Stay hidden. The battles currently unfolding are beyond your abilities."

Samantha pauses for a moment, then kisses Phoebe's forehead. Phoebe stares at her in surprise, but the succubus dashes back to the crater without another word.

* * *

Inside the crater, Blaarjiim licks his lips. "Make your move, Hero."

Jason nods. "If you and Amelia chose the path of evil, then I'll do what I must. You can't have my ability." Jason aims his palm at the shadowy woman, pausing for a second as a rush of emotions floods his mind.

Amelia... I'm sorry.

"FIRE!!"

A wave of holy magic erupts from his palm and races toward the Black Queen. However, it misses at the last moment. Blaarjiim leaps into the air, and the energy surge smashes against the side of the crater behind him.

Blaarjiim sends a wave of darkness from himself down into the ground, and a second later, hundreds of shadow-lances leap up, stabbing Achilles' armor all over, as well as Jason's arms and legs. The sudden attack stuns the hero as they pierce not bone and flesh, but his mana instead.

Sucking the power from Jason's body, Blaarjiim lands right next to the youth and grabs him by the neck, slamming him against the side of the crater.

"How foolish! You sent away your two allies, and now you haven't the strength to resist!"

Jason tries to raise his arm, but slumps in Blaarjiim's grasp. His energy drains into Blaarjiim's shadow-lances.

Blaarjiim begins punching and pounding Jason, battering the divine armor with all of his strength. Eventually, Achilles's armor and Orion's Belt explode into light, leaving only the Boots of Hermes. Blaarjiim's dark magic tears those off, leaving the Hero defenseless. All Jason wears is his tattered underwear and a torn green T-shirt.

"And now, Hero, you become mine." Blaarjiim presses his hand against Jason's face.

Samantha's voice echoes from the top of the crater. "Not so fast, Witch! I'm still here!"

"Oh?" Blaarjiim immediately diverts his attention, ignores the boy, and drops Jason's limp body to the ground. "So you've returned already? A succubus against the King of Darkness. You should know, I have no qualms about beating a woman senseless. Making the Second Emperor my servant in addition to the First should prove useful."

"I'm nobody's servant," Samantha mutters. She hops into the pit and begins to morph, unleashing her True Succubus form for the second time in an hour.

Blaarjiim crosses his arms and watches as Samantha's body shifts and twists. She grows a spiky tail, leathery wings, and replaces her soft hands with razor-sharp claws.

"You're foolish to transform in front of me. Luckily for you, I am a principled fighter. Beating you in your weakest state would be unsatisfying. The power flooding my veins aches for a challenge."

Samantha finishes morphing and immediately jumps forward, swinging her clawed hand at Blaarjiim. The Dark God leaps to the side and laughs. "You're so slow that I could dodge you in my sleep! You can't even-"

He stops mid-sentence as Belial's talons pound the side of the crater, shake the ground, and sending a flood of rock flying thanks to her Herculean strength.

Immediately, Blaarjiim's attitude changes. *Belial is slower than me, true, but her power is fearsome. I will end this before she lands a hit on me.*

Spears of darkness bolt out from Blaarjiim's aperture and race toward the succubus. Belial dodges them with ease. She darts between the gaps in the spear's attacks and leaps backward, retreating from the dark god's range.

Blaarjiim retracts his dark energy. "You're like a snake, slithering between the gaps in my attacks. I commend your battle prowess, but it won't be enough to save you."

Belial flicks her eyes to Jason, who lies on the ground next to Phoebe's bag, barely conscious. "Yeah, yeah, save it. I've heard more than my fair share of big, bad, evil speeches from goons like you."

Belial rushes toward Blaarjiim. The two of them continue trading blows, and the Second Emperor's succubus form transforms her from a decent opponent to one with lethal power and precision. While Satan and Arthur unleash a hail of attacks on their Archdemon enemy in the distance, Belial's enhanced speed and power drive Blaarjiim back again and again.

Belial swings her claws toward Blaarjiim's head, and even when the dark god dodges, she still draws blood. One of Belial's claws cuts Blaarjiim's chest, spraying blood all over the dirt.

"Gurk! I'll finish you off! As soon as one of my tendrils hits, you'll-!"

"Too bad they wooooon't~!" Samantha cackles, cutting him off. She pushes Blaarjiim back against a wall, then slaps him, sending Amelia's corrupted form flying to the side.

"Uwah!" Blaarjiim slams against the crater with a resounding *thud* and coughs up blood. One of his ribs jams through his chest. "C-curses..."

"I don't like killing," Belial hisses, rage building in her eyes. "But you took my husband from me. A thousand deaths would be too good for you!"

The succubus raises her claws to land the killing blow, but Blaarjiim raises his voice.

"You fool! If you love Satan, then you should be careful! If you kill me, he will die as well!"

Belial hesitates. Her arm lingers in the air for a split-second. "Y-you're lying."

"Try me."

"RAAAH!" She swings her talons at the dark god, but out of nowhere, a blast of fire slams into the side of her head, catching her off-guard.

Belial flicks her gaze around. "Who did that?!"

"I did," Beelzebub replies from atop the crater.

Belial sweeps her gaze toward him, only to freeze in place.

Beelzebub's right arm wraps around Phoebe's neck. She slumps listlessly in his arms, unable to fight back. "You wouldn't believe who I spotted while I was flying around! Why, you dumped this poor, defenseless human off behind a rock and left her there! How wonderful it is that I showed up to save this insect from all the scary *monsters* running around!"

The Baron of Flames cackles gleefully. "Hahahaha! I can hardly believe it! The Hero who humiliated me, his fiance, the woman who pounded me to a pulp in Hero City, and the woman who enslaved my master as well! I owe every one of you a blood debt!"

Belial turns white in the face. "Leave Phoebe out of this! She's innocent!"

Blaarjiim sneers. *Foolish woman. Belial forgot about me.*

With a quick motion of Amelia's hands, Blaarjiim unleashes the full power of his tendrils, spiking fifty energy-sapping spears of darkness through every point in Belial's body.

Shik-shik!

Belial gasps. "Ahh!"

The succubus stumbles forward, unable to retaliate. "Eugh... you... you..."

She flops to the ground and writhes for a moment, then goes still as Blaarjiim's magic does its work. Belial's eyes slowly turn toward Blaarjiim. "C-cow... coward..."

"Only a fool turns her back on an enemy," The Dark God replies.

He lashes out and kicks her limp body with brutal force, sending her sprawling over to the other side of the crater, where she lands near Jason. Her succubus form reverts, causing her wings and claws to retract as she falls unconscious.

Beelzebub smirks. He drops Phoebe off the ledge. Her body spins and rolls, bouncing off fifty feet of hardened dirt until she hits the ground with a sickening *crunch*. She lands only a short distance away from Belial, but her badly broken arms and legs reveal her arrival at death's door.

"Three down, one to go," The Baron of Flames says.

Blaarjiim cracks his neck. "Oh, do you wish to fight me as well? I drained all the energy in the Second Emperor's body. I'm ready for action again. I suppose a pipsqueak like you will do for a weak servant. Maybe you could fetch the water for my queen's bath, or serve as a footstool when she's tired."

Fire erupts from every pore on Beelzebub's body. "The Hell I will!!"

"What chance do you have, imbecile? I'm immune to fire. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that I'm your worst opponent!"

Beelzebub raises his palm toward Blaarjiim. "We will see."

I'm pathetic. I'm weak.

How long have I hovered at the edge of life and death, already? I couldn't beat Satan. I didn't stand a chance against Amelia. Some Hero I turned out to be.

I thought when Phoebe showed up, everything was going to work out. Seeing her face filled me with life.

My eyes vacantly follow her body falling off a cliff. The woman who cared for me during my paralysis slams into the ground and falls silent.

The succubus demon girl... she's down too.

We've lost.

Amelia said she would reap my soul and turn me into a servant, just as she did with Satan. Maybe I deserve that.

I failed in every conceivable way one could. I never had a chance in the first place.

Today is the greatest failure of my life.

My eyes drift to the side, away from Phoebe. It hurts to see her lying in that position. Her arms and legs are bent unnaturally. *Why, Phoebe? Why did you have to come? I didn't want you here. This place... it's awful. You're too kind for the perils of war.*

Eventually, my gaze settles on a bag. Ah, it's Phoebe's shoulder-purse. The one she always carries. It seems brighter than usual. Almost as if it's glowing...

All alone.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, a voice whispers.

No, Jason. You are not alone. I have always been here for you. You merely had to listen.

My eyes widen.

H-Hoarhiim?

Part 049: Hoarhiim's Awakening, A Sacred Dawn

[Recommended Listening](#)

"ARTHUR!! Stand still for two seconds, you little rat!"

Diablo pounds his chest and limbs like an angry gorilla. He repeatedly tries to slap the tiny light form dashing around his body, occasionally stabbing and jabbing the Archdemon with spears of light.

At one point, Arthur pauses for a moment and stands still, allowing Diablo to swat at him. When one of the Emperor's claws races at the Hero-King, Arthur jams a spear into the Archdemon's belly, then forms a chain of light and a second spear, attaching the two weapons.

Just as Diablo's attack is about to hit, Arthur impales the Archdemon's palm and transmits away, chaining it to Diablo's gut.

Diablo screams in anger as he tugs and pulls, trying to free his limb. **"Coward! Pest! I'll crush you flat!!"**

Arthur reappears a mile away inside a small depression in the ground. He evaluates the damage he's dealing and immediately calculates that his offense is insufficient.

I require a new weapon.

With Dellfingler out of commission, Arthur sweeps the battlefield with his piercing gaze. A single sword lying near a crater catches his eye.

Catherine.

Arthur raises his hand and uses the power of holy magic to call the weapon to him. Despite the immense distance, the sword rattles and shakes for a few moments. Then, it leaps into the air and spins like an enraged scythe. Catherine flies across two miles of plains within a few seconds and strikes the flat of Arthur's palm. Arthur wraps his fingers around the blade, examining it for a moment to determine its power level.

Seconds later, something unexpected happens. Arthur staggers as a new voice appears in his mind.

Hero. New Hero? Not the Wordsmith. Someone else? An empty soul. I am Joan of Arc. Who are you...?

Arthur tries to shake the fog from his mind. Joan speaks to him. *Fear not, warrior of virtue. Thou lack a soul, so I shall use thy body. Let us smite our enemies on this battlefield with our shared divinity.*

Arthur's eyes shift silently. His body trembles as his soulless vessel tries futilely to resist Catherine's power.

The Sword From Heaven shimmers with divine light. Eventually, a brilliant light transfers through Arthur's palm, arm, and chest. Once it reaches his brain, it takes over and engulfs his mind.

Moments later, Arthur jumps to his feet. His stance changes. The King's mind vanishes, replaced by Joan's consciousness.

Joan swivels Arthur's body around and evaluates the battlefield in an instant. "Darkness blankets this land. A servant of evil taller than mountains stands beside his master, the one known as Satan and Devil. Which foe shall I send to an eternal slumber first?"

Across the rising and falling plains, Satan crouches low and stares at Diablo as the enraged Archdemon yanks and tugs at the chain binding his palm to his gut.

Oh, Diablo. Why did you have to transform? I'll have to use attacks I once deemed too dangerous for my health simply to slow you down.

Satan quickly takes inventory of his souls. *Ten thousand, one hundred and sixty-one. I can refill my energy to its maximum at the cost of one soul each, or expend several souls at once to temporarily increase my cap. However... my most potent magic will require more than a thousand souls worth of energy to use a single time.*

Satan bites his lip. *Damn! I wish I could take Lilia away from here and flee! I don't want to waste valuable souls attacking my ally. There must be a way out of this fight.*

Diablo's tentacles slam the planet repeatedly like a hurricane of destruction. **"Graaah! How dare you snare my arm! I'll make you pay, Hero! YOU'LL PAAAAY!"**

A light bulb brightens in Satan's mind. *Of course! If Diablo is defeated and the Black Queen gives me no new orders, I'll be free to do as I please! Blaarjiim didn't specify that I had to return to him once I killed the Archdemon, so I won't!*

Satan pauses and blinks. He watches Arthur's bright body begin running across the battlefield again, but for some reason, the Hero-King moves much more slowly. He doesn't transmit around as he did before. Given the darkness of night shrouding the planet, his body, glowing with Holy Energy, draws Diablo's attention.

"Aha! The coward shows himself! I won't let you get close this time!"

Diablo sends a flurry of tentacles out, biting at the pinprick of light with feverish intensity. However, Joan of Arc tosses her sword out and uses her advanced control of Catherine to transform it into a whirling buzzsaw. The blade lunges to and fro hungrily, spinning around the massive appendages and severing them two and three at a time.

Metric tons of flesh slam into Polaris's soil. Diablo recoils in pain as ten of his lower limbs vanish. **"Gaaah! You worthless human!"**

Joan ignores him, recalling her sword and diving underground before he can launch a counter-attack. She burrows furiously, using her powers of earth manipulation to tear through rock and stone at nearly the same speed as she can run.

Arthur, thy powers are formidable. Thy divine energy appears limitless. It shines as bright as the sun. How can one mortal hold such overwhelming reserves? With our powers combined, we shall slay

this monstrosity.

Joan lifts her head as she rushes forward. *The beast rises above me. Soon, he shall sense my approach. The time to strike is now!*

She bursts from the dirt and activates Arthur's spears of light, an ability she once held. Rapidly, Joan summons and hurls a dozen of the partisans into the ground, keeping her eye on the hungry maws of Diablo's tentacles as they lunge at her. She finishes within seconds and forms more chained spears to attach to the ones buried in the earth.

A demon tied down and unable to fight shan't pose any more of a threat than a field hare caught in a trap!

Diablo lunges his remaining three limbs down to grab the Hero, and she uses Arthur's powers of light manipulation to send out the remaining chained spears, lancing through the Archdemon's hands and binding them.

Diablo bellows in rage. **"Damn you!! Arthur! Your tricks are pissing me off!!"**

Joan dives back underground and burrows over two hundred feet below the planet's surface, then uses Arthur's light manipulation to pull the holy chains with tremendous force, yanking the Archdemon against the earth and onto his belly.

All the while, Satan watches silently.

Is this... Arthur? Up until now, he never demonstrated this much tactical prowess. I find it hard to believe a single Hero is taking on the Archdemon and... and winning!

Diablo's rage subsides as the Third Emperor scowls at his sudden predicament. The five-hundred-foot-tall demon cocks his head left and right, thinking about how to escape the Hero's snares.

Joan emerges from the ground, another spear held at the ready, and rears back to hurl it into the Archdemon's skull.

Suddenly, all of Joan's plans flip upside-down.

Diablo inhales, creating a micro-monsoon as hurricane-force winds suck into his mouth. With one mighty exhale, the demon blasts the surface in front of his face with the full force of his fiery rage. Polaris shakes violently, throwing Joan and Satan around like pizza dough in the hands of a practiced chef. The resulting explosion boils back up from the planet's interior, destroying the chains bound in the dirt and blowing out a massive crater under the Archdemon.

The ejection shoots the Emperor several hundred feet into the sky. He lands with a *WHOOMPH* half a mile away, his forty remaining tentacles absorbing the brunt of the impact.

Joan lands on her back and jumps to her feet immediately. *Mon dieu! This brute is neither slow nor stupid as I first imagined. No matter the era, evil grows without the forces of justice to oppose it.*

Satan, still standing over a mile away, nods. *Arthur can't stop Diablo, then. Soon, my old friend will begin unleashing his full rage. The madness in his mind has scarcely emerged.*

"Satan!" A female voice makes the Devil jump. He turns around to see Lilia running toward him. "I'm here to help!"

Despite his beautiful mate arriving to see him, Satan shakes his head. "Dammit, Lilia! I told you! You are no use against Diablo. Leave, save yourself. I'm going to unleash the Genesis Flood."

The Second Emperor slows to a stop beside him. "What? B-but you said the energy requirement was..."

"Aye, Lilia. It will cost me at least a thousand souls. However, I'm planning to spend more than two thousand. The more souls I burn, the more powerful my magic. You should get to high ground."

Satan starts to turn away, but pauses. "Weren't you going to fight the Black Queen?"

An odd look appears in her eyes. "I was, but I lost. The one fighting her now is... the Wordsmith... but something is very different about him. There's an uncanny look in his eyes."

"Ah." Satan turns back to the Archdemon. "Well, I'm going to unleash my magic now. If you must stay by my side, then assume your Succubus form and prepare to fly. You'll need-"

"I can't." Lilia rubs her back. "I lost to the Black Queen after transforming again. I can barely use any magic, let alone attempt a third transformation."

Satan sighs. "Devils. Fine. After I activate the spell, I'll take you somewhere safe. We can watch the destruction from a distance."

"Satan."

Belial speaks again, but this time, she lowers her voice to a whisper.

"Hm? What's the matter?" Satan asks.

"I... I just want you to know how much I love you. I stayed faithful all this time. I never once looked at another man."

Satan lowers his eyes.

"You're a good woman, Lilia. You deserve better than me. I thought about what you said. You're right. I've always been a murderous psychopath. I got my just desserts when the Black Queen took my soul. After all the souls I devoured, I ended up swallowed by the one who created me. In a way, you could call it poetic justice."

"There is no justice in death," Belial murmurs. "If we get out of this together... I want you to come with me and leave all of this behind. Forget the battles and the strife. Stay by my side, and let us enjoy eternity together."

Satan closes his eyes.

"I'll do what I can, toots. I'll do anything for you."

He turns to face Belial. A smile creeps onto his face.

"And for what it's worth... I'm sorry I left you alone. You deserved better."

Belial blushes. "I'll forgive you, but only if we make it out of here alive."

"Haha!" Satan laughs. "I ain't gonna let Deebs kill us. Come on! We ain't got a moment to waste."

"Alright."

Minutes before.

Once again, Hoarhiim's figure appears in my mind as a vaguely human-shaped apparition of light.

"Jason. We share a life bond. My orb is not far. Reach out and place it in your hand. I can help you, but only if you trust me."

I try to lift my head a fraction of an inch, but fail.

I... can't. Everything hurts. I don't have any strength left.

"You do!" Hoarhiim beckons with both hands. "Come, Jason! Don't let my brother win! Blaarjiim consumed tens of millions of human souls! I know you won't let his evil plans succeed!"

My eyelids droop.

I've already failed. I lost to Satan, and I lost to Blaarjiim. I couldn't convince Amelia to abandon the path of corruption. I'm no Hero. I'm a failure.

Hoarhiim's soft gaze hardens. "Imbecile! When did the Jason I knew become a weakling who gave up because the going got a little too tough?! Look at Phoebe! She's lying facedown in the dirt, breathing her last, weak gasps of air! After everything Phoebe did for you, will you let her die? Will you let her become the victim of a psychopath?!"

My eyes close for a moment. *I don't want that... but... I have nothing left. No juice. No batteries. I can't even speak a word to heal her. I'll die soon when Amelia consumes my soul. I deserve-*

"Shut up!" Hoarhiim grows uncharacteristically angry. "I won't tolerate another word! Use your telekinesis, boy! Just a little pull, that's all it takes! Yank out my orb! Touch it with a single finger! Do that, and earn your title! Become the Hero you were meant to be!"

Something about Hoarhiim's anger stirs an emotion deep in my chest. Sadness. Anguish.

Beelzebub told me that he attacked the Core. I was terrified at the possibility that he killed Phoebe, yet here she is, alive, but dying. I nearly failed her once, but I can't do that a second time.

Hoarhiim is right. I won't fail her.

I won't fail anyone ever again!

Pain surges through my mind like electricity. The sounds of Beelzebub and Blaarjiim fighting echo through the canyon, lighting up my surroundings. Hoarhiim's orb glows in his bag like a flare in the darkness.

Reaching out with my mind, I pant like a dog as I expend what minuscule amount of energy I have left to tug at Hoarhiim's orb, but it rests deep inside Phoebe's bag, buried under an avalanche of minor trinkets and gadgets.

Releasing my pull, I gulp air desperately. *Hoarhiim! I can't budge it! What do I do?!*

Hoarhiim makes a pulling motion with his arms. "Flip the bag on its side toward you. My orb should fall out and roll downhill toward your hand."

Gears click into place. *Of course! I should have thought of that!*

This time, I aim for the whole bag, tugging and pulling and tugging some more. Beelzebub yelps in pain, and Blaarjiim bellows angrily as the two of them trade more blows.

Suddenly, my heart skips a beat. Something I was doing must have worked. Phoebe's bag tilts onto its side, and Hoarhiim's orb drops out, hits the ground without bouncing, and rolls toward my outstretched palm.

The orb comes to a stop a few inches away, and I use all my remaining strength to stretch toward it.

Come on, worthless body! Work! WORK!!!!

My finger touches the orb.

A tingle shoots down my arm.

Power engulfs my body. The orb sucks into my palm as if I'd suddenly gained control over magnetism.

"Well done, Hero," Hoarhiim says with a smile. "It's time to pay my brother back in full."

Beelzebub snaps his fire whip out, lashing it left and right as he attempts to slice through Blaarjiim's shadow shielding. The dark god avoids the majority of the attacks and only deflects when he must. He desperately tries to find a moment to jump up to the lip of the crater.

"Attacking from the high ground... the mark of a coward! Allow me to meet you on equal terms, and you won't live to see the sunrise!"

Beelzebub jerks his whip forward again, then blasts several heat bullets from his finger, battering the female human around. "Not cowardice, but intelligence. Only a fool gives his enemy a fair shake. All is fair when it comes to war, little insect."

Blaarjiim gnashes his teeth and shoots a shadow spike at the demon, but Beelzebub dodges it, letting the dark weapon fly past him harmlessly. The Baron of Flames counters with a concentrated blast of fire, turning the heat up as high as possible as he attempts to cook the dark god inside his shadow-shell.

Unnoticed by them, the Hero makes contact with the orb of light. Hoarhiim's energy instantly floods Jason's body. Jason's wounds regenerate as Hoarhiim yanks the globe into his palm.

Inhaling, the deity of light jumps to his feet and pats his chest.

I made it. Barely.

Hoarhiim trots over to Phoebe and flips her onto her back. "**Heal.**"

Life returns to her body, and Phoebe gasps for air. Hoarhiim stares at her while her broken arm fixes itself. "**Examine.**"

The power of Wordsmithing fills Hoarhiim's mind with tens of trillions of pieces of information regarding Phoebe's physical well-being. Hoarhiim concentrates and stares into the woman's brain, then

nods.

As I suspected. Phoebe suffered a head injury at some point. I wondered why she was having such trouble standing and walking. Beelzebub likely didn't knock her unconscious. She must have passed out due to this skull fracture. Not to mention the blood building up in her parietal lobe.

Phoebe's eyes flutter open. "J-Ja...son? What-? Where-?"

"Not Jason. I am Hoarhiim." The deity of light glances over at the two dueling combatants who will surely notice him at any moment. "It is dangerous for you to stay. I will send you somewhere safe."

"Wait!" Phoebe squeaks the interruption out, even as she follows Hoarhiim's gaze to the battle between Beelzebub and Blaarjiim. "If you're Hoarhiim, then where's Jason? Aren't you, well, him?"

"I have taken over Jason's body temporarily, in much the same way as my brother has taken over Amelia's. Jason will be quite alright. I apologize for rushing you, but, **Return.**"

Ignoring Phoebe's protests, the deity of light transfers her body to the Labyrinth in the blink of an eye.

With Phoebe gone, Hoarhiim Wordsmiths again, directing his spell at the Second Emperor. "**Heal. Regenerate.**"

The succubus coughs and shakes her head as life returns to her soul. "Huh? What's going on?"

"I have healed you. Take your leave. Return to your kind. I must deal with my brother now."

The sound of Beelzebub yelping in pain as one of Blaarjiim's shadow lances strikes his arm jars Belial awake. She jerks her head over to stare at the battle in progress. "He... what? I don't understand."

"There's no time to explain. Leave." Hoarhiim uses his telekinesis to hurl the succubus up toward the top of the pit. She yelps in surprise, but rights herself in midair and lands on her hands and feet with catlike grace.

Beelzebub and Amelia look over, having heard Belial's shriek. Blaarjiim's jaw drops. "What? The mortal is moving again?"

Blaarjiim's eyes instantly gravitate to the glowing orb held in Jason's hands. "Hoarhiim? You damned, meddling-!"

Beelzebub, unsure of what's going on, glances warily at the Second Emperor as she pivots to face him. "The devil-whore is up as well? I thought all three were down for the count!"

Belial curls up her lip. "You thought wrong. And I owe you for what you did to Phoebe."

Hoarhiim holds up his left palm. "Belial, leave. I will handle both of-

"Don't worry. It'll only take me a minute to pound this little man into pulp." Belial smashes her fist into her palm. "*Someone* didn't learn their lesson the first time around."

Blaarjiim, having already stopped caring about his squabble with the Baron of Flames, pivots to face his brother. "Hoarhiim! It has been many ages since both of us took physical form at the same time! Let the two demons hash out their differences."

"Agreed," Hoarhiim replies. "I warn you, brother... we share a deep bond. The lives you've stolen increased my power as much as they did yours. I tasted their pain within my soul. Our family ties end here and now."

"Haha, I wouldn't have it any other way," Blaarjiim sneers. "Calling a weak-minded simpleton like you a brother has always been my greatest shame."

The two orb-beings and their vessels slowly walk toward each other until they're only twenty feet apart.

Meanwhile, Belial jumps at Beelzebub, shrugs off his fire, and delivers a bone-snapping punch to his chest. He slams into the dirt and grass brutally, breaking many more bones in the process.

Before Beelzebub can regenerate his body, Belial grabs him by his leg and lifts him overhead, then hurls him into the ground with enough force to embed him five feet deep. The planet trembles from the impact.

Unsatisfied with the damage she dealt, Belial stretches her arm out and hurls punches into the shallow pit, smashing the suited demon repeatedly until she's broken every bone in his body ten times over. Belial smacks her palms together and dusts herself off.

"I hope you've learned your lesson this time, regenerating Phoenix-boy."

Sleep takes Beelzebub. The darkness of the shallow grave surrounds him, and Belial leaves.

Hoarhiim stares at his brother stonily, seeing past the soft face of Amelia deep into the corrupted evil of Blaarjiim's mind.

"You are vile. An aberration of nature. An all-consuming plague that annihilates everything it touches. Because of your lust for power, I have been forced to taste the misery of millions. I felt each of their screams as your so-called 'queen' tore them apart one-by-one. The boy does not understand how utterly irredeemable the two of you are... but I do. I know the depths to which you've sunk."

"Spare me your platitudes," Blaarjiim sneers. "Empty words from a vacuous mind. You play the arbiter of justice, the pure and holy crusader of light... but you are as willing to kill as I. The only difference is that you add qualifiers to make yourself feel warm and fuzzy. Murder is only acceptable if the one you must kill is evil. Isn't that right, brother?"

Hoarhiim sighs and opens his free palm. A tower-shield of light appears in his grasp, one that he can summon with a mere thought. "I target those who commit atrocities. You attack wantonly. That is the difference between us. Ready yourself, Blaarjiim. I will unleash the full power of the Wordsmith upon you."

Blaarjiim forms a club of darkness in his free hand, one made of skulls and bones. "I wonder, Hoarhiim... which of us will win?"

"Destiny has already decided," Hoarhiim murmurs.

In the sky overhead, the first traces of sunlight begin to emerge.

Morning is coming.

Part 050: Unstoppable Force, Immovable Object

"Wait! If you're Hoarhiim, then where's Jason? Aren't you... well, him?"

Jason, or rather, *not* Jason, shakes his head. "I have taken over the Hero's body temporarily, in much the same way as my brother has taken over Amelia's. Jason will be quite alright. I apologize for rushing you, but, **Return.**"

Suddenly, the world shifts around me. The crater and night sky vanishes, replaced by a vacuum of darkness. Air rushes against my face with a *whoomph*.

I drop half a foot onto my rear, impacting my butt with a dull crack.

Thud.

"Aah!"

An involuntary yelp of fright leaves my mouth. A moment later, I whip my head around to scan my surroundings. I desperately try and figure out where I've traveled, but the power of Wordsmithing disorients me, making it difficult to ascertain where I've landed. The teleportation felt like stepping through the portal to the Core, only so much more sudden and unexpected that I didn't even have time to-

Splash.

What was that?

The dim lighting makes my skin crawl. Somehow, without understanding why, I suddenly realize Hoarhiim must have teleported me inside the Labyrinth. A dim blue glow fills the room, its light so faint that I can barely make anything out. However, the sound of splashing water is unmistakable.

A woman's voice speaks out, chilling my blood. "Hey, Millie, did you hear something? Over there, in the corner."

My vision rapidly adjusts to the dim light. I finally realize that I'm in a vast open room, one with a great lake of water in its center. The lake is illuminated from the bottom, possibly by glowstones or some other natural light source. And in the water... several women are splashing around.

Wait! I know who they are! Mermaids. Why am I near a bunch of mermaids? What in Heaven's name...?

One of them glides over and pops out of the water to squint at me. She's lovely, with long red hair and an innocent face. "Oh! It's a human woman! What's a human doing here?"

"Ahh!" One of the other mermaids screams in fear. "An adventurer! She's here to kill us!"

Suddenly, a massive shape sitting in front of the pool jumps up. I hadn't noticed it until just now, but my eyes instantly lock onto it and realize with a start that it's a tremendous, armored being. And... judging by the horns...

A demon!

The demon turns to face me. Its horrible blood-red eyes glow in the dark.

"Human. You do not belong."

His voice, like a lion chewing on steel, sends pangs of terror into my heart. *Where did Hoarhiim send me?! Oh god! I'm right in the heart of enemy territory!!*

The demon takes two lumbering steps in my direction, clearing the thirty-foot gap with frightening speed.

"W-wait! I'm not here to hurt anyone! I'm sorry! I don't know how I got here!"

The demon pauses and towers over me. I crawl back against the wall and cower as the monstrous mountain of steel raises its hand to strike me.

"Not belong. Leave."

I nod rapidly. "I... I will! I don't know where I am, though! Oh god, p-please don't hurt me!"

The steel-clad behemoth, a mass of twisting metal and skulls and bones that all taper off into a horned helmet, lowers his gaze slightly to examine my body.

He says nothing for a few long moments. One of the mermaids swims closer and climbs onto dry land. "Oh, Barbatos! Look at her! She's petrified! You told me you'd never frighten an innocent woman!"

The demon, apparently named Barbatos, turns to look at the mermaid. "Did not mean to scare. No intruders allowed."

The mermaid woman flutters her eyes bashfully. "You have to be more careful, sweetie! Nobody understands how kind you are! They only see your scary black armor." She turns to look at me. "Barbatos wouldn't harm a fly! I'm Millie. What's your name?"

I try desperately to swallow my terror. "Ahm, it's... Fuh- Phoebe. I'm Phoebe."

"Human?"

"Yes... I didn't mean to trespass. I-I'm sorry!"

Millie slides a little closer, showing no fear toward me. Her leg-fins slap on the ground to give her a little push. "Our alcove is a bit out of the way, cutie. How does a random woman 'accidentally' end up here?"

Okay, Phoebe. Play it safe. Millie may look sweet and innocent, but she's a monster with a tremendous demon protector. Don't give out too much information.

"Someone teleported me here. I was right in the middle of a battle."

Millie nods consolingly. "I see. With who?"

Dang. I can't just tell a lie...

"Um. My fiance. He's a human too, but he has magic."

The mermaid cocks her head. "A human with magic? Huh. One of those appeared here not long ago. Within the last day or so, come to think of it."

"Was he a young guy? Blonde hair?"

She nods excitedly. "Oh, yes! That's the one! I don't remember his name, though. We all gossiped about him for quite a while. Very handsome. Barbatos scared him off. Our protector is very, erm, *protective*."

I glance up at the towering wall of metal. "You don't say."

Barbatos kneels slightly, making himself smaller and maybe a little less terrifying, though his horrible red eyes unnerve me, even more so when they're at my eye level.

"Battle. Where?"

I frown. "A planet, but I don't know which one. A bunch of demons were fighting each other, as was my fiance."

Millie rolls her eyes. "Demons are always trying to tear each other apart. Barbatos would never join in on that barbarism. You look tired, Phoebe. Why not come and dip your feet in the water? You don't have a weapon, but we won't hurt you. We're not like the sirens."

I pause, remembering my demonology. *Sirens use their beautiful voices to trap and devour men, while mermaids are peaceful creatures that subsist on seaweed and plants. Among monsters, they're considered the weakest, and as such, typically use their beauty to coerce males of other species to protect them.*

They're probably the gentlest of all monsters.

A moment later, I shake my head. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I need to return to my fellow humans at the Labyrinth Core. I'd hate to ask for favors... but I don't know where I am. Could someone give me directions?"

Millie's face contorts into confusion, and she glances back at the other mermaids, then shrugs and meets my gaze again. "Ahh... sorry. You're a long distance from the Core, Phoebe. We're near the outskirts of the Labyrinth, mostly so other monsters won't bother us. This area is considered the 'tropical zone.' To return to the Core, you'd have at least a month's hard travel ahead of you."

Seeing the dismay on my face, Millie quickly adds, "Oh! But Barbatos can take you back! He can teleport around and do all sorts of things! Why, he's one of the most powerful Dukes in the Labyrinth!"

My heart trembles. I gaze at the mountain of metal. "You're a Duke?"

Millie answers in Barbatos's stead. "Mhm! But as I said, don't you worry. Barbatos will take you back to your people. Won't you, sweetie?" The mermaid lightly rests her hand on the Duke's leg.

Several moments pass. Barbatos, still crouched down, tilts his head up to the ceiling, then returns his eyes to me. "Battle. Who? What demons?"

I frown. "Sorry. I don't know exactly. I know Satan was there... and Belial. A bunch of other demons were fighting in the distance. I never saw who they were."

The Duke nods. "Acceptable. War. Unpleasant. No winners. Only death."

Millie lowers her head and sighs. "Barbatos lost his brother. He doesn't like war. Neither do we."

"I lost many friends recently too," I admit. "I thought you were scary at first, Mister Barbatos, but you don't seem all that bad, now. Sorry for judging you."

The demon closes his eyes. Without his burning gaze fixated on me, his armor suddenly appears more like a prison encasing his body than an armored suit intended for combat.

"Return you. Stop battle. Prevent death. Come with me, now."

The Demon Duke opens his eyes again and stands, rising to his full height. He begins making motions with his hands, and a portal appears. He beckons for me to step through, and on the other side, I spot several familiar faces turning to gape in horror at the demon on the other side of the portal.

"Go."

I nod quickly. "Um, thank you. Miss Mermaid, and Mister Duke as well."

Millie waves nonchalantly. "Oh, geez, Phoebe, you're a cutie! Drop by anytime!"

Hoarhiim holds up his shield of light and waits for Blaarjiim to slam his bone-club against it. Blaarjiim eagerly rises to the task, sending out spines of darkness to attack his brother while also jumping at the deity of light and trying to score a hit.

"How very like you to always play defense!" Blaarjiim knocks the shield aside for a split-second, and the spines of darkness impale his brother, draining Hoarhiim's energy into the Dark God.

Suddenly, Blaarjiim stumbles forward and collapses to one knee as nausea hits him and Amelia in waves. "Gah! W-what is this... this pain?!"

Hoarhiim grunts as the spines drain his energy. "Our orbs are two sides of the same coin. The energy you stole from millions of souls served to energize me, just as your attacks against me will drain you. Fighting me is like striking a mirror. You'll only hurt yourself in the end, and the woman you care for."

Blaarjiim coughs and retracts his spines. "Dirty tricks. I should have known you'd-"

"No tricks," Hoarhiim calmly replies, cutting his brother off midsentence. "Only truth. Neither of us can win this battle. Either we both give up, or we both die. Which will you choose?"

Diablo unleashes a roar of pain in the distance. Blaarjiim scowls at Hoarhiim. "If I kill you, I can take the power of Wordsmithing for myself. I can spread my darkness to every corner of the galaxy!"

"If you kill me, you will die. You won't spread *anything, anywhere*," Hoarhiim replies. "I do not wish to die, Blaarjiim, but you leave me little choice. The atrocities you've committed make me wish I'd done something sooner to stamp out our existence from this universe. We don't belong. Even compared to demons and angels, we've always been aberrations of nature."

"Clichés! All you ever spout are proverbs and axioms!" Blaarjiim gnashes his teeth. "War and death are inevitable, Hoarhiim. There is no such thing as peace. Life without death has no meaning. Many must die

so that the rest may learn to enjoy living."

"You would prefer that all die so you can rule over a galaxy of corpses," Hoarhiim retorts. "Although you only care about Amelia, you aren't content to live with her in peace and solitude. You always hunger for more. Never satisfied; always anxious."

Hoarhiim slams his orb into Jason's chest, sending a wave of pain from himself into Blaarjiim. The Dark God leans over for a moment and clutches his heart, then regains his breath.

Blaarjiim's anger lessens. "Fine. I can't defeat you without killing myself. So what? What do you expect to prove?"

Hoarhiim's shining white eyes narrow. "I did not awaken for no purpose, brother. While I rested, I came to a decision. I realized that the only way to stop your terror from consuming all sentient life would be for both of us to die."

"A suicide mission?" Blaarjiim slaps his club against his orb. "You plan to play the martyr? You can't kill us both! I know you haven't the heart! After all, you love Amelia too."

Hoarhiim winces. "I do. I always have. It is a shame that she listened to your counsel instead of mine. The pain she felt, the loneliness... she only ever wished to bring back her closest companion, but you took advantage of her sorrow. You turned her into a monster and led her down the path of agony."

"My queen was always a monster! A beautiful, unhinged agent of malice!" Blaarjiim roars, while pacing like a wild animal. "I brought out her rage. I turned it into a fire, one I stoked with logs of fury. You merely rested at her waist and chastised her every move! When Joan attacked, you watched as my queen was sealed away! You *liked it*."

"I didn't," Hoarhiim replies. "It hurt me as much as you. Nevertheless, we won't ease our conflict with words. The time for debate is long past. I'm sorry, brother. It seems, in the end, that both of us will be the loser in our struggle."

The demonic battle outside the crater intensifies, and the ground begins to rumble. Hoarhiim lowers his shield and raises his palm. "**Bind.**"

Blaarjiim's hands wrench around behind his back, and shackles form on them. A moment later, similar restraints bind his feet together. Blaarjiim trips and falls to the ground. With his weapon still in hand, he struggles and writhes trying to break apart his bindings, but fails.

"I can't get them off! What are these made of?!"

Blaarjiim stares silently for a few moments. "This boy has no understanding yet of the power that Wordsmithing holds... but I do. You do. Ponder my word of power and what effect I may have used."

Blaarjiim stops struggling and stares at the Deity of Light. "You imagined unbreakable metal in your mind, Something that would take incredible force to shatter."

"Yes."

"Gahh!" Blaarjiim struggles again and gasps for breath as he wrenches and rolls, trying desperately to pull the shackles apart. "Binding me in a pit so that you can kill me without a fight! I always knew you

were a coward!"

"I haven't the heart to kill you directly," Hoarhiim says. Turning away from his brother, he uses telekinesis to hover out of the pit. In the far distance, toward the ocean, Hoarhiim spots that which causes the earthquake.

"A valiant effort, Satan," The Deity of Light whispers. "But it will ultimately prove fruitless."

Joan forms spears of light in each hand as she rushes the Archdemon. Catherine spins in midair, controlled via Joan's mental link. The sword slices and cuts any of Diablo's tentacles that threaten the Hero, and Joan, in turn, closes the distance between herself and the demon.

"Filthy Hero! I hate you! I hate everything about you!" Diablo concentrates power in his chest as the Hero leaps into the air. Before Joan can hurl her spears, Diablo unleashes a wave of mana, turning the air around him into a whirlpool of lightning and fire. The typhoon yanks Joan to the side. She yelps in surprise as the intense heat and electrical power pour into her body. Bolts of lightning batter her from all directions, tossing her around like a ragdoll.

Joan tries to right herself in midair, but one of Diablo's tentacles bites onto her leg, making the Hero scream in pain. "Ahh! Gahhh!"

Catherine lunges out to slice the demonic appendage off, but the tentacle bites down hard, severing flesh and bone. When Catherine finally cuts the maw in half, it's already too late.

Joan impacts the ground with the force of a meteor; her descent speed increased to ludicrous levels thanks to the power of Diablo's mana storm. She trembles and grits her teeth as blood pours from her severed leg. Diablo spots her body and licks his lips. **"Finally, Arthur! You little worm! Die!"**

Across the field, Satan and Belial arrive at the top of a small mountain. Satan drops into a sitting position and folds his legs together, then inhales deeply. "I'm going to regret this, but I have to stop Diablo. At any cost."

Belial sits behind him, wrapping her arms around his chest. "Do your best, love. Bring the pain. Show everyone why you possess the title of First Emperor."

Without another word, Satan begins folding his hands together into a series of increasingly intricate shapes.

Hound. Tiger. Bat. Golem. Trigram. Sword. Lion.

I took this spell from a Titan King many millennia ago. I've never had to use it, but it's unparalleled when it comes to battlefield devastation. I can lay waste to an entire planet with it, so long as I have mana to spare.

Satan trembles as souls begin to vanish from his body, flooding his aperture with godlike amounts of demonic energy. Ten times his maximum capacity, a hundred times, a thousand times...

Higher and higher, Satan's mana surges upward until he exhausts his five-thousandth soul. The Devil trembles. The level of energy in his body nauseates him.

Genesis Flood.

Satan unleashes the full might of his power, summoning all the water from the ocean, fifty miles to the west. As if an earthquake of magnitude eleven had just struck, the coastal tides retreat, then surge inland. A five-hundred-foot wall of water rises from the coast and rushes eastward, devouring everything in its path: trees, boulders, even small mountains.

Belial's eyes widen as she stares at the incoming tsunami. "Seven Hells..."

Satan concentrates all of his willpower and yanks the ocean toward himself. Diablo, about to smite the Hero with a finishing blow, turns around to stare at the oncoming wall of destruction.

"No! NOOOOO!!!"

Part 051: Mephisto's Ultimate Weapon, Amelia's Best Friend Returns

[Recommended Listening](#)

"A valiant effort, Satan," Hoarhiim whispers. "But ultimately, your struggle will prove fruitless."

A five-hundred-foot wall of water tears across the landscape at over three hundred miles an hour. Hoarhiim glances down at his brother, Blaarjiim, whose limbs are bound together. Blaarjiim rolls around in the crater below, struggling to break free.

"This will not kill you, Blaarjiim... but it will hurt."

Blaarjiim's eyes widen. "Don't leave me here! Hoarhiim! Even for you, this is-"

"Think of it as retribution for the lives you've ended. A little pain won't be the end of you."

"Hoarhiim? HOARHIIM!!"

The Deity of Light ignores his brother's screams of anguish and continues levitating into the sky as the seawall approaches. A flash of movement catches Hoarhiim's eye. An armored figure appears, yanks Beelzebub out of the hole Belial pummeled him into and vanishes, stepping through a portal.

Oh? It seems Barbatos understood after all.

Below Hoarhiim, the seawater rips up the land, floods into the crater, and crushes Blaarjiim and Amelia with unrelenting force. Blaarjiim's screams cut off halfway as tens of millions of gallons of seawater pulverizes him without restraint.

* * *

Elsewhere, Joan writhes in agony on the ground as her leg heals, but it regenerates far too slowly for her to save herself from the wall of water. She tucks her body into the fetal position, making herself as small as possible. Catherine stabs into the ground before her, erecting a powerful barrier of Holy Magic around the Hero.

Diablo inhales mightily and unleashes a blast of fire at the oncoming seawall, hoping to slow it down or make it split around him, but the oncoming sea swallows his flames without remorse. At the last second, he jams every tentacle into the ground, intending to root himself like an anchor. Instead, the millions of tons of water tear him away when the sea impacts, yanking him off his feet and pulling him across the plains. The Archdemon tumbles and swirls inside the vortex, spinning his body around several times per second as he's dragged and beaten across the land. Eventually, a massive mountain appears before the Emperor, and he slams into it with enough force to generate a localized earthquake.

Diablo's four main limbs dig into the mountainside as he struggles to hold on for dear life. The seawater pounds him for several minutes, yanking his immense body left and right with the force of a hundred hurricanes.

Eventually, the height of the water begins to dip. Time passes, and it lowers from five-hundred-feet to four hundred, three hundred, and so on.

Half an hour later, the Third Emperor sags to the mud, his strength sapped dry. The tsunami reduces to the depth of a puddle compared to the colossal Archdemon, but Diablo loses his ability to move.

Hoarhiim, flying high in the sky, frowns. *Perhaps I was wrong. The Archdemon has nearly been beaten already. I might not have to stop him myself.*

The Deity of Light glances at the crater below, now filled with water. His Brother is nowhere to be seen.

"Locate."

Hoarhiim's mind travels across the battlefield, toward the direction the water surged. Twenty miles away, sprawled against a rock, Amelia's body lies in a ditch, Blaarjiim's orb gone from her grasp.

"Teleport."

Hoarhiim transmits the thirty miles in an instant, arriving at Amelia's bound, soaking wet body. Her dress is waterlogged beyond belief, and she gasps for breath, occasionally coughing up fluid as she sputters and wheezes.

"Ja... Jas...on."

Hoarhiim shakes his head. "I am not Jason. Not right now. Where is Blaarjiim?"

Amelia lays still, her wrists still bound behind her back by Hoarhiim's unbreakable shackles.

"G-gone. Kah! Where am... I?"

Hoarhiim aims his palm at her. **"Release."**

The shackles vanish, and Hoarhiim takes a knee. "Were you working with my brother?"

Amelia's body trembles. She shivers from the cold. "S-s-suh- sorry... I d-didn't want t-to wake up... but he entered my mind. It was awful."

"I did something similar with Jason. I assumed you and Blaarjiim were at odds with each other."

Slowly, Amelia presses her back against the rock. She mops her hair out of her face. "What happened? I don't... I don't know how I got here. Why am I s-soaking wet?"

"Dry. Warm." Hoarhiim aims two words of power at the young woman, and immediately her condition improves. "It seems my brother intended to take over your mind and force you to kill Jason. His desire for power is insatiable."

Amelia pulls herself up and dusts her now-dry clothes off. "I... I see. Um. Hoarhiim?"

"Yes?"

Amelia fiddles with her fingers for a moment.

"Is, err, Jason in there? Is he listening?"

"No. The Hero is dormant, and will stay so until I've finished."

"Okay." Amelia splashes her feet in the muddy ground absentmindedly. "Look... I've done some bad things."

"To say the least," Hoarhiim replies blandly.

"I killed many people. So many that I couldn't count them if I wanted to."

"Blaarjiim's influence, no doubt."

She nods. "Yes, but I was complicit. He didn't force me to become a mass-murderer."

Surprisingly, Hoarhiim smiles. "Agreed. You did that much of your own volition."

Amelia turns away to gaze at the massive Archdemon slowly standing up in the distance. "Jason said I could be forgiven. He said I c-could redeem myself... in spite of what I've-"

"Jason is wrong," Hoarhiim says, cutting her off. "You cannot be redeemed. Once evil, always evil."

Amelia blinks in surprise. "Huh? Wait, I thought you were..."

"Going to forgive you? No. I cannot offer repentance for your life of evil, and neither can Jason. No act of goodness can redeem you for murdering tens of millions. No matter how many you save, no matter how many you heal, no matter how often you pray to gods that no longer exist... you are utterly irredeemable."

Amelia leans back to gaze up at the man towering over her. "H...Hoarhiim? What are you saying? After drying me off, helping me up, and freeing me from those shackles, I thought you'd-"

"You thought wrong. I only freed you because you don't pose a threat to me." Hoarhiim turns away from Amelia and the Archdemon and stares into the distance, his piercing gaze fixating on his brother's orb, over a mile away. Even in the shadow of the rising sun, the light-consuming void of Blaarjiim's orb is unmistakable. "I've made my decision. No apology you make will sway my soul. Go to my brother and-"

Suddenly, from the direction of the Archdemon, a horrible monstrous scream erupts in the din. Something alien and decidedly *non-demon* howls in rage. Amelia and Hoarhiim both cease their conversation for a moment and gasp.

A gigantic dragon, made entirely of bone and decomposed skin, bursts from the ground and leaps at Diablo. The winged beast, nearly as big as the Third Emperor, rips and tears at Diablo viciously. Atop the dragon rides Mephisto, Duke of Mist.

"Kss! Behold! My mossst prized possesssion! The corpsse of the lassst dragon! The ultimate weapon to ssslay my enemiesss!"

The undead dragon unleashes a torrent of acrid green balefire upon the Archdemon, draconic breath which melts flesh and bone alike. Diablo roars in rage and blocks the gout of flame with one of his arms. The limb melts into a puddle before him, proving useless against the dragon's breath. Diablo howls angrily and jumps at the dragon.

Diablo grapples the undead behemoth with his three remaining arms, while simultaneously lashing his tentacles out and biting at the monster, only to yank back and hiss in pain as mouthfuls of acid dissolve their teeth away. The tentacles wilt and melt apart, flopping to the ground uselessly.

Amelia's eyes widen. "No! I... I can't believe it!"

Hoarhiim, too, stares in shock. "The last dragon?! But... that means..."

Mephisto cackles gleefully. "Keh keh keh! A torrent of sssoulsss, leap forth from the heart of thisss world!"

Immediately, hundreds of ghouls burst from underground, climbing and covering the Archdemon from head to toe, biting and clawing at him. Diablo releases one arm to try and tear them off, but doing so only frees the dragon's head.

"GRRRROOOOAAARR!"

The undead colossus rears its head back and unloads a torrent of acid-breath right into Diablo's chest. Diablo wheezes and gasps, trying to block the breath, but as his chest melts away, his grip weakens. The ghouls band together and pull him to the ground.

For one moment, Amelia sits beside Hoarhiim. In the next, she vanishes. The young woman explodes in rage and charges toward the battle of the goliaths.

"Leviathan..." Hoarhiim mutters. "You... you were defiled... by the grave-robber. Such sin. Such misery."

Atop the mountains, Satan and Belial watch in stunned silence as Mephisto's ultimate trump card tears Diablo to shreds.

"Mephisto... he..." Satan grapples for words as the Archdemon begins to revert to his base form, all of his energy exhausted. "When did Mephisto get hold of the last dragon?"

Belial shakes her head slowly. "I never knew. I don't think anyone did."

Satan's hand clenches into a fist. "If he wields Leviathan's power, then Mephisto's might exceeds that of any mere Duke. He may even rank higher than an Emperor. Higher than me!"

"Leviathan appears soulless," Belial points out. "He's undead. Perhaps his powers aren't as great as they once were."

Satan calms down noticeably as he spots Amelia racing toward Mephisto. "Hm. Yes. Perhaps. *She's* quite angry, though."

"Can you blame her?" Belial murmurs. "I doubt she'll be able to rationalize away her pain."

* * *

In the fields below, Joan's leg finally finishes regenerating. She pats Catherine and offers a prayer to the gods. "I thank thee for saving my life... sister."

The Hero jumps to her feet, shifting her weight uncomfortably as she adjusts to the regrown limb. Immediately, her eyes lock onto Amelia. "Unbelievable. A mighty demon, a tainted dragon, and the Black Witch. I shan't watch idly as three vile enemies of God battle amongst one another."

It doesn't escape the Hero's notice that the Archdemon is beginning to revert. Indeed, as Joan starts energizing her weapon, she checks him off in her mind, turning her attention instead to the Black Witch.

"The Dragon will have to wait."

Satan leaps off the mountain, racing down it at faster than free-fall speeds as his Eight vectors simultaneously carry Belial and yank into the cliffs, pulling him with incredible force.

He comes to a screeching halt and lowers Belial to the ground.

Suddenly, Barbatos appears in front of them and steps out from a Labyrinth portal. The Duke of Steel stands imposingly over the former First Emperor. "Satan. We leave. No more fighting."

Satan pauses and frowns. "What? Are you giving me an order?"

"Enough death. Enough sorrow. Agares is dead. Beelzebub unconscious. Diablo defeated. The battle is over."

Satan clenches his teeth and looks past Barbatos as Amelia leaps atop the dragon and begins swinging wildly at Mephisto. "Now, you listen here--"

WHAM

Barbatos moves instantly, so fast Satan can't react. A punch with the force of a tactical nuke pounds the First Emperor back against the mountainside, blowing out several metric tons of rock and stone in all directions. Satan instantly dies. His broken corpse rests lifelessly against the cliff's face, sending horror coursing through Belial's veins.

The Duke of Steel points at Belial. "Go. Portal. Take Satan."

Belial stares at him for several seconds with a dumbstruck look etched into every corner of her face. She nods. "Uh... uh huh..."

Barbatos turns away from her without another word and plods across the field to Diablo's shrunken body. The Third Emperor lies comatose in the mud. Mephisto's ghouls leave to focus their attention on the new threat.

Amelia rides the bucking dragon, swinging and punching at Mephisto and screaming incoherently. "I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL FUCKING TEAR YOU APART! HOW DARE YOU!!!"

Her attacks pass through his ghostly body over and over, and the cloaked demon cackles. "Keh keh keh! I merely reconstituted a dead corpse into something useful! You should be happy to see your friend one last time!"

Tears pour down Amelia's face as hundreds of ghouls begin climbing the dragon to jump and bite at her. Unlike before, however, her wrath boils like lava poured into a pot of water, igniting her latent powers. Thousands of shadow-javelins rush from her body in all directions as she continues to swing at Mephisto. Each partisan impales one ghoul after another. Her mind focuses on nothing but rage as she swings and kicks, yet still, the Duke of Mist stands and laughs maniacally.

Suddenly, a holy spear flies across the field, impaling Amelia's chest. The Black Witch stops mid-swing and gasps. A chain of light yanks her off the dragon with animalistic force.

Amelia sails hundreds of feet away and slams into the mucked-up ground with terrific power, blasting muddy dirt in every direction. She barely catches sight of a massive armored man as the man yanks on the

chain again, hurling her body into the air before slamming her into the ground repeatedly.

Mephisto cackles with glee. "Kekekeke! What deliciousss irony that the Black Witch'sss sssummoned warrior hasss turned againsst her!"

Amelia pants and tries to pull the spear of light from her chest. "Ar-Arthur! Stop! I order you to stop!"

The Hero stomps toward Amelia, grabs her by the throat, and lifts her into the air. "I am not Arthur."

The voice, Amelia realizes with a start, is all too familiar.

"J-Joan? No! Nooo!!!"

She tries to kick at the Hero, but Joan slams Amelia into the ground and summons spear after spear, rapidly impaling and stabbing the screaming Black Witch with righteous fury. "Enemy of God! Thy time to live is over! I will send thee to the realm of death wherefore thou belong!"

Amelia screams in terror. "Please!! Nooo!"

* * *

Across the plains, Hoarhiim looks away. Sorrow etches into his face. "Such pain. Such ruin. I will transform this planet into a resting place for the damned. I'm sorry, Jason. Amelia, no matter how you care for her, brought this fate upon herself. Perhaps... someday... you will forgive me."

Hoarhiim closes his eyes.

The sun appears over the horizon. Its rays of light warm the land, invigorate the soggy soil, and awaken the planet's creatures.

"That which gives this planet life shall become its reckoning," Hoarhiim mutters softly.

He aims his mind toward the distant sun, tens of millions of miles away. His mind travels across the blackness of space toward the lustrous star which gives the world energy and life.

"I curse this planet... all those who live on it... as well as myself... with death."

"SUPERNOVA!"

Part 052: Everything Into The Void

Joan impales Amelia's throat with a spear. Amelia gags and trembles, unable to speak. Holy energy courses through her body, hitting her with waves of blinding pain. Amelia opens her mouth to beg for mercy, but nothing comes out.

Joan closes her eyes. "In the days of Jesus Christ, son of God, we punished enemies of God with crucifixion. How fitting that you will perish in a manner befitting a sinner. Thy blood will water the land, freeing us from your wickedness. God will judge thee for all thy sins. In the name of the Father... the Son... and the Holy Ghost... I sentence thee to death. You shall be the first human I kill, and thusly, I condemn myself to the fires of Hell as well."

Amelia looks to the side slightly and stares at Hoarhiim.

No, please. Hoarhiim. Jason! Don't let her kill me! I'll be a good girl! I'll be good...

Hoarhiim's glowing eyes close. He speaks a word and vanishes.

Blaarjiim appears in Amelia's mind as little more than a hazy, indistinct face. "My... queen. I... failed you. I couldn't protect you. I even hurt you."

Amelia closes her eyes as Joan begins summoning holy energy to her palm.

Blaarjiim... help me! They took Levvy... they're hurting me! Jason left! Where are you? I can't see anything...

The sky brightens noticeably as the radiant energy from the exploding star approaches the planet.

"I'm too far away, my queen. I cannot aid you. If only I hadn't forced you to walk the path of darkness... perhaps..."

* * *

Mephisto watches silently as the Hero prepares to unleash Holy Energy upon the Black Witch's pinned body. "Pity. I wanted to desstroy her myssself."

"Mephisto." Barbatos's voice catches the Duke of Mist's attention. "Leave now. Danger approaches. Sky."

Without another word, Barbatos creates a portal and steps inside. Mephisto frowns and looks up into the air. Only now does he notice the increasing light in the sky far beyond how the sun might normally shine. "What? The ssstar? Did the Overlordsss...?! No! My dragon! I can't unsssummon it quickly enough!"

He glances at his giant winged beast and screams in rage. "Cursssesss! CURSSSESSS!"

Mephisto leaps into Barbatos's portal, and it seals shut behind him.

Joan ignores the demon and unleashes a holy blast of energy at Amelia, bombarding the Black Witch's body with agonizing pain. Before she can wipe the girl off the face of the planet, the undead dragon leaps

at the Hero and slams her into the ground with its powerful claws. The massive monster screams angrily and repeatedly pounds its spiked tail against the Hero's crusader aura.

"Gahhh! Fetid beast! Servant of the damned!" Joan struggles desperately to fight the dragon off, but its balefire tears apart her aura bit by bit, until, with one final attack, the dragon impales the Hero through her chest with one of its massive claws. Joan smacks at the claw uselessly, only to be rewarded with a terrible death as the dragon lurches its head down and tears her torso apart, chewing her into pulp.

Amelia, her body beaten and broken, stares at the dragon and smiles.

Levvy... you... saved me... in the end...

* * *

Hundreds of miles away, a single sword lies propped against a rock, having been washed away by the floodwaters only minutes earlier. Dellfingler coughs weakly. "Ah, shucks. I'm done for. So this is how it ends, eh? All alone in a muddy field. Oh well. There're worse ways to go."

Despite his pain, Dellfingler chuckles. "At least I made friends. It was a good life."

The sky burns away in an instant as the exploding star engulfs the planet in apocalyptic heat. The last thing every resident of the dead world sees is a light as bright as Creation itself.

Their souls scorch to ash, leaving nothing behind.

The remaining Council Members stand in a circle with three bodies in the center; those of Bael, Agares, and Diablo. The screams and cries of humans and imps at the River Styx go unnoticed by the leaders of demonkind.

Satan gasps for breath and clutches his chest. He scowls at Barbatos. "Bastard! How dare you strike your leader?! You've made a grave mistake, boy!"

Belial quickly holds him back. "Satan, Satan... please. Calm down. Barbatos would never do such a thing unless he thought it necessary."

Barbatos's imposing form stands over the comatose Diablo, lying in the center of the room beside Agares and Bael. Having traveled around, recovering those he could, Barbatos ignores Satan's raving.

"Enough war."

Satan bites off his anger with a hiss. "No matter your excuse, I won't forget this treachery. The Black Queen was within my grasp! All I had to do was strangle the life out of her, and I'd be free! Now what?! She can unsummon me at any moment! She-"

"Sssatan." Mephisto interrupts the First Emperor's ranting. "Ssshe iss no longer an issuse. You left before ssseeing what happened... but I did not. Arthur unleassshed hisss full might againsst her. Ssshe wasss powerless to ssstop him."

Mephisto continues. "Besssidesss... the Overlordsss mussst have intervened. Polarisss'sss ssstar... it detonated."

Satan gapes at the Duke of Mist. "What? It did?"

Barbatos shakes his head. "Not Overlords. Wordsmith. Hoarhiim."

A hush falls over the group.

Belial speaks next, feeling her heart palpitate. "Wait. If... if the sun is exploding, then... won't that kill the Black Queen?"

Someone coughs. Everyone turns their attention to Beelzebub as he strides up, eying Belial warily. The Baron of Flame's suit is nothing but tatters and rags, yet he struts proudly, as though he were adorned in kingly attire.

"She survived once. She might do so again. However, we believe she escaped the first time. If the sun is going to explode, then it's unlikely anyone, even her, could survive it."

Barbatos glares at the young demon. "She will die."

Belial taps Satan's shoulder hesitantly. "Love... if she dies, won't you as well?"

Satan scoffs. "Of course not! I have thousands of souls left! Once she's gone, I'm free. I will return to my position as First Emperor."

"But someone told me... they said that if Amelia died, you would too."

The First Emperor pauses and stares down at Diablo. "Unlikely. I don't know the powers of her magic, but--"

He pauses mid-sentence. "Wh-what?"

Mephisto cocks his head. "Emperor Sssatan?"

"This... this sensation... what is..."

Satan staggers backward. In the middle of the council, Agares' body starts disintegrating into ash. The effect isn't noticeable for a second or two, but within moments his body transforms from flesh and bone into something resembling both sand and rust, disappearing forever.

Belial's eyes widen. "No! Satan! You're going to..."

The First Emperor slumps forward and falls to the ground. His vectors go limp. Belial catches him just before he hits the Labyrinth's floor.

Satan wheezes and gasps as Belial stares at him in horror. "L-Lilia... Lilia... I was wrong... oh, Devils... I didn't know..."

She presses him against her breast. "I knew this would happen! No... I don't want to lose you a second time! You promised me you'd live! You promised me!!"

Tears erupt in Belial's eyes as she stares at Satan's paling face. His breath comes in ragged gasps. Soon his chest begins to melt away, just as Agares' did. "No... no... no..."

Satan exhales one last time, and his body fizzles into ash, scattering all over the floor. Belial shrieks in horror. "NOOOOO!"

Barbatos, Mephisto, and Beelzebub all stiffen and gaze in silence as they watch the hysterical woman frantically grab at their leader's ashes, doing anything she can to try and bring him back.

Mephisto's eyes darken. *Even I cannot ressstore one who hasss turned to dussst. Cursse you for an eternity, Black Witch. Even in death, you damn usss with your black magic.*

[Recommended Listening](#)

"Hoarhiim? Where are we?"

I ask the question automatically, once I realize that I'm no longer dreaming. Vague memories and emotions appear in my mind, but I can't tell fiction from reality.

The orb in my hand glows silently for a moment until Hoarhiim appears.

"Jason. We're back in the Labyrinth."

"Oh." I stare ahead silently, blinking twice as I notice something surprising. "I can see, again. With my eyes, I mean. What changed?"

Hoarhiim stares at me unsmilingly. "A lot did. Jason... Amelia was irredeemable, as was my brother. They nearly killed Phoebe and her succubus friend. I fought them off as best as I could."

All the memories come rushing back. My battle with Satan. Healing myself, only for Blaarjiim to tear me apart. Allowing Hoarhiim to take over.

"Wait, did Phoebe make it out? Where's Amelia? What's going on?!"

Hoarhiim holds up his hand. "We haven't much time left together, Jason. I need to tell you something important. Please listen carefully."

I nod dumbly, still wondering about Phoebe. "Okay. What is it? What do you mean we don't have much time left together?"

"I unleashed the power of Wordsmithing. You have yet to discover the majority of its applications, but I assure you, Wordsmithing is the most powerful magic that has ever existed. I forced the planet's sun to initiate a supernova. It will engulf the world within minutes."

My heart pounds. "You did?"

"Yes. My brother and I share the same well of power. If one of us dies, the other will as well. When the supernova hits... he will perish."

It doesn't take long for me to connect the dots. "So, you're going to die as well?"

Hoarhiim bows his head. "My brother and Amelia are evil, Jason. However, Amelia used to be a kindhearted girl. My brother tainted her soul over time. In return for taking their lives... giving up mine is a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

He continues. "There's more. I won't be around for much longer. The demons know about your Wordsmithing now. They will find ways to counteract it. Phoebe is safe, but won't stay that way for long.

You must master Wordsmithing and save humanity, Jason. You are the last Hero. If you die, the demons will rule the galaxy until the end of time."

"O... okay. I understand."

A pause follows. Hoarhiim clears his throat. "Ahh... the demons are not the only threat. There exists another entity you must beware. The Overlords. They're powerful beings who-"

Hoarhiim freezes for a moment and clutches his chest. "Ahhh! Gnuh- gah!"

"Hoarhiim? What's wrong?!"

The Deity of Light forces a smile. "It is done. M-my brother... is gone... as is Amelia. I'm sorry, Jason... I had... I had to... to stop them... no matter the-"

Hoarhiim's image freezes in my mind, almost as if someone had paused him mid-sentence.

"No..."

Hoarhiim's body boils away, and his face freezes into a look of agony.

"Hoarhiim... HOARHIIM?!"

His orb begins to shake and tremble in my grasp. Then, it heats up rapidly to a scalding temperature, forcing me to drop it. The moment it hits the floor, it pops like a balloon and dissolves into vapor.

The moment Hoarhiim's orb explodes, his face dissolves from my mind, vanishing from existence.

Silence follows.

I stare ahead blankly at the wall for several moments. Sinking to my knees, I mumble a word.
"Locate."

My word of power returns to me after mere moments, revealing nothing.

I can't find Amelia.

I can't find Hoarhiim.

They're all gone. Everyone is dead.

Now, I am truly, completely... alone.

Part 053: The Council Regroups, A New Hierarchy!

"Ohh... grahhh... my head hurts..." Bael mumbles and mutters, blinking his eyes open. The remaining members of the Demon Council, including Beelzebub, stand around Bael and stare at him silently. "Where am I? What happened?"

"Emperor Diablo wiped the floor with you," Mephisto hisses. "Sso much for the mighty *Balrog*."

Beelzebub crosses his arms and glares at the Undead King. "You're one to talk. You weren't doing anything for most of the battle, just skulking underground."

"My undead dragon sssaved usss from Diablo'sss wrath!" Mephisto retorts. "Meanwhile, Barbatosss pulled you out of a ditch."

"That he did," Belial remarks blandly. She usually might display rage or anger or even a smirk, but ever since Satan melted to ash in her arms an hour before, she's stood against a wall and stared into the maw of the River Styx.

Beelzebub doesn't reply. He merely glares at Belial for a moment, then averts his eyes.

Bael staggers to his feet and rubs his back. Suddenly, he spots Diablo's slumbering form beside him. "W-whoa! Boss?! What the heck?! I know he likes ta' sleep on the job, but damn!"

"He's not asleep," Belial murmurs. "He's comatose. When Diablo last assumed his Archdemon form, he didn't awaken for over a hundred years. The same will probably happen again."

"At such a terrible time," Beelzebub mutters. "Tch. The humans are growing in power, and this fool has to take a century-long nap."

Bael's dumbfounded expression melts away. A look of malice appears in his eyes. "Hey. Pup. Watch your fucking mouth. Diablo nearly died fighting the Black-Bitch's pet. We were battling King devil-damned Arthur. I bet you don't even know who that is."

Every face in the group turns to look at Beelzebub. He shrugs. "I do not."

Barbatos, ever the silent one, shifts his body, his metal grinding together with a sharp scraping sound. "Hero-King. Legendary."

"Yeah, what Tin-Can said," Bael replies, jerking his thumb toward Barbatos. "I remember the Ancient Times, back when Arthur walked the Earth. We once sent out three legions of demons to track him down. They never came back."

"Maybe he offered them a job," Beelzebub says sardonically. "Whatever. The point is Diablo is out of the game, and so is Agares."

A moment passes. Beelzebub clenches his fist and stares at it. "I killed my mentor during the battle. I always dreamed of overcoming him, but... not like that. Not with his body controlled by a filthy human."

Mephisto's smoldering eyes fixate on Beelzebub. "You defeated the Duke of Reptilesss? Impossible. He wasss one of the greatessst demon warriorsss of all time."

Bael rubs his back and grumbles to himself for a moment. "Hmph. You beat Agares, eh? Even if the Black Queen's magic sapped the old bat's power, that still ain't bad. Maybe what they say about you ain't true after all."

Beelzebub glares at the Duke of Pain. "What *do* they say about me?"

"It involves the size of your demonhood," Bael replies with a wink.

Beelzebub growls a curse under his breath. "Fat slob."

Barbatos uses the lull in conversation to speak up. "Wordsmith. Jason Hiro. Very powerful."

Mephisto clenches his fist. "I ssstill cannot fathom what happened. The flessshbag blew up a ssstar. Such power isss on par with the Overlordsss."

Bael blinks. "Uhh, come again? Wait, you mean that little kid? The boy who was fightin' Satan?"

Belial winces at the mention of her lover's name, but Bael doesn't notice. Beelzebub replies instead. "While you took a dirt nap, the Black Queen dueled me. I had her against the ropes until Belial interfered. After Belial launched a sneak attack and caught me off-guard, the Wordsmith-"

"It was a fair fight, not a sneak attack," Belial says, cutting Beelzebub off. "You don't need to lie to hide your insecurity. There wasn't a chance you could beat me, the Second Emperor, even if you tied both of my hands behind my back."

Beelzebub's teeth gnash together. "Why are you even here?! You betrayed the demons! It was you who guarded the humans at the Core when I attacked! You damned turncoat!"

Belial slowly licks her plump red lips. "I have my reasons. I refuse to allow wanton slaughter. Humans have suffered for long enough at the hands of demons."

"As have we at theirs!" Bael joins Beelzebub in facing down the temptress. "You left for ages, and then you popped back up only to cavort with Satan! You stinkin' whore! Where's your demon pride? Where's your sense of obligation to your people?!"

While fumes erupt from Bael's nose, Belial sighs. "I have none. I don't pick a side; I merely oppose war and violence in all its forms... especially against the weak."

"Well spoken," Barbatos mutters.

Bael ignores the Duke of Steel and makes a mouth flapping motion with his hands. "*Especially against the weak*. Listen to you. Weak. Useless. A dumb broad who cares so little about other demons she helps the enemy! I guess you've forgotten what the humans did to us during the Energy Wars, eh?"

"I didn't forget," Belial says, her voice almost a whisper. "But that was a thousand human generations ago. They don't deserve to suffer for the sins of their ancestors."

"Agree to disssagree," Mephisto interrupts, a note of caution in his voice. "Ceassse this bickering. We have more important mattersss that require dissscussssion."

Bael and Beelzebub glower at the succubus for several seconds before looking away. "Yeah? Like what?"

Mephisto's eyes swivel between Bael and Beelzebub for a moment. "Agaresss iss dead. Diablo iss incapacitated. Belial iss the lassst Emperor left, asside from the reclusssive Firsst."

Belial narrows her eyes at the ghostly apparition. "And?"

"We require a new Emperor... and a new Duke," Beelzebub says, finishing Mephisto's thoughts for him. He turns to Belial. "Unless you're planning to lead for once, *your highness*."

"Pass," Belial says, rolling her eyes. "I never asked for this job."

"Then it's settled," Beelzebub continues. "Bael, as the First Duke, will become the new Emperor. At least until Diablo awakens. I'll become a Duke to replace Agares, and-"

"Whoa whoa whoa, I'ma hafta stop you right there," Bael says, wagging his finger at the young demon. "You got two things wrong, kid. I ain't smart enough ta' lead. I ain't Emperor material. Someone else has gotta deal with that crap. The other thing is that you ain't gonna become a Duke just like that."

Beelzebub scowls. "I defeated Agares! That proves that I'm qualified to be a Duke!"

Barbato nods. "He did. I found Agares' body."

"And then it melted into dust. Just... just like Satan's..." Belial hiccups involuntarily. She looks away. "So much pain and death. It's always due to the greed of men."

"Save it for someone who cares," Bael replies. "Look, Beelzy, I'll level with you. We ain't letting some no-name punk who didn't even see the end of the Energy Wars into the ranks of the Dukes, understand? And as for the new Third Emperor..."

Bael slowly turns to stare at the crowd of demons. "Yikes. We got metal-mouth over here, never says a word. Boney-boy with his creepy ghouls, and the pup. Great selection."

"I defeated Diablo!" Mephisto lurches toward Bael. "If you won't assume the mantle of Emperor, then I will! My powersss stopped Diablo during hisss deadly rampage! You didn't lassst ten sssecondsss!"

A drop of drool creeps down Bael's mouth as the fat demon stares blankly at Mephisto. "Uh-huh. Great. I'm first Duke, so you ain't becoming Emperor unless you convince me otherwise." He pauses to look at Belial. "Or the wench, I suppose. Got anything to say? You *do* outrank me, technically."

She shakes her head. "Not especially. If you don't want to be Emperor, I don't blame you. Barbato?"

The Duke of Steel tilts his head toward the succubus, the metal grinding together unpleasantly as he does.

"No."

"Excellent. That leaves Mephisto and the scheming fox as your two candidates. Oh, wait, they're both schemers." Belial facepalms. "The future leader of demonkind will be one of two psychopaths. Devils save us-"

Click. Click. Click.

The sound of high heels echoing off the tiled ground around the River Styx catches everyone's attention. Belial pauses mid-sentence, and a look of despair appears on her face.

"Oh, no. Kill me."

A demure female voice breaks out in the din. "Tsk, tsk. I'll be happy to oblige, Belial. Present your neck, and I'll slit your throat post-haste."

Bael slurps up the drool leaking from his mouth, only to slobber even more aggressively. A moment later, a demoness strides up. Her pure white high heels and stockings are the first things to come into view as she rounds the corner.

The white satin covering her legs blends together elegantly with her luscious red skin and perfectly contoured body. While Belial's black fetishy-outfit leaves little to the imagination, the newcomer's white dress and gloves give her a prim and proper look, as if she were a demon princess awaiting her knight. Indeed, the only color she wears is white, to fashion herself uniformly, making her skin pop out wherever it appears.

The succubus doesn't raise her head from her palm as the new woman stops next to the group.

"Ose."

"Belial."

The newcomer, Ose, Baron of Infiltration, flips her long, white, butt-length hair back, adjusting her glasses a moment later. "Forgive me, boys, but I couldn't help overhearing your conversation."

"You weren't anywhere nearby," Beelzebub says, suspicion in his voice.

"Astral projection. I'm a woman of many talents." Ose smiles cutely at the confused man, only to glare at Belial. "Unlike the 'woman of many lovers' over there."

"Your jealousy reeks of desperation," Belial mutters. "Why are you here?"

"Why, to toss my ballot in for the position of Third Emperor, of course!"

Bael immediately straightens himself out. "Wha-? You? A woman? Look, Mephisto ain't the best-looking, but at least he's a Duke. I don't know what makes you think you're fit to lead, Ose, but-"

Ose slides a leg out from one of the slits going up both sides of her dress and presses her voluptuous body against Bael. "Oh, Bael! Surely you don't think just because I'm a woman I'm not qualified for the job! If Belial can be an Emperor, why not meee~?"

She bats her eyes like a butterfly at Bael, but he maintains his resistance. "Yeah, exactly. Look what happened the last time some broad took command."

Ose presses her finger against his chest for a moment, then pulls away. Immediately her attitude shifts, as if she were casually tossing aside a facade. "True enough. Using Belial as my example isn't something I *want* to do, anyway."

The ice in her voice could freeze a glass of water solid.

Mephisto rises to his full height of just over five feet to stare up at the beauty towering over him. She and Belial, being the same height, stand nearly a foot taller than the small demon.

"Ossse, I am the one who ssshould lead the demonssss. You are but a Baron, while I am a Duke."

Ose stares down at the Undead King icily. "I see. So, Mephisto, you plan to lead demonkind as the Emperor, then? Have you any strategies for the future?"

The Duke of Mist cocks his head curiously. "Hmm? I do not follow."

"The humans. I've been watching them. They're rapidly accelerating their technological growth. I watched the Wordsmith as he built a large-scale Replication factory. Do you know what that is?"

Every other demon shakes their heads at once.

"I thought not. It uses energy induction to power a hypo-compensator with dilithium supplements. This, in turn, folds space to create quantum inductions, forming matter from energy."

Bael nods slowly. The drool makes a roaring comeback. "Uhh... I don't get it."

"It makes big weapons that go *boom*," Ose says, smiling sweetly once again. "I watched with my projection as the Wordsmith unleashed his frightening powers against the lot of you. You haven't a clue what you're dealing with, but I do. I will make the perfect Emperor until Diablo awakens."

Beelzebub stares at Ose silently, unmoved by her beauty. "You're weak. I've already surpassed you in power. If you deserve to be Emperor, so do I."

Ose reaches up to adjust a red bow set against her white hair. Her smile melts away as she turns to face Beelzebub. "Have you not been listening, child? I am not stating that I *deserve* to be Emperor, but that I am the best choice. I am older than Mephisto and have fought in numerous wars against humanity. My mother ensured that I was the best equipped to fight humans as their technological limits increased. The only reason I am physically weak is due to the lack of a worthwhile enemy."

Bael rubs his chin thoughtfully. "Make Ose the new Emperor, huh? Well, rumors say you took down an entire Britannian command post all by yourself. That's how you got the nickname 'Ghost.' Still, I dunno. I'm not keen on having two women for Emperors."

Ose shakes her head. "It's more like one since only *one* of us is going to do her job. Isn't that right, Belial?"

The succubus throws her hands in the air. "Choose whomever you please. I tire of this nonsense. I'll be returning to the humans. Attack them at your peril."

Ose seethes for a moment as Belial starts to walk away. "Nothing worse than a traitor who cavorts with the enemy."

"Nothing worse than a hypocrite," Belial retorts, ignoring any further comments.

The Second Emperor trots away, her black high-heels clicking just as Ose's did. A minute later, she vanishes, leaving Ose alone with all the men.

Barbatos bows his head slightly. "Farewell."

Making a motion with his gauntlets, the Duke of Steel creates a portal to his mermaid lair and steps through, sealing it behind him. Before the portal seals, several mermaids cry his name out in excitement. "Ooooh! Barbatos is back! Yay!"

Afterward, only Bael, Mephisto, Beelzebub, and Ose remain, along with the comatose Diablo.

"Tch. Two backstabbers and a woman. The pickings for Third Emperor are mighty slim these days," Bael grumbles to himself.

"Well, Duke of Pain, there is... one other... one who you might consider a worthy Emperor." Ose bats her eyes innocently at Bael, but it takes him a moment to understand who she means.

"Gressil?! No! Devils, no! I'd sooner castrate myself than appoint that gross monster to lead all of demonkind."

Mephisto shudders visibly. "Even for a demon... he lovesss pain too much. I've never ssseen one who torturesss and maimsss like Gresssil does."

Beelzebub glances between the other three demons quizzically. "Gressil? I believe I've heard of him. Who is he? Why the violent reactions to his name?"

Bael grunts. "I'm the devil-damned Duke of Pain, and I like torment less than he does."

Ose waves her hand flippantly. "Gressil is supposedly the worst demon ever to live. The rumors are all lies."

"You take after your mother," Bael says. "I walked in on one of his victims once. I couldn't have had fun with what was left of her even if I tried."

"Every man has desires," Ose counters. "Gressil's are... more extreme than polite society would like. In any case, if Gressil is out of the count, then I say you promote me. I studied in human colleges for over two hundred years. I know their psychology, the way they think, how they build their machines, and things you can't imagine. I helped design the multiple-world concept for the chattel, and I created the machinery in the Core. It isn't enough to kill humans; you must break their spirit and overwhelm them with sorrow. You have to make them beg for the release of death."

Mephisto meets her gaze evenly. "You are kindred with Gresssil. Your effeminate body beliesss the sssinisster malice within."

"Perhaps," Ose concedes. "The difference is that Gressil tortures and maims for pleasure. For me, it's business. Nothing more, nothing less."

Bael sighs. "Haaah... fine. I'll allow you to become the new Emperor."

"Really? Yay!" Ose bursts with joy and jumps at Bael, hugging and kissing his cheek over and over. "Oh, Bael! You're such a sweetheart! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

Bael, seizing an opportunity, reaches down with one hand to cop a quick feel. "Heh, I'm always happy to please-"

A massive bolt of lightning arcs off Ose's posterior, knocking Bael's hand away and jolting his system for a moment.

Ose pulls away from the Duke of Pain. Her expression turns sour. "You just *had* to get grabby."

"Eh. It's in my blood," Bael says, shaking the numbness out of his palm.

Mephisto broods silently. *Cursssesss. I ussed the lassst dragon, my ultimate trump card, but it wasss all for nothing. Thisss worthlesss female ssstole the title of Emperor right from my grasssp!*

Several seconds later, Bael turns to Beelzebub. "You know what, pup? I've got an idea. Still wanna be a Duke?"

Beelzebub narrows his eyes. "I do. What do you propose?"

Bael looks away, kneels down, and picks up Diablo's hefty body. "A test. Meet me in the Slaughterseum in three days. If you show up, you can't leave until you pass or die."

"Why? What are you planning?"

Bael smirks. "You'll see. If you don't want to feel agony wrack your body, don't come. I won't blame you."

Beelzebub seethes. "You make me take a test but not... not this woman?! She'll be Emperor!"

"I already took a test," Ose replies. "The skillset an Emperor needs is very different from the one a Duke needs. Emperors lead. Dukes fight. That's the way it's always worked."

She pauses to poke at the cute little black horns on her head. "Speaking of which, I think I should take my fill of souls now, don't you, Bael? Sweetie?"

"Go for it," Bael grunts. He hefts Diablo onto his shoulder and winks at Beelzebub. "I'll be seeing you. Three days."

"Three days," Beelzebub echoes.

As the Duke of Pain and Baron of Flames part ways, Mephisto glares at the woman leaning down to dip her neatly trimmed nails into the River Styx.

You'll regret crosssing me, Ossse...

Author notes:

This is Ose's most recent design, wearing some sexy stuff.



This is Ose's most recent design, wearing her cute suit.



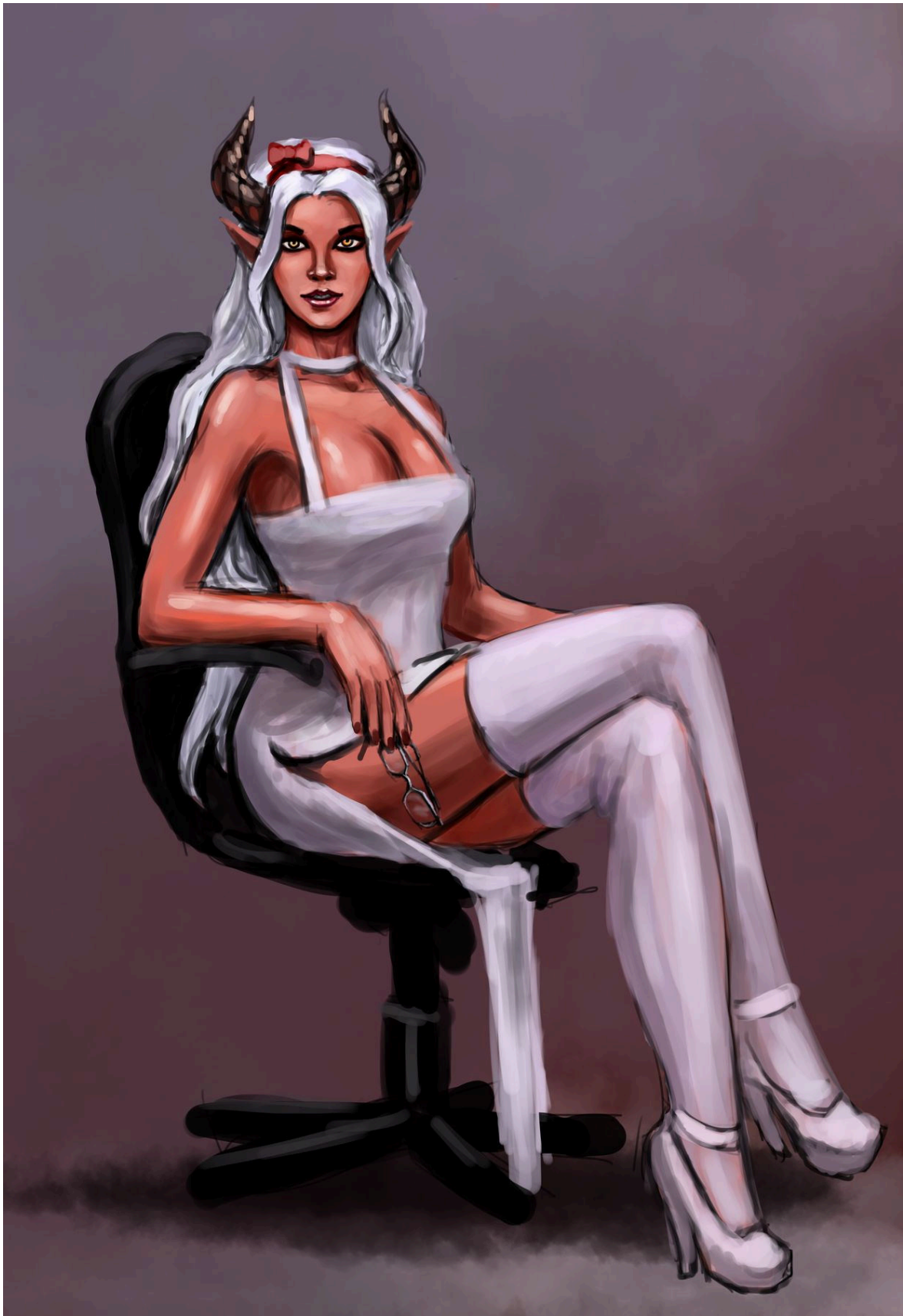
This is Ose's most recent design, wearing not much at all.



This is Ose's original design where she wears a suit.



This is Ose's original design where she wears her formal dress.



This is Ose and Belial.



Part 054: Prepare For Trouble... Make It Double

Hoarhiim... Amelia... Blaarjiim. They're all dead. I killed them.

My boots *clomp* against the hardened dirt labyrinth floor, echoing into the distance. My thousand-yard stare makes my eyes burn, but I can't bring myself to blink.

The Crown's mental map says I'll be arriving at the Core, soon. Another few turns, and I'm there. New hallways appear as the Labyrinth shifts around, and now there are more paths to arrive at the Core than ever before.

No. I didn't kill Amelia. Hoarhiim did.

Is there a difference? I touched his orb and allowed him to use my body. I should have understood his intentions.

A different inner voice speaks to me.

You did the right thing. Amelia devoured two worlds worth of humans. She was worse than Hitler, Stalin, and all the other mass-murdering dictators in history put together. Don't beat yourself up.

Maybe. Does taking the life of someone who committed an atrocity justify my actions? Murder is still murder.

True, but there's a difference in degree, and the matter of justice. If you murder someone for a selfish reason, that makes you a criminal, but if you kill someone to protect yourself or others, that makes you a Hero.

Amelia seemed like she didn't want to kill anyone else. What if Blaarjiim was the cause of all her psychopathic tendencies? What if she never killed anyone ever again?

You can't know the future. Whether one day or one millennium from now, she might have returned to her evil ways. It's a good thing she's dead. Besides, eye for an eye, right? The people she murdered would thank you for returning the favor.

Sighing, I round the last corner, and the Great Doors to the Labyrinth Core loom closed before me.

I guess. I still feel sick to my stomach.

You were ready to kill her with Wordsmithing, remember? You opened with a killing spell before doing anything else. Don't be a hypocrite. Accept what happened and move on. If you still feel awful, improve the lives of others. Be a force for positivity.

I slow to a stop in front of the sealed doors and sigh. My head hurts. My body aches. Not because of physical pain, but because of emotional and psychological torment. I've spent the better part of a day trudging through the Labyrinth to arrive at the Core, second-guessing my actions the whole way.

Maybe that second inner voice is right. Accept what happened and move on.

The problem is: I don't know if I can.

Pressing my hand against the door, I pause. *Shit. Opening this thing last time nearly killed me. How am I going to get inside? I should have installed a doorbell before I left.*

A minute passes, then a light appears in my mind. *Teleportation. I feel like I've done it before. Did I? The memory seems recent, yet not. Am I going crazy? Well, it might be a bad idea. I wouldn't want to materialize inside of someone and die a horrible chimeric death.*

A minute passes as I tap my feet thoughtfully. *I could pound on the door violently and hope someone hears. Whoa! What happened to the turrets? They're a burnt mess! Oh... fuck. Beelzebub. That's right. He attacked the Core. Good god, these should have been able to hold him off. He must have brought a massive army.*

Using the Crown, I speak two words of power. **"Repair. Repair."**

The turrets rapidly reconfigure themselves, transforming once again into death-spewing weapons of war. I reconfigure them to add even more firepower before returning my attention to the barrier before me.

I should probably build a hundred more turrets later. I thought with their explosive power that two would be enough, but I suppose I was wrong.

Another lightbulb appears in my head. *Aha! I know how I can get inside.*

"Visualize."

Using my Wordsmithing, I open my mind up to the universe around me, sending it past the doors to see the inside of the Core. Inside, dozens of humans and monsters mill around, but luckily the area past the doors isn't blocked.

Pulling my mind back, I blink for a moment as a sickening realization hits me. *I barely see anyone inside. Usually, there are thousands of people working their feet to the bone... but I barely saw two hundred. How many did Beelzebub kill?! That bastard!*

"Teleport."

My body instantly appears on the other side, a faint *whoosh* of air all that signals my arrival. Nobody notices.

Trudging forward, I spare a few glances around the place. To my left, a small but deep hole in the wall signals the use of that restricted railgun prototype I was working on before I left. Someone must have pulled it out against Beelzebub and his army. I hope it didn't misfire.

Scorch points, black splotches, and severe burns pop out of the usually monotonous scenery here and there. Destroyed equipment, overturned tables, and many other marks of destruction signal a battle that was recently fought, yet hasn't had enough time pass for cleanup to finish.

After fifteen seconds of standing and staring at the devastation, one man notices me. "Hero, sir? Is that you?!"

I nod. "Yeah. Who's- err, where's Phoebe? Neil? Anyone?"

The man's face whitens. "Ah, General Adams. He hasn't felt well since the attack a few days ago. Everyone was worried about you, Mister Hero, sir. I'll tell General Adams that you're here. As for Miss Berthold..." The young man points across the room to a field of body bags, all with tags sticking out. Phoebe stands among them, unzipping one near the head. She winces and looks away from whatever its contents might be, then nods to a man beside her with a clipboard and says something I can't hear.

"What's going on?"

The soldier swallows. "We're still identifying the deceased, sir. Miss Berthold, well, she knows everyone's name. I don't know how, but she does. If it weren't for her, we wouldn't know what to do."

"That's my girl."

I nod at the soldier, and he returns the gesture, then quickly walks away to alert Adams to my presence.

Quietly, I walk over to Phoebe. Once I draw near, I hear her talking to the man with the clipboard as she unzips another bag's head. "Umm. Uhh, Jonas. I think his name is Jonas."

Clipboard Guy jots something down. "Last name?"

"Ahh. Mmm. It's right on the tip of my tongue. John... Lidric? I think?"

He pauses for a moment. "John? Didn't you say Jonas?"

"Right, yes. Jonas Lidric."

"Alright. Want me to add John, too, just in case?"

Phoebe sighs and zips the bag up. "I guess. Sorry."

"You've been at this for ten hours, Miss Berthold. Why not take a break? You look exhausted."

I pause a few feet away. Clipboard Guy looks up and sees me, but Phoebe answers him before he can acknowledge my presence. "The sooner we identify these people, the sooner we can give them a proper burial. It's undignified for men to rot inside of bags, especially when they died so honorably."

Clipboard Guy coughs. "Ahm! Uh, yes. Say, Miss Berthold. Can you identify the one standing behind you?"

"Standing? What do you-" She turns and nearly smacks into my chest. "Uwah! Jason? Oh, you're back!! Jason!!"

She leaps into my arms, and a huge smile comes to my face, in spite of all the death surrounding us.

Tears fill Phoebe's eyes. "Oh, god! I was worried about you! First Hoarhiim sent me away and then I was in this big chamber with a bunch of mermaids and this scary-looking demon guy only he wasn't all that scary and he seemed really nice but then I talked to him and the mermaids all said hello and he opened up a portal and sent me here to the Core and then when I got here the place was still a horrible mess so I had to pitch in and help so I've been working nonstop to try and get all the bodies-"

"Whoa, whoa, Phoebe! Haha! Slow down, girl!" I quickly press a finger to her soft pink lips and lower her to the ground. "Sorry I was busy. Um. I uh..."

A moment passes. Phoebe pulls away as I struggle to find the right words. "Well, the battle ended. Hoarhiim destroyed the entire planet. Amelia is dead."

Relief washes over Phoebe's face. "Ah, so it's over. You must be relieved."

My voice cracks as a lump forms in my throat. "Y-yeah. Something like that. Hoarhiim died, too."

Phoebe freezes like a deer caught in the headlights. "W-what? No! Oh, Jason... I'm sorry. I didn't- I mean, he did? When? How?"

Clipboard Guy averts his eyes and quietly nods at me behind Phoebe's back, then walks away.

"When Hoarhiim destroyed the planet and killed Amelia, he destroyed Blaarjiim's orb as well. Since the two of them are linked, Hoarhiim died."

Phoebe rubs her head and winces. "God- I didn't realize. You must be devastated."

Images of Hoarhiim and Amelia appear in my mind. "Yeah. It doesn't look like you're having fun either, though. I wish I'd been here to help fight. Beelzebub brought one hell of an army."

Phoebe reaches over and takes my hand in hers. "It was only one demon, Jason. Beelzebub didn't bring anyone else. Don't blame yourself for our losses. I saw the battle you fought. The Demon Emperors and Dukes were pure insanity. If we couldn't handle one Lord, then it was my fault for not equipping our forces properly."

"What?" I blink in surprise. "Oh, come on, Phoebe. Don't blame yourself. I'm supposed to be the Hero. I should have been here to save humanity."

Phoebe snuffles and shakes her head. "Jason, no matter how powerful you are, you're only one man. You can't be in two places at once. We need to protect ourselves. I had the Crown and spent more time replicating technology to improve life in Hero City rather than improving our armaments. That's why I say it's my fault."

Sighing, I lean down and kiss Phoebe passionately, holding her lips against mine for a few seconds before pulling away. "Let's agree to disagree."

Phoebe blushes. "Sure."

The soldier from earlier comes walking up to us, hesitating for a moment until I look at him. "Ahh, Mister Hero, Miss Berthold. General Adams would like to see the two of you as soon as possible. He's in his office."

"Alright. We'll be right over."

I smile at the lad, but he nods back austere. Something's got him spooked, but I don't know what.

After he walks away, Phoebe closes the gap between us and presses herself against me, hugging me tightly. "After Beelzebub attacked, I spoke to Neil. I don't know if he was anxious or desperate, but something about him was off."

"People cope with loss differently," I reply, rubbing the back of her soft white hair gently.

"It wasn't that, Jason. He was looking for someone to blame. He blamed you, me... even Samantha. She saved us from Beelzebub, but Neil seemed to think she may have even instigated the ambush."

"Samantha?"

Phoebe pulls away and nods. "Don't you remember? That succubus girl. The one who-" Phoebe's eyes widen. "Oh... oh my god! Is she okay? Is she alive?! When Hoarhiim healed me, she was lying in a pool of blood!"

"She's fine," I say. "Hoarhiim healed her. All of the demons escaped off-planet before the sun exploded. Only Amelia and Hoarhiim died... only them."

Another lump forms in my throat. "Shit. Even Satan got away. Hoarhiim blew up an entire planet to kill one girl. Senseless."

"Satan." Phoebe stares at me meaningfully. "As I recall, Satan is Samantha's lover."

"What? They're an item? But... that means the demoness who saved the Core from Beelzebub was-!"

Phoebe winces. "Jason. Things are never as simple as they seem. Samantha leaped in front of Satan to protect you and me. Don't you remember? She's a good person with a kind heart. Don't judge her just because she's a demon."

"Right. Sorry."

"It's fine." Phoebe waves my apology off. "Neil said something similar. After all, she's the Second Emperor of all demons. Even I feel slightly suspicious of her."

"And you treat everyone wonderfully," I point out.

"Hah. True. Look, let's chat with Neil. I hope he isn't like he was after the attack."

I take Phoebe's hand and start walking away from the bodies toward Neil's office. "Oh? Did something happen?"

Phoebe doesn't meet my gaze. "W-well, he got a little angry. It wasn't anything serious."

"Okay. Like I said, people cope with loss differently. Losing thousands of good soldiers will affect a military man differently than it would you or me."

Phoebe doesn't reply for several seconds.

"Yeah."

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A few minutes later, we arrive outside Neil's office. His giant oaken door is already cracked several inches, so I knock lightly on it and press it open.

"Come in!" Neil's voice replies with a high-pitched lilt. As I step inside, he spins to face us in his chair. "Ah! Jason! So glad to see you! Same for you, Phoebe!"

The happiness in his voice catches me by surprise, but I roll with it. "Yeah! I just got back. I uh... I heard about the attack. I wanted to offer my deepest-"

"No, no. Don't worry about that, Jason." Neil waves at me nonchalantly and jumps up to shake my hand. "Everyone's glad you're back. After all, we may have lost soldiers, but we survived in the end, and that's what matters. How are you?"

I glance at Phoebe, trying to beam my thoughts into her mind. *Neil looks like he's in a good mood.*

"I'm fine, somewhat. I managed to kill the Black Witch. She won't be a threat anymore."

Neil stares at me intently for a few moments before nodding. "Yes, that's great. Wonderful. At least you accomplished something from wandering the Labyrinth. Well, now that you're back, I hope you'll stick around and assist us in shoring up our defenses."

I nod. "One-hundred percent. I'm not going anywhere."

Neil turns away. "Ah, I do owe you an apology, Phoebe. The way I acted before... it was very unkind. I hope you'll someday find it in your heart to forgive me."

The relief on Phoebe's face is palpable. "Oh, my. Of course, I forgive you, Neil. I wasn't mad at you in the first place. It was a terrible moment for everyone, and I can hardly blame you for how you reacted."

Neil mops at his forehead. "Excellent."

The General turns away and sits at his desk, grabs a small pile of papers, and pulls them toward himself. "So, listen, both of you. I've come to learn of several crucial locations in the Labyrinth through varying informants. These areas include slave-holding facilities where the demons torture humans, raise humans for cattle, among other things. There are also various spawning-lairs where imps are whelped and raised, and so on."

Phoebe nods, but her eyebrows lower almost imperceptibly. "What does that have to do with rebuilding the Core's defenses?"

I clench Phoebe's hand in mine just a little bit, but she ignores me. Neil coughs into his fist. "Well, rather than moping around, I came to realize that we have to fight back. We can play defense all we like, but in the end, the demons will overwhelm us. Establishing outposts throughout the Labyrinth and slowly exterminating them is the only way to pay them back in full for what they've done."

Phoebe's earlier relief vanishes, as does mine. "Neil? Why would- I mean... I see your point, but an eye for an eye only leaves two people blind."

Neil exhales slowly. "I am a man of God. Phoebe, you of all people should understand what that means. You are, after all, a Christian, are you not?"

My fiancée shifts uneasily. "Yes. But, that doesn't mean-"

"You should understand how God views demons." Neil cuts her off before she can finish. "Jason, you spent quite a while traversing the Labyrinth. Two months, by my count. After that, you had a climactic battle with the demons. I await your debriefing on what happened, but I assume you saw what they were capable of?"

"I did."

The general nods. "Our enemies number in the billions, possibly trillions. We cannot defend forever. We must be proactive. If they so wished, demons could pour against us like an ocean over a fire. No matter how powerful our weapons, we won't withstand a neverending tide of bloodskins crashing against our defenses. Most importantly, they will not allow us to live in peace."

This time it's me who shifts uneasily. "Look, I get what you're saying... but surely you don't mean *all* demons? What about those who join us? Are you going to hunt them to extinction as well?"

Neil shakes his head. "Of course not. We will accept any who choose to join us without reservation. We might survey them for a while to see if they are agents of the enemy or spies, but once cleared, they will have the same standing as any other citizen. However, don't get your hopes up. Demons are well-known for their lies and skullduggery."

"Perhaps. Still, sending humans and monsters into the Labyrinth to fight demons on their turf... that's dangerous, Neil. I should be there with them."

He nods. "Probably. However, we need you here in the Core. You can't be in two places at once. Anyone who leaves the safety of the Core must accept that their lives could end at any moment."

Their lives could end. You can't save them all.

My inner thoughts mutter and whisper to each other once more.

You can't be everywhere at once. If you could, then that means you might have saved the Core from Beelzebub while also fighting Amelia. Think of how awful you'd feel if that were the case.

I don't care about my feelings. I have to save lives. If Neil goes through with his plan, more demons and humans and monsters will die. There's been enough death already.

Yeah. Like Amelia.

Exactly.

For some reason, I chuckle out loud. "I can't be in two places at once. That's like looking right and left at the same time."

Neil raises an eyebrow. "Exactly. We went over this."

Gears turn in my head. *Hold on a minute. That's not right. I'm a Wordsmith. This should be a piece of cake! I'm wearing the solution on my head!*

Taking a deep breath, I begin to form my thoughts into a solid object in my mind. I close my eyes, and from a distant place, Phoebe's voice reaches me. "Jason? Is something wrong?"

No, Phoebe. There's nothing wrong. I've solved my biggest problem.

A complete mental image of myself appears in my mind.

"Clone."

Seconds later, a *whoomph* of air rushes into the other side of Phoebe. Neil nearly jumps out of his seat. "Sweet mercy!"

Phoebe raises an eyebrow, then turns around and squeaks in surprise. "Eep! Jason? Another one?!"

Indeed. On the other side of Phoebe stands a perfect facsimile of me. The other Jason blinks and looks around. "What's with the weird look, Phoebe?"

She gawks at him for a moment before looking back to me. "What's going on? How- why?!"

The other Me speaks up. "I cloned myself. He looks just like me."

I raise an eyebrow. "Uhh, actually, you're the clone."

"I am? Are you sure? I remember cloning you."

"Nope. You're the clone."

Both of us turn to look at Neil. The Frenchman jumps to his feet and adjusts his collar; then, he points at me. "You're the original. The other one is the copy. How did you do that?"

"I used the Crown and copied myself identically, down to the DNA level. Uh. I think New Jason has Wordsmithing too, right?"

New Jason blinks at me in surprise. "God, I hope so. Uh. **Light.**" He holds up his hand, and it brightens noticeably. "Nice."

Phoebe steps away from us toward Neil. I suddenly notice how pale she looks. "Uh. Um. Two Jasons. Uhh... which one do I..."

New Jason scratches his head, and I notice now that he doesn't have a Crown of Solomon. It wasn't copied over, though my clothes were. "This is a little awkward. Yo, other Me, what do we do here? I guess you're the boss?"

"Something like that? I didn't give much thought to rankings. I thought you could help Neil with whatever, while I help build the Core up. That way, I could be in two places at once."

"Nice. I can roll with that." New Jason pauses to look at Phoebe. "Do we share a fiancée, though? How's that gonna work?"

My face pales visibly. Now I understand what's going through Phoebe's mind. Before I can reply, she jumps in and forces a smile. "Oh, there's nothing to worry about! I can, um, handle two Jasons! I'm going to need a way to identify you, though..."

"Crap. Call me Jason Two, I guess?" my Doppelganger says.

Neil smirks. "As pleased as I am by this turn of events, that name is a little clunky. We should probably call you something completely different and unique."

New Jason grunts, and his expression sours. "Christ. Now I have to learn a whole new name. Oh well, it comes with the territory. Uh. Maybe something like John? James?"

Phoebe walks back between the two of us and presses both of her hands in one of ours. "Um, yeah, I don't know about that. Ooh! I know! How about something inspirational! Like, we can call you Miracle! It's a Miracle that I have twice as many Jasons to love!"

The other me laughs awkwardly. "Haha... I suppose..."

"Phoebe's on the right track," Neil says. He pokes at his chin a few moments before making an *aha* face. "How about 'Hope?' You represent the hope of all humanity, after all."

New Jason shrugs. "Sure, whatever. Nice and distinct. It's just a name, in the end."

Phoebe beams sunshine at both of us. "Great! It's settled then! Hope and Jason!" She pauses. "But um, can you maybe put a few moles on your face or something? I can't tell you two apart!"

Hope sighs. "**Mole. Mole.** There, does that work better for you, beautiful?"

Two little black marks appear under his right eye. Phoebe nods excitedly. "Perfect!"

For me, however, a strange sensation appears in my stomach. Something I've never felt before.

Jealousy.

He's identical to me in every way... and he calls Phoebe 'beautiful'. I know he's me, and I know I'm being a little unfair, but... at the same time, it feels wrong.

I don't want to share my wife with a clone. I only created him to help out with the things I can't manage alone.

No! I can't be selfish and rude. Hope is the same as me. How would I feel if he had the same thoughts? Just because he's a copy doesn't mean he doesn't have thoughts and feelings too.

Hope turns to look at me. "Well, I guess I, or you, had a good idea with this cloning thing. We'll be able to get twice as much work done compared to before!"

I nod and smile.

"Yeah. We sure did."

Part 055: The Puppetmaster

"Mister Beelzebub! Mister Beelzebub! Oh my gosh, you're back!"

Beelzebub steps into his Labyrinthian abode. Immediately, his stomach clenches when he sees the hideous, overweight demoness bouncing up and down excitedly. "Rosalia."

She blushes as her eyes examine his mangled suit. "Are you okay? Th-there's not m-much covering you..."

Beelzebub rolls his eyes. "Thank me for the view later. Fetch me a new suit from the wardrobe. On the double." Beelzebub slams his door shut and sighs. Rosalia nods and rushes a few rooms away without complaint.

His home, a special privilege reserved only for demons of Lord status or higher, is a small but cozy alcove carved into Hell's outskirts. Not far from the Expanding Borders of the ever-growing Labyrinth, it's remote enough that he can get some rest in between his duties as a Lord.

The Baron of Flames sears his suit to ashes and crosses the room fully nude, frowning as he spots an unhealed cut on his arm. Focusing on the wound for just a second, it regenerates immediately.

Hmm. The power of the Phoenix. Legendary regenerative capabilities. Still, that whore of a Second Emperor managed to break me apart twice. I wonder if she will have such luck once I've ascended to Duke... or higher...

Chills go down Beelzebub's back as he steps behind a changing screen and examines the rest of himself. *Other than that scratch, nobody could look at me and guess I'd recently been in a battle, let alone had every bone in my body shattered.*

Half a minute passes. Beelzebub starts tapping his foot. "Rosalia! Do you know what *on the double* means?!"

"Y-yes! Coming! Uwah!" A violent *thud* in the other room makes Beelzebub sigh.

She fell again. Clumsy ogre.

Rosalia quickly picks herself up. The floor shakes with every step she takes as she stomps over. She holds the suit up so Beelzebub can grab it from over the privacy screen. The Baron snatches his clothes from her roughly, then holds them up. "Damn you, pig. You dropped this one on the ground. There's dust on it now."

"I'm sorry..." Rosalia mutters from the other side of the screen. "I didn't mean to."

"Tch. You can't do anything right, can you? Take these back and have them cleaned again. Then fetch me another one- the pin-striped one, in fact. *Don't* drop it this time or so help me; I'll use my fire on you."

He holds the suit up, and she delicately takes it, then rushes away. Another *thud* makes Beelzebub grind his teeth.

"This is who the Dukes decided should be my assistant," Beelzebub mutters to himself quietly.

Beelzebub gives himself a quick fire-bath to pass the time, burning away all the smells on his body while he waits.

Two minutes pass. This time, when Rosalia returns, she doesn't fall. "I-I brought your suit, Mister Beelzebub, sir!"

Beelzebub takes it and sighs. "Wonderful. So, dare I ask, did you manage to contact the oracles as I ordered?"

Rosalia nods so vigorously that Beelzebub can almost hear her head move. "Uh-huh! I sure did! And after that, I waited at the River Styx for about ten hours, then I came back here to make sure the place was all tidied up for your arrival, and I pressed your pants, and then I made you some Blood Soup just as you like, and then-"

"Spare me the play-by-play. I was only making conversation," Beelzebub grumbles. "More importantly, I'm surprised you haven't asked about *me*."

"Oh, yes! I've been dying to know how your battle against the humans went, Mister Beelzebub!"

He hops up and sticks one leg into his pants, then the other. "Ah. The humans. I killed several thousand of them, then got bored and left. I achieved the rank of Baron in doing so."

"Omigosh! I *knew* your horns looked bigger than before! Eeeee!" Rosalia squeaks excitedly, and Beelzebub flinches at the sound of her awful, nasally voice. "Oh! If you're a Baron, then that means we'll be moving to Hell Harbor soon!"

"We?" Beelzebub pulls his dress shirt on and adjusts his tie. "No, I think not. You and I will part, soon. I will get a bevy of beautiful servants once I move, and you'll stay here, with the rest of the swine."

"Oh, you! Tee-hee!" Rosalia laughs, ignoring his cruel barbs. "You always say the funniest things! You couldn't live without me!"

Beelzebub scowls at his reflection in the mirror. "Yes. *Funny*."

After fumbling with his tie for a moment, Beelzebub pulls his pinstriped jacket on and quickly combs his flawless hair back. *Damn, it feels good to be a Baron.*

Stepping out from behind the privacy screen, Beelzebub nearly bumps into Rosalia as she rubs her hands together gleefully. The Baron winces at Rosalia's hideous face and instead fixates his gaze just above her, trying desperately to pretend she's someone much more attractive.

"You look great, Mister Beelzebub! As wonderful as- oh!"

"What?" Beelzebub frowns at her sudden look of concentration. "Is there something wrong with my face?"

"Two hairs out of place, and your tie is three degrees crooked. Also, I see a speck of lint."

"Lint? Where? Get it off." Beelzebub quickly examines his coat, but Rosalia leaps into action. She shifts his tie and nabs the lint in the blink of an eye, but Beelzebub grabs her hand before she can touch his hair. "I don't think so."

"Aw."

Beelzebub quickly warms up his palm and irons his hair back into place. "I should tell you something else. Regarding my new status as a Baron. I'm going to face off against Bael for the right to ascend to Duke at the Slaughterseum."

Rosalia's eyes widen. "Y-you are? But how? You only ascended yesterday, right?"

Beelzebub wipes his nose and casually glances away. "Oh, I didn't say? The entirety of the Demon Council traveled to a world to battle the Black Queen. During that process, I defeated my teacher, Agares. I've earned the right to be Duke by defeating another in mortal combat."

Rosalia gawks for several moments. "In... incredible. Even for you, Mister Beelzebub... you're a prodigy like no other."

"Oh, pish. Praise me more. I also assisted in defeating the Black Queen. Doubtless, the Dukes will soon have to weigh their accomplishments against mine and grow jealous."

Rosalia reaches up and twines her curly brown hair between her fingers. "You're incredible, Mister Beelzebub. I wish I had half the power and good looks you do."

"As do I," Beelzebub grunts. "You're the last thing I like to look at when I get back after a hard day killing humans."

"Ooooh!!!" Rosalia squeaks excitedly. "You look forward to seeing me?! That's so nice of you! I didn't know you cared about me in that way!"

"I don't."

"Hahahaha! You're so bashful sometimes!"

Beelzebub's gaze drifts a thousand yards past Rosalia.

I want to die.

"I'm leaving for a while. It's been ages since I visited the Slaughterseum. I need to come up with a plan for defeating Bael. Stay here and... clean the house. Or something. I don't care."

Rosalia's smile falters. "You're leaving? But what about the Blood Soup? I boiled it nice and thick for you. I haven't even given you your deep-tissue massage yet!"

"And you never will," Beelzebub hisses. "Sometimes, I wonder if you're a succubus trapped in the body of a whale. Absolutely mindless."

"You think I look like a succubus?! Omigosh!!!"

Beelzebub pushes past her. "Maybe Bael will kill me. What a mercy that would be."

The door slams behind Beelzebub, and Rosalia stares at it for a moment. Then, she dashes over to the mirror and hops up and down excitedly.

Mister Beelzebub couldn't take his eyes off my new hairdo! I knew he would love it!!

"Alright. I'll, uh, leave you in Neil's capable hands."

Turning away from Hope, I rest my hand on Phoebe's shoulder and leave the clone in Neil's office. Seeing a mirror image of my face staring back at me has yet to stop feeling weird.

"Cool beans! I'll see you guys around!"

Hope waves at Phoebe and me. Phoebe smiles and waves back, then falls into step beside me. A minute later, once we're out of hearing range, Phoebe sighs.

"Oh, Jason. You should have warned Neil and I. You always do the most dramatic things without thinking them through. Now there's another of you running around!"

I chuckle nervously. "Haha... well, look on the bright side. If anything ever happens to me, there's always-"

"Hey!" Phoebe glares daggers at me. "Horrible! Don't even joke about that! Don't you know how broken this poor maiden would feel?"

"Sorry. Just a bad joke."

"Mmm."

I stop for a minute and raise an eyebrow. "Say, I meant to ask you earlier but didn't have time. How did you appear out of nowhere? That is, during the battle. I barely remember anything. Satan was pulverizing me, then I was on the ground, and you were there too."

Phoebe blushes. "Oh, um, you gave me the Crown, remember? I replicated a device that analyzed Hoarhiim's magical energy and um..." She stops and frowns, then rubs her head. "Uh... oh! Right. I created a wormhole thingy with my truck and traveled to you. I thought I had hit you with my truck when I showed up."

"I'm glad you showed up. If you hadn't, Satan probably would have killed me. I'm glad nothing happened to you, though. It was dangerous rushing into an unknown situation out of nowhere."

"I'm glad you're okay, too. It all worked out in the end."

"That it did."

We turn and continue walking. Half a minute passes. The two of us trot over to a familiar monster, one I'm relieved to see still alive. He turns around when he hears Phoebe clear her throat. "Ah! Turtle! You made it back in one piece!"

"Hey, Kar. I'm back."

Kar's fairy assistant pops out from behind his back and lands on his shoulder. "Don't forget about me!"

"I'd never dare, Blinker. How are you two holding up?"

Blinker glances at Kar for a moment, and he coughs. "Hurgh. Well, we are fine. Hotface did a lot of damage, but we can still rebuild. The fallen will serve as a reminder of the danger demons pose."

Phoebe's eyes drift across the rows of computer consoles to the corner where the body bags lay. "I won't forget them," she mutters.

Blinker flutters over and pats Phoebe's head. "Cheer up! Nobody likes to see you sad! Anyway, when are you going to tell Jason the good news?"

"Good news?" I echo her words. "What's she talking about, Phoebe?"

Blinker giggles. "Heehee! I knew it! She didn't tell you! Kar and I are getting married!"

I blink in surprise. "Y-you are? That's great! I, uh... I mean..." Slowly, my eyes drift from the tiny six-inch fairy to the towering ten-foot-tall lizard-Sphinx. "But... how?"

Phoebe's sadness lifts. She chuckles. "Haha, oh, Jason. You know Kar can shrink, right?"

"Oh! Of course! I, ah, shit! I didn't mean-"

Kar roars with laughter. "Bwahaha! You thought I might break this little lassie, didn't you?! Have no fear. I'm more worried about myself than her!"

The four of us share a good laugh.

After chatting for a few more minutes, Phoebe and I wave goodbye to them and head toward the exit gate back to Hero City.

Phoebe loops her arm around mine. "Isn't that great? They're getting married."

"Yeah. It sure is." I blush slightly, remembering my proposal to Phoebe a few months ago. "You're not jealous, are you? I think we could... you know... make it a double-wedding."

"What? Really?!" Phoebe squeaks happily and hops up and down. "I'd be so happy, Jason! Are you serious?"

"Of course, I am." I smile at the woman I love, and a moment later, a sharp pang in my chest makes me look away. "Well. Before that, I... I need to talk to you about something."

We step through the portal and back onto Tarus II, the *whoomph* of air pressure making our ears pop in the process.

Phoebe cranes her neck and yawns, trying to get the odd sensation out of her ears. "Oh? What's that?"

I hold up a finger. "Let's wait until we've cleared the gate."

"Okay."

We walk past several men and women, each of whom waves at us, and especially at Phoebe. She's popular among everyone and disliked by nobody.

When we arrive at the gate, Phoebe waves at a young guy on the other side. The youth nods back but doesn't smile. "Hello, Miss Berthold."

"Henry! How are you?"

He shrugs. "Fine. Lemme get this open for you."

The soldier marches away and presses a button, opening the gate. Phoebe glances up at me. "Henry is usually a lot more excitable and happy. He lost a good friend during Beelzebub's attack."

"That's awful."

Henry wanders back over. "Alright, there you go, guys. Where's your truck, Miss Berthold?"

"Oh... it's destroyed." Phoebe scrunches up her face. "Yeah, gonna have to get a new one made."

"Next bus is thirty minutes. If you'll give me a minute, I can call a military transport."

I smile at the lad. "Nah, I'll make a new truck for her. Thanks for the offer, champ."

Henry nods and walks away. His downcast attitude makes my heart feel heavy.

Phoebe and I pass through the gate, and it closes behind us. Phoebe looks at me expectantly, but I shake my head. "Let's take a walk for now. It's a nice, sunny day."

And indeed, it is. However, winter is coming. The cold will be here within a month, and snow will probably show up not long after that.

Slowly, Phoebe and I walk down the path, putting distance between ourselves and the portal encampment. She looks up expectantly at me. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

"It's hard to put into words. I... I don't know how to say it."

"Say whatever's on your mind. I won't judge you."

I nod. "Yeah. You're a saint like that. Look, it's about Amelia. She's dead, you know."

Phoebe nods. "Is this about your attraction to her?"

My heart pounds like a jackhammer. "What?! You knew?"

"Not until just now. I guessed as much though, given how you left in such a hurry."

I bow my head. "Are you mad? I felt a lot of things toward her. Maybe even... love."

"I wouldn't blame you, Jason. You mentioned that she saved your life twice. From what I understand, you woke up in the Labyrinth, scared and confused, and she was the first friendly face you saw. It's only natural to feel attraction."

My face burns up. "Well, I didn't feel anything toward Amelia at first. After all, she looked like a little kid."

"I wondered about that. Haha!" Phoebe giggles to herself. "I saw Amelia as a grown woman for the first time when I showed up to save you. It took me a second to recognize her. She was a beauty... better-looking than me, at least."

Phoebe's voice trails off. I stop walking and kneel so I can look her in the eyes. "Don't say that. You're beautiful and radiant like a star. You're kind, witty, strong, loving. Everyone likes you. Compared to you, Amelia was an evil-"

"Don't say it, Jason." Phoebe holds up her palm, silencing me. "Don't speak ill of the dead. You cared for her. There's nothing wrong about that. Insulting her to try and make me feel better will only hurt you in ways you can't imagine. Besides, everyone has a degree of evil in themselves."

"Not you," I counter. "You're the kindest person I know. You're everything Amelia wasn't. You're-"

Phoebe cuts me off. "-Not the woman you think I am." She stares at me icily. "Jason, while you were fighting, I caught a glimpse of a familiar face. King Arthur. Somehow, he was there on the battlefield. I

was too busy helping you to speak to him, and it caved my heart in that I couldn't do so."

She and I stare at each other for a moment. "Did something happen?"

"I failed my king, Jason. I failed him. It's haunted me ever since."

"How?"

Phoebe rubs her arms and averts her gaze. "I... I don't want to talk about it. Besides, we were talking about you. Don't worry about my issues. My past is 100,000 years old. None of it matters anymore."

"Phoebe... that's not true. It still affects you. C'mon, I'm over Amelia. Tell me about you. I want to know what's hurting you, deep down."

Phoebe stares stoically into the distance for several moments. Finally, her lip starts to tremble. "I... I don't know if I can. But I'll try."

"Good, Phoebe. Let it out. I'm here for you."

[Recommended Listening.](#)

Hope stares at Phoebe longingly after she and Jason leave, but a few seconds later, he sighs. "Haaah. Okay. Let's get to work, then, Neil."

Neil eyes the clone for a moment. "Are you alright, lad? It looks like there's something on your mind."

Jason's clone chuckles. "Heh, it's probably nothing. I feel a little off-put, you know? Like, I'm him. Jason is me. I was with Phoebe, but now I'm not. It's like I've stepped into a parallel reality where this isn't my life. I suddenly feel alienated despite how everything is the same."

Neil nods. "I can't imagine how that feels. Phoebe didn't even give you a goodbye kiss. It's good to see you taking things in stride."

"I suppose."

Hope shakes his head and Wordsmiths, "**Chair.**" Sitting down, he mops his hair back. "Never mind that. Uhm, what happened to the Core? Mind filling me in? Phoebe told me a bit, but I didn't get the full story yet."

Neil nods and pulls out a paper from the pile. "A demon named Beelzebub attacked. He was only a Lord at first, but he used some unholy fire that instantly killed anyone it so much as grazed. I've never seen anything like it in all my years. Somehow, during the battle, he increased in power and became a Baron. That's when the onslaught intensified."

Hope bows his head. "I should have been there."

"No, Jason should have," Neil says, correcting him. "You're a copy of Jason, not Jason himself. You can make different choices and take a different path."

"I have all of his memories," Hope mutters. "I did all the things he did right up to five minutes ago."

"You can think like that if you wish." Neil stands up and walks over to a keg of wine. He pours out two cups, then walks over to Hope. "Here, have a drink."

Hope smiles. "Ah, thanks. I don't like alcohol."

"You don't?" Neil sits down but continues to hold the cup out. "Or *Jason* doesn't?"

Hope opens his mouth to respond, but pauses and shrugs. "I guess it's him who doesn't... not me. It won't hurt to try a cup."

"Not to mention you would be impolite to refuse," Neil says chidingly.

He hands the cup to Hope and watches silently as the youth takes a drink and coughs. "Kah! Man, that's bitter! I thought it would taste like sweet grapes."

"Wine has a taste all of its own. Force yourself to drink more. It'll loosen you up a bit. It's a good way to relax after a hard day."

Hope sips the wine slowly, wincing every time it enters his mouth. After a moment, he blinks twice. "Oh. **Sweeten.**"

The next time he takes a sip, Hope smiles. "Much better."

Neil swallows a big gulp. "What? Did you use your Wordsmithing?"

"Yeah. I changed it to taste more like grape juice. Now it's delicious."

The two of them sit in silence for half a minute, finishing their cups. Neil takes Hope's glass and walks over to refill it. "So, Hope. I asked Jason to debrief me on what happened over the last two months. I heard he, and thusly, you, fought the demons. At least, that's what Miss Berthold said."

The wine finishes dripping into the cup, and Neil closes the spout, then walks back over to Hope and hands him the cup.

"Oh. That. The battle... yeah." Hope sweetens his drink once again and drains half the glass before pausing. He wipes at his eyes and yawns. "Um, a lot happened, Neil. I defeated the Black Queen. Hoarhiim did. I was too weak to stand up to the demons."

"I heard Phoebe arrived just in the nick of time."

Hope nods. "Yup. She popped in and saved me. Kinda sad, huh? A regular human woman saved a man with godlike powers. I'm pathetic."

Neil's eyes lower to Hope's wine-glass as the youth looks away.

"Pathetic? Maybe a little. You're not perfect though, Hope. Besides. The only person who has the right to godlike power is God himself in the heavens above."

Neil reaches over and touches a book at the end of his desk. "I found this in Bahamut's library. It's my most precious possession."

Hope's eyes follow Neil's arm. "A Bible?"

"Yes. Growing up, I fought under Napoleon, doing my best to serve my country. I always was a God-fearing man. From what little I know about you, or rather, Jason... you're not much for God."

Hope shakes his head and swirls his wine around. "No, I'm not. Sorry."

"God made the heavens and the Earth. God rules our lives even today. I believe in fate and His will. I don't think it was a coincidence that Bahamut took me and forced me into her slavery. I was reborn today, able to save the future of humanity from the evils of demonkind."

Hope shrugs. "I don't know. That sounds more like a coincidence than fate."

"Possibly." Neil finishes off his glass and sets it on the table. "In any case, don't expect yourself to meet God's greatness. You can't do it. No man is as perfect as He is. Tell me what else happened during your battle."

"Not much." Hope rubs his arm. "Hoarhiim took over. I woke up later to find out he had destroyed the entire planet. Amelia and Blaarjiim died. Hoarhiim did as well. His orb exploded in my hands."

The two of them pause for a few moments. Neil considers Hope's words.

"I'm sorry to hear that," The Commander says, keeping his voice neutral. "I don't know your relationship with the orb, but I imagine he was important to you."

"Yeah. Hoarhiim saved me from Hell itself."

Hope lifts his head and blinks sleepily. "It's... it's Amelia, though. She's the one whose death hurt me the most. I can't stop thinking about her."

"The Black Witch?" Neil raises an eyebrow. "That little girl?"

Hope scratches his head. "Well, she wasn't a little girl when I last saw her. She aged up pretty rapidly. She looked stunning."

"Ah, the trappings of the flesh." Neil takes Hope's empty cup and walks over to refill it. "The Bible has many things to say about seductresses and those who accept power from demons. Why, the demoness who saved us from Beelzebub was a succubus. Can you believe it?"

"A succubus? I think... I think I might know her."

Neil nods. "Oh? Tell me more."

Hope furrows his brow. "When Phoebe arrived on the planet, she had a female demon with her. Horns, tail, and she wasn't wearing much."

"That's the one," Neil replies. He continues to fill Hope's cup and stares at the wall.

"Amazing. So the succubus saved you from Beelzebub, huh? She had a romantic thing going on with Satan, though."

Neil's eyes freeze. He stares at the cup in his hands and closes off the spout, but keeps his back to Hope. "She did? Interesting."

"Yup. He kissed her and got grabby too. I think they might have been husband and wife, or whatever the demonic equivalent is."

The General turns around and hands the cup to Hope. "Here you go. Have a refill."

Hope stares at the glass. "Nah... I think... I think I've had enough."

"Oh, come now. Two glasses of wine? Surely you can hold your liquor."

A few seconds pass. Hope sighs and takes the glass. He doesn't bother sweetening it, opting instead to drink it plain. He doesn't even taste the difference. "Uhhmm... so yeah. What was I saying?"

Neil smiles pleasantly at the now-constantly yawning lad. "You were talking about the succubus and Satan- hm? What's going on? Why are you crying?"

Hope wipes his eyes as two tears run down his face. "Crying? I-I don't know."

After a few seconds, a dam breaks in Hope's mind. He leans over and cries hysterically. "Ohh, God! It's Amelia. I killed her. I let Hoarhiim take over! I can't believe myself! I didn't want her to die!"

Neil stares at the youth for a few moments and raises an eyebrow.

"But she did, as did my men. You've been negligent as of late. You have to do better. You can't keep failing people as Jason did."

Neil continues pushing, and Hope's tears begin to flow more freely. "God, I can't believe myself! Uwaah!!" He drops the half-filled cup, causing the wine to spill all over his clothes. Hope doesn't notice the cold liquid running down his body. "Amelia!! I'm sorry! I can't believe I let you die..."

Neil quickly grabs a cloth beside his chair and steps over to Hope, then kneels to pat the blubbling man dry. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pressed so hard — Heaven's sake. You're drunk already. Let me get you to bed."

Hope nods slowly and paws at his eyes. "Failed... failed..."

Neil wraps Hope's arm around his neck and hoists him up, then helps him across the room. "Luckily for you, I sometimes sleep in my office. Here you go, sorry for causing you trouble."

On the opposite side of Neil's office, a door leads to a lavish bedroom with a king-sized bed. He lays Hope down and pulls away to stand and stare.

Hope curls up in the fetal position and continues to weep over and over, though he manages to pause and whisper, "Th-thank you, Neil. I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

Neil smiles at the clone. "It's no trouble. I'm glad you're letting your emotions out. It will free your mind."

The Commander turns and walks out of the darkened room, leaving the door only slightly cracked. He continues to his desk, plunks down in his chair, and his smile widens.

Everything is going to change.

Part 056: Phoebe's Tortured Past, An Unlikely Connection

"Lady Berthold. The King requires your presence at the Round Table."

The militiaman bows his head as Phoebe, the leader of the Silver Battalion, enters. She, in turn, sheathes her sword. "Thank you, Private. I will leave at once."

Phoebe examines her wooden training dummy to see how deep her strikes have cut. As usual, she's almost at the point where she can chop its head off, but not quite.

My sword arm lacks striking power. Ah, well. Perhaps someday that will change.

Phoebe walks outside. Her boots *clomp* against the cobblestone streets as she picks up her pace. She heads away from the knight training yard, past the stables, up toward the castle. The hustling and bustling commoners pay her no mind.

Her steel armor glints in the midday sunlight, and her white hair flutters in the breeze. Occasionally, she catches sight of a familiar soldier here and there who nod politely at her, their looks of respect and desire apparent on their faces.

A lady of the court must remain chaste, she reminds herself. Besides, she has no interest in the other knights. Despite several approaching her over the last several years, she always turns them down. The only man she feels anything towards is King Arthur. Naturally, her feelings for him amount to deep respect and admiration, nothing else.

She adjusts her belt fittings and looks up in surprise as one of the Knights of the Round falls into step beside her. "Oh! Sir Percival! How are you faring on this beautiful morning?"

The tall and lanky man smiles kindly. His blonde hair tilts forward as he gives a polite nod. "Lady Berthold. I am quite well. Are you headed to the Round Table as well?"

She smiles. "I am. The King must have summoned both of us. I wonder to what end?"

"Aye." Percival and Phoebe increase their pace. "Summoning us to the Round Table must mean important business."

Minutes pass. The two chat politely about this and that. They step into the castle, and Phoebe lowers her gaze. "Do you think His Majesty will finally assign me a combat task? Until now, he's only directed me to train myself and the other troops."

Percival shrugs. "Anything is possible. The demons have been plotting a major attack on Camelot for quite some time. I imagine His Majesty is feeling anxious."

"As would anyone," Phoebe murmurs.

She and Percival stride into the antechamber of the Round Table and raise their eyebrows as they spot the other ten knights awaiting their arrival.

"Sir Percival. Lady Berthold. Welcome." Lancelot, the King's right-hand knight, nods at them as they enter. His commanding physique, chiseled chin, and piercing eyes make any woman swoon. Indeed, the rumors speak of him being equal to the King when it comes to his conquest of demons and females alike.

"Sir Lancelot." Phoebe takes up her seat a few spots away from him and blushes as once again, she feels the weight of her position at the table. *The only female to ever be knighted and appointed to the Round Table. Compared to the others here... I feel unworthy.*

The last chair, a golden throne, stands emptily at the opposite side of the table from Phoebe. A chill goes down her arms as she imagines Arthur's handsome face when he enters. *Soon, His Majesty will sit across from me, and I will gaze upon his visage.*

The King, of course, is widely known to be the noblest man in the land. In addition to his beautiful wife, Guinevere, he has a dozen concubines at any given time, all chosen from the most beautiful women of his court.

Every knight, including Phoebe, bows their heads and folds their hands together on the table to join in prayer. When they finish, they stare at the King's throne in silence and wait for his arrival.

Five minutes later, the far door swings open. The Knights of the Round rise to their feet and turn to face the King as he walks in. "Hello, my paladins. Apologies for running late. Little Morgan wouldn't cease her sobbing. She prefers her mother's touch to mine."

Phoebe smiles. *What a devout family man His Majesty is.*

Arthur quickly seats himself at the table and nods. "At ease."

The knights smoothly seat themselves. Lancelot touches a few scrolls before him. "I brought intelligence reports from our southern borders. Sightings of demons have increased of late."

"And I bring news of a witch from the north," Sir Gawain remarks. "A villager described a young woman of short height with a lovely and fair complexion. However, we suspect she may be a demon shapeshifter, given her barbarism and power."

"Aye," Sir Kay says. "And just today we've beheaded four traitors to the crown. The ones I spoke of two fortnights past."

Arthur sighs. "Haah... as always, trouble brews. A king's rest never comes. Let's begin with the demon sightings, Sir Lancelot. What are their numbers and military might? Can one of you dispatch them quickly, or must I go there myself?"

The other knights begin discussing their information with the King, but Phoebe stares in silence, twirling her fingers together. Her eyes glaze over, and she looks past the King toward the stained-glass window behind him. It depicts the Virgin Mother as she holds her beloved child, baby Jesus. As Phoebe eyes the window, her thoughts turn inward, toward her own family life.

Minutes pass. Sir Gawain and Percival break out into a minor spat over how to divert resources from one border to the other. Eventually, the King taps the table. "Lady Berthold? Lady Berthold?"

"Huh?" Phoebe blinks, suddenly realizing everyone is staring at her. "O-oh! Sorry! What was the question?"

Arthur smiles pleasantly. "I asked if the newest batch of militiamen were ready to send to the southern border. Do you believe they've trained enough?"

Phoebe swallows. "With all due respect, Your Grace, I believe they require a few more weeks of training. The archers might prove useful in the meantime, but their horsemanship lacks finesse."

"That won't do," Lancelot says, cutting in. "I won't send unprepared young men out to die against the demon hordes. We should transfer our more capable warriors from the palace to the southern border, and put the recruits here."

"B-but..." Phoebe swallows. "That would leave the castle weakened."

"Aye, but it is unlikely that any demons will show up so deep within our borders. We anticipate it will take but a month or so for our troops to crush the demons in the south. Once they finish, they will return post-haste."

Phoebe nods at Sir Lancelot. "Of... of course. That is sensible."

King Arthur examines Phoebe shrewdly with his sparkling blue eyes. "Is there something the matter, Lady Berthold? You've hardly said a word since I arrived."

Blood rushes to Phoebe's cheeks. "Oh, no! Not at all! I- I um, well, I feel a little... um... small."

Several of the knights glance at one another. Arthur rubs his chin. "Hmm. You are the newest paladin here, and a lone woman, to boot. You probably feel somewhat inadequate, seated at this table of legends."

Phoebe's blushing intensifies. "Y-yes."

"I see." Arthur looks away. "Sometimes, I forget how difficult it must feel for you to fit in. Nevertheless, you are a fantastic swordswoman, one who bested Gawain in mock-combat. We vexed him endlessly as a result of his defeat. However, it is not your prowess with the blade that I value, but your ability to intuit the feelings of others. Tell me, how does my kingdom view me?"

Arthur holds up a finger to silence Phoebe. "Gawain, you answer first. How do those living in the less prosperous district of Trost view my reign?"

Gawain shuffles uncomfortably. "W-well, my King... ah... I hardly travel to Trost. The last I heard, they suffered a plague and had to burn the bodies."

"That was three years ago," Arthur mutters. "Lancelot. How about you? What does Trost think of my reign?"

The muscular knight bows his head. "I do not know, my liege. Matters regarding the military always occupy my time."

"But Lady Berthold does," Arthur says with a smile. "She has never visited Trost, yet I guarantee she knows more of their current situation than anyone else at this table. All she needs is to speak with villagers and citizens, and they open up to her in ways you men couldn't imagine. Isn't that right?"

Phoebe twirls a hair around her finger. "Somewhat, Your Grace. After the plague, the citizens of Trost held animosity toward the crown. However, when a voodoo demon appeared in their village, you sent Sir Tristan there to slay the demon. People later went on to blame the bastard for the plague and forgive the crown. Their troubles have lessened noticeably as a result."

Arthur claps his hands together twice. "Good, very good. You see? You have value and intuition that the men here lack. Don't look down on yourself simply because you lack for military conquests. Heaven knows you will someday get the chance. Our enemies never stop plotting against humanity."

Percival reaches over and rests his hand on Phoebe's. "The King is right, Lady Berthold. Everyone here values you. Do not be so eager to stain your sword with blood."

Phoebe relaxes visibly. "Alright. I apologize for my... my lack of conviction."

Arthur returns his gaze to Sir Gawain. "Very good, then. Gawain, tell me more about this beautiful witch that has been attacking our villages."

"Aye, Your Majesty. She is a young woman, perhaps twenty-five years of age. The villagers speak of her long, black hair and blood-red eyes..."

Phoebe turns away from Gawain's debriefing to gaze at Percival, whose hand still rests on hers. He quickly retracts his touch and blushes awkwardly. "Ah... forgive me for my... impropriety."

Phoebe gently reaches around and rubs his back. "There's nothing to forgive."

Two weeks later.

Phoebe watches silently as the captured demons shuffle through the streets, their hands, feet, and necks shackled and bound with powerful restriction magic. Female and male demons of many varieties gaze around at the wall of knights surrounding them on both sides. They whimper in despair as heavily armored soldiers march them to the dungeons.

Gawain stands beside Phoebe and claps his hands eagerly. "Chop chop! Let's get a move on! I want these prisoners ready for interrogation by no later than midday!"

The demons include not only imps, but children, too. Phoebe watches as a little demon girl with white hair shuffles along behind the taller ones silently, emptiness in her eyes.

"Sir Gawain, are you planning to torture all of these demons?"

Gawain shakes his head. "Not I. The court appointee, Sir Gallant the Brave. I lack the finesse required for torture. He will certainly find the locations of their hidden dens."

A horrible rolling pain forms in Phoebe's gut as she watches the last of the demons walk up the street. "Is... is the brutality necessary?"

Gawain glances at her. "Of course. Even if we required no information, they're *demons*! God demands that all of their kind be broken and slain. Finding out where more of their wicked kin are hiding is but a bonus."

Phoebe clutches her stomach and nods. Gawain walks away to follow the demon convoy.

Eventually, Phoebe slowly turns to walk back to the training stables. *How cruel. The demons look similar to us, but with different skin, horns, and pointy ears. Why must we torture them? Is there no better way?*

Before entering the training facility, Phoebe slams into someone walking out, falling hard on her rear and wincing in pain. The voice of Sir Percival greets her ears. "Ah! Lady Berthold! I'm so sorry! Forgive me!"

When she looks up at his face, her feelings of discomfort erupt all at once into powerful emotions she can't contain. Tears roll down Phoebe's face. She looks away and tries to control her sobbing, and wipes her eyes furiously.

Percival stares at her in confusion. "O-oh goodness! I wasn't watching where I was going!" He kneels to her level, his hands shaking as he tries to figure out how badly he hurt her. "Are you okay? Shall I call a medic?"

"Hic..." Phoebe rubs her eyes on her arms and trembles. "It's not you! It's me! I'm too weak... I can't even look! Oh god, it hurts to think about!"

Percival opens and closes his mouth several times, trying to parse her emotions. Unfortunately, unlike the other knights, his experience with women is quite limited. Percival can do little more than pray he didn't hurt her too badly.

Eventually, he settles with just staring at Phoebe's feet while she weeps. Three minutes pass before Phoebe can get her emotions under control. She finally looks at Percival, tears staining her face. "I... I'm sorry. I can't control it. The little girl... it's not fair."

"Little girl?" Percival, still baffled, tries to probe Phoebe to find out what's distressing her. "Who?"

Phoebe sniffles. "Th-the demons. We brought back a hundred demon prisoners from the south. They all looked so hopeless and distraught..."

Percival nods. A look of relief passes over his face. "Ah, is that all that's bothering you? Well, they *are* our enemy. You'll have to get the notion out of your head that they deserve mercy. A little girl demon will eventually mature into a man-eating succubus, or potentially even a wraith. Why, wraiths slew thousands of innocent villagers in the south just last winter!"

Sticking his hand out, Percival offers to help Phoebe to her feet. Instead, she stares at him, a feeling of shame washing over her. "You feel the same way as the other knights, Sir Percival? About demons? Even the children?"

Percival drops his hand to his side and sighs. "That I do. I know you are a kind soul, Lady Berthold, but those damned bloodskins are pure evil. If you respect His Majesty, then you will see that he is a Hero ordained by the gods to rid the world of demonic sin. There is no place for demonkind in a peaceful world."

Phoebe reaches for the doorway and pulls herself up, rubbing her sore butt as she rises. "I can't help but wonder if there isn't a better way. People seem too eager to inflict barbarism and cruelty upon one another just as much as they do the demons."

Sir Percival stands up as well and smiles. "Lady Berthold..." Slowly, he reaches over to caress her face. "You are the kindest woman I know. Your dignity and grace are your greatest assets. I pray you never have to see the horrors of war, nor the punishment we inflict upon those who oppose his majesty. Your heart would break."

Phoebe pulls away from his touch, a chill going down her back. "That would be... ah... I... I will retire for the day. I'm feeling light-headed."

"As you wish." Percival sighs. "If you like, I can manage the training today."

"Yes. Please do," Phoebe whispers. She eyes Percival for a few seconds, then turns and walks away.

Phoebe's quarters, little more than a small hut near the castle, stand not far from the dungeons. As she walks along, she eyes the small stone tower with its stairs that delve deep into Camelot's depths.

She pauses before her home, hesitating to walk inside. Gazing across the field, she swallows hard.

No, Phoebe. Don't look. You shouldn't. Leave it to the men. The King knows best.

She bites her lip, hesitating as she reflects upon her actions.

Finally, she relents. *I have to see. I need to know what will happen to them.*

Another voice whispers in her head. *What will you do if you witness something loathsome?*

N-nothing. I'm only... I'm going to take a quick look. Nothing else.

Phoebe turns away from her house and walks across the field, heading for the massive wooden doors which lead to Castle Camelot's dungeons.

A hundred demons stand, their wrists shackled to the ceiling, as they await their demise: men, women, even a child. The guards, having already torn all their clothing off, examine the prisoners.

Maxim, the head guard, paces back and forth, grimacing at the more freakish demons, including a pair of Scythers, whose sword-arms possess the power to slice through thick armor. Maxim's eyes fall on three succubi, and he sneers at them. "You may think your male mind control will work on me, but think again. The Archangel Camael, Lady of the Lake, forged those collars that you whores wear now. She created these artifacts explicitly to render your *filth* powerless. There is no way out of the Camelot Dungeons."

Maxim continues walking past them, and his eyes lower to the lone little demon girl, her long white hair barely covering her upper body. "A kid, huh? Today will be even more fun than I expected."

Two male demons beside her, somewhat older, shuffle to the side to try and block her from Maxim's view. The older one speaks up. "Keep your eyes off our sister, fleshbag scum!"

"What?! How dare you!" Maxim pales for a moment, then rears back and strikes the one who spoke right in the stomach, making the handsome demon gasp in pain.

"Brother!" The little girl wriggles and tries to do something at all, but her toes barely touch the ground.

Maxim glares nastily at the older demon, then grabs him by the throat. "I don't take lip from blood-skins!"

Whump! Whump! Whump!

Maxim slams his metal-gauntlet fist over and over into the male's stomach until the eldest brother can't make a sound. Blood pours from his mouth.

With a smirk, Maxim gestures to another guard. "Let's have some fun with this tough guy first. Go ahead and strap down two of those succubi for me. I'll have my way with them later. As for these worthless Scythers, kill them. They never talk. Too stupid."

Two muscled guards nod without smiling and draw their swords. The scythers wriggle and try to turn away, but their efforts fail. The swordsmen impale them through the stomach three times, then stab them through the throat.

The succubi scream in terror as the guards manhandle and drag them away by their hair. "Please! Don't hurt us! We don't mean any harm! Pleeese!!!"

After tightly binding the arms of the succubi so they can't fight back, the guards drag them away to a nearby room. Their screams echo throughout the dungeon.

Maxim glowers at the crowd of onlookers. "Drake! Get that male in the iron maiden, and tie the one who gave me lip to a Pain Chair. We'll have a go at the little one after we finish the first batch."

The girl watches in horror as they cart her brother off. "Rahab! No! Don't hurt him, please!"

"Shut your mouth," Maxim says, backhanding her face and knocking her away. Her remaining brother pulls hard at his chains and snarls, but Maxim ignores him.

Leaning down, Maxim grabs the little girl by her chin. "You know what we're gonna do to that handsome devil brother of yours? First, we'll smash his kneecaps. Then we'll break his elbows. Unless someone in this motley crew decides to tell us where more hidden demon dens are, every demon here will suffer the same fate as him. I have a long line of pests to get out of the way, so rest easy that his death will be quick."

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning arcs off the girl's chin and violently shocks Maxim, sending him sprawling back. The girl screams at him, tears in her eyes. "Take that! You awful human!"

Maxim's entire arm shakes and spasms for several seconds before it slows to a tremble. His eyes bulge. "You little bitch. How did you activate your magic?! Ohh, now you're in for it. I've got a special present *just* for you."

Maxim beckons to another guard. "Bring her brother here. We'll torture him right in front of his siblings. Won't that be fun?"

"Rahab!" The remaining male demon pulls and tugs at his chains, but can't get free. "You bastards! Satan will damn you to Hell! Our kind will tear your children from their mother's arms!"

"Hahaha." Maxim shakes some feeling into his numbed hand. "Tell me where the demon lairs are, and your brother won't suffer. Otherwise, stand there and watch."

The little girl and her brother gaze in terror as their still-coughing older brother is dragged over and strapped to a chair with a thousand small spikes lining it. The guards slap and batter him around. "Wake up! Say goodbye to your fellow cockroaches, worm!"

A guard from the other room walks over; a large nail in one hand and a sledgehammer in the other. He hands the spike to another guard who positions it above Rahab's knee.

Rahab blinks deliriously. His eyes widen when he sees what's coming.

Then the first guard raises the hammer.

The little girl and her brother scream in unison. "No! Stop!"

WHAM.

The nail impales Rahab's kneecap with a sickening *crunch*. His unearthly howl of pain makes even the guards flinch. "GEEYAAAUGH!"

The little girl presses her eyes shut and turns away, sobbing uncontrollably. "Uwaaah! No! Rahab...!"

The guard yanks the spike out of Rahab's knee, which only causes him more agony, then places it over the other one.

Maxim smirks and walks over to the girl, not deigning to touch her this time. "You think this is painful? Sir Gallant has a special plan for you. The same one he does for all the cute little bloodskins. Hehehe."

"Uwaaah..." The little girl hiccups and shakes as she forces herself to look away. Rahab's anguished screams ring in her ears as they drive the next nail into his other kneecap.

"Bastards... bastards... bastards..." The remaining brother gnashes his teeth and tugs at his chains as he watches helplessly. "A million curses..."

Maxim stands up and dusts himself off. "Alright, let's break all of his fingers. I don't care about getting information from this one. Show these blood-skins we mean business. Sir Gallant the Brave will be here soon. I'm betting he'll want the child for himself."

"Aye, sir," One of the other guards says.

For the next hour, each guard takes turns breaking various parts of the eldest brother's body, until soon his voice is so hoarse and his mind so numb that he passes out and falls comatose.

The guards wipe their brows. "Whew, gods, that's a hard day of work. Haha."

"Stupid bastard finally croaked," another guard laughs. "Let's haul him to the butcher table and finish him off. I wanna have some fun with that last succubus before Gallant gets here. Once he has his way with her, she'll be too far gone for me to enjoy myself."

The little demon girl whimpers and shivers uncontrollably, partially due to being cold, but mostly because of the hatred and anguish in her body. She cracks her eyes and watches as they take Rahab's limp

form away.

"Rahab... brother..."

"It's... it's okay," her other brother mutters. He stands silently now, forcing himself to keep calm. "R-Rahab was valiant to the very end. The Emperors will not forget his fearlessness. He'll... he'll go into the great demon city under the Earth."

Both he and his sister tremble and cry.

Phoebe opens the dungeon door. A young guard at the entrance, perhaps twenty years old, spots her. "Oh! Lady Berthold! A pleasure to see you! What are you doing poking your head into these parts?"

Her stomach clenches as a man's voice howls in agony far in the distance. "I... I need to see someone here."

The guard scratches the back of his head. "Ahh, Sir Gallant just returned a few minutes ago. I've gotta ask him if it's okay for visitors to show up. After all, prison ain't no place for a noble lady like yourself."

A moment passes. Another scream makes Phoebe's skin crawl. "Are you questioning my fortitude? I am one of the Knights of Twelve, young man."

The guard's face whitens. "O-oh, no! Of course not! I meant no disrespect! Would you like me to show you to your destination?"

Yet another shriek tears through the dungeon, this time filled with ten times the raw emotion of the previous scream. Phoebe shakes her head. "No. I think I already know the general direction."

"As you wish."

She pushes past the guard and heads down the spiral staircase three stories into the Earth, where rock and stone and brick all blend to create a gloomy, dark atmosphere.

I've never been down here before. This horrid hellhole is where we keep the prisoners? It's filthy! Barbaric!

Her teeth grind noisily as an even more piercing scream rattles her innards. Still, it tells her to take a left when a two-way junction appears. Only a few torches line the walls, along with a few empty ones meant for lighting and carrying in the darkness. She takes one of the spares, touches it to a lit one, and continues onward.

Eventually, Phoebe arrives at a small room, and her eyes widen. A mixture of disgust and horror floods through her body as she stares at over ninety demons, all chained to the ceiling, their positions calculated so they can barely touch the floor with their toes. Her eyes instantly gravitate to the little girl from earlier, but then she follows the girl's gaze. A demon sits, strapped in a chair, his arms and legs little more than a bloody mush.

The demon male breathes weakly. His tongue lolls out of his mouth, and his head rolls around. He babbles incoherently, his voice a whisper. "Puh... puleese... hurt... stop... pluss... hurtsss..."

One of the guards raises a hammer and slams it down. The demon croaks as the guards smash one of his fingers into pulp. His hoarse voice reminds Phoebe of a donkey braying in pain.

She watches silently, her body trembling more and more as each hammer strikes batter his body. Finally, the guards give up when their hostage stops screaming. His head lolls back, and blood pours from his mouth.

Is that demon dead?! Phoebe's teeth chatter nervously. What is going on in these dungeons?! How could we unleash such wickedness, yet call ourselves agents of God?!

The guards eventually drag the beaten and bloodied prisoner away. For the first time in Phoebe's life, insecurity in herself and others boils up in her chest.

What purpose have I trained for? What side am I on? I thought the demons were the greatest evil in this world... but... but...

"Lady Berthold! We-he-hell, a pleasure to see you!"

A man's voice booms out from behind Phoebe. She nearly shrieks in fright, but instead opts to whirl around and stare at him, her eyes wide as saucers.

"M-mister- I mean, Sir Gallant?"

A fat, repulsive man leers toward her, his body covered in ill-fitting armor and far too much chest hair for anyone's liking. A badly trimmed mustache worms its way across his upper lip, like a corba searching for a meal. "Why, yes ma'am! That's me! Did you come to watch us flog these blood-skins too? I'll be damned. I had no idea you were that kind of lady."

Phoebe swallows hard and forces herself to calm down. "I... I came here... to, ah..."

"Heeey, no need to be shy! Come on in. We like to have *good* fun down here, if you know what I mean. Haha!"

Gallant walks past her and licks his lips as he stares at the fresh meat lined up against the wall. "Sweet Jesus, look at all these filthy sodding bloodsuckers. Each of 'em looks like a sweet chunk of beef just waiting to be tenderized. Haha!"

Gallant slams his boot into the closest male's genitals, then decks him in the face before the demon can yell out in pain. "Hahaha! Nothing better than defenseless blood-skins to let out a little anger. Wanna have a go? They can't hurt you none, not with those collars on."

Phoebe's eyes avoid the lower regions of the demons as she tries not to look at their exposed bodies too much. "N-no."

Instead, her eyes gravitate toward the collars around their necks. *Cursed Necklaces. They sap the energy from demons and leave them unable to fight back. Demons can't remove the collars... only humans can.*

Having served on the Round Table for several years, Phoebe knows full well the capabilities of Camael's divine artifacts. However, having never witnessed their usage in person, her stomach churns as she realizes how the prison guards use them.

Gallant continues walking the line before kneeling to stare at the little girl. Phoebe's heart pounds in her chest as he strokes her hair. "Aww. You look terrified, my delectable butterfly. You should be. We're gonna stick you in the Bull. Know what that is? Of course, you don't. It's a hollow metal animal that makes your screams louder. Then we're gonna cook you over a fire. If your pitiful shrieks don't convince everyone here to spill their secrets... hehe... nothing will."

As Sir Gallant strokes her hair, the little girl's older brother suddenly yanks on his chains, lifts himself by his chains, and delivers a kick *smack* into Gallant's face. The prison-master stumbles back and slams on his back, creating a scene of chaos among the nearby prison guards. He spits and sputters for a moment before hauling his fat ass up.

"Why, y-you piece of FILTH! You won't live to regret that!" He grabs a wooden club from the wall and wipes a drop of blood from his nose. Then, he charges at the girl's brother, but Phoebe suddenly steps in his way and knocks him to the ground yet again.

"Sir Gallant! I-is this how you act when a superior officer is watching?!" Phoebe's voice cracks slightly, but she forces herself to stand dominantly and tower over the man sitting on the floor. "I came here to inspect the dungeons, not to watch you unleash your fantasies on children!"

Gallant stares at her in surprise, then clamber to his feet once again. "I... I beg your pardon? I'm the bloody prison-master! I can do as I please to these filthy monsters! Have you any idea the horrors they committed against our brothers and sisters in the South? The bodies stacked higher than the huts!"

Phoebe falters. "Th-they did?"

Sir Gallant's nostrils flare. "Aye. So, before you let your feminine sensibilities get in the way of your duty, I advise you to remember what fiends you're dealing with."

Doubt appears in Phoebe's mind. However, the sound of the little girl's chains rattling behind her solidifies her convictions.

"I have my orders, Sir Gallant. I'm temporarily relieving you of your duty until we can evaluate your conduct and treatment of the prisoners."

Sir Gallant stares at her and gawks for several agonizing seconds. He clutches the club in his hand a little tighter. "You... you treacherous demon-loving *whore*... the King will hear of this treason!"

Phoebe swallows hard, but keeps her eyes locked on his. "That he will. Leave."

Snarling like a madman, Sir Gallant eyes Phoebe for a several moments before swearing under his breath and storming out of the room.

"You'll regret crossing me."

Phoebe's hands shake as she forces herself not to think about her actions. *Keep moving, Phoebe. No time to waste.*

After Sir Gallant the Brave storms away, Phoebe turns to face the little girl. "I'm sorry, child. I'm sorry the bad men treated you like that. Let me get those shackles off..."

Only now does she realize that she hasn't a clue how to do that. Luckily, the girl's brother coughs and nods across the room. "O-over there. The keys. Please, save my sister. Ose is a good girl. She doesn't deserve what those men are going to do to her."

Lady Berthold doesn't waste time in grabbing the keys and walking back over.

As soon as she unshackles the child, the girl slumps and falls into Phoebe's arms. Her tiny little body is weak from exhaustion. Phoebe's heart trembles as she picks the girl up in her arms. Ose whimpers. "Brother... don't leave my brother behind, please..."

Several of the other demons stare at Phoebe longingly. *Take us with you*, their eyes beg.

The last remaining succubus trembles. "Th-they took my friends. They're torturing Merle and Hana right now! You have to help them... you don't know what the guards do to captured succubi..."

"I can't. I can't." Phoebe glances across the room in the direction of the inner torture chambers. Only now does she recall the horror stories she's heard about nonstop rape and torture in the dungeons. Demon prisoners naturally receive far worse punishments than humans.

She chews her lip into shreds. "I can't save them. But... I'll try and save the women here. I'll do what I can."

Indeed, she glances around at the thirty shackled females and the nearly sixty males. *I can't save everyone. If I walk out of the dungeon with all the captured demons, someone will stop me. If it's only the women, perhaps I can make up an excuse.*

Nodding to herself, she quickly rushes around, releasing all of the women before pausing in front of the little girl's brother. He shakes his head. "Don't. If you release me, you'll have to release the other men as well. I don't deserve special treatment." Phoebe nods, but jumps onto a stool and unlocks his shackles anyway. He slumps a little but catches himself before falling.

"Hug your sister. Quickly."

The demon nods and takes his little sister from Phoebe. He presses her against his chest. "B-be strong, Ose. I'm sorry. I love you."

The girl weeps in his arms. "I love you too... don't stay... come with us! Come-"

He pushes her away and raises his arms again for Phoebe to shackle him. "No. I stay. The women leave. And to you, human... thank you."

Phoebe nods, as the sound of women screaming in the distance raises several alarm bells in her mind. "Alright. Little one, follow me. Ladies, line up. I have to bind your hands and chain you all together. If I don't, it will draw too much suspicion."

The demonesses glance at each other. *We have to trust this human*, their eyes say. Fearing the return of the guards, they quickly hustle into the line, with the little girl at the front. Phoebe tosses chains and cuffs to them, then strings the shackles along to their neck collars.

Not a minute later, they leave, their chains clinking as they walk. The little girl stares silently at her brother, and he nods back at her. "Be safe, little sister."

* * *

It takes Phoebe more than thirty minutes of walking at agonizingly slow speeds, but she still sighs in relief when the chained demonesses reach the spiral staircase. They climb the steps, forming a strange conga line.

After ten full minutes, Phoebe spies the top of the stairwell. The guard from before watches her pace up the steps, and he cranes his neck to see what's causing all the chain rattling noise. When he sees the line of women, his suspicion immediately rises. "Hey! What's going on here? Where are you taking all the demon whores?!"

Phoebe bites her lip and forces another lie out. "King Arthur's orders. I'm taking them to a different facility."

"Yeah? Did Sir Gallant sign off on this? I'm supposed to know who's coming and going!"

Phoebe rises to her full height, still an inch or two shorter than the lad. "Are you questioning King Arthur's orders? What's your name, guardsman? Perhaps I should tell Arthur you wish to be the new King, since you think your orders supersede his."

The youth's face pales again. "Oh, no! I meant no disrespect, milady. I... I'm just trying to do my job. That's all."

The little girl pushes to Phoebe's side as the guard's gaze fixes on her for a moment. Phoebe reaches back subtly and touches her hair. "Good. If you have a problem, I'll let King Arthur know about your complaint. Open the door for us."

The youth pauses for only a moment, sighing as he eyes the sultry nude red-skinned women. He takes a few steps and throws the door open, standing outside so they can leave. "As you wish."

Phoebe marches outside, the demon ladies in tow. She continues to amble along, so nobody will trip and fall. One woman gasps in surprise, and Phoebe turns back just in time to see the young guard smacking her bottom. "Move it, cutie! They're gonna looove you at the other camp! Haha. Damn shame, I couldn't have a turn before you leave. Maybe I can pay you a visit later, eh?"

Phoebe grits her teeth, but keeps walking. *Bear with it. We have a long, long walk ahead of us. I don't know how in the hell we're going to get through town.*

Indeed, Phoebe's lack of planning comes rushing to her all at once as she realizes they still have five miles of the village to travel through before she can safely release the women.

The guard stares at the prisoners for a solid twenty seconds before sighing and closing the door behind himself. The demoness closest to Phoebe, right behind the little girl, looks around worriedly. "What now, human? We're right next to the castle. Someone could see us at any moment."

Phoebe inhales, and her hand starts to tremble.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. What do I do? I can't believe myself. All this, and we could end up captured by guardsmen. Every second we spend waiting is another second that doom draws nearer.

Suddenly, from the side of the dungeon tower, a single figure steps out. Phoebe's heart pounds as she hears the heavy footsteps. When she whirls, she gapes in shock at Sir Percival. He stares back silently, first at her, then the demon women all chained together.

"I knew it. Lady Berthold... what are you planning? Why are half of the prisoners out here naked and chained up?"

Phoebe's mouth opens and closes several times as she tries to formulate an answer. "K-king Arthur- he told m-me to..."

"Lies." Percival strides over to Phoebe, and slowly his gaze lowers to the cowering child. "Dammit, Phoebe. Dammit. Now you've stepped in the shit."

Tears begin rolling down Phoebe's face. "P-Percival, please... they're helpless women. The things those men were going to do to them..."

Percival closes his eyes. "They're demons. Temptresses. They beguile men, and now you as well."

Despite the harshness of Percival's voice, something about his behavior strikes Phoebe as odd. She finds out why when he continues speaking. "Alright. I'll help you. Take the women to your house, just across the way. If someone spots you crossing the castle yard, you're on your own. I'll bring a horse and wagon, big enough to fit them all inside. Give me thirty minutes."

Phoebe stares at him in stunned silence for a moment, then nods. "I... thank you, Percival. I don't know why you're helping us, but-"

"I'm not helping the demons," Percival mutters. "I'm doing this for you. You're a kind woman. You will be punished horribly once the King finds out what happened. They might even execute you. The least I can do is make sure that your rescue operation isn't fruitless."

Percival strides away, unable to look Phoebe in the eye. She and the demons watch in stunned silence as he leaves.

The demoness behind Phoebe shakes her chains. "L-let's get a move on, then. We can't stand in front of the dungeon."

Phoebe nods, a sensation of loss looming in the back of her mind. "Right. Let's hurry."

Part 057: Her Country, Or Her Morality?

Phoebe's heart pounds like a thousand galloping stallions. The women quickly shuffle into her house, but only after Phoebe shuts the door does a faint feeling of relief wash over her.

A panic attack immediately follows.

Trembling violently, Phoebe clutches her chest, gasping for breath as sweat and terror drench her body. She shivers and mutters incomprehensibly, before falling to her knees. When she comes to, the demoness at the front of the line is straining to get closer to her, with the one behind her being as accommodating as possible, given the circumstances.

"Fleshbag? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Phoebe blinks. "I... I'm... scared. I disobeyed the king. We're all going to die. They'll behead me. I'm evil. I betrayed my people."

Phoebe babbles rapidly, releasing her pent-up emotions upon the unwitting demoness. However, the succubus merely nods without passing judgment.

"You're not evil; you're brave. Never thought I'd see the day when a human would save us from other humans."

Phoebe pulls herself up and fumbles for the key she took from the jail cell. She unhooks each demon's bindings but stops short of removing their leg and arm shackles. "I have to keep these on until we leave the city. It won't do to have you all unbound in the back of the wagon. The guards will be suspicious."

The succubus nods. "A sound idea. I'd rather free myself and try to escape now, but I can't repay your kindness with selfishness. Not when those animals still have Merle and Hana locked down in those hellish dungeons."

Phoebe nods. She unlocks the little girl's restraints, then walks over to her closet and grabs a blouse. "I won't parade women nude through the city. We'd be begging for trouble. Everyone, come here and take my clothes. I'll fetch blankets from upstairs for the rest of you."

The small house, barely more than a few rooms, teems with life as the women pass clothing from one to the next, sighing when they can't get any of their arms through the sleeves. Phoebe returns to undo and redo each of the women's bindings one after the other, allowing them to put the shirts and pants on comfortably.

A drop of sweat rolls down her back. *Percival... it's been over half an hour. Where are you?*

The little girl, Ose, sniffles. "Big brother... they're both gone. I'm... I'm never gonna see them again."

Phoebe walks over and hugs the girl, trying to comfort her. "No. I'll do what I can to help the men. My life is already forfeit at this point. I won't let your brother die, little one."

A sudden pounding at the door makes every person in the cottage jump in fright. Phoebe draws her sword and holds it behind her back, nodding at the women to make them stay out of sight. Only when she

cracks open the door and spots Percival standing in the doorway does she relax slightly.

Percival jerks his head from left to right. "Are they all here? Did anyone see you?"

Phoebe nods, then shakes her head. Yes, they are. No... I don't think anyone did. Thank you, Percival. Leave, before anyone sees you here. I don't want you getting involved beyond this. You're a wonderful knight."

"Shut up. Get the whores out here and loaded into the covered wagon. I'm going with you."

Phoebe shakes her head. "No! You can't! My life is already over! Don't throw yours away, too!"

"I'll throw away whatever I damn well please." Percival eyes Phoebe silently for a moment. "I told you. I'm not helping the bloody demons. I'm saving you, Phoebe. After we release these women, I want you to flee with me. I have a relative outside Camelot's borders. He'll take us in."

Phoebe shakes her head. "I won't. I'm going to submit to the crown for my punishment afterward. I can't live with my betrayal of His Majesty."

Percival grits his teeth. "God... damned... woman. Confound you. We don't have time to argue. Ladies! Get out here, on the double. The guard shifts will be changing at high-noon at the border gates. We have to leave before Sir Lorgon arrives. No way he'll let us pass."

Phoebe's face whitens. *Sir Lorgon?! I forgot about him. He hates demons more than just about anyone else. He lost his wife and daughter to them.*

Phoebe quickly looks back and beckons at the demonesses peeking around the corner. "Come quickly."

The women nod and shuffle out as fast as their feet can move. Phoebe takes the little girl in her arms and hoists her into the wagon parked mere feet from her door, obscuring her house entrance from prying eyes.

Percival helps each woman up, barely giving a passing glance at their ill-fitting and often embarrassingly revealing clothes. Instead, he steals glances at Phoebe now and then.

Once everyone enters the wagon, Percival closes the front and back, hiding the cowering women from prying eyes. "If anyone looks inside, make yourselves look as pitiful and weak as possible. Pretend you've already suffered terribly in the dungeon."

They nod in unison. *Simple enough*, their eyes say. *It wouldn't be a lie.*

Percival and Phoebe climb into the wagon's front. Only now does she take the time to look around. Several people are playing horseshoes across the distance, but they don't seem to notice the covered wagon.

"Percival, please. Leave. You've done enough for me already."

"I won't," he says matter-of-factly. "If there are two Knights of the Round, that will legitimize our leaving the castle with thirty demon prisoners. If it's just you, a woman, they might question your sensibilities."

Phoebe blushes. She looks away, unable to meet his gaze. "Th-thank you... Sir Percival. You're too kind."

"No." The man takes the reins, and the horses start walking. "I'm selfish. I'm only doing this because I... toward you... I feel..."

"I must remain chaste," Phoebe says, cutting him off. "We can't. I vowed to the Mother of the Lord."

Percival clamps his mouth shut. He runs a hand through his windswept blonde hair. "So you say."

* * *

Both Knights of the Round ride in silence toward the city gate. Minutes pass. Phoebe's anxiety increases as they draw nearer and nearer. *It's a trap. It's a trap.*

Finally, the city gate appears in the distance. The wall surrounding Camelot, made of stone and steel, stands a mere fifteen-feet tall, but with a wagon-full of chained women, it might as well be a mile high.

"Let me do the talking," Percival mutters. "You look like you're about to have a panic attack."

Phoebe clutches her hands into fists. "Last chance, Percival."

"Mhm."

The man doesn't bat an eye.

The guards up ahead turn and spot the wagon coming. They hold up their spears to stop the horses. "Whoa, whoa! Hey there, Sir Percival, Lady Berthold! You headed somewhere?"

Percival nods, forming his face into steel. "We are. I'm taking a batch of the blood-skins we recently captured to a holding facility just outside of Camelot. Dungeon's too full for them right now."

"Zat so?" The black-haired guard swaggers over to the rear of the cart and flips it open. "Huh. They're all women. Why're you taking all the whores out of the city?"

Percival doesn't bat an eye. "I only do what the King and Sir Gallant ordered. He kept a few of the prettiest ones for himself. You might even get to have a taste if you pop over after your shift."

The guard sucks air through his teeth and glances at the sun. "Oooh, shiet! You're right! It's goddamn near high-noon! I might be able to break some backs and call in a few favors. If these babes are the ugly ones, I can't wait to see the cute ones!"

The succubus flinches as she realizes what his words mean. *My sisters...*

Closing the rear curtain, the guardsman saunters to the front. "Hokay then! Don't have too much fun on the way over! And for you, Lady Berthold, don't let this scoundrel take any extended breaks, hahaha! Lord only knows the moaning will drive you-"

Percival glares ice at the guardsman. "Are you done belching words yet?"

"Uhh..." The man nods dumbly at the imposing knight decked out in full platemail. "Y-yeah. Sorry." He shuffles awkwardly over to the other guards. "Alright, let 'em through."

The horses *clomp* across the ground as the guards swing open a gate for them. "Take care!"

Phoebe and Percival nod in unison, forcing themselves not to appear relieved.

Only once the gates slam shut behind them, and half a mile passes, do the two knights finally sag their shoulders.

"Heavens." Phoebe shivers. "That was terrifying. How did you keep your calm?"

Percival stares ahead blankly for a few moments. Then, he turns his head toward the white-haired woman. "I pissed myself."

"Y-you did?" Phoebe's eyes slowly lower to his lower region.

"Mhm. I'll need new trousers when we reach my relative's house."

Phoebe turns to gaze ahead, and a moment later, she chuckles. She starts with a quiet snicker but soon erupts into roaring laughter as she slaps her knee and guffaws at the top of her lungs. "Hahahaha!!!"

Percival joins in, and the two of them howl and poke each other cutely, ignoring the demons peeping through the front flaps to see what's so funny.

Two miles pass. Then three. Phoebe glances back and sighs in relief at the distant walls of Camelot. "We'll go on foot from here. It shouldn't take long for the dungeon keepers to alert the city guards."

Percival doesn't slow the horse. "Do you trust these demons? You'll have to remove their collars. You don't know how dangerous demons are, Lady Berthold. You have yet to see what they can do."

Phoebe twirls a few hairs around her finger. "I saved their lives. Do you think they'd stab me in the back now? Have you no faith?"

Percival's gaze lowers. "You're too trusting. Demons are evil. No matter how sweet or innocent they may appear, they are irredeemable."

"And humans are better?" A tinge of anger appears on Phoebe's face. "What I saw in those dungeons was a horror unlike anything else. Demon or not, they look like us, yet we treat them worse than animals. You act as if they're subhumans."

"Tch." Percival pulls on the reins, slowing the horses to a stop. "If you're resolute in your beliefs, release the she-devils. Do what you wish. My life is already forfeit, as is yours."

Phoebe doesn't reply. She pulls open the flap, then climbs inside. The demons look away, having heard the conversation the knights just shared. A sensation of shame and despair washes over the group.

The little girl stares up at Phoebe. "Do you think demons and humans can be friends?"

Phoebe nods, kissing the child on her forehead. "I do, precious one."

"But... but humans took my brothers..."

"Not all humans are like that." Phoebe sighs. "Most are, though. I'm sorry. I wish we could all get along."

The succubus nods. "As do I."

Phoebe unshackles everyone in the cart. They rub their sore wrists and ankles, relieved that their captivity is behind them. Phoebe pauses for a moment, then removes the first Cursed Necklace from the

little girl. A small static shock makes her recoil, but she quickly moves on and continues releasing each of the remaining demons. Within a few minutes, she finishes freeing everyone.

Phoebe clambers past the demons to head for the front, but the Succubus grabs her wrist. "Wait. Human. Before we leave, kneel down."

Phoebe eyes the succubus quizzically but does as she's asked. To her surprise, the demoness pulls Phoebe's head in close and plants a passionate kiss on her mouth.

"Mgmm?!" Phoebe pushes away from the demon, a look of surprise on her face. "W-what?! Why? That's forbidden!"

The succubus smiles and rubs her two little horns. "I don't care about your human laws. All I care about is you. You've saved us all, and awoken a passion in me I haven't felt before. I'll see to it that you're welcome among my sisters any time."

Phoebe nods dumbly. "I... I see. Thank you... I... suppose..."

She stumbles forward into the front cabin. Percival raises an eyebrow. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"No. I don't... think so." Phoebe's eyes lower. "Let's get a move-"

Behind them, in the distance, a horn blows from the city's watchtower.

Bwaaaaaaaah.

Phoebe's blood turns to ice. "We have to run! They're pursuing us!"

All the demons leap out of the rear of the cart at once. One of the women gathers the others around and makes a few motions with her hands. "I'm summoning a faint mirage around us. My illusion magic is weak, but it will throw off any hounds. Let's go!"

Phoebe watches as the demon women flee toward the forest a few miles away. Each demon glances at her for only a moment, then they all take off, fleeing for their lives.

Percival leaps into action, loosing two of the horses. "You take the mare. I'll take the stallion. Let's go!"

The white-haired woman doesn't move. Instead, she continues to gaze at the backs of the demon women as they flee for their lives. "No. I told you. I'll submit to my punishment honorably. No matter what His Majesty does to me, I will not walk the path of a coward. What I did was just. I will plead my case."

Percival blanches. "Lady Berthold! If you go back, they won't allow you to plead for anything! We committed treason! It's beheadings or the gallows for both of us!"

A rock forms in Phoebe's throat, one that won't dissolve no matter how hard she swallows. "King Arthur is a just man. He will spare me. I believe in him. He will force me to slave in the fields for the rest of my life, or throw me in the dungeon until I die... but he will not execute me."

Phoebe climbs off the cart and turns her back to Percival. "Farewell, Sir Percival. Leave and save yourself. This is my burden to bear."

"Phoebe..."

Percival's voice cracks. Tears roll down his face.

"Don't go. Please. *Please*. I beg you."

Phoebe ignores him and begins walking toward the city. Her boots crunch against the loose dirt and twigs lining the well-traveled road. Her eyes gaze ahead, imagining the future.

She smiles. *At the least, I succeeded. I released those poor women. God will look upon me favorably. Even if the king punishes me to a life in prison... even if the guards ravage me in place of the demons... I know my choice was correct.*

Another voice in her head speaks. *Was it? You released demons! They are God's mortal enemy. Your countrymen will hang you... as you deserve.*

Something grabs Phoebe's arm. She turns around in surprise to see Percival, tears in his eyes.

"I love you, Phoebe. I won't leave you to die alone. I'll return with you. I'll be honorable and strong... just... just as you are. I won't let you face the gallows by yourself."

Phoebe inhales, seeing the passion in his eyes. "Percival..."

In the distance, horse hooves galloping toward them make the two knights stiffen. Phoebe and Percival turn to face their doom; their faces pale with terror.

"We could still flee," Percival offers, though he can see the riders approaching now.

"No. It's too late. We will accept our fates nobly, Sir Percival."

They stand in silence as the army of a hundred strong draws near, confusion on some of their faces. The cavalry eventually slows to a stop, their horses kicking up dust toward Phoebe and Percival.

A vicious-looking man with a full beard stares down at the two silent warriors. *Sir Lorgon*. The rage of his face ripples through the air. "Bald-faced traitors! Where are the demon whores?!"

Phoebe doesn't back down. "I released them. The women don't deserve the horrors of the dungeon. We shall return to the castle and allow His Majesty to sentence us for our crimes."

Lorgon's teeth grind together. "You *dare* humiliate my brother, Sir Gallant the Brave, yet think I'll allow you to live?! Traitors die where they stand!"

He makes a quick motion with his fingers, and two riders raise their bows at Phoebe and Percival.

Percival gasps. "What? No! The King-"

"There is no king here, foolish broad! I have the right to sentence two demon-lovers to death! FIRE!"

Phoebe's eyes widen as the arrows fly from their bows toward her. Time crawls in slow motion as she passively waits for her death to arrive. Instead, something massive shoves her out of the way. A choked wheeze erupts from Percival's lips as he jumps in front of her. An arrow lances into his chest, sentencing him to certain death.

The knight stumbles backward and lands on top of Phoebe, stunned, as his eyes lurch to the arrows in his gut. "G-guh! Muh-hurk!"

Sir Lorgon snarls. "Hah! The brave aristocrat wishes to die protecting his harlot. Give him what he wishes. Fire!"

"Nooo!" Phoebe screams in terror as Percival's body spasms. Two more arrows plunge into his chest. When the archers nock two more, something unexpected happens. All of the horses in the troop begin to buck and whinney in terror.

One of the Privates cries out in alarm. "What in god's name?! Something's got the mares spooked!"

Phoebe stares at the back of Percival's head as he lays on top of her, his arms spread out protectively. Warm blood trickles from his chest, wraps around his body, and spills onto her light, leathery armor. "Percival... Percival..."

"Ph... Phoebe... e..."

From across the field, a blur of motion catches one cavalryman's attention, even as his horse kicks and bucks. "O-over there! In the grass! What is- GWAH!"

A flash of green leaps from the grass, tears the youth from his saddle, and jumps away, dragging the poor bastard into the dense grass on the opposite side of the road.

Lorgon's eyes widen. "To arms! Abandon these damned horses!" He dismounts and lands on the ground, smacking his steed's ass to send it running away before drawing his sword. The other men quickly follow suit.

The screams of their fellow soldier in the field, loud at first, suddenly go silent. A sensation of terror appears in their minds.

The creature, animal, monster, or *whatever* it is, leaps from the tall grass again.

"Look out!"

A man yells and raises his shield, but the monster, a terrifying human-shaped crocodile, smashes against it, shatters the man's arm in fifteen places, and slams him into the ground. The green-scaled monster whips its bladed tail in a horizontal motion and slices five other men in half before they can react.

"F-form a circle! Attack its weak spots!" Lorgon bellows orders quickly, having more battle experience than the troops from the city, soldiers that Phoebe herself trained not a summer before.

"What weak spots?! AAAUGH!" A man explodes into a puddle of gore as the lizard-like monster roars angrily. "Flee! Flee before the might of Agares!"

On the other side of the men, opposite the Duke of Reptiles, a wolf howls. From the distant forest, a four-legged creature with fifty eyes bolts from its cover, dashing across the fields at speeds one would be hard-pressed to follow with their eyes. The creature, a *Hellhound*, moves at thrice the speed of a cheetah, tearing up the ground during its mad dash. The flesh-rending razor-sharp teeth in its mouth, capable of tearing apart the finest steel armor in the world, shine menacingly as the horrific monster charges the poorly grouped-up defensive line.

Lorgon's eyes bulge. "Brace for impact!!!"

BOOM. The Hellhound batters the wall of troops, sending them flying. Bones snap, shatter, and twist. Men rain from the sky. Before they can hit the ground, the monster leaps into the air and tears them apart ruthlessly.

Agares laughs. "Excellent work, Lucifer!"

"Shut up! Kill! Tear!" The female hellhound unleashes her ravenous claws upon the defenseless troops, sending them rushing away in a panic. Her claws shred their steel armor like wet paper.

Phoebe stares at the two demons in terror as Percival's eyes flutter shut. She turns to look at him. "Percival... stay with me. Stay alive!"

The knight smiles. "Phoebe... won't you say... you love me? Just this once? Just... just this..."

Percival takes his last breath. His soul leaves him, and his body slumps against the woman he loves. Phoebe stares in silent horror. Then, her eyes return to the two demons. When they draw near, she whimpers.

Agares leans down. "White hair. Is she the one?"

The hellhound stalks over to Phoebe, its monstrous face and smoky-black skin sending terror through her body. All fifty of its eyes lock onto her.

Sniff. Sniff. "I smell the scent of our brothers. She is the one the child spoke of. She will take us to our comrades."

Phoebe's lip quivers. "Who...? What?"

"Devil's sake, Lucifer. She's petrified." Agares delivers a bone-crushing kick to a soldier trying to crawl away, flinging the man hundreds of feet. The distant *whump* of his body impacting the ground signals his demise.

Lucifer's animal body begins to shift and morph. Within moments, she returns to her demonic form, and all Phoebe can do is stare with a mixture of trepidation and awe.

These two are Demon Emperors?!

Lucifer's muscular body and dark red skin contrast with the tight black leather she wears. Hundreds of razor-sharp teeth line her mouth, but Phoebe's eyes stare mostly at four massive breasts, each one the size of a cow's udders. Coupled with her wolverine claw-like hands, the demon woman appears to be a mixture of several species of animals.

When Lucifer turns to look at Phoebe, a third eye emerges on her forehead and locks onto the human. The eye, Phoebe notes, has several circular rings and is shaped like an archery target, with a red pupil smack in the center. "You're lucky, fleshbag. You saved my sisters. Were it not for that; I'd tear you apart like the rest of your kind. Get up!"

The demoness flings Percival to the side and yanks Phoebe up roughly by her arm. Phoebe whimpers at the demon's powerful grip. "Aaaoo! You're hurting me! Let me go! I need to bury-"

"What are you blabbering about?" Lucifer raises her claws to strike Phoebe. "Take us to the dungeon! I will see my brothers freed, or your life will be-"

"Lucifer!" Agares bellows, silencing the woman. "Calm yourself. Save your rage for those worth fighting. Use your nose and eye. What can this weak little girl do for us? We don't need her. We'll save our comrades ourselves."

Lucifer scowls at the reptile, but lowers her claw and releases Phoebe anyway. "Tch. I don't need a *Duke* to give me orders."

"Got something to say?" Agares hisses, shooting her a look of disdain. "I can't wait to hear it."

Lucifer rolls her eyes. "You always play the sympathy card."

The Demon Emperor of Providence leans toward Phoebe and sniffs like a mad hound. Then, Lucifer grabs the top of Phoebe's head and forces the human to look into her third eye.

An impression of weightlessness envelops Phoebe for a moment, making her feel as though she's starting to float into the air. The sensation vanishes abruptly when Lucifer tosses the human aside like a ragdoll.

Crack.

Phoebe lands fifteen feet away and nearly breaks her arm when she hits the dirt. "Aahhn..."

Lucifer doesn't give the human a passing glance. She turns to look at Agares. "Found them. Our brothers are trapped inside a dungeon adjacent to the castle. You'll have to slow down Arthur and his knights. I'll rescue our men."

Phoebe stares wordlessly as the two demons bicker, ignoring her entirely.

"You expect me to handle the Hero-King?! You're the Third Emperor! You fight him, and *I'll* rescue the prisoners. Besides, your hellhounds will fare better against his knights."

Lucifer hisses at the lizard. "Fine, scared little frog. Send your critters into the catacombs and rescue our warriors. Time's running short. Based on what I saw, they've already killed at least a few of our kin. I won't let the filthy fleshbags embarrass us, not today!"

Before the two demons move to run away, Lucifer swivels her head and glares bloody daggers at Phoebe. "You've been spared. Should we ever meet again, expect death. I hate the stench of your kind."

Turning away, the demoness morphs once again into her fifty-eyed demonic-dog form and howls. From the forest, a chorus of other animals wail in return.

Phoebe shudders as thirty massive Hellhounds, all shaped like the Demon Emperor, come bursting out of the trees toward her. Lucifer growls at Agares. "Come on, then! Let's go."

She and the lizard-demon dash away, tearing apart a few straggling soldiers in their path.

Many minutes pass.

Eventually, Phoebe turns to stare at Percival's cooling corpse. She crawls over to him and rests his head in her lap. The light in his eyes, now gone, make a chorus of memories wash over her.

She remembers all the times he would rub her muscles after her training, or when he would offer excuses for her tardiness at the Round Table. She remembers the side-glances he gave her when they sat

beside each other at the Round Table, as well as the time when he covertly left a rose beside her bed when she fell sick with the flu.

Phoebe weeps uncontrollably. *Percival. You always looked out for me. How did I repay you? How did I repay my king? I betrayed you and him both. Now a horde of demons descends on Camelot. What... what am I supposed to do? Everyone put their faith in me... but... but I...*

Phoebe buries her face in Percival's neck and sobs for several minutes as she presses him close. Distant screams from the city rattle her mind. So do the horrible howls of the Hellhounds tearing villagers apart.

She eventually pulls herself back together and cradles his head for a few moments longer. Standing up, she lifts his heavy body, exerting her toned muscles with all her strength. She walks a few hundred feet away and lays him on the ground, then draws her sword, hacks at the dirt, and slowly carves out a pit.

Her tears don't stop. She digs and digs and digs until finally she's torn up enough ground to make a shallow grave. Gently, she places her comrade's body in the dirt, staring at him for only a moment before piling the soil on top.

She jams her sword into the ground at the head of his grave, then gets up, and slowly walks over to the wagon and horses.

I have nowhere to go. Nowhere to call home. I'm no knight. I'm a failure. I betrayed my people for the sake of demons.

She unhooks both horses, keeping only one for herself.

I will wander these lands. I will fast until I find death atop a mountain. Death by starvation. A fitting punishment for a sinner such as I.

She rattles the reins and nudges the horse to go forward, hardening herself to the cries behind her.

Survive, Arthur. Never forgive me.

Phoebe doesn't meet my eyes. She stares at the ground for several long moments.

"So, you see, Jason... I failed everyone. That's all I am, nothing but a failure. I've never killed anyone in my entire life, but I stabbed my king and my nation in the back. I couldn't protect everyone from Beelzebub's attack. I'm nothing but a useless, pathetic, weak woman."

I swallow, unsure how to reply. Several moments pass. I decide to hug Phoebe. "You're not a failure. You made a hard decision. The way I see it, those demons would have attacked the city anyway. They were there to free their captured comrades. All you did was save thirty innocents."

Phoebe shakes her head, wiping her face against my chest. She pushes me away. "That's not true, Jason! Don't you see? Percival died because of me! All that happened thanks to my betrayal was death and suffering!"

"I don't think so." I ponder her story and its implications. "Look, the humans were torturing those demons. Your gut told you to save the women because you care about everyone equally. What if you had

left them there to die? Would you feel better about respecting your king if it meant such acts of barbarism could continue? You sacrificed your standing with Arthur to save lives."

An odd feeling dawns on me. "Hell... you're better at self-sacrifice than I am. I couldn't surrender my morality to kill Amelia. Hoarhiim had to do it for me. You made an impossible decision. Besides, you don't know that Arthur would have punished you. Maybe he would have been lenient."

"He wouldn't." Phoebe's voice holds a note of finality. "You don't understand how much humans hated demons in those days. How much they still do."

I reach over and take her hand in mine. "Perhaps not. I didn't know the guy, so I can only guess at his thoughts."

Phoebe smiles faintly. "As I said, I saw him during the battle on Polaris. My heart nearly stopped. I wanted to ask him... ask him how he felt, and if he hated me."

"What if he did?" I counter. "Would you have killed yourself? Don't you think that after 100,000 years, you can forgive some of your past? Nobody's perfect, Phoebe. Not you, not Arthur... certainly not me. Compared to Amelia, you're a saint, and I still believe she could have repented for her wickedness..."

My voice trails off as Amelia appears in my mind again. Phoebe notices, of course, and blushes.

"Sorry. I hate that we keep returning to Amelia," I say. "The sadness on your face hurts me as well."

"No, no, it's not your fault. It's mine. I'm telling you to forgive yourself, but here I am still tearing myself apart." Phoebe chuckles. "Haha... to be fair, my past is distant. Yours is recent. You've barely had time to heal. Perhaps we both have something to learn."

"Yeah."

We stare at each other for several moments.

I look away. "So, uh... that Percival guy. Blonde hair and blue eyes. Just like Arthur. Just like me."

I can almost hear the smoke coming from Phoebe's ears as her face turns crimson. "J-just a coincidence."

"Maybe. Someone told me about fate recently. Maybe there are no flukes in nature, you know? Perhaps everything happens for a reason."

When I turn back to Phoebe, her smile is gone. "Did Percival die for a reason, then? Did Arthur?"

Sighing, I pull away from her and aim my mind a short distance away. "I don't know, Phoebe. Sometimes death is senseless. It has no reason or rhyme. People die, and you can't save them, no matter how you try."

The Crown of Solomon activates as I form several mental images. "**Truck!**"

Before us, an exact copy of Phoebe's ten-ton monster-truck appears in midair, then slams into the ground.

Phoebe smiles. "You remembered."

"Of course, I did. I love you too much to forget."

She sticks her tongue out. "I love you more."

"I know."

She smacks my arm. "That's not what you're supposed to say!"

"I know."

"Jason!"

"Haha, I'm joshing around. C'mon, let's go for a drive."

The two of us walk over and climb in her truck, but before she nudges the accelerator, Phoebe blushes and smiles at me.

"I love you, Jason."

I smile back.

"I love you too. Forever and always."

Author notes:

This is Lucifer and her Hellhound.



This is Lucifer and Diablo.



This is an earlier version of Lucifer's character art.



Part 058: Time Heals All Wounds

I can't believe my eyes. It only took two short months for Hero City to become unrecognizable to me. Buildings ten stories tall loom over areas where small houses and mud huts once stood.

Phoebe drives her new truck along, pointing out various additions to the city.

"...And over here, I made these things I like to call *Sidewalk-Water-Spitters*. If a building catches fire, we can hook up these long hollow snakes to them and shoot water all over the fire."

"Nice invention, Phoebe. I think the name's a bit convoluted, though. How about calling them *Fire Hydrants*?"

Phoebe beams an award-winning smile at me. "Great thinking, Jason!"

I lean back in my seat and smile smugly. "I have my moments. How'd you managed to create these buildings so quickly? Normally, you'd need a team of a thousand workers slaving full time around the clock to build a single structure."

Phoebe shakes her head. "Oh, not anymore. I created a device that creates stone and brick out of energy. I still haven't thought of a good name for it, but we can build walls by aiming a gun at them. The Crown is useful! I barely know what I'm doing half the time, and it fills in the gaps!"

I reach up and pluck Solomon's Crown off my head, then stare at it absentmindedly. "Yeah. It's a damn shame we only have one of them."

A minute passes. As Phoebe and I stare at the road, I scratch my head.

"I don't know why I never tried doing this. **Copy!**"

Solomon's Crown stays in my left hand, but in my right, a second crown materializes, identical to the first.

"I can't tell if I'm smart for thinking to do this, or stupid for not trying it sooner. Oh, well." I stick the new crown on my head and glance around.

Nothing feels different.

Mental Map.

No change.

Phoebe glances at me as she pulls into a garage next to our home. "A second Crown?! That's great!"

"It's... a dud."

My voice flattens as I pull the new crown off my head. "Doesn't work. It looks identical to the original, but it's a useless piece of gold. Fuck. I bet it's because the Crown is a magical artifact."

"Oh. Never mind, then." Phoebe leans back and stretches in her seat. "Aaahn... god, I'm tired, Jason. How about you?"

I hand her the fake crown. "I'm tired too — long day. I can't rest just yet, though. We don't know if demons will attack or not."

The two of us hop out of the truck. Phoebe and I don each of our crowns. She seems disappointed that hers is little more than an ornament, but it makes her look like a queen, so she rolls with it.

"Jason, can we visit the Factory? I want to talk to Hans."

"Sure. I've got nothing better to do, for now."

"Hey, cutie, yer back!" A voice from behind makes me jump in fright. I whirl around to see an odd-looking lizard standing behind me.

Ah, he's a salamander. His red-scales glow under the waning sun.

"Is this yer boyfriend?"

Phoebe walks around the back of her truck and wraps herself around my right arm. "That's right! This is Jason, my fiance. Jason, this pretty boy here is Ogie. He also has a wife named Jeera."

"Uh, pleased to meet you." I hold my left hand out, and the salamander stares at it with suspicion.

"Wassat? You want a handout, kid? I ain't made of money. Jeez, I thought the Hero would have enough to get by without begging."

"It's a greeting. We're supposed to, uh, shake hands."

"A greeting? But we already did that!"

I retract my hand. "N-never mind."

The salamander smiles at me with an odd look in his eye, then turns to Phoebe's truck. "What the hey? Did you get this thing refurbished by someone? Looks brand stinkin' new!"

"I kinda destroyed my old ride," Phoebe says. "Sorry. Jason built me a new one."

"Ah. No worries, then. I'll fix this lady the same as I did the other. Trucks're all the same to me." Ogie's tongue flicks out. "Saaay, you wouldn't happen to have any of those sweet-rolls left, would ya?"

Phoebe's body sags. "Sorry. I'll make some tomorrow, Ogie."

"No problem! I shouldn't eat so many anyway. Jeera says I'm puttin' on the pounds! Bahaha!" The Salamander rears up to almost my height and rubs his gut. "It's better if I take a couple o' days off the sweets!"

* * *

Several minutes later, Phoebe and I stroll down the street, hand in hand. Three Felaris boys bat a ball around with their paws, trying to play kitty-in-the-middle. The unfortunate middle-child swipes at the ball but always comes up short. "No fair! You guys are too fast!"

I gaze around at the gaggle of humans, monsters, and other mythical creatures alike all hanging out and playing together.

"You must have found a lot of monsters willing to join our cause while I was gone."

Phoebe shakes her head. "Not especially. Many of the newcomers lived on human worlds Neil reclaimed. A small number moved out of the Labyrinth at the recommendation of family members already living here."

The Factory, a giant building that takes up an entire city block, rises just ahead. "I take it everything has gone well, then?"

Phoebe doesn't reply for a few seconds. "Aside from Beelzebub's ambush, yes. Perhaps too well. I constantly worry that the peace and harmony we're enjoying won't last."

"You can make anything endure, but you have to struggle and sweat."

"Well, I'm willing to do that much."

We enter the factory through a set of automatic doors at the nearest corner, only to hear someone swearing in a German accent.

"Verdammt! Get off mein vorkbench! Pest!"

A Felaris girl hisses at Hans as he squirts her with a water bottle. "Kss! Jerk! Lemme sleep here! Leave me alone!"

"You're in zee way!" He squirts the cat-woman again, and she swipes at him with her sharp claws.

"Hans!" Phoebe walks over to him, mostly ignoring the cat-person. "What's going on here?"

She's hardly asked the question before the Felaris girl casually bats a nearby beaker filled with blue liquid off the table. Hans' eyes bulge as he tries to catch it, but he's too late. It falls off the desk and crashes to the floor, erupting in a smoky fizzle.

"Gahhh! Zat culture took two weeks to mature! Zees pest is causing me nothing but troubles!"

The felaris girl licks her paw innocently, flicking her tail around. "It was shiny."

"Sandy..." Phoebe rubs her head and sighs. "Can't you go curl up in a corner and let Mr. Wagner work in peace? He's a busy man."

The cat-girl pouts. "I don't wanna! It's warm on the desk!"

Her face is extremely catlike, with a mouth and nose that jut out and eyes like slits. However, her 'paws' resemble human hands with short talons sticking out. A thin layer of fur coats Sandy's body, but she wears human-like clothing. She's a weird amalgamation of human and cat that makes me a little uncomfortable.

Phoebe crosses her arms. "Go home. Don't make me grab a bucket of water."

The Felaris girl meets Phoebe's gaze for a few moments, then hops off the desk and walks past me, groaning all the while. "What a paaaain."

After she leaves, Hans grumbles and curses as he leans down and tries to scoop some of the already-dried liquid into a beaker. He isn't successful. "Shiza. Two weeks of work lost. Verdammt Felaris, always causing me trouble."

The thin, wiry German stands up and suddenly notices my presence. "Oh, Mein Fuhrer, apologies for mein conduct. I wasn't expecting any guests so late in zee day."

"Hans, I told you not to call me that."

He frowns, then waves off my complaint. "Right right, it slipped mein mind. I meant to say Mein Lieber, ja."

"Yeah. Anyway, Phoebe, why'd you want to come here?"

She pauses to look around Hans' workshop. "Where's that new design I had you working on?"

"Oh! Zee new suit! Ja, I made some progress on zee thing, but it was quite difficult to tweak. Zee technology is beyond mein level of expertise."

Hans walks over to a workbench and picks up a circular object with several wires sticking out of it. It's about the same width and circular shape as a compact disc, but with a height of thirty stacked atop one another.

"Zee protective capabilities are limited, but I believe zat with time, it could be a formidable weapon against zee demons."

He places it in Phoebe's outstretched palm. She studies it for a moment, looking everywhere at the seamless object with only a faint groove where the top pops off.

"Hmm. Looks the same as when I left it with you."

"Ja, ja. I have no Crown of Knowledge like you, so I make do with what I have." He walks over and picks up a clipboard with fifty papers stuffed in it, and hands it to Phoebe. "Here are zee new armor designs."

Phoebe stares at the page for three seconds, then shrugs. "Um, Jason... I can't read his language. Not without the Crown, anyway."

It's only now that I realize all the writing on the page is in German. I start to remove the Crown, but pause. *Hang on a moment, I could give Phoebe the Crown, but isn't there a better way?*

Naturally.

"Languages."

I speak the word, aiming at the three of our minds simultaneously. After a moment, Phoebe blinks and rubs her head. "Aaaaooow... what was that?"

"I think you can read German without the crown now. Give it a shot."

Phoebe nods and glances at the clipboard. "Oh! I can read it perfectly! Wow... Wordsmithing is versatile."

"To say the least."

I scan the documents along with her as she flips the pages. Thankfully, the Crown allows me to read at lightning speed and comprehend the information at levels beyond my brain's usual potential. Otherwise, I'd fall behind my wife. Even without the Crown, she devours the information with ease.

The paper reads:

The Environmental Adaptative Armor is a nano-technology-based suit that can fit a user of any size by forming dermal shielding around their body. It's lightweight and acts as a second skin, protecting the user from physical damage. While the suit has limited power, it's possible to extend the duration of the power cell by placing mobile power transmitters nearby.

I note with interest that its functionality resembles my old, discarded lightsaber design.

I propose that we create different suit variants for different combat units to maximize their warfare capabilities. The demons have hundreds of monster types at their disposal, and so should we. These suits have a secondary advantage in that our soldiers can wear them under their civilian uniforms and activate the armor even during a surprise demon attack.

I continue reading the rest of the report, glancing every so often at Phoebe's face.

I'd never have thought of this. Phoebe, you're smart and beautiful, yet you don't give yourself enough credit for creativity.

Phoebe finishes reading the documents. "Excellent work, Hans. You've outdone yourself. Continue working on the new armor. Do you have anyone working on those Recall Markers?"

"Ja. They're already done."

Hans reaches under his desk and plops a tiny pill-sized piece of metal in Phoebe's hand.

She smiles and hops excitedly. "Oh, Hans! I knew I could count on you!"

"Ja, ja, German engineering is truly something to behold with awe."

* * *

Later, Phoebe and I trudge toward our palace, arm in arm. She looks at me for a moment, then looks away, as if she has something to say but doesn't know how to say it.

"What? Felaris got your tongue?"

She glances over to where the three boys were playing. Now they're swinging sticks at each other and pretending they're sword-fighters.

"J-Jason... kids are nice, aren't they?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. Why do you ask?"

A long pause follows.

The wind ripples down the street, colder than when I left. Phoebe shivers and pulls a little closer.

"W-well, you know... kids are... they're innocent and fun, and they remind me of my childhood."

"Uh-huh..."

She's trying to take this conversation somewhere. I don't think I need the Crown of Solomon to follow the dots.

"Say, Phoebe... I was gone for two whole months. I don't suppose you got a new boyfriend or fiancé in that time, didja?"

Immediately she recoils in horror. "What?! No! I-I would never!"

"I know. I'm messing around with you."

The palace doors approach. We climb the ten steps toward the doors, but I pause before entering.

"You like kids, huh?"

Phoebe blushes madly. "Sure. Kids are wonderful..."

"Great. Let's get married next week."

Dead silence.

Phoebe's face freezes into a mixture of a thousand different emotions.

"Y-y-you don't mean... *next* week, *next week*?!"

"Yeah. As in, seven days from now. I thought about you every day while I was gone. I was all alone in the Labyrinth, and then when I was fighting Satan, and his Demon Council appeared, Beelzebub said he attacked the Core. For a while, I thought... I thought maybe... you'd..."

My voice catches.

I almost lost Phoebe. She worried about me, too. I don't want that feeling, not ever again.

Phoebe swallows hard. "Jason. I love you. I don't want to wait another week."

"Alright. Me neither. Let's get married tomorrow."

She smiles widely. "No, we can put off the marriage until next week. But, tonight. Tonight. Let's make a baby."

Oh.

Oh. *That's* what she means.

Sometimes I forget that I'm still only an eighteen-year-old guy.

"What about your vow of-"

She presses a finger to my lips. "The Gods are dead. The Church is gone. I persisted in chastity for a hundred thousand years. It's time for me to free myself from the past."

I smile, as Amelia's face appears in my mind. Mentally, I force myself to wipe her away.

"Yeah. Me too."

"Amelia. Amelia."

Hope mutters in his sleep before lurching up in bed, waking up from a deep dream filled with fear and anguish.

"Amelia! She's dead. I killed her. No. Hoarhiim did. Jason did. Why? She didn't need to die. There could have been another way. Wordsmithing. It could change her mind. I could have made her a better person!"

Hope sweeps his feet over the side of the bed and exhales. "She's gone. There's nothing I could have done. Nothing at all."

His gaze wanders across the room to a mirror on the wall, barely visible in the darkness. Only a sliver of light from the doorway illuminates the room.

I don't even know whose face gazes back at me. I'm Hope, not Jason. Jason loses one woman but returns home to another. I get nobody. I don't matter to him. I'm just a copy. A hallucination.

Hope climbs out of bed and wanders over to the doorway, cracking it open. He peeks out to see Neil sleeping on his desk. His hand rests on a freshly written piece of paper. Hope slips out of the room, walks over, and glances at it.

A wall of dead soldier names appears on the left side of the page, along with a few checkmarks for only a small portion of them on the right. At the top of the page, the title reads, *List of confirmed dead. Check off if condolences were sent.*

Hope looks away from the page and stifles a sigh. *Five thousand dead. My failure. Jason's failure. Instead of saving lives, we've only taken them. We tracked Amelia down and murdered her, and in the process, left the people in the Core defenseless. No wonder Neil was angry. Who could blame him?*

We should have stayed here. Amelia would have done *whatever* to the demons, and we could have protected the Core. Hell, I probably led the demons right to her. Ahh! Not me, Jason. Jason did that. I can't keep pretending we're the same person.

Hope slips back into the room and yawns, sitting on the bed in the darkness.

Amelia. I want you back. I made a mistake. I can't live without you. Jason can keep Phoebe, but I want you. There has to be something I can do with Wordsmithing!

Almost immediately, an obvious idea comes to him.

Of course. Wordsmithing is the power of the gods. I can bring her back, just like that.

A confident smile spreads across Hope's face. He aims his mind at the center of the room. Gathering his thoughts, he pictures Amelia, her smile, her adult body, and everything else about her.

"Resurrect."

For a moment, nothing happens. Then, in the darkness, a *fwoomph* of air rushes in, and a woman's body appears and falls to the ground.

Hope's heart catches.

I... I did it! I did it!!!

"Amelia! Amelia!" He jumps off the bed and rushes over to her. "Hey, wake up! **Light!**"

The room brightens dramatically, as if he had activated a hundred-watt lightbulb.

When he finally catches sight of Amelia, the color drains from Hope's face. Her frigid body lays limp in his arms.

"No... no no no... Amelia. Wake up. Why are you so cold? **Resurrect! RESURRECT!**"

He yells again and again, but her body stays still in his arms. Everything about her is identical to the woman in his mind, but still, she slumps unmovingly.

"Hope?" A voice from the doorway makes the clone freeze. Neil steps in, wincing at the bright light. He stops and stares in silence at the woman in Hope's arms. "No. You didn't."

Hope whirls around. Panic spreads across his face.

"I... I needed to t-try! I had to see if I could bring her back! I can't! She's dead!!!" Hope's body shakes as he tries to rub warmth into her skin. "She's so cold, Neil! I thought Wordsmithing had all the answers! I thought it could do anything!!!"

Tears stream down his cheeks. He presses the dead woman against his chest. "Again. I feel like I've lost her again."

After a moment, Neil leans down and rests his hand on Hope's shoulder. "I'm... I'm sorry. I wondered privately if you could bring back the deceased. It seems even you have a limit. Hope... I lost my wife and children to the passage of time. I know what it means to lose someone you love. To want to do anything to see them again, yet lack the power to bring them back."

Hope stares silently at Amelia's face. "She looks peaceful. Like she could wake up at any moment."

"They always do," Neil murmurs. "But they won't. They can't. The ability to bring back the dead is a power reserved only for the Creator."

Neil squats down to Hope's level. "The only way you can save people from death is by protecting them. If you fail at that, with all the power you possess, then you will suffer and wallow in pain for the rest of your life. Just as I have."

"You?" Hope turns to stare at Neil's stoic face. "What do you mean?"

"A General leads his troops to death. Any victory earned without losses is a miracle. He must be willing to lose some of his best men. In that sense, I have killed many. Their passing weighs on my soul. The Creator will judge me when I fade."

Hope nods slowly and looks away. "I don't believe in God. But, then again, maybe I don't know anything about the universe. Maybe you're right."

Neil reaches over and brushes Amelia's hair from her face. "Come now. You were never able to bury her, were you? Dig the hole yourself. Put the dirt over her body. Burn her sleeping image into your mind and never forget. Her memory will give you the strength to protect the others you care about."

A long moment passes. Hope nods.

"Don't you worry. I will *never* forget the woman I love."

Part 059: Sticks And Bones May Break My Stones- Wait, That's Not Right

Three days have passed. It's time.

Beelzebub rolls his eyes as he and Rosalia walk through the halls of the Labyrinth. The demoness with the appearance deficit prattles on and on about this and that, often shouting excitedly.

"And when we get to Hell Harbor, there'll be servants and cake! Lots of cake! Don't you like cake, Mister Beelzebub?!"

"Cake is a great way to balloon my body," Beelzebub drawls. He glances at the chubby demoness. "Somehow I'm not surprised you enjoy it."

"Aww! Because I'm sweet, right? You always say the nicest things, Mister Beelzebub!" Rosalia skips along as she dances to some tune in her head.

Maybe if Bael hits me hard enough, I'll forget the ogre exists, Beelzebub thinks to himself.

Minutes pass. The sound of a large crowd in the distance echoes down the halls. Rosalia quiets down and lowers her excitement level. "Wow. The Slaughterseum. I've heard rumors... but I've never been there."

Beelzebub smacks his tongue around, trying to get the taste of chalk out of his mouth. "Barbaric. Uncivilized. The only appeal I find is watching filthy insects crushed by merciless demons. Few things satisfy me as much as witnessing a human grovel and beg for his life, only for the light in his eyes to vanish at the end of an orc's spear."

Rosalia nods. "Yeah. I hate humans. They're ugly, and they scare me."

"You're one to talk about *ugly*." Beelzebub warms his hands and slicks back his hair, perming it once again. *Just in case.*

The two demons plod along in silence. Eventually, the hallway opens up before them. It widens into an antechamber with booths for placing bets and an opening in the side-walls big enough for Trolls and Ogres to fit. Concession stands sell a mixture of food made from animal and human parts, often obtained from the poor souls who died in the arena earlier that day.

Gnolls, Kobolds, Pureblooded Demons, Lords, even a few Barons stand here and there, chatting amongst one another like best friends. Unlike in other areas of the Labyrinth, the spectators of the Slaughterseum ignore the typical boundaries separating species and rank, given their unified desire to witness bloodshed and carnage. Beelzebub even recognizes a few demons standing in the crowd, though he doesn't bother to say hello.

Nobody pays Beelzebub and Rosalia the slightest attention as they slowly walk among the several hundred monsters milling around. To the left, the massive entrance to the Slaughterseum yawns,

beckoning for them to enter. Rosalia flinches as the arena crowd roars in excitement, likely from witnessing a brutal slaughter.

Beelzebub glances left and right, then sighs. "I've just realized that I haven't a clue where Bael is or how we'll meet him."

Rosalia follows his gaze as he scans the crowd for the massive demon. "Bael sticks out. He should be easy to find."

"Should be, yes. However, this is one of several entrances to the Slaughterseum. He could be anywhere."

"Ooohh!" A tiny imp squeaks from the ground at Beelzebub's feet. "Bubblezits? Are you the one who's here to fight Bael?"

"Hey! Stupid imp!" Rosalia delivers a bone-crunching kick to the brat, sending him flying against a wall. "How dare you get Mister Beelzebub's name wrong! You little shithead!"

The imp, stunned but not injured, rubs his head. "Aaaoo... that was mean! Cruel! Nasty!!"

"Thank you, Rosalia. You saved me the trouble." Beelzebub leans down to the imp's level. "Don't get my name wrong again. If you think she's nasty, pray you never anger me. Now tell me, where is Bael?"

The imp looks away for a moment and rubs his arm. The vindictiveness in his eyes hints that he's considering ditching Beelzebub and Rosalia to their devices, but Beelzebub quickly lights a ball of fire in his hand, snuffing that thought out.

"O-oh! His Nastiness, the Duke of Pain! Ehehehe..." The imp eyes the fireball for a moment. "Gate three! He's waiting f-for you at gate three!"

Beelzebub closes his fist, extinguishing his fire. "Get out of my sight."

"Yessir! Right away, sir!"

The imp scampers away, and Beelzebub smiles. *When I was an imp, it was the same for me. The ones above you pick, poke, and stab. You're little more to them than vermin. Their sneers and jeers gave me the will to rise above the rest. Now I will complete the circle by stepping on those below me.*

He stands up, the smile still plastered across his face. *Humans wouldn't understand. It's the demon way. Demons evolve and grow ever stronger, while humans stagnate and weaken. The only chance they have at fighting back is for one powerful individual to take control. But what happens if he should fall?*

Beelzebub turns and walks away, heading for the third gate. *Once I defeat the Hero, he who destroyed a planet and slew the Black Queen... I will earn my place atop the demon hierarchy. The Black Queen raped Satan's mind and took control of him, so if the Hero killed her, and I kill him, that will prove I am worthy of being not just any Emperor... but the First Emperor.*

Rosalia cocks her head. "Mister Beelzebub? Is something funny?"

Beelzebub's smile disappears. "Not especially."

It takes another twenty minutes of circling the Slaughterseum's perimeter before they find the second gate, and another ten to reach the third. As soon as he and Rosalia arrive, Beelzebub's eyes lock onto a quarrel between two werewolves fighting over a dead human woman's body.

"Mine! Stupid bloodhound! I wanted this piece of meat ever since the moment I first saw her!" The first werewolf, a brown-furred variant, howls angrily at his peer.

The other werewolf, one with white fur, leans forward menacingly. "My clansmen slew her! She's mine!"

The fresh corpse, a female human with dozens of gashes and other barbaric wounds inflicted on her corpse, lies in a pool of blood. A few spectators begin to form, including a male harpy and even a shadow-walker, jeering at the two werewolves. "Blood fight! Blood fight!"

"Your clansmen, eh?! I saw an orc land the killing blow! Always knew you white-hairs slept with pigs!"

The white-one rears back, preparing to pounce. "You take that back, shit-fur!"

Suddenly, a massive flail falls from the sky, crushing the corpse between them and shaking the room. In a flash, Bael leaps into the center, lands atop his spiked flail with his bare feet, and violently backhands both of the werewolves. They fly in opposite directions and plow through several bystanders into the walls.

"Shut up! You stupid mutts are giving me a fucking headache!"

Beelzebub sighs. "And there he is."

Bael hops to the ground and coils his flail around his body, then spots Beelzebub. "Bahaha! I thought you wouldn't show. You're an idiot, thinking you can beat me."

Rosalia, usually one to jump to Beelzebub's defense, shies away from talking back to the intimidating Duke.

"I don't know that I can," Beelzebub says. "But if I have even a slight chance to beat some sense into your thick skull, it's worth the effort."

"Hahaha! That's the spirit." Bael stomps the ground, shaking the room. "Mephisto! MEPHISTOOO!"

A few moments later, the Undead King spindles out of the ground. "What isss the problem?"

"You're gonna help me. C'mon, let's get the whelp over to the Den. We're gonna teach him a lesson."

Several minutes later, Beelzebub glances around uneasily as they enter a dark, secluded room not far from the Slaughterseum. "What is this place? I expected to engage in combat."

"Cheh. Nice try." Bael beckons to a nearby female demon. "Gimme your best set of Sticks and Bones." The woman nods, and as she turns to walk away, Bael slaps her butt. "Hehe, perfect ass."

She rolls her eyes and ignores him.

Beelzebub glances around. "Sticks and Bones? Is this a gambling den?"

"Course it is, idiot." Bael lumbers over to a nearby table. Mephisto, Beelzebub, and Rosalia follow behind him. The room rattles when Bael's massive bulk hits the opulent demonstone chair. "You'll be playing Mephisto for the right to become Duke."

Rosalia raises an eyebrow. "I didn't expect that."

"Neither did I," Beelzebub confesses. "Are you joking? I'm not known for my sense of humor."

"I am," Bael counters. "But this ain't no gag. Sit your pasty ass down."

Mephisto sits next to Bael, while the other two sit on the table's opposite side. Rosalia glances around at the seedy room, with its unscrupulous inhabitants smoking on their bone pipes and the scantily clad demonesses serving various food and beverages.

Beelzebub stares silently at Bael as they wait for the hostess to bring their game pieces. *Unbelievable. I expected a test of combat, but Bael decided to hinge my rise to Duke on a game of chance. Perhaps he should rename himself to the Duke of Unpredictability, or the Duke of Chaos. No, scratch that, he'd like the latter too much.*

A minute passes, but still, the hostess hasn't shown up. Bael itches his bare chest. "You can still back out. You'll be a chicken, but at least you won't be dead."

Beelzebub narrows his eyes. *Dead? From a game of Sticks and Bones? What in the blazes does he mean by that?*

When the hostess returns, she carries two small wooden boxes, each one embossed with gold and a bloody demonic pentagram on top. "Here you are, sirs. Please consider indulging in our refreshments if you require them."

Bael smirks at her. When she sets the boxes down, he pats his lap. "Come have a sit on my lap, baby. I've got fifteen inches waitin' for ya."

She barely blinks. "I didn't know we measured IQ in inches these days."

Turning around, she walks away without a second thought.

Bael's smirk lessens. "Hey, Mephisto. What'd she mean by that?"

The King of the Undead hisses. "I think ssshe likesss you for your persssonality."

Bael's smile comes roaring back. "Damn right. All the bitches do. Alright, let's get this game started."

He leans forward and winks at Beelzebub. "You know how to play Sticks and Bones, don'tcha, boy?"

Beelzebub nods. "I've watched a few games. You throw the five four-sided wooden Mahja sticks down. This creates a modifier, and you follow up by throwing the bones. The modifier, plus the bones, equals your score."

"Oh, oh! I know, I know!" Rosalia hops in her seat excitedly. "One of my den-brothers used to gamble all the time."

Bael smiles at her. "Zat so? Alright then, cutie, tell Beelzepup the rules he doesn't know."

Beelzebub's body rises a few degrees in temperature at the nickname, but he forces himself to ignore it.

Rosalia, however, beams excitedly. *He called me a cutie! Omigosh! All the men are falling in love with me!*

She clears her throat. "Ahem. There are four sides to the Mahja sticks. Swords, Fists, Eyes, and Flames. Each one is worth more than the previous point-wise. If you throw the sticks and you get five swords, you instantly lose the round."

Mephisto nods. "Ssswordsss... too *human* for my tassstesss."

Beelzebub stares at the sticks as Mephisto pulls them out and hands them to him. "Flames, hm? I already know which one I prefer."

"Bahahaha! So predictable!" Bael slaps his knee! "Of course the hothead likes flames! I betcha can't guess my favorite!"

Beelzebub rubs his forehead. "Fists."

Bael's laughter instantly disappears. "Oh. Lucky guess."

Mephisto titters quietly for himself, as he locks his smoldering red eyes on Beelzebub. "Flamesss are worth the mossst pointsss, in any cassse. Who knowsss, you might throw five flamesss and an Ancient Monster..."

Rosalia's eyes widen. "Oooh..."

"What? What is it?" Beelzebub glances at her in confusion. "Is there something special about that combination?"

"It's the Fire Dragon formation," Bael murmurs. "The only thing harder is the Phoenix formation, but don't you worry your pretty little head about getting one of those."

Rosalia shakes her head. "The rules of this game are quite odd."

"That they are," Beelzebub says. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. Everything's up to chance. What is this, best of three rounds?"

"Best of eleven," Bael corrects. "If ya can't win by more than two points, the game continues til' someone takes a two-point lead."

Mephisto nods. "You throw firsst, Beelzebub. New playersss alwaysss go firsst. It isss tradition."

Despite the simplicity of the game, Beelzebub swallows hard. "If I win... I become a Duke?"

Bael stares at him icily. "Yup. And if you lose... we kill ya."

"What?! Well..." Beelzebub rubs his forehead. "Fine. I agree. Good luck succeeding."

"Bahaha! I knew you would! Predictable!"

Tsk.

Beelzebub throws the Mahja sticks down. The five long, rectangular sticks clatter to the table, and Mephisto leans forward to examine them.

"Ksss. A Sssword, Three Fissstsss, and an Eye. No Flamesss for you."

Rosalia touches her chin thoughtfully. "Mister Beelzebub can discard an entire throw twice during a full game, or three individual sticks at any point, right?"

"Yup," Bael replies, adding no extra commentary. "Throw the bones."

Beelzebub reaches into the other box and pulls out a dozen differently-shaped bones. One resembles a snowflake, while another is a spiked-ball, echoing Bael's flail. Others include a curved bone shaped like a boomerang, and even more exotic shapes. One appears to be little more than a bunch of spikes twisting and curling around like a pretzel.

"Alright. Here goes nothing."

Beelzebub tosses the bones, and they clatter loudly on the wooden table.

Mephisto inspects them for a moment. "Kss. Reptile pattern. Newt formation. Four points."

Beelzebub glances at Rosalia. The dejected look on her face tells him the result with a single glance. "Bad?"

"Terrible," Rosalia says. "The most points you can get in a single round is one hundred. That requires a Fire Dragon formation, though."

Bael chuckles. "There's also Hydra, Wurm, Kraken, Hellhound. You threw a Newt! Bahaha!"

Mephisto doesn't move to grab the sticks and bones. "Care to throw again? The besst you can get iss a water ssserpent formation. Thirty pointsss."

Rosalia nods. "You should, Mister Beelzebub. Just retry the sword. You might land a Fist. Getting four of the same, let alone five, is worth bonus points. You'll end with twenty points."

Beelzebub curses himself internally. *I'm being forced to rely on the counsel of the ogre. Nobody deserves that punishment.*

He nods and throws the sword again. It lands on an Eye.

Rosalia breathes a sigh of relief. "Three fists and two eyes, plus the land animal pattern. Not great, but better than four points."

Mephisto scoops up the sticks and bones. "Ksss. Sssalamander formation. Fifteen pointsss. My turn."

Mephisto doesn't hesitate. He deftly throws the sticks. They clatter to the table, and he smirks. "Two ssswordsss, two flamesss, and an eye." When he throws his bones down, his smirk grows into a bony smile. "The Human pattern. I've rolled an Adventurer formation."

Bael stares at the game with rapt attention; his usual loudness pacified by the gambling happening. Unlike how he often acts, he's quieter, paying attention to every result. "Thirty-four points. You gonna re-roll anything?"

The Duke of Mist shakes his head. "I have a sssmall lead. Only a fool throwsss away hisss rollsss at the game ssstart."

Rosalia takes a piece of paper and an ink quill from the Mahja stick box and notes two numbers down. "One token to Mephisto. Subtracting Mister Beelzebub's points from Mephisto's, that leaves nineteen

points."

Beelzebub frowns. "I'm still a novice, so I must ask. Why count points if the tokens represent a win for the round?"

Bael clears his throat. "Sometimes the one who wins all the rounds has fewer points. Happens more often than you might think. There are special rules for if that happens."

"Like what?"

"Doesn't matter. Mephisto's the Undead King. Playing with bones is his job."

"Whatever. Suit yourself." Beelzebub slouches in his chair and sulks.

Mephisto, having gone second in the first round, goes first in the next. He throws the sticks out. "One Sssword, two Fissstsss, an Eye, and a Flame."

"Huh. A full spread." Bael mutters under his breath. "Poor showing."

"Full spread?" Beelzebub echoes his words.

Rosalia answers. "It means Mephisto rolled one of every type. Half points."

"Ah."

Beelzebub watches as Mephisto throws the bones down. "Ksss. The Bug pattern. Cockroach formation. Worthless."

"I expected better from you," Bael murmurs. "Three points before the full spread, two after. Even if you roll again, you'll top out at ten."

"Passs." Mephisto hands the bones and sticks to Beelzebub. "If you lossse thisss round, I'll kill you myssself."

Beelzebub tosses the bones, and his heart skips a beat. "F-four flames and a fist."

When he tosses the bones down, Rosalia grows excited. "Ooooh! An Elemental Monster pattern! Coupled with the four flames, that means you rolled-"

"A Fire-Hydra formation. Seventy-three points. Impressive." Bael smiles widely. "Your second toss of the bones, too. Tally those points up, little missy."

She does so. "Round two's token goes to Mister Beelzebub. He takes the lead with seventy-one points to Mephisto's nineteen. Wow!!!"

Bael crosses his legs under the table. "Beginner's luck. Don't get all full of yourself."

Beelzebub, however, stares at the sticks on the table. "What if I re-rolled that fist to a flame? What would happen?"

Bael shakes his head. "If you get a sword, the formation drops to a Thunder Hydra. Seventy points. If it becomes a flame, you get an Infernal Hydra. Eighty points."

"Don't do it, Mister Beelzebub. Seven points aren't worth using up a re-roll. You already won the round."

Beelzebub nods. "I know. I'm learning the rules. That's all."

* * *

Half an hour passes.

Skeleton Commander. Harpie. Mermaid. Kobold Gang. Demon Duke. The formations come and go, and Beelzebub files their values in the back of his mind for later. He and Mephisto trade tosses, and soon, they enter the ninth round.

Rosalia tallies up the score. "336 versus 294 points in Mephisto's favor. The tokens are tied."

Beelzebub clutches the sticks in his hand. "My turn, huh? I have to win two of the next three rounds to seal my victory, then?"

"Correct."

"Alright."

Beelzebub throws the sticks down. "Three swords and two eyes. Damn." He tosses the bones afterward.

The moment the sticks hit the ground, Bael's eyes widen noticeably. "Whoa. Is that-"

"Demon pattern. Servant formation." Rosalia stares at it for a moment. "The lowest score for a Demon pattern is fifty points. The highest is ninety. It's the second-best pattern you could toss."

Beelzebub gapes. "H-how much is my roll worth?"

"The Servant formation is valued at fifty-three points."

Beelzebub stares at his formation. "I'm going to use one of my discards to re-roll."

Rosalia nods. "Good idea. If you get five swords, though, you instantly lose the round. If you get a full spread, that will halve the value too."

"It's worth the risk."

Beelzebub scoops the sticks up, swallowing hard as Bael eyes him. "Careful, whelp. Fifty-three points is a respectable score. A loss now will give Mephisto a huge advantage."

Without any hesitation, Beelzebub throws his sticks out. They clatter and land, and his heart leaps for joy.

"Yes! Three flames and two eyes! Whoo-hoo!"

Bael laughs. "Gwahaha! You're enjoying yourself now, boy! It's a damn shame I didn't introduce you to gambling when you were younger!"

Rosalia wipes at her forehead. "Impressive, Mister Beelzebub, as always. Lower Demon Emperor formation. Eighty-three points."

"Ksss!" Mephisto grabs the sticks up angrily. "I'll win the next two roundsss for sssure!"

When he throws the sticks, a disappointing showing of two Fists, two Eyes, and a Sword appears. Mephisto follows up with the bones.

A moment of silence falls over the group.

Bael nearly knocks the table over as he jumps out of his chair. "An Ancient Monster pattern? Right after the Demon pattern?! What game am I watching?!"

His voice attracts attention from other gamblers nearby. Several of them turn around to look at the commotion. Bael quickly explains the results, and they drop what they're doing to scramble over to Mephisto.

"Oy, oy!" One kobold eyes the board and snatches the score count from Rosalia. "Ah don't believe it! Mephisto! The runt got a Demon Emperor formation! You've gotta beat him on this one!"

"Yeah!" A salamander adds. "You can't let this lil' upstart beat you!"

Beelzebub gestures toward Mephisto's toss. "I'm guessing this is a good result."

"It certainly is," Rosalia mutters. "Ancient Monster is the most valuable pattern. Mephisto rolled a Rock Troll formation. Seventy-five points. Ancient Monsters include dragons and the Phoenix. The cap is a hundred points, versus ninety for the Demon pattern."

Mephisto nods. "I'll ussse one of my dissscaddsss."

"Hell yeah!" Bael *thwumps* down at the table, slobbering slightly at the possibilities. "Hey, kid, here's a protip. For the Ancient Monster pattern only, if you roll five flames, that's a Fire Dragon. One hundred points. If you want, though, you can roll again for free. If you get five flames *again*, that's a Phoenix. You get three discards added to your future rounds, five individual stick re-rolls, two tokens, and you instantly win the round."

Rosalia nods. "There is a downside, though. If you decide to try for the Phoenix, but your next roll includes even one sword..."

"You lose the whole game. Bahahaha!" Bael's body trembles. "Oooh, exciting!"

Beelzebub nods. "I see. Rolling a Phoenix is high-risk, high-reward."

"Hahaha, damn right it is!" The kobold hands the stats back to Rosalia. "But that's what makes the game exciting! You guys playin' for stakes, or what? I ain't seen a Phoenix in three hundred and forty-five years!"

Bael nods. "Yeah. If this shrimp wins, we're making him a Demon Duke. If he loses, though, then we're gonna kill him."

"OOOOH!" The crowd of onlookers shrieks with excitement. "Holy skarn-droppings! That's amazing! Everyone, drop your games and check this match out!"

Beelzebub shifts uncomfortably as dozens of demons and monsters crowd around, blowing smoke in the air and congesting the table. He ignites the fire in his hand. "You all may watch, but keep quiet. I'd rather not burn the lot of you to cinders."

They nod, and Mephisto grabs the Mahja sticks. He tosses them down, and Beelzebub's heart sinks.

"Ksss. A Flame, Three Eyesss, and a Sssword."

"An Elder Basilisk. Hell yeah! That's eighty-one points, pal." Bael reaches over to nudge the Duke of Mist playfully, only for his fist to pass through Mephisto's body. "Oh, right."

Mephisto smirks. "I could toss the stickss one by one... but that wouldn't be satisfying. Instead, I'll re-roll."

Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. "Why? If you re-roll the sword, you could get another eye. You'd beat me in this round with the point bonus."

Mephisto smirks. "Yesss, but unlike you, my life does not ride on thisss. Look at the crowd surrounding usss. It would be dishonorable of me not to try for a Fire Dragon formation."

Mephisto takes the sticks and throws them again. Beelzebub's stomach flip-flops as the results come up.

"Four Swords. One flame." Rosalia calls the results. "A Gorgon. Seventy-three points."

Mephisto doesn't even blink. "I'll usse my lassst disscard." He snatches the Mahja sticks once again and throws them down.

"Five Fists. The Mountain Troll formation. Eighty points."

"Curssssss!" Mephisto screeches and lowers his head in shame.

Beelzebub leans back and sighs in relief. "83-80. Close round."

"A good effort, Mephisto. Don't beat yourself up." Bael gestures to the hostess. "Let's get some drinks for everyone who watched. On me!" The crowd cheers exuberantly and disperses as the hostess makes the preparations.

Rosalia jots down the new scores. "Mister Beelzebub takes the lead with one token extra. The new score is 336 to 297 in Mephisto's favor, after applying his three points gained. Mephisto is all out of discards for the rest of the game."

Beelzebub sighs. *If I wasn't immortal; this game would have shaved a few years off my life.*

"Round ten. Mephisto goes first," Rosalia says.

The Duke of Mist bitterly tosses the sticks down. "Two Fissstsss and three Eyesss." He follows up with the bones.

"Human pattern. Prophet formation. Twenty-six points." Rosalia jots some numbers down on her paper.

Mephisto hands the sticks and bones to Beelzebub. "I will not re-roll. Even if you win thisss round, the two-point rule only takes effect after round eleven."

Beelzebub nods. "Fair enough." He tosses the bones and the sticks.

Rosalia eyes the results. "Two Flames, two Fists, and a Sword. Monster pattern. Lower Cerberus formation. Thirty-eight points. The new score is 336 to 309 in Mephisto's favor."

The Baron of Flames keeps his results. Sweat drips down his back. *I'm two tokens ahead and about twenty points behind. One match to go. If Mephisto wins the next one, I'll have to win another round to*

seize victory... and my rank as Duke.

Beelzebub goes first in the next match. Rosalia eyes his throw. "Two Flames and three Eyes. Undead Monster pattern. Undead Drake of Darkness formation. Sixty points."

Rosalia hesitates for a moment. "If you win this match, you win everything, including your Duke status, Mister Beelzebub. You should use your individual re-rolls to get the best result possible."

Bael nods. "That's for the best. You have one full discard and three individuals left. You could try re-rolling each of the eyes to get five flames, but that's a crapshoot. Five eyes will get you sixty-five points, and you'll only need two retries."

Beelzebub licks his lips slowly. "I can win this or the next one to defeat Mephisto. I'll take a chance when I'm countering him. I don't know what his score is yet."

"Kss. Sssmart choice." Mephisto snatches the playing items up. With a flick of his wrist, he casts the sticks and bones down.

Rosalia's face whitens. "Two Swords, one Eye, two Flames. Elemental Monster pattern. Elder Mermaid formation. S-sixty-two points."

For a long few moments, nobody says anything. Finally, Beelzebub sighs.

"I lost by two measly points. Whatever. I'll beat you in the next round."

"That's the spirit, Mister Beelzebub!"

Bael taps the table. "You're on defense this time. I think you may manage to beat a seasoned Sticks and Bones player!" The Duke of Pain smirks as he reaches into a small pouch hanging on his belt. After a moment, he holds up a tiny marble-sized orb.

"Know what this is, pup?"

Beelzebub shakes his head. "No. What?"

"It's your prize. If you beat Mephisto, I'll give you this soul-stone. It has the souls of over two-hundred thousand humans inside. After you swallow it, you'll blackout and experience the best pleasure of your life. Once you wake up, you'll be a Duke."

Beelzebub's eyes meet Bael's, then lower to the grey marble. *Damn! I could almost reach out and grab that stone before this fat bastard reacts! I can't take a chance, though. I'll play this safe.*

As Bael sticks the marble back in his pocket, Beelzebub loosens his jacket collar. "T-two-hundred thousand souls, huh? I knew the soul cost of ranking up to Demon Duke was enormous, but..."

"You're a genius to ascend to Baron so quickly, whelp, but you're still at the very bottom of your rank. President Ose possesses far more souls in her body than you. Promoting her to Duke was a cinch."

Beelzebub nods, staring at Bael in silence.

The Duke of Mist casts his pieces out. "One Sssword, One Eye, Three Flamesss. Ancient Monster pattern."

Rosalia and Bael's eyes turn to saucers.

"I don't believe it," The Duke of Pain whispers. "A Dark Dragon formation. That's... that's eighty-seven points."

Mephisto blinks twice. Then he lunges for the Sword Stick. "I ssshall re-roll."

Bael beckons to some nearby patrons. "Another possible Fire Dragon, boys!"

Everyone rushes over again, and curses can be heard as some lament the luck of rolling two Ancient Monster patterns by one player in an eleven round game.

Mephisto tosses the stick. It hits the ground and clanks to a stop.

Flame.

The sounds in the room screech to a halt.

"One Eye, four Flames. E-Eldest Dragon formation. Ninety-seven points." Rosalia stares at the pieces shakily. Even Beelzebub gazes at the board with a thousand-yard stare.

"Four Flames and an Eye on an Ancient Monster roll. Ah can't believe it." The kobold from earlier rubs his paws together. "Ya know, if Mephisto flips a flame, and he decides to roll for a Phoenix... Whatever he rolls'll be his new point total. Not to mention-"

"The sword, yeah. Don't bring that up, Gamcha! It's bad luck!" A second kobold with darker fur slugs his peer. "Shut yer maw and let 'im play!"

Mephisto cautiously takes the Eye Stick, twirling it in his hand for a moment, before flinging it down. The crowd gasps as the stick *tinks* along and comes to a stop.

Rosalia exhales in relief. "Sword. It's a Sword."

The collective disappointment in the air could drown a demon in an eternity of depression. Mephisto raises his bony finger. "I ssstill have one more single roll left. I will ussse it now."

The crowd goes silent as he picks the stick up again.

This time, when the stick lands, the room explodes into applause.

Flame.

Beelzebub's heart wrenches, as does Rosalia's.

Five flames. It's a Fire Dragon formation.

"Good game," Beelzebub mutters emptily.

Mephisto waves a finger. "Not ssso fassst. I am going to attempt for the Phoenix, ass any ressspectable Mahja gambler ssshould."

The crowd howls excitedly. "Do it! Do it! Do it!"

Bael strokes his chin. "Hey, pup. Wanna hear a fun fact?"

"I suppose so."

"Who do you think was the last demon or monster in the Labyrinth to throw a Fire Dragon and follow up with a Phoenix?"

Beelzebub shrugs. "Like I'd know. Who?"

"Barbatos."

Bael's utterance of the name immediately sends a wave of chills throughout the room. The thunderous applause tapers off.

One male Harpy shudders. "I still remember that match like it was yesterday. Some idiot orc thought it would be funny to challenge the Duke. He never said a word the whole game. He threw the Bug pattern five times in a row. We thought it was hilarious."

The talkative kobold from earlier rubs his long, pointy wolf ears. "Ya! Then came round six! Barbatos threw a perfect Fire Dragon! Five Flames! Then he threw the sticks again, and..."

Bael rubs his arm. "... and he somehow got five more Flames. It shouldn't have been possible."

"The orc gave up on the sssspot, ass I recall." Mephisto lightly traces the Flame pattern on the Mahja stick in his hand. "Nobody blamed him. Barbatossss hasss the luck of the Ancient Devils."

"Yeah," Bael mutters bitterly. "Luck."

Mephisto reaches for the sticks again, but this time more slowly, more deliberately. He takes the first one in his hand and tosses it down.

Flame.

Then he tosses the next.

Flame.

The crowd stares silently, watching and wondering what will happen next.

Mephisto tosses the third stick down.

Flame.

"I don't believe it," Bael says.

Then comes the fourth stick.

Sword.

The room goes silent, almost as if everyone is in mourning. Mephisto lowers his head. "Ksss... unfortunate."

Every muscle in Beelzebub's body relaxes simultaneously. He sags in his seat and breathes a sigh of relief. *Mephisto rolled a sword. That means he lost the entire game. I won.*

Beelzebub smiles, though it's faint. "I didn't want you to roll the Phoenix, but at the same time, I did."

Bael nods. "You win, boy. Still, you could've seen history unfold before your eyes. Damn shame." He pulls out the soul-stone from his pouch.

Everyone shuffles away, leaving the four demons alone at their table. Beelzebub reaches forward to take the stone, but Bael pulls it back. "Ah, ah, ah. Not yet."

Beelzebub scowls. "I knew you weren't going to let me ascend to the rank of Duke that easily."

"No, I will." Bael nods along. "But we ain't doin' it here. This is where the real party starts." He stands up, as does Mephisto. "Come on, hatchling. Let's see what you're made of. You're gonna eat this in the middle of the Slaughterseum."

Beelzebub narrows his eyes and stands up, ignoring the hostess as she puts the pieces back in their boxes. "Why there? Are you planning a sneak attack while I'm mutating?"

"Bahaha! A sneak attack! Didja hear that, Mephisto?!" Bael slaps his knee. "Hahaha! A sneak attack. Aw, shucks. That's a good one."

Mephisto quietly chuckles to himself, trying to force down the bitterness of his loss. "Keh keh keh. Yesss, quite amussing. Beelzebub, if we wissshed to kill you, you would be dead already. You've won, fair and sssquare."

Rosalia turns to Beelzebub. "I think they're telling the truth, Mister Beelzebub. Let's go! I really want to see you get all-powerful and grow your horns out. Pleaaaaaase!"

It takes a minute, but Beelzebub relents. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

The group of demons begins walking toward the exit.

From behind, Beelzebub catches the sound of several monsters muttering. "Let's go check it out. I wanna see what happens to the suited guy."

"Same."

Author Note: This is the full ruleset for Sticks and Bones.

[Link to image of the rules.](#)

Sticks and Bones is a game of chance that many demons like to play. It involves throwing five four-sided Mahja sticks onto a table, then throwing out a series of bones.

There are four sides for the Mahja sticks: Swords, Fists, Eyes, Flames. Each side in that listed order is worth progressively more points. You want as many of the high-value sticks as possible, and as few of the lower ranked ones as possible - especially the swords. Swords are 'human' so they often apply point penalties.

Full spread: One of every side. Halves the point value.

Five swords: Instantly lose the round.

Four of any side other than swords: Bonus points.

Five of any side: Major bonus points, especially the eye or flames.

Twelve sticks:

Snowflake, Flail Ball, Boomerang, others are just ???

Sticks form patterns. These patterns have a variance of points they can assign.

Insect, 0-10

Animal, 0-20

Reptile, 0-30

Human, 10-40

Chimera, 10-50

Monster, 20-60

Undead Monster, 30-70

Elemental Monster, 40-80

Demon, 50-90

Ancient Monster, 70-100

Patterns, plus the sticks, create a formation.

Formations are basically the numerical value of the sticks, but given a name.

Example, a really high roll in the Elemental Monster pattern might be called a Fire Drake, or something similar. NGL, these are really just random bullshit.

Rolling five Flames on an Ancient Monster gives you a Fire Dragon. Should you choose to roll again, if you roll five flames again, you get a Phoenix. It adds three re-rolls and 5 individual stick re-rolls. However, if you choose to re-roll and get even one sword, you lose the entire GAME. Also, you have to give up your 100 points from the Fire Dragon and keep whatever comes up.

Can discard an entire throw twice during a game. Or three sticks throughout the game individually. Cannot re-throw the bones.

Part 060: Beelzebub's Final Test, The Duke Arises

Beelzebub and Rosalia slowly walk behind Bael and Mephisto. They watch as the massive demon whispers to his undead colleague conspiratorially.

"Mephisto is an interesting Duke," Rosalia murmurs. "He looks like a freaky undead monster, but he has feelings, likes and dislikes, things of that sort. I always thought he was just some creepy necrophiliac."

Beelzebub nods and keeps his voice low. "Master Agares told me a bit about each member of the Dukes and Emperors. Mephisto used to be an ordinary demon, but he was corrupted into a variant demon, and then later into a unique by Lucifer's power."

"Lucifer? Who's he?"

"She. Lucifer is the antithesis of pureblood demons. Most of us grow into purebloods, but Lucifer used her abilities to corrupt many of our people, and later the broodmothers themselves. They became aberrations, often with unusual powers. Master Agares and Mephisto were two such examples."

"Why haven't I ever heard of her, Mister Beelzebub?"

The group of four demons passes through a small crowd of people. They glance upward, toward the Slaughterseum's entrance looming overhead.

"Lucifer died a long time ago. Agares never spoke of why or how she passed, but I sensed it was a matter that temporarily destabilized the upper ranks of the Council. It happened around the time of the Energy Wars, though I couldn't tell if she died before or after."

"Energy Wars?"

Beelzebub, realizing what he said, curses himself silently. "Tch. Never mind. It's nothing a mere servant should concern herself with."

Rosalia asks Beelzebub another question, but his mind closes off to her. A dozen thoughts appear in his mind all at once.

Mephisto. The Undead King. One of the few Variant Demons to successfully morph into a Unique. I saw only a fraction of his skills during the battle against the Black Queen, but what I saw was jaw-dropping. He possesses undead legions that spring from the ground and drag their enemies to a dirt slumber. He summoned an undead dragon and nearly single-handedly slew Emperor Diablo. Unlike Bael, Mephisto is a shrewd and cunning opponent. Were it not for his greed during our match, I might have lost.

The bright light from the Slaughterseum pours through the doorway ahead. The screaming crowd deafens the four demons as they stride toward the field. A steel gate bars the path, and the newcomers slow to a stop before it.

Bael presses a button on the wall, then crosses his arms. "We gotta wait our turn. There's a match going. Look."

Beelzebub walks to Bael's side, his eyes glancing none-too surreptitiously at Bael's pouch, the one with the soul-stone.

Deciding not to make a grab for it, Beelzebub turns his attention to the arena. Half a dozen individual battles take place across the massive field. In total, the Slaughterseum holds up to 300,000 demons in the stands at any given time. The ceiling rises a thousand feet into the air, with goblins crawling all over it to chisel away pieces of the Labyrinth as it tries to reform itself.

The Baron of Flames clenches his fist. *The Slaughterseum. It's the ultimate demon entertainment exhibit: An artificial pit carved into the Labyrinth, intended to give demons thrills and gambling and all manner of other perverse entertainment. It's all part of the Emperor's strategy to prevent an uprising among the lower ranks. That's what Master Agares told me.*

His eyes jump from one battle to the next.

In one of them, a male human and a woman stand chained together with their backs against a thick pillar. With their arms shackled together, they can do little more than wriggle and kick at the monsters encircling them.

The man screams in terror. "Spare me! Please! Kill her! I'll work my debts off! I'll do anything!"

Three orcs ride atop hellhounds while waving their spears toward the helpless slaves threateningly. Their hounds stand slightly taller than the humans, each one with sharpened claws that can cut through steel, and fifty eyes that swivel and move around independently, giving the fearsome predators excellent eyesight.

"Dumb hoomun! Dishonorable for man beg for mercy!" One of the orcs stabs his spear into the man's leg, cutting deep and shattering his thigh bone before quickly retracting his weapon. The man screams and wails in agony.

"Ahhh! It hurts! Please, no more! No more!!"

One of the other orcs eyes the female slave. "Woman look tasty. Why kill? Tear man-filth arms off, keep slut for fun."

"Can't. Magister order. Kill both. Feed meat to pups. They soil Ose's clothes."

"Bah! Dumb demon woman. She make us waste perfectly good virgin meat!"

The first of the three orcs slaps his hellhound's rump. "Get her!"

Beelzebub watches bemusedly as the hounds rip and tear the screaming woman to pieces. The man follows shortly after.

"Ose sent those slaves here?"

Bael nods. "Yup. She hates humans even more than the average demon. As for me, I like having my way with the women before tossing 'em to the dogs."

Mephisto grins evilly. "Ossse likesss to give her ssslavesss a sssenssse of hope. Ssshe sssaysss ssshe will ssset them free, only to inssstead execute them. Ssshe likesss watching them ssscream in anguisssh."

"Interesting. Personally, I wouldn't waste the effort on a filthy insect. Kill the rat on the spot. Why bother with giving them hope or whatever?"

Bael grunts. "Dunno. Ose knows more about humans than any other demon. She probably has her reasons."

"Oh?"

"Yup. She studied at their, uh... their... what were those things called again?"

Mephisto answer's Bael's question. "Collegesss."

"Right. Those things. Yeah, Ose did a bunch of studying and learned about fleshbag brains or whatever. Most in the Council consider her the smartest demon."

Beelzebub crosses his arms. "Then why didn't you make her an Emperor sooner?"

"Didn't need to. Humans were under control until recently." Bael's eyes harden. "Until that filthy Hero showed up. Damn. I hate Heroes."

Rosalia blinks. "It sounds like you've had some bad experiences, Mister Bael, sir."

"If only you knew," Bael mutters. His eyes lower to the ground for a moment. "I remember when Agares and Lucifer fought the Hero-King. I was surprised they came back in one piece, but they barely made it out alive."

Beelzebub replies, "You mean Arthur? The one you fought on Polaris?"

"Yeah. Him. I remember when we found out he died. It was like a nonstop party in the Demon Dens for a hundred years after. Then the bastard had to come back after all this time. Nearly killed Diablo."

Mephisto shrinks slightly. "Oopsss."

"I don't blame you. You did what you had to. Considering that Word-shit kid destroyed the planet, it's probably better we got outta town. Diablo would've died for real."

Beelzebub returns his gaze to the battles outside. In one of them, three big orcs surround a Hellhound, holding only thick wooden sticks and nets as they try to wrangle the massive animal. The hound leaps around deftly and dodges their pointed branches. Only once it learns their movement patterns does it suddenly lunge forward and attack.

A slight stumble by one of the orcs leads to his demise. The fifty-eyed monster pounces at him and slashes his chest with its claws. Dozens of pounds of bone, blood, and tissue go flying as the animal nearly tears the orc in half. However, the orc's death allows his allies to dive toward the hound and hurl their net over the beast, twisting the net around its legs to trip it up. With a quick motion, the orcs twine the rope around and tie it off, leaving the wolf to chomp futilely at anyone in range.

"Not bad," Beelzebub mutters. "I heard it takes five orcs to catch a Hellhound. Most of the time, as many as three or four of them will die. This lot must be skilled."

Bael nods. "Leadership challenge. You don't see it often. Three of the biggest, meanest orcs get together to take on a Hellhound. It takes balls to try it, so even if one or two of 'em dies, they're honored by their clan. Fun to watch."

Several minutes pass — one by one, all six of the battles in the Slaughterseum end. Eventually, the field clears. Beelzebub watches in silence, a growing suspicion in the back of his mind. "Why aren't more battles starting?"

"I reserved the whole arena for this occasion." Bael smiles innocently. "I mean, it ain't often we get a new Duke."

Beelzebub glares daggers at his older peer. "There's something you're not telling me. You promoted Ose directly to Emperor. I'd expect her to receive a giant ceremony before little old me."

"Oh, she'll get a fancy ceremony, too," Bael promises. "But yours is... a little different."

"Bael. Jusst tell him."

A moment passes. The gate begins to rise.

"Nah. He'll find out soon enough." Bael turns to Rosalia. "You should get in the stands, cutie."

She blushes and nods. "O-okay!"

However, her expression darkens as she realizes his implication.

The demons enter the Arena, and Rosalia splits off to climb the stairs up into the stands. Beelzebub glances back to see the patrons from the gambling den following them. The various monsters and demons walk behind Rosalia, plunking down here and there in the stands.

"Planning on a show?" Beelzebub asks.

The gate they passed through slams shut.

Something like that," Bael replies.

Trodding across the dirt, Beelzebub glances at the ceiling above. Hundreds of torches stay lit thanks to the tireless efforts of the goblins, along with the torches lining the walls and spectator stands. The room is stunningly bright, as though there was a sun directly overhead on a midsummer's day.

Beelzebub's eyes adjust. The two Dukes and newly risen Baron stride into the center of the arena, the former two positioning themselves directly opposite their junior.

"Alright, pup. I admire your patience. You've stayed with me up to now. So this is the final test. If you wanna back out, this is your last chance."

Bael pulls the soul-stone from his pocket and tosses it to Beelzebub.

"If you swallow that stone, you'll consume the souls inside and mutate into a Duke. But... there's one thing you should know."

Beelzebub resists the urge to immediately pop it into his mouth. "Yes?"

"You'll have to fight Mephisto and me. We gotta test ya to see if you're the right guy for the job."

Beelzebub sighs. "Haah... Two against one? You don't play fair. How am I supposed to beat two Dukes at the same time?"

Mephisto chuckles. "Keh keh keh... mossst amusssing. You misssunderssstand, Beelzebub. You can't win againssst usss. Your job isss to sssurvive for thirty minutesss."

Everything clicks in Beelzebub's mind.

Asking me to show up was a test of my resolve. The Sticks and Bones game was meant to test my judgment skills. And this battle... it's going to test my combat capabilities.

Beelzebub pops the soulstone into his mouth. "How many people have ever passed this test?"

Bael smirks. "None."

"Ksss. You're the firssst perssso to *take* the tessst," Mephisto clarifies.

Beelzebub scowls at Bael as he swallows the soulstone. "You're a real piece of skarn-dropping, Bael."

The Duke of Pain smiles widely but doesn't respond.

A moment later, millions of lightning bolts explode in Beelzebub's stomach as the pill takes effect.

The Baron of Flames doubles over and clutches his gut. His head shakes. His body spasms. He falls to the ground, writhing as a million daggers pierce him from every direction.

DAMN YOU BAE! YOU SAID THIS WOULD FEEL LIKE ECSTASY! YOU FUCKING LIAR!

Bael chuckles. "Ooh, that looks like it hurts."

Mephisto shakes his head. "Your sssadisssm knowsss no limitsss."

"Fuck off. Pain'll make the brat tougher."

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The pain transforms into a roaring fire in Beelzebub's stomach. A short eternity passes as he wavers in and out of consciousness.

Not even a minute after taking the pill, Beelzebub leaps to his feet. A soothing feeling sprouts in his stomach. Bael and Mephisto watch as flames begin burning his skin and sear his clothes to ash. The crowd gawks at the now-naked demon, while Rosalia leans forward intently. Drool spills from her mouth.

The fire grows more intense. Soon, it becomes a roaring blaze, engulfing Beelzebub's whole body in an infernal shroud.

Beelzebub holds his hand up and stares at it.

This power awakening inside me is primeval, primordial. This is unlike anything I've felt in my life. It's almost as if-

Bael lunges forward, laughing haughtily. "Bahaha! Time starts now, boy!"

His fist smashes Beelzebub's chest with astounding force, sending the arisen Duke flying backward. The instant Beelzebub strikes the ground, zombie arms burst out and grab his limbs, violently yanking

him into the dirt.

The newly crowned Duke winces at his shattered ribcage. A moment later, he realizes that he doesn't feel any pain at all.

Beelzebub's shattered ribcage heals in less than a second when his enhanced Phoenix Physiology works its magic. He spots Bael leaping at him, and wriggles, trying to free himself. It's only when Big Bonk comes swinging down that Beelzebub's instincts take over.

Barely conscious of what powers he's awakened, Beelzebub's eyes begin to glow. A second before Bael's mace impacts him, Beelzebub blasts a concentrated stream of fire from his eyes, knocking Bael away and making the Duke drop his flail. Big Bonk strikes the ground only a few dozen feet away, making the arena shudder.

Beelzebub inhales and unleashes fire from every pore in his body. The expansion of heat fries the zombies holding him down to ash, and he jumps into the air, igniting flames from his soles to fly nearly a hundred feet into the air.

The crowd cheers and whoops excitedly. Rosalia screams, "Kick their butts, Mister Beelzebub! I believe in you!!"

Beelzebub looks around, scanning the battlefield. *Mephisto's gone. He must be hiding underground. His undead should be little more than a nuisance. It's Bael I have to watch out for. He hits like a Hydra.*

Bael clutches his chest where Beelzebub shot him. "Aaaaaoooh! The pain! Gaaahhhh!"

Beelzebub flies a little lower. "Maybe I was wrong. It's hard to believe that hurt you."

Bael's pained grimace vanishes. "You're still an imp when it comes to the art of deception."

The Duke of Pain rolls over into a reverse-crab-walking position, revealing his undamaged chest. He smashes both arms and legs into the ground below him, pouncing at the unsuspecting Beelzebub. The newly crowned Duke yelps in surprise and tries to dodge, but Bael's movements are lightning-fast. Without much effort, he rips Beelzebub's arm off, soars past the youngster, and lands next to his flail with a *whump*.

Beelzebub clutches his arm, but once again, he doesn't feel any pain.

Bael spins around, flail in hand. "Hah! Gotch'err arm, idiot! Now you're in for a world of..."

Beelzebub sprouts a new arm in less than two seconds, causing Bael's taunts to falter.

"Heh, would you look at that? My regeneration is even more potent than before." Beelzebub glances at the arm in Bael's grasp. "Enjoy the souvenir. I've just tapped into one of my newest powers."

Bael glares at the kid. "Regeneration, huh? When'd you get that? Ain't seen a demon with an ability like that since..."

"Since Satan? I've heard a lot of demons comparing him to me lately." Beelzebub holds a hand up. "Say, have you ever played Hot Potato, Bael?"

Bael spits on the ground. "Pteh! Potatoes? Sounds like shitty human food."

Beelzebub targets the arm in Bael's grasp with his mind. "Not quite."

He snaps his fingers.

A moment later, the arm in Bael's grasp begins to shake violently. Bael stares at it dumbly. "What the hell? Why's this thing-"

BOOOOM!

The arm explodes with the force of a small bomb. Bael flies backward, bounding and careening across the arena until he crashes into a wall. The impact leaves a crater ten feet deep in its wake.

The audience goes silent, then applauds excitedly. Beelzebub grins as he stares at the result of his self-detonation.

Suddenly, a voice speaks from right behind Beelzebub.

"You forgot about me," Mephisto whispers.

Beelzebub whirls around in midair just in time to see the aetherial duke plunge a spirit knife into his back, smiling the whole time.

Nothing happens.

Mephisto's wicked grin fades. He stares at the knife in confusion. "What?! I usssed my Pain Inducement! You ssshould be in agony!"

Beelzebub swats at the knife, but his hand passes through it. "Oh. That. I believe one of my new powers is pain immunity. Your skullduggery won't get you far with me."

Mephisto floats away from Beelzebub. Only the screams of goblins above give the young demon any warning. A moment later, one thousand ghouls fall from the ceiling onto Beelzebub, pulling him from the sky and hammering him into the arena floor below. Dirt explodes outward from the force of dozens of tons of flesh and bone.

Beelzebub blinks as the ghouls viciously tear his body apart. Still, he feels no pain.

You want a taste of me? Enjoy.

Summoning the energy from his body, he calls upon his newly realized power of Nuclear Manipulation to agitate the cells in his torn-off limbs.

One of the ghouls raises its head in confusion as its stomach begins to inflate.

The crowd stares at the mass of flesh piled atop the new Duke. Rosalia covers her mouth and tears well up in her eyes. "Oh no... Mister Beelzebub..."

A light like staring directly into the sun erupts from the pile of ghouls, blinding the audience for a moment. Beelzebub's torn-off body parts explode like a hundred tactical warheads, blasting apart the undead atop him and spraying their flesh across the arena. The spectators lean back and cover their faces as black blood and flesh rain down on them, coating their bodies in a foul, fetid stench.

Rosalia ignores the ghoul innards all over her and jumps to her feet, whooping and hollering ecstatically. "Yeahhhh! Whooo! Get 'em! Get 'em!!!"

Beelzebub rises, purging the disgusting innards from his body with his Flame Cloak.

Having already recovered from Beelzebub's surprise a minute before, Bael brushes ghoul blood off his chest. "Well, spawn of a Broodmother. Ain't you just the toughest gobby-fucker I've ever seen?"

Mephisto floats over to Bael. "Beelzebub regeneratesss from any wound. Not only that, but hisss body isss a living bomb."

"Yeah, I noticed." Bael shakes a slight stinging pain out of his right hand. "His exploding arm tickled me. Burned real good."

Beelzebub strides over with a huge smile stretched across his face. "Oh, dear, are you okay? I hope I didn't *hurt* you."

"Tch." Bael grinds his teeth together. "I've felt real pain once before. Barbatos made sure of that."

The Duke of Pain grabs the stick-end of his flail and yanks hard. Big Bonk lurches off the ground and flies across the hundred-foot gap and sails into his outstretched palm. Bael catches it effortlessly, acting as if the spiked-weapon were little more than a softball to him.

Beelzebub notices for the first time that Bael appears smaller than before. *No. That isn't it. Mephisto looks shorter, too. It's me. I've grown in size. I must be over seven-feet tall, now.*

He sneers. *Neither Bael nor Mephisto can hurt me. I'll burn the hordes of undead off my body and tank anything the big guy throws at me. It'll be a cinch. I've never felt more confident in my life.*

Mephisto glowers at Bael. "I have a sssolution. We ssshouldn't be humiliated by thiss upsstart."

Bael itches his ass. "Hope you've got an idea. I dunno if pounding his body into mulch will work this time."

"Keep Beelzebub busssy," Mephisto whispers.

The Duke of Mist floats underground, while Beelzebub activates his foot-thrusters to fly into the air. He pulls out his fingers and shapes them like a gun, then rapidly fires his Heat Bullets at the Duke of Pain below.

Bael stares silently as the bullets *piff* against his body and fizzle into nothingness. "I probably didn't tell you this before, kid, but I'm your worst matchup. Ya see, I'm immune to fire."

Beelzebub stops shooting. "I'm immune to simple idiots punching me over and over."

"Bit of a stalemate we've got, then. Hehehe. Why not fly down here so we can talk this over like gentlemen?"

Slowly, Beelzebub lowers his palm to his waist. A fire-whip forms in his grasp. "How about... no?"

Beelzebub's eyes jerk to a torch about twenty feet behind Bael. A moment later, he vanishes.

Bael stares at the spot where Beelzebub was levitating only an instant before. "Wha-? Where'd that little imp-porker go?"

"Behind you."

Beelzebub lashes his whip out and lashes his solar whip against Bael's back. It instantly cuts through Bael's thick hide, boiling the blood underneath and leaving a horrible, blackened scar.

"Gwaaah!" Bael jumps away and grabs his back. Blood trickles from the gash. "Cheh! You startled me!"

Beelzebub cocks his head. "You don't have the power of regeneration, do you? You're a physical fighter. If I cut you to pieces, you won't heal."

Bael snarls. "Go ahead and try. The burn feels nice. Only a little pansy-ass fears pain. Besides, I got blood that clots real easy."

Beelzebub lashes his whip out again, and it slices a gash across Bael's chest. The Duke doesn't flinch. "Uh oh, the pup isn't paying attention."

The ground shakes under Beelzebub. The young Duke jumps into the air and starts to fly away, but he's too slow. A massive undead hand explodes from the dirt, reaches up, and grabs his whole body.

"What?!" Beelzebub gasps.

A hundred-foot-tall undead monster climbs out of the ground. It makes no noise as it squeezes Beelzebub with all its strength.

Crack. Pop.

Beelzebub's bones and innards snap under the strength contained within the monster's grip. However, not once does Beelzebub feel any pain.

Beelzebub activates his Heat Vision and blasts the giant monster's thumb, but his fire doesn't affect it. Every second, his bones pop and snap some more as the creature squeezes him like a vice.

"Huh. Didn't expect that," Bael murmurs. "What is that thing?"

"A Brute." Mephisto emerges from underground, noticeably tired. "It is elementally resssisstant. I had to conssssume a hundred Ghouls to mutate it. It will die in two minutesss. Crusssh the boy while we can."

"Hell yeah!"

Bael leaps up to the giant's shoulder, and the crowd watches silently, everyone wondering who will win in this engagement.

Beelzebub strains his head around, but he doesn't feel anything as the silent behemoth grinds his body into pulp. *What should I do? My heat vision doesn't work. Should I fire-port away? Can't. I'm pinned. I'll have to detonate my body.*

Before Beelzebub can agitate his cells once again, Bael arrives on the Brute's shoulder and swings Big Bonk down. "Special delivery!"

Beelzebub watches helplessly as the flail flies at him. Before he can activate his Heat Vision to knock it aside, the flail meets its target, crushing Beelzebub's skull and ripping the Brute's hand off. The flail careens toward the arena floor below, carrying Beelzebub's body along with it. When Beelzebub's body, the flail, and the Brute's hand hit the dirt, his mind goes blank.

"Shit. You passed. What the *hell*, man."

Bael stands over Beelzebub's body as the younger demon awakens.

"Huh? What happened?"

He blinks and looks around. The spectator stands are noticeably emptier. About half as many monsters and demons stand around, uninterested in the final result.

"Mister Beelzebub!" Rosalia flops to the ground, bringing her hideous face within inches of his. "Omigosh! I thought you died! Are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?"

"No. No, it doesn't." Beelzebub rubs his eyes, then stares at his naked body. "The last thing I remember was Bael's flail hitting me."

The body of the Brute rests motionless not far away, its body slowly dissolving into ash.

Mephisto walks up behind Beelzebub. "Bael sssmassshed and pounded you, over and over. No matter how many timesss he crussshed your body, it regenerated. I've never ssseen such incredible recovery powerssss in all my yearsss."

Beelzebub pulls himself to his feet. "What does this mean? Did I win?"

Bael shrugs. "Dunno. I'm tired of punching puddles of blood, though. Cripes. You're fuckin' unkillable, kid. I wouldn't say ya won, but'cha didn't lose. Either way... you lasted thirty minutes, so, welcome to the ranks of the Dukes."

Bael pats Beelzebub on the back, sending the younger one stumbling forward a foot or two before he recovers himself. Beelzebub rubs the spot where Bael smacked him. "My... my sense of touch is gone. It isn't pain I'm immune to, but touch all over my body."

Only now does Beelzebub notice the sickening sensation he'd been ignoring during the fight. *That's why my movements were so sluggish. I couldn't feel the subtle shifting of wind on my back, nor could I sense when Mephisto slipped his dagger into my gut.*

Rosalia touches Beelzebub's arm, something he'd normally yell at her about. However, this time, he doesn't notice at all. "Are you sure, Mister Beelzebub? Can you feel this?"

"Feel what?" He looks at Rosalia, then spots her hand. For once, he doesn't yell at her or tell her to stop touching him. "No. I can't."

"Ksss. Unfortunate." Mephisto shakes his head. "You ssspent all that effort trying to become a Duke, only to lossse sssomething preciousss to you. Remindsss me of myssself."

Beelzebub blinks. "It does?"

"Yup," Bael says, jumping in. "Most of the time, when a demon evolves into a Duke, they lose something important. A piece of themselves."

"Oh? Did you lose anything?"

Bael glowers at him. "Nothin' you need ta know about."

"Fine." Beelzebub yawns. "I'm exhausted. Any more tests? I'd like to take a nap."

Bael shakes his head. "Naw. But uh... you won't be returnin' to your den. Mephisto. Gimme the thing."

Beelzebub and Rosalia watch quizzically as the Duke of Mist reaches into his cloak and procures a small envelope. When he pulls it away from himself, the object becomes corporeal, allowing Bael to grab it.

"The old man wanted you to have this. That is, assuming you ever reached the rank of Duke." Bael hands the envelope to Beelzebub. "You ain't just moving to Hell Harbor, kid. You get Agares' estate. I'd congratulate you, but, given he died and all..."

Beelzebub nods to Rosalia. "Take the note. I don't want to burn it accidentally. I can't control my powers yet."

She nods and accepts the note from Bael.

"Alright." Beelzebub yawns mightily. "Hell Harbor, then? When do we leave?"

Bael stares Beelzebub down. "Now. I've already talked to folks. Everything's waitin' for ya, whelp."

A sensation of satisfaction spreads through Beelzebub's body. "You expected me to pass the test?"

"I hoped ya would. I wasn't gonna take it easy on ya, though, just 'cause I owed the old man a favor or two. Anyway, shut up. We're boring the arena folks."

The four demons laugh and walk away, Beelzebub occasionally staring at the note in Rosalia's hand.

I wonder what it says, he thinks to himself.

The Arena door slams shut behind them, and Bael raises an eyebrow. "Say, now that you're a Duke, what'cha gonna call yourself?"

Beelzebub stares ahead silently for a long minute as he contemplates the question.

"I will be... the Duke of... Inferno. Yes. The Duke of Inferno."

Rosalia claps excitedly. "I love it, Mister Beelzebub! You're the greatest demon ever!"

Part 061: Thanks for the Frienemies

"Welcome to Maiura, Your Majesty," The soldier on the other side of the portal says with a nod.

Hope blushes. "Ah, sorry, you have me confused with Jason. I'm his clone. He's the king."

The guard blinks twice. "Oh, sorry. I couldn't... err..."

"Tell me apart. Right. I get that a lot."

Hope inhales deeply, smelling the fragrance of a delightful pink and green planet. "Officer, can you direct me to Commander Neil?"

The guard scratches his chin uneasily. "Sorry, sir. I don't know where he is off the top of my head. If you give me five minutes, I can ask around and find out."

"No need," Hope replies. "I'll find him myself."

The Wordsmith paces down the steps and glances back at the Core, visible through the portal. *This is the 32nd world we've reclaimed since I- no, since Jason first emerged from the Cryopod. It's beautiful.*

Hope turns away from the Core and jogs down the steps, taking them two and three at a time. Dozens upon dozens of uniformed men, women, and monsters run around, looks of trepidation on their faces. They're all armed with a mixture of weaponry, and Hope pauses, sensing an aura of fear in the camp.

He continues walking for a minute or two and pauses to stare at the distant vistas of mountains and trees, along with several large animals reminiscent of dinosaurs. However, no matter where he looks, Hope doesn't see Neil.

Hope shrugs. "**Locate.**"

It barely takes ten seconds to discover Neil in a tent half a mile away. The army's commander flails his arms and yells angrily at a group of men and a demon, but Hope pulls away before he can hear what's going on. *It's not polite to intrude on conversations with Wordsmithing. At least, not when it comes to my friends.*

Not two minutes later, Hope finishes jogging through the makeshift camp and pauses outside Neil's tent. Neil's outraged voice is muffled somewhat by the tent's fabric. What makes Hope pause, though, is a giant cloud of smoke in the distance, which is now much more visible at the edge of the camp where Neil's tent stands.

A forest fire? Hope shakes his head. *No, something else. That looks like the direction of this world's capital city.*

He lifts open the tent flap and steps inside. A few people glance at Hope, but Neil doesn't notice him. The Commander stands with several men and a familiar-looking demon. Neil gesticulates wildly and points at the demon. "-fault! You didn't tell us the demons would fight back so fiercely! Why are they guarding this world more than they did the others?"

The demon rubs his hands together. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? Demons need human souls. If you guys keep liberating worlds, they're gonna get desperate. It's that simple."

Hope's eyes widen. *Ah, I recognize him. Didn't I- err, didn't Jason chat with him a few months back? His name is Paimon. He was part of the assault force that attacked the Core. Jason interrogated and let him go. I didn't even know he returned.*

Neil curses. "Shit. We lost thirty soldiers. How long did Lorvos torture those innocents before he killed them?"

Paimon shakes his head. "A while. At least a month. What are you gonna do with him?"

"I'll have to think of a fitting punishment. Many of the bodies we recovered already melted together thanks to his infernal magic."

Neil pauses to take a breath, and one of the men nudges the commander. He turns around and raises an eyebrow at Hope. "I expected you an hour ago. Where the hell have you been?"

"Busy, sorry. There was a cave-in at a mine. I was pulling people out. I didn't realize your message was urgent."

"Tch. It sounds like the messenger boy didn't understand the meaning of an S.O.S! Whatever. You're too late to do anything now."

Hope glances around at the group of people, as well as Paimon. "What happened? What's going on?"

Several of the lower-ranked officers turn away, unable to meet Hope's eyes. Neil replies, "Demonic brutality, of course. I expected to liberate this world quickly, but it turns out the demons anticipated our movements. They were waiting for us."

"Waiting?"

Neil turns to Paimon. "Tell him."

The young demon, still dressed in a smart suit, yet appearing smaller than the first time Hope remembers meeting him, slicks down his black hair. "Hey, Jason. Long time, no see."

Hope smiles. "Wrong guy. I'm Jason's clone. Call me 'Hope.'"

Paimon blinks. "Hope?"

Neil snaps his fingers. "It's a long story. Let's get on with your report. Small talk can come later."

Paimon nods. "Right, sorry. Anyway, I had a few comrades who told me this was an outer rim human world. It's supposed to be one the Council didn't care about, but I think my friends lied to me."

"Why?"

"Dunno."

Paimon hesitates.

"Okay, I *do* know. I don't wanna say it, though."

Neil crosses his arms. "Paimon is a traitor to his people. A good soldier, willing to join the forces of humanity. The other demons discovered that fact and fed him false intel. They wanted to ambush us on

this planet."

"P-pretty much," Paimon says. "Sorry. They played me for a fool."

Neil waves his hand. "It's not your fault. I thought the demons might try something sneaky. That's why I set up camp before we traveled to the city."

Hope waves his hands. "Hold on; I don't understand. What happened? The demons attacked us?"

The Commander and the Demon Lord nod simultaneously. "Aye," Paimon replies. "You're lucky I was there to help. There were fifty-thousand monsters and a bunch of low-level demons, plus a Demon Lord named Lorvos. I managed to knock him out and capture him. We can't return to the city, though."

"Why not?"

Hope's blood chills. He glances at the tent doorway and remembers the smoke in the distance. "Don't tell me the monsters are still there!"

"They outnumber us ten to one," Neil replies, clicking his tongue in exasperation. "Even if we had superior weaponry, which we don't, we couldn't beat them. We had to pull back to the safety of the portal, but I imagine they'll hit us here in the next few hours."

Sweat rolls down Hope's back. "Why the laid-back atmosphere in camp? We need to retreat or attack them now. We can't simply sit around and do nothing!"

One of the other men in the room speaks up, though he and his peers have been quiet until now. "Hope, Paimon captured Lorvos. That means we have a bargaining chip. I think the top-level monsters are waiting to hear our demands."

Hope scoffs. "A bargaining chip? Come on! That can't be all you've got. Demons will abandon one Lord if it means tearing apart humans."

"True," Neil says. "But we have two other sources of protection. The demons are hesitant to attack us directly as of late, likely because Jason destroyed Polaris. Not only that, but as that succubus stated, supposedly we're under her protection."

Hope mentally recalls the succubus's name. "Samantha, you mean? Belial? But she isn't here now."

"They don't have to know that."

"Right."

Neil punches his palm. "It took you an hour to arrive, but now that you're here, I say it's time for a counter-attack. We've been thinking of some ways we can pay the bastards back. Since you're the Wordsmith, maybe you have a few ideas?"

Hope pauses to consider his options.

I haven't used my powers much since Jason created me. The lack of Solomon's Crown is my biggest hindrance compared to him, since the crown allows him to visualize complex machinery and the like. However, in all other respects, my abilities and mana capacity are equal to his.

Hope nods. "I have a few ideas. I can teleport, put people to sleep, read minds, release holy energy, use telekinesis..."

"Excellent. You're an intelligent fighter, Hope. I believe in you." Neil rubs his hands together. "Would you be able to go in and thin the herd a bit? If you can kill half of the demons in the city, that will make things a lot easier for us."

Hope blanches. "W-what? Kill them? Are you sure that's necessary? I could knock them out, put them to sleep, change their allegiances, and all sorts of other-"

Neil scowls. "They're enemy combatants, Hope. If you put them to sleep, they'll wake up. Do you expect us to capture every enemy we meet? We haven't the prison capacity for such an operation."

Paimon squirms in embarrassment. "Neil, Jason converted me to humanity's side with words. Maybe Hope could do the same for these monsters."

Irritation appears on Neil's face. "Do you expect Hope to sit down and have a twenty-minute chat with fifty thousand monsters one at a time?"

"...I suppose not."

Neil waves his hand. "Fantastic. I'm interested in recruiting the strong ones, but the cannon fodder will do little more than devour our food reserves and tax our system. Right now, what we need are humans. They'll ally with us, as the others have before, and won't be a security threat once inside our borders."

Paimon looks away, unable to meet Neil's gaze. The atmosphere in the room turns tense. Several men glance at the Demon Lord, unsure how he'll react. Neil ignores Paimon and focuses on Hope.

"You need to thin the monsters out and save as many humans as possible. Can you do that for me?"

Hope shakes his head. "I won't kill, Neil. I can't. It's not right."

The room goes silent. The bystanders hold their breath. The nearest spectators wince as their emotions wash across their faces.

Hope told the Commander 'no.' Yikes.

Neil glances around. "Would everyone give Hope and me a few minutes of privacy?"

Wordlessly, everyone nods and shuffles out of the room, including Paimon. The demon sends a look of concern toward Hope before he leaves, but Hope holds his ground and shows no anxiety.

After everyone disappears, Neil rubs his face. "Hope. I understand. I know why you think the way you do. You don't want to kill because killing is wrong. Am I correct?"

"Yes. I won't budge on this, Neil."

Neil licks his lips. "Is that *you* speaking, or Jason?"

"What do you mean? I can be my own person while also sharing a value system with Jason."

The commander folds his hands behind his back and strolls to the center of the lightly furnished tent. Only a few chairs and a table sit on the side opposite the entrance. "Hope. Don't you think that perhaps Jason does things the wrong way, on occasion?"

"I don't follow."

"A lot of people died because Jason was unwilling to kill. He was unwilling to kill Amelia to save humanity, but he was also unwilling to kill demons to protect her as well. When your values contradict themselves by their internal logic, don't you think that's a problem?"

Hope shifts on his feet. "Okay. I... I see your point, somewhat. However, I don't know if I can-"

"You *can*," Neil says, interrupting him. "We're in the middle of a war, Hope. Jason might run around flitting about with women, but you're better than him. Do you want the demons to tear apart the Core? Do you want us to appear weak?"

"No."

"Well, if you make them take a nap, that's what they'll think. Demons respect strength. You have to set aside your emotions and put them in their place."

"What about Paimon?" Hope counters. "I talked to him and convinced him to join our side."

Neil's lip twitches. "Can you convert trillions of demons to our side? Can you ensure the safety of humanity by talking to our enemies and making them see the error of their ways?"

The Commander takes a few steps forward and lowers his voice. "You don't think I *trust* Paimon, do you? Have you any idea how many humans he killed before he joined our cause?"

"I don't," Hope says, swallowing hard. "But Paimon was indoctrinated into demonic beliefs and values from birth. He didn't know better."

"You're naive," Neil counters. "There are two types of men in this world: Those who have taken another man's life, and those who haven't. Once you kill someone, no matter who they are, something *changes* inside you. That's the way humans are. That's the sin we share with demons. Paimon can convert to our side, but how many human souls did he devour to become a Lord?"

Hope opens his mouth, but Neil cuts him off. "At least a thousand. That's how many human souls it takes to mutate into a Lord. How many men do you know who've killed a thousand people, hmm?"

"None," Hope replies, reluctantly.

"Then you understand," Neil says. "Go to the capital, Meldora. It's not far from here. Kill as many enemies as possible with your Wordsmithing. When you finish-"

"No."

Hope stares at the Commander silently. "There's another way. I can wipe their minds. I can make them loyal to us with Wordsmithing."

Neil stares at the Wordsmith for several seconds. "How?"

"I can influence and change their minds with Wordsmithing. Well, I think I can. It's worth a try."

"And if that fails?"

Hope bites his lip. "I guess I'll have to try your plan, then."

The two don't say anything for a long minute. Neil breaks the silence. "Fine. Far be it for a simple man like me to question the *mighty* Wordsmith. But before you go, why not test your theory on Lorvos? If you can convert him, perhaps you will succeed at turning the rest."

Hope nods. "Good idea."

They turn to walk out of the tent, but Neil hesitates. "If you succeed, then your power will be even more frightening. The ability to take free will, a gift given by God, should not rest in the hands of any man."

"I don't disagree, but if the alternative is killing, wouldn't you agree changing someone's free will is the morally superior option?"

Neil touches his lips. "Is it? I wonder."

Neil and Hope eventually arrive at a tent on the other side of the camp. Paimon and the others stay behind, given the Commander told them it was a private matter. Two guards outside the tent pull its flap open, and Hope steps inside, followed by Neil.

"Here he is," Neil says, gesturing to a bound demon. The big brute, only somewhat smaller than Bael, thrashes around on the floor, grunting through a gag over his mouth. His hands are bound firmly behind his back, and his legs are shackled tightly together. Black hair and a torn-apart set of light, leather armor are all that cover him.

"Wow. Lorvos is massive. How the hell did Paimon beat him?"

"Paimon is a proficient fighter, especially for a Lord. He has command over water and ice. Lorvos is a physical fighter, so Paimon jammed ice all throughout his body. Nearly killed him. The big guy didn't stand a fighting chance. When their boss went down, the enemy monsters didn't dare to stand up to Paimon."

Hope kneels and pulls the gag out of the demon's mouth. The lunkhead scowls at him. "Filthy fleshbag! Take these bloody cuffs off, and I'll tear you apart! I'll shove a thousand maggots up yer arse!"

Hope cocks his head. "You hate humans a lot, don't you?"

"No shit, stupid! Lean a little closer, and I'll bite yer fuckin' ear off!"

Neil curls up his lip. "Quite the foul-mouth, isn't he? Go ahead. Do it."

Hope hesitates. "Lorvos, can't you sit still for a minute? I want to talk."

"Eat my ass! I ain't talkin' with no skarn-droppin' fleshbag!"

"I could kill you right here," Hope warns him. "Do you still want to be feisty?"

Lorvos grins. "Hehehe, tryin'a scare me, eh? I see the weakness in your eyes, you little shit. You ain't got the heart to off me."

Lorvos glances at Neil. "Not like that one over *there*. He's got a hard edge to 'im. Even if you did kill me, I'd consider it an honor! I died after killin' hundreds of your kind!"

Hope winces. "You did?"

"Course I did. Meldora was ripe for the takin'. Raped a bunch of sows, gutted a few crawlers, and they begged for mercy the whole time. That's what you want me to do, innit? Beg?! As if!"

Hope swallows. "I wanted to talk. Maybe that wasn't the right thing to do. You aren't like Paimon at all. He was reasonable."

Lorvos's smile vanishes. "Paimon. Filthy devil-damned traitor. Turned his back on demons to grovel at the feet of fleshbags, he did. Don't think the rest of us are like 'im. There's always a few weaklings in the crowd. I call 'em arena-droppings, since we feed 'em to the hellhounds. You can spew honeyed words at one or two of us, but the rest'll gut'ya in your sleep."

A moment passes. Neil purses his lips. "Heard enough, yet?"

Hope stands up. "I guess."

"Why are you waiting? Use your Wordsmithing."

Lorvos and Hope stare at each other silently. The former grins evilly, while the latter stares blankly, trying to parse what he's heard.

"You heard the big boss! Smith me with your words... whatever the hell that means."

"Maybe I should kill him," Hope says. "Maybe you're right, after all, Neil. Do I want someone like this on my side?"

"I don't," Neil says. "But you're the Wordsmith. You make the call."

Hope sucks air through his teeth. "I came here to test my Wordsmithing, and that's what I'll do."

He closes his eyes and inhales. **"Convert."**

Energy travels from his body into Lorvos.

The Demon Lord's evil smile slips away. He blinks. "What was that? What'd you do to me? I felt somethin'... somethin' tickle my head."

His eye twitches. Hope watches intently. "Who do you serve?"

The big demon raises an eyebrow. "Uh, you, of course, dumbass. Why'd you put me in these cuffs, anyway? You testing me or somethin'?"

"You don't remember?"

Lorvos shifts his wrists around and moves his eyes from right to left. He scrunches his forehead together. "Hmm... ahhh... I feel like there was somethin'. I fought another Lord. Lost. Bastard iced me up. Can't remember why, though."

Neil exhales. "It worked."

Hope forces a smile. "Yeah. Lorvos is trying to fit past events into his new persona. He's justifying his past actions in a new light."

Lorvos continues to stare at the humans. "What're you babblin' about? Are you gonna leave me all tied up like this forever? My wrists are killin' me. What's a fella gotta do to get some fresh air around here?"

"Should I release him?" Hope asks.

"You tell me," Neil replies. "Think he's safe?"

Hope reaches out with telekinesis and shatters the bindings on Lorvos's arm, and flinches, waiting for the demon to attack him.

The attack doesn't come.

Lorvos rubs his wrists. "Cripes, my skin's chafed as hell. Next time when you're messin' around, don't make the bindings so tight. And what about my ankles, eh?"

Hope shrugs. He tears the bindings off. "How many humans have you killed?"

Lorvos hops to his feet and stretches. "Humans? Oh, a few thousand. That was a long time ago, though. They were our enemies. Why d'ya ask?"

"You're not going to hurt humans anymore, are you?"

"Of course not, dumbass." Lorvos rolls his eyes. "Humans are friends, not food. New creed. That's how it goes."

"Sure. Whatever you say, Lorvos." Hope stares at the big demon for several seconds, then shakes his head. "Can't believe it worked. Wordsmithing is something else."

"Huh? Whaddya mean?"

"Nothing."

Hope turns to Neil. "Meldora, then. I'll go alone. Let's hope I can convert fifty thousand monsters to my side by the end of today."

Neil nods. "Yes, let's. Still, don't let your guard down. Anything could happen. And I hope for your sake you're ready for whatever you see in that city. I've... heard rumors. Paimon told me some unsettling things."

"I can handle it," Hope retorts. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Godspeed."

Part 062: Hell Harbor

Bael slaps his belly. "Come on, Grigori! What's the holdup? I ain't got all day."

Beelzebub, Rosalia, Mephisto, and Bael all wait impatiently while Diablo's personal Warper creases his brow. "Please, if you'd be so kind, give me another minute or two. Traveling to Hell Harbor isn't like traveling to other worlds. The magic restrictions are quite severe."

The Warper, a purple-skinned fellow, continues to fold his hands together into increasingly complex signs as he summons the gate that will carry them across the cosmos to the World of the Demons. Grigori sweats profusely under his black robes, but he's careful not to complain about his misery. After all, he's a professional, and this is his job.

Mephisto glances around the small inner chamber, a place in the third quadrant where the Warpers live. While their residence may be small, it's out of the way enough that they enjoy the peace and quiet. With their abilities, Warpers can easily travel from one end of Hell to the other in the blink of an eye, so distance never proves a barrier to them.

"Kss. A ssshame we have to travel sssuch a long disssstance sssimply to warp to our home. The filthy flessbagsss have taken too much from usss already."

Beelzebub glances down at his bare body. "Before we head to Hell Harbor, I'd very much like to get some clothes."

"Heh. You'll have clothes aplenty when you arrive," Bael says. "Ever been there before?"

"No. Master Agares rarely spoke of the place."

Rosalia's eyes occasionally flick to Beelzebub's body, but she forces herself to look away, lest she make him uncomfortable. He pays her little mind.

"Mister Beelzebub, I thought your mentor showed you all the aspects of being a demon leader?"

"Not especially. Agares was never one to brag or lord his title over others. I heard he mostly slept in the Labyrinth, rather than traveling home."

"You heard right," Mephisto mutters. "The codger never ssstayed in his esstate. A ssshame. It'sss one of the lovelier placesss in Hell Harbor."

Beelzebub doesn't reply. Instead, Grigori sighs. "It's ready. Prepare to enter. The portal only lasts for fifteen seconds."

Bael nods. "Yup."

Grigori opens the portal, and everyone steps through as quickly as possible. Grigori seals it behind them and doesn't bother waving goodbye.

Beelzebub and Rosalia examine their surroundings. The four demons stand atop one of several small platforms with a magic pentagram engraved into the soft, red stone beneath their feet.

The outdoor landing area bustles with demons, all ranked at Baron level or higher, aside from their slaves. Humans, demons, and monsters alike all carry out errands for their masters, traveling to and from the Labyrinth, thanks to the one primary warp-gate still open and owned by the demons. A long line extends to the gate, and several demons tap their feet impatiently while they wait for their turn to step through.

"Ever since the humans took the Core, we haven't had many portals open to travel to Hell Harbor," Bael mutters. "Fucking fleshbags."

Beelzebub's gaze drifts past several statues carved in the likenesses of various top-ranking demons, and to the far distance, where trees and mountains give way to a lone tower atop a plateau. It stands out among the other mountains, for the fact that black smoke rises into the red sky above.

Mephisto hisses. "Do you like my home? It catchesss the eye, doesssn't it?"

"You live there?"

"Of coursse. The Undead Monolith hasss been my home for tensss of thousssandsss of yearsss. It housssss excesss energy for me to conduct my experimentss."

Rosalia swallows. "It... um... sure looks inviting."

Bael points to the right of the tower, in the general direction of a forest. "I live out past the Shrieking Woods. You ever wanna have a good time, come on over to my place. I got lots of ladies there for your enjoyment, kid. I trained 'em well, heh heh."

"Pass." Beelzebub stifles a wave of revulsion. "I've heard of your penchant for human females. I gag at the thought of living with humans."

"Oh? Is that so?" Bael stifles a smirk and nudges Mephisto. "Hear that? He don't like humans."

"Mosst amussing."

Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. "What? Is something about that funny? Humans disgust many demons."

"No, no, of course not. Anyway, let's get you to your new home. I can't wait to see what you think."

Beelzebub narrows his gaze. "You're planning something."

"Nah. Wouldn't dream of it."

The four demons depart their arrival platform and head into the thick of the crowd. Several pedestrians stare at Beelzebub's nude body, including the women. He scowls at them. "Keep your eyes to yourselves."

"Come on, boy, they're just 'mirin. Not to mention you're a new face around here. Most of us know each other."

Beelzebub bristles. "Soon, they'll learn to respect me. I'm a Duke now. Far above the common rabble."

"There's that big ego. Better get that under control, or me 'n Mephisto will have to teach you a lesson."

"You tried that once, and failed."

Bael goes quiet. "Tch. Whatever you say."

They stop at the exit when a few Orcs nod at them. "Mishter Bael. Muhphishtoe. You go home?"

"Nah, not yet, Grok. Get us a shuttle. We're heading over to the Slithering Spire first. Need to show the newest Duke his estate."

The head Orc grunts at Beelzebub. "No problem. Me call shuh-tul. Take few minutes. Wait here."

Beelzebub rubs his arms. "What's a shuttle? Never heard of it."

Mephisto titters. "Keh keh keh, amusssingly enough, it'sss a flessshbag invention. It floatsss over the ground and can ssseat ssseveral demonsss inssside. It'sss usssed for transssportation from one placce to the next."

A minute later, a giant vehicle floats up, hovering over the paved ground silently. A goblin inside thumbs toward the back. "All aboard! This one's heading to the Slitherin' Spire!"

The four demons climb inside, with Rosalia and Beelzebub sitting directly across from Bael and Mephisto. Beelzebub leers away from Rosalia, even as she tries to wiggle a little closer to him on the seat. "Confound you, woman. Keep your mitts off me."

Rosalia bats her eyes innocently. "The seat isn't very big, Mister Beelzebub. I can't help myself."

"The seat is plenty wide, but so are you. You take up too much space!"

Bael chuckles. "Calling this cutie fat, huh? You've got bad manners, pup."

"Shut up."

Bael pulls the side-door shut, but when it slams, something gets in the way, causing it to reopen. The Duke of Pain pauses to examine the door. "Err, Beelzy..."

"What?"

"Uh. I slammed the door on your fingers."

Beelzebub glances at his hand. It's broken in several places. He heals it a moment later. "Oh, sorry."

"You didn't feel anything?"

"I did not."

"Mmm."

Time passes. Minutes. Hours. The shuttle drives past houses large and small, all homes belonging to one Baron or another. Most of them are quite large, standing several stories tall with dozens of rooms for servant quarters and anything else the resident requires.

On the car's left, Beelzebub spots an ocean, while on the right, the mountains press against the cliffside. Mephisto touches his fingers to his forehead for a moment and communicates with his undead minions. "We've arrived."

Beelzebub and Rosalia stare out through the wide windows to the right. The mountains peel away, and a lush green meadow appears, filled to the brim with flowers and small animals hopping about. Statues

and gargoyles dot the landscape, and a gigantic tower rises into the sky thirty stories above, twisting and turning to form a shape neither of the two younger demons has seen before. Vines fall off the tower at various places, making it blend into the mountain in such a way that one might not see it if they didn't look for it.

Beelzebub's expression turns to disgust a moment later. Dozens, no, *hundreds* of humans walk around in a field adjoining the meadow, where they pluck fruits and vegetables from trees and plants growing nearby.

"What the hell? This is my home?"

"Mmm. Kinda. Slithering Spire is your old master's place. It's Agares' home, but he asked me to pass it down to you. Lucky break, huh?"

Beelzebub seethes for a few moments as the shuttle enters a gate with two more gargoyles atop and rolls down a long ornately laid brick driveway toward the tower a mile away.

"Humans. Why are there so many of them here? Is this some sort of sick joke?"

Mephisto glances at Bael, then at Beelzebub. "Agaresss wasss fond of flessshbagsss. He sssaved ssseveral thousssand of them during the Energy Warsss. They work ass hisss chattel here in Ssslithering Ssspire."

"Human slaves. Fantastic. Where are the low-ranked demon slaves?"

Bael smirks. "Agares only used humans. It was a rule of his. Never whipped or hurt 'em either. Too soft, in my opinion."

The shuttle pulls up to the tower, and Beelzebub leaps out, igniting fire around his body as he departs. "I won't let filthy rats look at my unclothed form."

"Suit yourself," Bael mutters. The other three demons climb out of the shuttle, and the Goblin leans his seat back.

"Lemme know when you big bosses are ready to head out."

"Sure thing, Grum-Grum," Bael says.

Beelzebub gazes up at the tower for a full minute, examining the intricate winding pattern of the chiseled marble. *What a marvel of engineering. I wonder who built it?*

Bael claps his hands. "Let's go inside and get you some clothes, whelp. Gettin' pretty tired of looking at your tiny meat all day long."

"I'm not," Rosalia whispers.

"Both of you, shut up."

The group of demons heads toward the front doors. While climbing the steps toward the intricately chiseled marble entrance, the doors swing open, and three humans step through; One dark-skinned man, and two light-skinned women.

The man raises a hand. "Duke of Pain. Duke of Mist. Welcome. I did not expect you here today. How may I be of service?"

Beelzebub sizes him up. *Dark skin, bald, wearing a black tuxedo. Big scar going over his right eye. I thought Bael said Master Agares never punished his slaves? Maybe it's an unrelated injury. This fellow carries himself with confidence. Seems taller than he should be, considering he's only a human.*

Bael crosses his arms. "Yo, Benjamin, it's been a while. I'm sure you've heard of Agares' return, and his second death."

"Only yesterday," the man says. "We're still preparing for a second funeral. I hear his body disintegrated into ash...?"

"Aye. It did." Bael nudges Mephisto, and the Duke of Mist makes a motion with his hands. In the grass at the bottom of the steps, a zombie emerges from the ground with a ceramic container in its arms. It trudges up the steps and hands the container to Mephisto, then heads back down and goes underground.

Beelzebub shivers. *That thing had no face. Horrifying.*

Mephisto hands the urn to Bael, and Bael to Benjamin. "Here he is. It's all we could recover."

Ben takes the urn and stares at it for several long moments. "I heard he died fighting the Black Witch. How did he come back to fight again?"

Beelzebub coughs. "Ahem. I can answer that question, insect. I fought and defeated my master when the Black Queen summoned him from the realm of the dead."

The man glances at his two female companions, then back to Beelzebub. "Oh. You must be his pupil. Beelzebub, am I right?"

"You are."

The man nods. "I am Benjamin Brown, the head slave here at the Slithering Spire. Since you are the new master of this residence, I am your humble servant."

Beelzebub gnashes his teeth. "I don't want a human servant. I want demon servants. Why in the Devil's name would Agares have humans working under him?! I thought the old lizard had more sense than that."

Rosalia nods. "Yeah! Why should Mister Beelzebub have humans working under him? Gross. He deserves better than that!"

Benjamin doesn't reply for a few moments. The man rubs his bald head a few times before answering. "Master Agares spoke about you all the time. He mentioned your proclivity toward hating humans, and your tendency to distrust and hate us, irrational though it be. I didn't expect you to look at me with such venom in your eyes, but now I understand what he meant."

"Irrational? I'm far from irrational," Beelzebub counters. "Humans tortured and exterminated demons in the past era before the Energy Wars. Your kind deserves all the pain you've suffered."

Benjamin scratches his thin black facial hair, then looks at Bael. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"Nope."

Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. "I don't know... *what?*"

Benjamin smiles faintly, then dismisses the two women. After they leave, he clears his throat. "Master Beelzebub, this may come as a surprise to you, but I lived during the Energy Wars."

"Huh? Lies. That's impossible. Your kind barely lives to a hundred, and that's if the demons allow you."

Bael shakes his head. "Ben's telling the truth. He was one of humanity's military commanders. He killed a lot of demons."

Nobody says anything for a few seconds.

Beelzebub's face whitens. "You... slew demons? And Agares allowed you to live?"

"I did, and he did. We had an agreement." Benjamin looks at a watch on his wrist for a moment. "Why not come inside? I'll tell you all about it. We've already prepared dinner for tonight, and everyone here is free to enjoy it."

Beelzebub's body stays tense. "I couldn't care less. I'm not entering a house filled with *humans*."

Benjamin nods. "I thought you might say that. I think you'll find Agares' last will and testament... enlightening."

Rosalia blinks, then reaches into her clothes to withdraw Agares' envelope from the Slaughterseum. Beelzebub eyes it for a moment. "Rosalia. I'm still having trouble controlling my flames. Hold it out so I can read it."

The plump woman nods, opens the envelope, and pulls out some ancient, faded papers. Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. *It looks like Agares wrote this will several hundred years ago.*

His eyes scan the page as Rosalia holds it up.

Beelzebub.

If you are reading this, I have perished. I know not how, when, or why, but I assume you will inherit my estate and eventually move in with my family.

Well, you might not think of them as family. After all, to you, they will appear as little more than slaves. Human slaves, at that, and I know how you loathe their kind. You're not one for compassion.

My pupil, I believed in you from the moment I met you. You remember how we met, don't you? I do. I think about it all the time. You were a feisty little imp, one who thought of himself as better than the others. Your body took a beating now and then, but your pride was invulnerable. I respected that about you. I still do.

You're a demon raised among demons. You're young, and thus know little of the galaxy and universe outside the Labyrinth. It's not your fault. We designed the Labyrinth to be an insular system. The Council wished to encourage ignorance among demons regarding their past so that we could look toward the future.

However... I believe we went about everything in the wrong manner.

I don't love humans. I've lost many brothers and sisters to their kind. However, I don't hate them, either. I believe humans and demons have value to each other. I tried to instill those beliefs in you as an upcoming Lord, but I fear I may have failed.

Beelzebub. I bequeath you my estate, but I ask that you do things differently from me. Focus on what went wrong in the past. Demons and humans need not be mortal enemies. We should not have a predator and prey dynamic, but one of cooperation and trust.

Some would say my goal is farfetched, and for an old bat like me, they would be right. However, you are not bound by the past as I am. Look to the future in a way the other demons won't. Lead humanity and the demons toward a horizon where both stand to benefit. If you do not... I fear that war will take us once again.

Life is peaceful now, but I believe it will not stay that way forever.

Be strong, my pupil. Stand up for what is right. Use that pride of yours to resist the honeyed words of the Council. Pressure them to accept-

Beelzebub sighs and stops reading. "Agares always *did* have a flair for the dramatic."

Bael walks around behind Rosalia. "Eh? What's it say?"

Beelzebub snatches the paper from Rosalia and burns it to ash. "Nothing you need to see. Human, have you read this letter?"

Ben shakes his head. "I have not, but I can hazard a guess regarding its contents."

"Excellent," Beelzebub mutters. "Incredible absurdity from a stupid old man. I regret wasting my time."

Rosalia stares at Beelzebub, having read the letter herself. "I thought the letter was... nice."

Beelzebub rolls his eyes. "I'm *shocked* you'd think that."

Benjamin gestures inside the Spire. "Well, if that's everything, will you be joining us for dinner, Master Beelzebub?"

The Duke of Inferno glowers at the human for several moments. He sighs. "Fine. Whatever. I don't trust you in the slightest, but at the least, I'd like to put on some clothes."

Ben cocks his head. "Oh. I thought that fire around your waist was what you normally wore."

"No," Beelzebub hisses. "Get me a suit. Black. Trimmed cuffs with a bright red undershirt."

Ben clicks his tongue. "You'll be staying for dinner, then?"

"Don't test me."

Part 063: Inner Monster, Outer Monster - What's The Difference?

The walls of Meldora, little more than low-quality bricks slapped together with mud, stand a mere seven-feet tall. Hope peeks out from the forest and squints at the four-dozen orcs milling about outside the city's gate. Alongside them are several goblins and even a harpy perched on the wall. She doesn't have a good foothold on the soggy bricks, but she clutches them tightly with her foot-claws anyway.

One orc, dressed in slightly more elaborate armor compared to the rest, laughs. "Bahaha! Stupid Lorvos! He think we save him? What idiot! Me no stick neck out for bloodskin!"

"You said it, boss," A goblin laughs. "Hope the fleshbags gut him real good! That's what he gets for getting caught, am I right? Hehehehe!"

Hope frowns. *Wow. Tons of security. Shouldn't be a problem to slip by, but if this is the group outside, I can only imagine how many will be inside the walls.*

He whispers under his breath, "**Invisible.**" His body becomes transparent, little more than a blur in the wind. He dashes from the tree-cover to the city without being noticed and hops the wall. Using his Wordsmithing, he speaks. "**Convert. Convert. Convert. Convert.**"

Over and over, for each guard outside, Hope says the word. It takes him almost a minute, and he coughs. *Aren't there supposed to be 50,000 monsters in this city? Jesus Christ. It'll take me forever to convert them all. There has to be a better way.*

Immediately, an idea appears in his head.

If I say the word 'Convert,' it will create an active effect. However, maybe I can make it passive instead. That's what I did with my telekinesis. I might be able to mind-control enemies by looking at them. Hopefully, that will work.

Nodding to himself, Hope utters a word of power. "**Conversion.**"

He slides up against a straw hut. An orc grunts inside the hut, and Hope can barely make out a man's muffled whimpers. Hope's stomach churns as he realizes what the monster is doing to the man. *Disgusting. What the hell? Maybe Neil was right about them. Do I want pigs like these on my side?*

He aims his mind at the source of the grunting, then slips around and the front and enters the hut. The man is tied down to the table while the orc has his 'fun.'

"Release him."

Hope speaks, and the orc pauses. It pulls away from the man. "Yes, master. Me do as you say."

"Untie and ungag him. Christ. That's horrible. You know what? Go jump in a pool of ice-water. Freeze to death for all I care."

The orc keeps his back to Hope, but nods dumbly. "Yes, master. Me free hooman. Me freeze in water."

Hope watches silently as the orc unties the man, then walks outside. The man lies on the table shivering and whimpering for over a minute. "Hurts... hurts..."

"**Heal. Forget.**" Hope Wordsmiths and gnashes his teeth together. "Maybe if you forget the trauma, you can live a normal life once I clear out this city."

Before leaving, Hope frowns. *I shouldn't leave him here. An orc might find him. I can't waste time running him back to the portal either, but maybe I can speed up the process.*

Hope speaks a single word. "**Return.**"

The man opens his mouth in surprise and vanishes a moment later.

Hope speaks again. "**Locate.**" His mind travels out of the city and flies over to Neil's camp, where the man appears in the middle of some confused soldiers. The soldiers stare at the man, and he stares at them. Several seconds pass before the soldiers take him to see Neil.

Great. Neil will understand.

Hope pulls away and returns to his body. *No time to waste.*

He slips outside the tent and glances up at the planet's sun. It beats down on the surface like a vengeful phoenix. The heat must be a hundred degrees out, and it's worse inside the buildings.

The houses on the outskirts of the city are little more than tents and huts, but deeper inside the city; they transform into mud, brick, and stone. One of them, a church, stands taller than all the rest. It's only now that Hope spots the source of the fire from earlier. A massive pile of human bodies sits outside the church, it flames rising dozens of feet into the air. Nearby orcs grab human hostages, bind their limbs together, and hurl them onto the bonfire to burn alive.

The victim's screams send chills down Hope's spine.

"Oh, god. Oh, god. I'm gonna be sick."

Hope watches in horror as a little girl screams and cries. An orc carries her bound body to the flaming heap, and her eyes widen in terror. Several of her friends lie motionless on the mound, their lives long gone.

Neil's words come back to Hope. *Demons respect strength.*

Hope's stomach trembles. *Strength? Is tying up defenseless children and hurling them onto a fire considered strong?! It's cowardly! Pathetic!*

The orc grins as he walks toward the fire. "After cook you good, you taste real nice. Burned human meat the best. Kids taste like yum. Hehe."

Hope aims his mind at the orc. *You're mine.*

The orc pauses in front of the fire. His eyes glaze over. "Uhh... what was doing?"

Hope looks around at the hundreds of orcs standings around, laughing about this and that. One of them glances at his ally with the girl. "Hey! Mulpu! What you wait for? Throw on cook meat and grab next one!"

Hope shivers. *Even invisible, I can't walk over there and talk to him to tell him what to do. Oh! I should order him around with my mind!*

"Telepathy."

Hope aims his mind at the big orc again. *Bring the girl to the green tent, then attack that loudmouth. Tell him you want to keep the little girl for yourself. Call him barf-skin. That should piss him off.*

Mulpu nods dumbly. He turns around, walks toward Hope, and sets the crying child down.

The other orcs scowl at him. "What big idea, Mulpu?! Follow order, stupid hog-fucker!"

Mulpu rears up and roars. "Shut up, barf-skin! This girl mine! Me fight for her!"

The other orc cocks his head. "Boorf-skin? What that?"

Hope facepalms. *They're so stupid they can't even recognize an insult. Mulpu, tell him his mother was a goblin.*

"Your mother a goblin!! She ugly like demon ass!"

The other orc's eyes widen. He yanks a sword out of a nearby barrel and raises it above his head. "How dare you insult mother! Me make rug from your skin!"

The two orcs leap into combat, howling like angry wolves. While they fight, Hope reaches down and picks up the little girl. Her eyes open in terror as the invisible assailant grabs her. "Eee-!"

"Don't speak," Hope whispers. "I'm a friend. I'm here to save you."

Despite the terror on her face, the child nods and stays silent.

Hope turns her invisible as well, and dashes away to a nearby hut. He's relieved to see nobody inside.

"Revert. Revert." He undoes the invisibility on the both of them, then unties her wrists and feet. "Hey there, cutie. What's your name? I'm Hope."

The child, barely seven years old, stares at him silently for several seconds. "M-Marisa..."

"Great. Marisa, who are the people that run the village? Do you know?"

Marisa stares emptily at him. "Mama. They hurt mama. And papa. They put them in the fire."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry. You know what? Never mind the questions. I'm gonna put you somewhere safe, okay? **Return.**"

He sends the little girl back to Neil's tents. "Two down, God knows how many to go."

Hope makes himself invisible once again and slips out of the tent. This time, he walks over to the tallest stone-building in the city.

"Adhere."

With a single word, Hope makes his hands and feet sticky and begins climbing the walls like a spider.

Several seconds pass. Once Hope reaches a decent vantage point, he gazes intently at the city sprawled out beneath him.

Mulpu's body lies motionless. Orcs surround and kick him, battering him left and right. "Stupid shrakh! Fell for a hooman, did ya? Bahaha!"

Hope doesn't blink. He mutters under his breath, "Piece of *shit* Orc. Fuck him. He deserved to die."

He freezes.

Whoa? Did I say that? That's not me. I shouldn't like death. He's an orc. He doesn't know any better. I sentenced him to death. Even if I didn't kill him myself, I ordered him to die. That's sick. Messed-up.

He doesn't have time to dwell on the thought. Several orcs yell at once. "Oy, Ligna! The tiny one got away! She musta crawled!"

A giant orc with a black ponytail, apparently named Ligna, scowls. "What?! She couldn't have gotten far! Look around! Search the tents! We don't waste little person meat around here!"

Hope scrutinizes the large orc. *He must be their commander.*

A sound behind Hope makes him shiver. He turns his head and nearly screams. A goblin climbs the wall beside him, sniffing the air. "Human... I smell a human..."

Hope gathers his wits and mind-controls the goblin. *Tell me where the human leaders of the city are.*

The ugly little monster pauses and blinks. His eyes glaze over. "Leaders. City. Burned alive. Only weak ones left."

What?! That's awful! How many humans are left?

The goblin blinks slowly. "Only a few thousand. Takin' 'em to the fire pit, we are. Not long now. Tasty meat. Lorvos is gone. No reason for us to stay. Return to Labyrinth."

Several people scream. The orcs ready themselves to hurl the next batch of squirming people into the blaze.

"No!" Hope leaps off the building and slows his descent with telekinesis. *You, orc. Release her. You, orc. Release him.*

Hope quickly sends thoughts and orders to each one. The dozen orcs blink their eyes and yawn. "Huh? Why me burn bodies? No need burn. Put on ground. Save for later."

Ligna spots the new batch of turncoats. "Aw, come on! Not you hound-fuckers too! Put the bodies in the fire! It ain't hard to do."

Hope hardens his eyes. *Kill your leader. He's in the way.*

The twelve orcs immediately spin and draw their swords, then advance on the commander. His annoyance vanishes, and deadly anger replaces it.

"Hey. What are you shrakh-heads planning? This some kinda mutiny?"

His subordinates charge him, but the commander doesn't raise a weapon. Instead, he drops to one knee, making himself a smaller target. The first orc that draws near gets a fist to the groin. Ligna flings that one behind himself with an expert-level maneuver that would make a martial-arts master weep with joy. The next eight follow similar fates. By the time he gets to the last three, the commander snarls.

"You lot are actin' like you ain't never trained before! Mindless idiots! Who taught you to fight? I'll have his head!"

Hope quickly returns the humans on the ground to Neil's camp while Ligna's busy. *Interesting. Their cognitive abilities decrease dramatically once I mind control them. I've seen orcs fight before. These guys are pathetic. I guess mind control isn't the catch-all solution I thought it was.*

The commander takes out two of the last three at the same time, then punches the final orc's head so hard it flies off and crashes into the dirt. The headless body collapses, and Ligna stares at it silently.

"Somethin's goin' on here. I don't like it. Smells like magic."

He spots the missing humans. "What? Where'd the tarks go?"

Hope continues to watch from beside the fire-pit. *The orc commander, Ligna, is more intelligent than his underlings. He can form full sentences. He took out his minions like they were nothing. I'll control him and see what happens.*

A moment later, Hope connects to Ligna's mind. *Obey.*

The big brute takes a step back and recoils, then winces. "Ohh, head hurts. What the devil?"

Several orcs and goblins come running up from the city entrance where Hope arrived. "Boss! Boss! You okay? Why followers attack?"

Ligna rubs his eyes. "Gah. I hear a voice. In my head. Shrakh. I don't want... to listen..."

Hope frowns. *He's resisting my Wordsmithing? He's only an orc. That shouldn't be poss-*

Suddenly, Ligna's voice roars in Hope's mind. *GET OUT OF MY HEAAAD!!*

Hope stumbles back and lands on the ground with a *thud*, disturbing the dirt. He yelps in surprise, causing several of the newcomers to turn toward him. One goblin yells, "Oy! Did you 'ear that?"

"Hooman voice! Someone's there!"

"I don't see nothin'."

Ligna shakes the fog out of his head. "Idiots! He's hiding! Look for him! Might be trickin' us. Use your noses!"

The goblins sniff the air, and the orcs narrow their eyes as they squint and try to spot him. Hope jumps to his feet, and one of the orcs points. "There! The dirt! It moved!"

"I saw it too! Somethin's movin' in the air!"

Ligna punches his palm. "I knew it. Some tark is tryin'a screw with me. Get him! Don't you shrakh-heads dare let him escape!"

Hope quickly levitates in the air with telekinesis, but in doing so, he spots a horde of orcs approaching the burning pile. Someone must have signaled them.

One of the goblins sniffs. "Something's moving. The air's shaking. I see it... I see the human!"

Hope winces. The monsters begin to converge on his position as the goblin keeps pointing at him. *I guess even invisibility isn't infallible. If the goblin's using his nose, though...*

"Anosmia. STENCH!"

With two words, Hope seals off his sense of smell and unleashes a vile odor that races around the town like a mad hatter. The entire army crumples to its knees. Even the orcs, who love the smell of dead bodies, can't control themselves. They double over and gag violently, wrenching up meals from the last few days all at the same time, which only adds to the horrid stink in the air.

Hope gazes at the crowd of enemies. *I feel nothing toward them, and I can't excuse their actions anymore. They deserve all the pain they're suffering. Neil is right.*

The Wordsmith begins mind-controlling orcs one-by-one. *Fight your fellow orc. Fight. Fight. Kill each other. Do the world a favor and bring an end to your disgusting existences.*

Despite the tears in their eyes, each mind-controlled orc stumbles to his feet and draws his sword, then attacks the enemy closest to him. Chaos ensues.

Swords and steel meet flesh and bone. Orcs and goblins alike scream in pain as their limbs end up hacked to pieces and sprayed all over the ground. Their blood mixes with the dirt, creating muddy trenches that suck their feet to the ground. Several orcs slip and fall in the chaos, only for their mind-controlled allies to pounce at them and end their lives.

Hope grimaces at the death occurring all around him. However, a hint of excitement appears in his eyes. *Yes. Yes! Tear each other apart. I'll save the humans while you lot suffer and gag.*

He hovers higher into the air and uses his Wordsmithing to locate any survivors he can, then teleports them back to Neil's camp. Any time an orc emerges from a tent or stumbles toward the chaotic battle, Hope mind-controls and orders them to fight their former allies.

Hahaha... I'm having fun. Watching disgusting creatures tear each other apart isn't so bad. I was wrong all along. I need to listen to Neil more often. I shouldn't compare orcs to fairies or other cute creatures. They might all be monsters, but some are more monstrous than others.

* * *

Several hours pass. Hope eventually rests atop the church and smiles to himself. *I saved nearly two thousand humans. Now all that's left is to let these idiots rip each other to shreds. I've left the commander alive. It's fun sending a stream of minions to die at his hand. He's getting pretty tired.*

Ligna swings a sword at another orc, chopping deep into the fellow's neck. "Haah... haah... damn you! Stop falling for his tricks! Fight back, idiots! Don't let a damn fleshbag turn us against each other!"

Hope shakes his head. *It's pointless to fight back. Even if you kill every orc in the city, you're no match for me. You remind me of old video games where I would kill zombies one after the other. They didn't deserve sympathy, and neither do you. It's a shame I can't trade orc lives for the humans you've killed, but maybe they'll rest in peace knowing I avenged them.*

Several minutes pass. Hope chuckles when Ligna kills his final ally and slumps to his knees, gasping for breath. He's long since grown used to the acrid stench in the air.

"Fah... fahking bastard! Where's that tark hiding? C-come out! Coward!"

Hope speaks again. "**Purify. Normalize.**" He hovers to the ground, and Ligna watches without moving.

"So... you're the one... who did this."

"I am."

The orc wipes his forehead. His arm shakes from exhaustion. "Smart human. I dunno how you did it... but turning my warriors against me was clever. Now you can gut me real easy. I'm ready for death."

"Oh? You think I'm going to kill you?"

"Why wouldn't ya? Go on. Do it."

Hope scratches his chin. "I'm considering it. Tell me, though... why do orcs pillage, rape, and plunder? Can't you be less savage?"

The commander shakes his head. "Than what? A filthy tark? As if. You're worse than all of us combined."

Hope narrows his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Ligna chuckles. He beckons toward the hundreds of dead orcs nearby. "Oh, come on. Don't piss in my face, tark. You did this. You might not've killed 'em yourself, but it's all your fault my warriors died."

Hope nods. "True. The difference is that they deserved to die. The humans didn't. The children didn't. I won't apologize. Don't even try and play innocent with me."

Ligna lowers his head. "Pretty words. I don't care. I'm tired. Need sleep. Get it over with."

Hope stares at the commander for over a minute. A question forms in his mind.

Should I kill Ligna?

He sets his jaw and considers his actions over the past several hours. *I didn't directly kill anyone, but I might as well have. I can't be a pansy. If I'm going to end this miserable creature's life, I might as well do it now. I can't sit around forever and rest on my laurels. Neil told me that the demons respect power. Jason isn't powerful. He's scared. He's always trying to take the easy way out, to save lives and protect his ideals. We used to be the same person, but I'm not bound to his path anymore.*

Yeah, that's right. That's the spirit. Jason let Amelia die. He could have beaten her without Hoarhiim's help, and Satan too. Maybe he could have bound Satan with unbreakable cuffs, then blasted him with holy energy over and over again. Hell, he could have destroyed the planet after taking Amelia away. Jason didn't do any of those things! He's an idiot.

I can't stand it. The guilt I feel is all because of him. Jason is the one who failed humanity, time and time again. He didn't protect the Core. He didn't protect Amelia. He didn't save these humans either... I did! I did!!

Hope raises his chin and stares coldly at the orc kneeling before him.

Humanity isn't battling itself anymore, but demons and monsters. Sometimes, it takes a monster to kill a monster. I'll do what I must to protect everyone, even if they hate me for it. That is my path. I see it

now.

Hope raises his hand and aims it at the orc.

"I feel no pity for you. I can only imagine the humans you've raped and tortured. Your barbarism ends here, Ligna, as well as the rest of your species. I won't show mercy for enemies of humanity, no matter what."

Ligna sighs. "Mercy is for the weak. Ain't that right?"

"Yeah. And I'm not weak. Not anymore."

Hope uses his telekinesis to reach into Ligna's chest and constrict the orc's heart. The sudden look of pain on Ligna's face fills Hope with an unfamiliar emotion. It isn't one he can put into words, but it resembles... *pleasure*.

Ligna gasps and clutches at his chest. Hope crushes the orc's heart with all of his strength, imploding it inside Ligna's ribs. The orc gasps, and falls over a moment later, dead.

Several minutes pass. Hope stares at the orc silently. "Rest in peace. You were my first kill. You won't be the last."

He spins around and trudges away, leaving the bodies behind. "**Burn.**"

An hour later, Hope arrives at the borders of the camp. Immediately, he notices something is amiss. He spots a few soldiers weeping near the outskirts of the tents and walks over to them. "Hey. What's going on? Why are you crying?"

The young man, barely twenty years old, turns to look at Hope. "Oh... oh, god! Wordsmith! You're back! It's terrible! Lorvos went berserk! He attacked us out of nowhere and nearly killed Commander Neil!"

"What? He did?! Where is he? Where's Neil?"

The man shakes his head. "Don't worry. The commander is safe. A demoness appeared and defeated Lorvos before he could kill the commander, then she healed Neil. However, so, so many others were not as lucky..."

The second soldier nods. She forces herself to remain stoic. "S-sir, you should know. Lorvos slew at least a hundred soldiers, and most of the refugees you sent back. His attack was so fast and brutal that it caught us completely off-guard. Among the dead... one of those killed, w-was..."

Hope's telepathy picks up the name before she says it. "Paimon."

She nods. "Yes. I'm sorry, sir. He died when he jumped in front of one of Lorvos's attacks."

Hope's eyes turn hollow. "I... I need to see the situation for myself. Where is- what's the current state of the camp?"

She walks toward the camp, and Hope follows. He looks around and spots several soldiers hauling dead bodies to the middle to line them up for identification. Hope's eyes immediately catch sight of

Paimon's limp form.

"Jason?" A woman's voice speaks out. Hope turns and swivels to spot a succubus he's seen before.
Samantha. No, Belial.

"I'm not Jason; I'm Hope. I'm his clone."

Melancholy fills Belial's face. She gestures to the bodies. "I hear you mind-controlled Lorvos."

"I did."

She shakes her head. "Mind control doesn't last forever. The stronger a person's will, the faster they will break free. He happened to be in the middle of the mess hall when he escaped his mental prison. You're lucky I showed up when I did, or he'd have killed everyone in camp."

Hope bows his head. "Th-thank you. I'm sorry. I... I didn't realize-"

"You don't have to apologize to me. I healed the commander. Go talk to him."

"Alright. Thanks." Hope turns to head toward the commander's tent, but he pauses. A body catches his eye. It's a little girl, one he saw not even a few hours before.

Marisa.

The child's eyes stare at the sky blankly. A look of horror rests on her face, as if the last thing she saw was something too frightening to put into words.

Hope freezes. He stares at the child for several seconds. Belial follows his gaze.

"Do you know her?"

Hope's chin trembles. "Where... where's Lorvos?"

Belial looks away. "I killed him. I'm sorry. I didn't want to, but he wouldn't stay down. Stubborn bastard."

A tear rolls down the Wordsmith's face.

"No. You did the right thing. Don't apologize."

Hope clenches his fist with enough force to crush steel.

I failed Marisa. I failed everyone. Never again.

Part 064: Dinner With the Demons

Author note: This part was originally going to have a second section, but it's taking too long to write, so I'll split it off for tomorrow's part. Sadly, that takes this part from 20k characters to 12k, but at least tomorrow's part will be super long! Yay!

Four demons and a human sit at the long table in the Slithering Spire. Beelzebub, Rosalia, Bael, Mephisto, and Benjamin Brown, with the two highest-ranked Dukes at the head and end of the table, Beelzebub and Rosalia at the left, and Benjamin opposite them. A beautiful chandelier hangs overhead, and the marbled floors shine brightly enough that one could eat off them. Unlike the humble abodes built within the Labyrinth, the crystal lights above glow with the power of electrical lighting, revealing their human-rooted design.

Beelzebub spears the meat on his plate with a fork and examines it for a moment before placing it in his mouth. The fish-like substance tastes unlike anything he's eaten before. The fish's bitter and salty texture mixes with its spongy flesh to create a satisfying flavor.

Mephisto sits alone with no plate before him, as he cannot eat, nor digest food. His skeletal body lacks any internal organs, and thus, he must sit and watch as the others eat their fill. Rosalia chews on something resembling tofu, while Bael stuffs three-quarters of an entire chicken in his mouth, crushing the bones with violent force. The sound of his lips smacking and the meat sloshing around makes everyone else hesitate to continue eating, but they force themselves to ignore him.

Bael wipes his entire arm across his mouth and smears chicken-meat all over himself in the process. "Eh. Not as good as human flesh, but it's decent."

After a few moments of staring at Bael, Beelzebub places another bite of fish in his mouth. "I'm not one to eat, usually. It isn't necessary for demon survival. Still, I suppose tasting food isn't the worst thing I could be doing right now."

"You said it, Mister Beelzebub. I'm surprised human food tastes this good!" Rosalia smiles cutely at him before drinking the red substance in front of her. According to Benjamin Brown, it's called "Wine," but she's never had it before. The lifestyle low-level demon servants like her experience daily doesn't afford them more than the basics.

Satisfied with himself, and rapidly losing his willingness to eat thanks to Bael's disgusting sounds, Beelzebub pushes his plate away and stares at Benjamin across the table. The human ignores Bael and proceeds to cut apart a stalk of celery with his fork and knife. All the food on his plate consists of vegetables, with no meat in sight. He chews the celery for a few moments before meeting Beelzebub's gaze.

"I presume you will be skipping most meals then, Master Beelzebub?"

Beelzebub places his handkerchief in his suit pocket. "Correct. In fact, I'll be skipping out on most things. I'm not fond of humans, not in the slightest. I don't think I'll loiter around here very often."

Rosalia perks up. "Oh! I know! Why not kick the humans out? Then you and I can have this spire all to ourselves! We can get married, and I'll become a broodmother, and then I'll-"

"Pass," Beelzebub hisses. "I plan to hire several dozen *attractive* demon servants and press them into my service."

Rosalia blushes. "Thank you for the compliment, m-mister Beelzebub."

"Devils. I wasn't referring to *you*."

Rosalia sits up a little straighter. A spark of realization appears in her eyes. "Ahh, right, because I'm already your servant! Silly me. It'll be hard for you to find someone you find as enrapturing as me, but I'll do my best to help you out!"

"You'll do your best for another demon lord once I sent you away," Beelzebub says, rolling his eyes. "I won't require your services past next week."

Bael snorts down the last of his chicken and raises a hand. "Hehehe, you're a funny one, pup. Don't you know? Demon servants serve for life. Rosalia ain't goin' nowhere."

Rosalia squeals. "Really?! I didn't know that! That's great news!"

"That's terrible news!" Beelzebub counters. "Since when was that a rule? I've never heard anything so absurd in all my years as a Lord!"

Mephisto's glowing red eyes flick to Bael, as if searching for something, then to Beelzebub. "Oh, yesss. It hasss been a tradition since the ancient timesss. Every great demon hasss a faithful ssservant who will ssstick with them through thick and thin."

Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. "Yeah? Then who's yours? Who's Bael's?"

The big demon chuckles. "I'll introduce you to him sometime."

"Sure you will."

Beelzebub slumps in his seat and scowls at Rosalia. She smiles from ear to ear. "Yay! Nothing can separate us now, Mister Beelzebub!"

"I know. That's why I'm annoyed."

Ben smiles. He sticks another forkful of celery in his mouth. "Young love is really something."

"Mind your tongue, human. No matter how my former master felt, I'll throw you and the rest of your kind out tomorrow if you keep those comments up."

The human looks away. "You will, hm? Why not today? I thought you couldn't stand the sight of me."

"I can't. However, I also feel as though if my master kept you around, he must have had a reason. Why not tell me your talents? I'll decide whether or not to evict you depending on how you answer."

Silence falls over the table.

Ben pops the last bit of celery in his mouth, then glances at Bael. "I thought demons had to be intelligent to become Dukes."

Bael shrugs. "I mean, lookit me."

"True."

Benjamin forks a piece of broccoli but holds it in midair and stares at the vegetable instead of eating it. "How old are you, master Beelzebub? A thousand? Two thousand?"

Beelzebub visibly bristles. "I'm well over ten thousand years old. Why?"

"Just curious." Ben sets the broccoli down and folds his hands. "I'm over a hundred thousand years old, you know. Bael was less than four thousand years old when demons conquered humanity. He may not be one to use big words, but Bael was quite wise when it came to matters of war, as was Mephisto."

The necromancer hisses. "You flatter me ssso."

"Get to the point," Beelzebub mutters. "Assuming you have one."

"I already told you I was, at one point, the leader of Earth's military, did I not?"

Beelzebub's voice tightens. "Yes. *So?*"

"I fought both of the demons here at this table. I even defeated them a few times. While humanity ultimately lost the war, the reason I lived under Agares in relative peace, along with the humans outside, was part of our peace treaty. A deal, if you will."

Beelzebub smiles. "Oh? You sold your kind out to us, and in exchange, you ended up in a palace fit for a king. The terms worked out quite well for you."

"Mostly correct," Ben says, his voice cracking. "But, I would hardly call it a blessing." He winces and looks away, meeting Bael's eyes. "After all, I knew what came next would be unpleasant. I helped the demons build containment worlds for humanity. I helped them enslave my brethren. I set the terms of our surrender, expecting full well that demons would kill us all after defanging us."

Benjamin continues. "I was surprised when they didn't. Agares was an honorable demon. He ensured that humans would be given worlds to live on, have their memories wiped, and that they would be reverted to a Dark Ages level of civilization. The bare minimum for our survival. In exchange, humans would have to follow requirements, including sacrifices to the demons, and a hundred other things that would surely pain them, but were better than extinction and endless war."

"I see." Beelzebub's smile fades. He stares at the human solemnly for a moment. "So, if I understand correctly, Agares held some level of respect for you."

Bael chuckles. "Heh, I do too. Ben was one tough son of a bitch, and a hell of a general. Sometimes I wish I could give him command of a thousand humans and go all-out on them. I wanna relive the old days."

The dark-skinned man nods. "Aye. I know of the happenings inside the Labyrinth. A newly arisen hero is causing trouble. He's the one responsible for the influx of chaos recently."

At the mention of Jason, Beelzebub sits up straighter in his chair. A flash of rage passes over his face. "Tch. I suppose you're entertaining delusions of grandeur, then? Thinking of joining him?"

Ben reaches for a glass of water and sips from it. "The opposite. I'm old, Beelzebub. We all are. Not you, of course. To me, looking at you is like looking at a coddled child. I see the energy in you. You're bored. You hunger for action. Not me. I put that behind me. Even if humanity wasn't thriving, at least they were living fulfilled lives until recently. Now, thanks to this newcomer, I worry about what will happen. I smell war. It's coming, and it won't be pretty. Millions, if not billions, will die."

"Is that so bad?" Rosalia leans forward and butts into the conversation. "War, I mean. What's happened over the last hundred thousand years, Mister Brown? Nothing. Nobody does anything. Demons like me have to stay servants. Everyone knows it's pointless to try and become Lords, Barons, and Dukes. There's no mobility. Beelzebub is extremely talented to have reached the rank of Duke so quickly, and lucky, too, but few have the opportunities he did."

Beelzebub smiles at his chubby servant. "Rosalia is right. You say that humans were living fulfilling lives, but also that they weren't thriving. Does an endless stalemate strike you as worth pursuing? Does not death give meaning to life? I would argue that it's better to die fighting to achieve something than to live forever yet accomplish nothing."

"I look at things differently from you," Ben replies. "For me, raising a family here at the Slithering Spire gives me meaning. When I first moved, only I, my closest family members, and a few other leaders of humanity lived here. We've exploded into over a thousand people as the millennia passed and eventually slowed our babymaking down once we'd filled the place to capacity several times over. Watching my children grow gave me a sense of fulfillment."

Beelzebub's mood darkens. "Watching humans die is what fulfills *me*. Tasting their pain and suffering. Bael understands."

"He does, yes," Ben replies. "I am curious, though, why do you enjoy watching humans suffer and die? Is it because you lack a purpose? Is it because you can think of no other way to fill the void inside yourself than to watch others writhe in pain? Have humans done anything to harm you?"

Beelzebub rubs his chin. "I can't say they have. Still, humans are pathetic and weak. Every demon knows that those who are weak deserve to die. It's a simple matter."

"Is that you talking, or your teachers from when you were an imp?"

"Shut up."

The demon and human glower at each other for a moment. Bael claps his hands to interrupt their *festive* mood. "Alrighty! I've heard enough! Look, Ben, give the kid a chance. And Beelzy, maybe you oughta listen to him. He's a lot smarter'n me, and he might have some ideas about getting the humans back in their cages. Hell, he's worked with Ose several times. Whaddya say? Kiss and make up."

Beelzebub and Ben speak at the same time. "Pass."

Bael's mood instantly sours, and he rolls his eyes. "Tch. Fine. Do what you want. I don't give a shit." He leans forward and points at Beelzebub's half-finished fish. "By the way... you gonna finish that?"

Beelzebub shoves the plate past Rosalia without a second thought. "Eat your heart out."

"Thanks."

After a minute of listening to Bael *shlorp* fishy chunks down his gullet, Beelzebub rises from his chair. "I'm going out for a walk."

Rosalia leaps up. "Ooh, ooh! I'll go with you! I saw a pond of ducks on the way over! They're super cute, Mister Beelzebub!"

"Oh? Relatives of yours?"

Rosalia blushes. "Is that your way of saying I'm cute?"

"No."

The two young demons stride out of the room. Beelzebub sighs, and Rosalia laughs.

* * *

After they leave, Mephisto turns to Ben. "I defeated Diablo during the battle againsst the Black Witch when he went bersssek. Afterwardsss, Bael decided to choossse a new Emperor. Bael picked Ossse to take Diablo'sss place."

Ben raises an eyebrow. "Oh? I thought Bael would be the new Third if Diablo ever fell. Hell, even you'd be the next best candidate, Mephisto."

Bael shifts in his chair. "Ose used her feminine charms on me. I'm a sucker for a nice piece of ass."

Mephisto seethes. "I would make a far better Emperor than her. I ssstill think you made the wrong decisssion."

"Maybe. We'll find out. Ben, you wanna pop in and say hi to Ose sometime? She might need your help to put the humans in line."

Ben nods. "I suppose so. What about the- the, erm, *Overlords*? Won't they help?"

"We would prefer not to bother them again. They're ssstill ssseething with sssussspicion after we asssked them to dessstroy a planet. Any more, and they will begin asssking troublessssome quesstionsss."

"A wise choice," Ben says. "Well, I guess I can offer. I should warn you two, though... I'm not on speaking terms with Ose. Her old hatred of humans flared up the last time we met. I don't know what I said, but she was quite angry."

"Ose's an odd one," Bael mutters. "But then again, so was her mother. That whole clan of demons is screwy in the head. Never liked any of 'em."

"Yeah," Ben replies. "Can't say I disagree. I don't like her tactics, either. Manipulative. Sociopathic. The only demon worse than her is-"

"Me?" Bael snorts.

"No. Ose's brother."

A chill falls over the table. Mephisto grinds his bony hands together. "Let'sss not ssspeak of sssuch mattersss at the dinner table."

Ben pokes a cooling batch of cheesy lettuce on his plate. His eyes glaze over. "Agreed. I apologize for bringing him up."

Bael shoves his plate away. Horrible memories appear fresh in his mind.

"Cheh. Lost my damn appetite."

Part 065: CENTURION

The whirrs and clicks of machinery around us, while irritating at first, are easy enough to ignore once I tune them out. Hans' laboratory serves as the forefront of humanity's research and development, allowing us to improve and iterate on our technological progress, thus elevating our species by leaps and bounds. He's on a well-earned vacation today, allowing Phoebe and I to mess around with his newest creation.

Phoebe adjusts several leathery straps attached to the gizmo on her chest. "The exosuit's modulator needs some adjustments. It pushes against my breasts and hurts my ribs. A man could wear this comfortably, but women will need a differently-shaped model."

I take a step back and examine the new armor system. The device itself is simple in its design. It consists of a circular metal chassis, small enough to fit in my palm, with two leather straps sticking out of its sides. The straps are designed to wrap across the wearer's chest in an 'X' shape, then loop behind the wearer's shoulders, where they connect at the spine.

I call it the Transforming Replicant Exosuit, or *T-REX* for short. Phoebe thinks it's a silly nickname, but I can be very persuasive when the situation is urgent.

"It'll have to do, for now, Phoebe. Test the nano-assemblers to see if they work properly."

Phoebe presses the button on her T-REX three times. The device engages, and immediately, liquid metal begins pouring out of the chestpiece. It wraps around the straps fastening the T-REX to her body, then floods across her arms and down her legs. Moments later, the nanites harden into an ultra-light compound resembling Kevlar but more durable than steel.

The device finishes building her armor within six seconds. Phoebe flexes and spins around. I can't see her face behind the helmet covering her head, but I imagine she's grinning hugely. "Wow! I can barely even feel it. Hans is amazing."

"You helped him, didn't you?"

"Mhm. Still, Hans did most of the work. Even without the Crown, he's incredible."

"German engineering is impressive like that."

After a minute, Phoebe turns to face me directly. "Hit me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Punch me. Right in the chest."

I raise an eyebrow. "Uhh, I'd rather not."

"Why not? Scared you'll break your fingers?"

"No. I'm worried I'll hurt you."

Phoebe waves her hand flippantly. "Jason, the point of this new armor is that it should allow us to fight on equal terms with demons. If one punch from a man can hurt me, the armor is useless."

I consider her point.

"Alright. Here goes. Brace yourself."

I rear back and pause for all of a second. Phoebe takes a wide stance and centers herself. Then, I punch as hard as I can.

CRACK!

I shatter every bone in my hand.

"Ahhhh! Fuck, shit, ass, bitch-tits! GRAAAHHH!!"

I double over and whimper like a baby for a few moments before quickly healing myself. I raise my head to look at Phoebe. She's unharmed.

"Are you okay, Jason?"

"Y-yeah. I'm fine. I healed the damage. Did that hurt you?"

"Nope. The armor has shock-absorbing technology. It can invert a certain amount of force applied to the nanites and expel an equal and opposite amount from the rear. Essentially, when you punched me, the kinetic energy passed through me and exited the rear of the suit."

"That was a lot of technical wording. I'm the one wearing the Crown right now, aren't I?"

"Haha! Ass!" Phoebe slugs my arm lightly, but the suit enhances her punch and turns it into a piledriver that sends me hurtling to the side.

I slam onto my other arm and yelp in surprise. "Gahh! Dammit, Phoebe! Warn me!"

Phoebe presses several invisible buttons in the air that only she can see, and the suit melts away. It retracts inside the shell after a few seconds. Phoebe smiles. "Sorry. I forget how it enhances my strength. I feel like a superhuman when I'm wearing it!"

I heal myself again and jump to my feet. "That's because you *are* a superhuman. You're like Supergirl or something."

"Who?"

"She's a character from a comic book."

Phoebe detaches the armor piece and hands it to me. "I see. Alright, now it's your turn."

"Really? Don't you need to calibrate it or something?"

"Nope. The T-REX is a one-size-fits-all armor. That's part of the appeal."

"Nice."

I stick my arms through the leather straps and adjust the circular piece across the center of my chest, while Phoebe clips the whole thing together behind me. I glance down at the conspicuous red button on the T-REX. "I'm supposed to push this three times to activate it, right?"

"Mhm. Safety feature. We wouldn't want people activating it by accident."

"Wouldn't that make them extra safe if they did?"

"Oh, you."

I shrug and push the button thrice with my thumb. A second passes. Suddenly a sensation like warm water pours over my body. The nanites rush across me, making me gasp involuntarily. The first two seconds are uncomfortable, but the last three are terrifying. Once the nanobots start crawling up my face and cover my mouth and nose, claustrophobia takes over. I stumble to my knees and gasp like a madman.

The moment passes. After the suit hardens into its metal form, the pure darkness in front of my face vanishes. The helmet turns transparent, allowing me to see a full 180 degrees in front of me. Based on what I saw when Phoebe used the armor, the helmet's outside looks like a solid metal plate, but on the inside, it's as if there's nothing there. I can't even tell I'm wearing a helmet.

A male voice, filled with power, speaks to me. His timbre is deep and gruff. **"WELCOME, PILOT ZERO-ZERO-THREE. I AM CENTURION, YOUR ONBOARD NEOMECHANICAL ASSISTANT. STATE YOUR NAME."**

"Jason Hiro."

"HELLO, JASON HIRO. I CAN DEBRIEF YOU ON THE ADVANCED FEATURES OF THE TRANSFORMING REPLICANT EXOSUIT. DO YOU WISH TO HEAR THEM?"

"No, not right now. Can Phoebe hear me?"

"PILOT ZERO-ZERO-TWO, PHOEBE BERTHOLD, CANNOT DETECT YOUR VOICE. I WILL ENABLE AUDIO TRANSPARENCY. ENABLED. OMNIDIRECTIONAL AUDIO COMMUNICATION NOW AVAILABLE."

Phoebe waves. "How is it, Jason? I can't see your face."

"It's cool as fuck! This suit is the dopest thing I've ever seen in my life. It's like a hundred different movies I used to watch."

As I speak, the suit begins drawing circles across various parts of Phoebe's body. Her heartbeat appears, along with a lie-detector algorithm and several other sensory readings.

I frown. One of the readings concerns me.

"Hey, Phoebe, the suit shows that your estrogen levels are 250% higher than normal. That doesn't seem-"

My voice catches. *No way.*

I stare at a bunch of other readings, and lower my head to look toward her stomach.

"Jason? What's wrong?"

My jaw drops. "I... I don't believe it. Ph-Phoebe! You're pregnant! Holy shit!"

"What? I am?!" Phoebe's eyes shoot open. She follows my gaze to her womb and pats herself repeatedly. "That's fantastic! Wow!! We're going to have a child!"

I look to the top right of the suit's visual indicators and spot a series of buttons. Reaching up, I tap on several of them and turn the suit off.

"CENTURION REVERTING TO OFFLINE MODE. GOODBYE, PILOT ZERO-ZERO-THREE."

The suit melts away, returning me to normal. The moment it disappears, I grab Phoebe and hug her hard. "I'm so happy, Phoebe! Wow! And it only took two nights!"

Phoebe turns beet red. "I was hoping we could spend more time as a couple before a baby showed up, but the Creator works in mysterious ways. Do you think it'll be a boy or a girl?"

I smile like an idiot. "I don't even care. If it's a boy, I'll make him a man. If it's a girl, she'll be as beautiful as you."

After a moment, Phoebe pulls away. Her smile lessens. "Jason, um, I have a question."

"What?"

"Well, our child. You have special powers. You're the Hero. Will the baby have powers too?"

"I don't believe he or she will. I'm not one hundred percent on how the Heroic Aura works, but I think I have to die before it transfers to someone else. That's what the Angels told me. They also said that when the angels went extinct, it eliminated the Heroic Aura's transference. That means I'm the last Hero, and will always be."

Phoebe wiggles her nose. "Well, you and Hope."

"Right, yeah. Him, too. I can always ask the angels for clarification if you like."

Phoebe smiles again. "Eh, whatever. It's wonderful news either way. Hey, speaking of Hope, why not tell him about the baby? We can also show Neil the prototype armor. He'll be glad to see how well it works."

I nod. "Good idea. I'm interested to see what Neil and Hope have been up to over the last few days."

Phoebe loops her arm through mine, and we walk toward the door. "What should we name our child? We should think of names for both boys and girls."

"I could use my Wordsmithing to find out the gender."

"Jason! Nooo! That spoils the fun!"

"I know, I know. I'm kidding. How about something like Timothy or Sarah?"

Phoebe cocks her head. "Too plain. Something involving nature would be better."

"What, like *Treebeard*?"

"Jason!"

"Nah, I took that one already."

Phoebe nestles her head against my shoulder. "Oh, you."

Two hours later, Phoebe and I drive into the Core, along with dozens of new blaster rifles in her truck's bed we replicated over the last few days. She waves at a few people standing nearby. "Special delivery! I

bring gifts. New guns!"

The men nearby would usually smile at her, but today they don't. They simply nod. "Okay. Thanks, Phoebe."

Phoebe climbs out of her truck, as do I. "Mark? Henry? What's wrong?"

Henry keeps his expression solemn. "Sorry, Miss Berthold. Maybe you haven't heard yet. Neil and Hope went to liberate Maiura, but there were fifty thousand orcs and a Demon Lord waiting in the capital city, Meldora. We managed to capture the Lord, but he later escaped and killed over a hundred soldiers."

"Oh my god." Phoebe covers her mouth. "That's... that's horrible."

Mark, a young man only three older than Henry, scratches his scalp. "The demon killed Paimon, too. We're lucky the succubus showed up--"

"Paimon?" I interrupt him and storm around the side of the truck. "No, no, you're joking! Isn't he the demon I spoke to after that batch of Lords and their minions assaulted the Core a few months ago?"

Mark and Henry glance at each other. Henry shrugs. "Don't know, Mister Hiro, sir. I only met Paimon two days ago. Barely said five words to him."

"Shit." I look away into the distance, remembering my talk with the demon. *It took over an hour to convince him that humans weren't the pathetic weaklings he thought we were. Now he's dead. What the hell?!*

Phoebe pats Henry on the shoulder. "Thank you for letting me know. By the way, you mentioned a succubus...?"

"Mhm. Samantha, milady. The same demoness who healed us and saved the Core from Beelzebub."

Phoebe sighs audibly. "Oh, thank the Heavens. I was worried about her."

I speak a word to the wind. "**Locate.**" My mind barely travels a few hundred feet past all the rows of servers to spot Hope staring at a row of bodies. His expression is grim.

I return to my body and grab Phoebe's hand. "Henry, Mark, thanks for the report. My fiancée and I need to speak to the Commander and my clone. Excuse us."

"No problem, sir. Have a good day."

* * *

A few minutes later, Phoebe and I walk up to Hope. He and Neil stand and stare at the rows of bodies.

Neil shakes his head. "-a good job back there, Hope. Don't beat yourself up. As I said, some casualties are unavoidable."

Hope remains unconvinced about whatever the Commander's saying. "I could have done better. I did my best, but it wasn't good enough. I didn't--"

"Hope?" Phoebe's cautious voice makes my clone pause. He turns to look at her and I. "Oh. Phoebe, Jason. Haven't seen you two in a few days."

"Sorry," I say. "We've been busy. I, uh... I guess you were, too, huh?"

Neil jumps in before Hope can reply. "As I was telling your doppelganger, casualties are an expected part of the war effort. However, there's no need to worry. Hope managed to pacify fifty thousand orcs all by himself. Also, Phoebe, you were right about that demoness. She saved our skin, and mine specifically, a second time. I misjudged her."

Phoebe waves her hand. "It's no big deal, Neil. Don't worry about it. It's only natural you'd be worried about a Demon Emperor in our ranks."

Neil glances at Hope for a moment, then back to Phoebe. "About that. I spoke with Samantha after she saved us. She was happy to provide me with Intel regarding the state of demonkind. Jason, we've been dealt a favorable hand. You won't believe this, but the Third Emperor, Diablo, was defeated by Mephisto. Additionally, the Duke of Reptiles, Agares, died during the battle against the Black Witch. Their ranks are crippled, and the demons are undergoing a power struggle to determine the new noble class."

Phoebe shakes her head. "I don't understand. How is that favorable for us?"

"The demons won't attack the Core again until they repair their power structure," Hope replies. "They have a strict hierarchy, and they'll freeze their military operations until they solve it."

"Alright," I say. "Then you'll love what I'm going to show you today."

I point at the circular imprint underneath my shirt. Neil and Hope look at it and raise their eyebrows. "What's that?"

"It's the new armor system Phoebe and Hans developed. It should allow ordinary humans to go toe-to-toe with demons. Well, at the Lord rank and below. I don't know how it will fare against a Baron, but when facing lower-ranked demons, it'll put us on equal footing."

Neil purses his lips. "How unfortunate we didn't have it on our troops yesterday. We could have saved a hundred lives. Better late than never, I suppose. Care to demonstrate?"

"Sure. **Give.**"

With a single word, I make the T-REX on my chest disappear and reappear atop Neil's uniform. The Commander takes a moment to notice the weight on his chest and gasps. "My god! That startled me!"

"Sorry. I figured it was faster. Press the button in the middle three times to activate the armor."

Hope raises an eyebrow. "What do you mean, 'to activate it'?"

"It's a nanite-based liquid metal compound. Think like Wolverine's Adamantium."

Hope nods. "Or like Colossus?"

"Hell yeah." I smile, glad that at least *someone* around here can understand my references. I never noticed before, but I'm starving for a fellow connoisseur of pop culture from my time. Does it count if the only person who gets my jokes and nods is my clone?

Oh, god. Sometimes I realize how lame I am and it *hurts*.

Hesitantly, Neil presses the button thrice. His eyes bolt open as the metal begins crawling across his body like a million angry bees. "W-what? What is this?! Ahh! It's all over me! It's going up my-!"

As it covers Neil's face, his voice cuts off. The Commander scrabbles at his face and claws furiously for a moment, before settling down. His body turns relaxed. A minute later, he speaks out loud. "Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?"

Hope nods. "Yup. Can't see your face, though. Jason, what's the point of a solid metal helmet?"

"It's like a one-way mirror on the inside, Hope. It transfers oxygen, purifies contaminants in the air, and has a screen that displays the entire world outside the helmet."

My clone crosses his arms. "Okay, sure, but it looks ugly as hell. He's wearing a tin can on his head. Can't you do something about the aesthetics?"

"We could," Phoebe says. "But look at it this way. The best method we have to keep demons at bay is to frighten them. When our faceless warriors start taking them down a peg, they'll start to associate us with fear. Demons respect power. If anything, the anonymous nature of the suit may allow us to recruit more demons and monsters who wish to live under us."

Neil turns away and holds his hand up, examining the top of it. "Incredible. I can zoom to the molecular level. This suit has many practical applications outside of combat. It'll help our surgeons too."

Phoebe holds up a hand. "Oh, about that. I couldn't bring it along, but Hans is developing a second prototype. It's a skin-patch that can detect when the user is under stress. The problem is, it's a single-use object, but it can heal most wounds, or at least stop the bleeding for a medic to help them. I'm looking into other practical applications for our battlefield medics as well."

Hope's jaw drops. "Wow, Phoebe. You're incredible. I remember when you could barely understand concepts from my time, and now you sound like a scientist who's spent her whole life researching!"

"I'm nobody remarkable," Phoebe says, blushing from his praise. "I had the Crown for a while, and it helped me learn and understand concepts quickly. Without it, I'd be lost."

Hope raises his eyes to Solomon's Crown on my head. "Err, speaking of which... Jason, I don't want to sound like a beggar or anything, but am I ever going to get to use it? I know I'm just a lowly clone, but-"

My face pales. "Don't say that, Hope. You're more than a clone. I look at you like a twin brother, you know? The problem is, I tried, but I couldn't copy the Crown. We only have this one. I want to let Phoebe and Hans use it where possible, and I need it to visualize infrastructure while Wordsmithing in Hero City."

A few moments pass. Hope lowers his eyes. "I understand. I'll make do without it, I suppose."

"I'm sorry. Look, if you want to borrow it sometime-"

Hope raises his palm. "No, I'm sure you'll do fine. I was just being greedy, that's all. It doesn't matter who has the Crown, as long as they use it for good, right? That's what matters."

"Yeah. E-exactly."

An awkward silence follows. Neil coughs. "Ahem, Jason, how do I get this suit off? I'd rather someone else have it than me. It should go to our best fighter."

"We're going to mass-produce the suit, Neil. Everyone, including you, will have one. But uh, if you want to remove it..."

I spend a few minutes explaining to the Commander how to press buttons inside the display, and while it takes him much longer than it did Phoebe or me, he eventually figures out the correct commands. Sometimes I forget how few people in the Core understand technology.

Phoebe nudges me. "Jason, now's a good time to tell them."

"Tell them?" I blank out for a moment. "Oh! Right!"

Neil unwraps the T-REX straps from around his body and hands it to Hope. "Tell us what?"

While Hope starts to coil the straps around his back, Phoebe smiles wide like the Euphrates River. "I'm pregnant! Jason and I are going to have a baby!"

Hope freezes. Anxiety appears on his face. He smiles, but I immediately sense his distress. "Y-you are? That's... that's good! Great! I'm glad for you!"

Phoebe's excitement lessens. "It's everything I've wanted. Hope, you're not mad, are you?"

My clone lowers his head. "Haah. I'm not mad. It's just... well, I don't know how to explain my feelings, here. I see Jason going around and doing things I used to do, but I can't be a part of those activities anymore. You and Jason love each other, but what about me? I still... I still have feelings for you, Phoebe."

Phoebe and I stare at my clone for several moments. Her happiness vanishes entirely. "I'm sorry, Hope. I didn't think about that. I should have been more considerate."

"Err, Phoebe..." I swallow, realizing how awful what I'm about to say will sound. "H-how about... why don't I clone you? Then Hope won't be alone. He's right. It isn't fair he had to give you up, but I didn't."

Hope raises his head. He meets Phoebe's gaze. Both of them speak to each other with only their eyes.

After a minute, Hope closes his eyes. "No. That isn't right. I know what was on your mind when you made me, Jason. You wanted another Wordsmith to help protect the Core. That's my job. I have to make sacrifices."

Phoebe presses her palms together and twists. "Nnn, I don't know how I'd feel about having another of me running around. Still, I can't be selfish. If you want to clone me, Hope, I'll understand."

Hope opens his eyes and smiles. "Really? You'd do that for me?"

I quickly interject. "Hold on. Won't Phoebe's clone be pregnant if we do it now?"

Immediately, Hope's smile vanishes. He looks at Neil. "Pregnant with Jason's child. That complicates things."

"Technically, we're more identical than twins," I reply. "It'll be your child too."

"I don't know how I feel about that. Never mind. Forget it." Hope waves his hand flippantly. "I'll get a new girlfriend eventually. Don't make any other clones if you don't have to."

I nod. "Okay. That's for the best."

After a moment, Neil and Hope politely laugh. The Commander asks, "If I may be so bold, when is the wedding?"

Phoebe smiles. "Next week. It'll be a private meeting. I'm only inviting our close friends. I was thinking we could get married out near Hero City's forest."

Hope chuckles. "Haha. Sounds fun. I'll attend. You'd better make me the best man, though."

"Of course," I reply. "Who else?"

The four of us share a laugh, and when Phoebe and I leave, she points at someone speaking to Kar. "Look, Jason! Samantha's here."

I glance back at Hope and Neil. They've already returned to examining the bodies.

"Let's say hi, Phoebe. I'm sure *she'll* be excited to hear the good news."

Part 066: Humanity's Potential

Beelzebub yanks the front door open, releasing a small amount of his frustration on its wooden frame. Unfortunately, the dark-skinned human woman on the other side didn't anticipate his actions. She gets yanked inward and crashes into the Duke of Inferno, knocks him over, and lands on top of him.

Rosalia jumps out of the way. "Oh my gosh! Are you alright, Mister Beelzebub?"

The woman shakes wooziness from her head and climbs off Beelzebub, then pats dust from her white dress. Her deep aquamarine eyes laser onto the Duke, and she snaps at him. "What sort of barbarian barges through a door without checking to see if there's someone on the other side? Did you need to pull it with such force?"

Beelzebub jumps to his feet. He barely registers the woman's poofy dress sleeves or the white bow in her hair. "Vermin. Mind your tongue. You're the one who was lollygagging and holding onto the handle like your life depended on it. Gah! Now my suit is filthy!"

The woman stares at him, her eyes widening every second. "I beg your pardon? I don't care if you're a demon or not, that's no way to speak to another person! Who are you? What's your name?"

Beelzebub smirks. "You damned sow. You're a thick one! Rosalia already said my name. You're speaking to none other than the new master of this estate! Show some respect, or I'll burn out your tongue."

Rosalia whips her head back and forth from Beelzebub to the human woman. *Oh dear, this is escalating quickly. One minute we were touring the building to let Mister Beelzebub blow off some steam, and now he's thinking of torturing a woman. His mood changes on a dime!*

"You're our new master?" The woman flips her long, pink hair back. "Humpf. I heard we were bringing in a tiny little Baron, but you're even more pathetic than I expected. You must be overcompensating for something with all that bottled up rage."

"Baron? I'm a Duke!" Beelzebub puffs up his chest, rises to his full height, and towers two feet over her. "You're speaking to Beelzebub, Duke of Inferno, and right now, I'm debating whether I should sear your bones to ash."

The woman rests her hands on her hips. "I'm *sorry*, did someone put poison in your milk this morning? You whine like a baby. Anyway, if you know what's good for you, you'll think twice about laying a hand on my beautiful skin."

Beelzebub sets his jaw. Two small flames ignite in each palm. "I'm the master here. As such, I can do whatever I please to slaves. A little pain might knock some humility into you."

The woman doesn't back down. "My father is Benjamin Brown, the head steward. I'm his second-born daughter. If you hurt me, let alone kill me, a thousand years of torment await you, foolish little demon."

Embers smolder in Beelzebub's eyes. "I've had quite enough of your insults. Words don't work on your type."

He raises his hand and aims his palm at the woman. She flinches slightly. "You wouldn't."

"Apologize," Beelzebub says. A tone of warning appears in his voice. "And make it count. I'm in quite a terrible mood right now. I want to see some groveling."

The fire begins to burn hotter in his hand. She takes a step back. "I'd... I'd sooner die. You're nothing to me."

"Oh? You'd prefer to die, hmm? *That can be arranged.*"

Rosalia cries out in alarm. "Mister Beelzebub! Don't lose your temper!"

The Duke ignores Rosalia. An instant later, he sends a ball of fire at the woman. It flies past her head and slams onto the floor outside, shaking the door from the force of its explosion.

She stares at him in shock for a moment, but her adrenaline quickly wears off. "I-I knew you wouldn't do it. Even you have enough sense to fear my father."

"I hit my target," Beelzebub says with a smirk. "Say, what's that dreadful odor?"

The woman gasps. The stench of burning hair begins to fill the air. She drops into a crouch and swats at her hair quickly. "No, no! Stop! Put it out!!"

Rosalia ignores Beelzebub and steps toward the woman, quickly putting out her blazing hair. "Mister Beelzebub, you need to stop! Picking on some human woman isn't-"

"Shut up!" Beelzebub snarls. "I don't intend to kill her, but some humiliation will put this harlot in her place."

Beelzebub shoves Rosalia aside and grabs the woman by her hair. "Aaaiee! Let me go! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

Beelzebub licks his lips. "I'll start by burning all your clothes off. Then I'll put some marks on your face that makeup can't hide. After that, perhaps some permanent mutilation is in order. I hope you weren't planning to use your arms in the future."

Her eyes widen. "You're sick! Perverted!"

"BEELZEBUB!" A voice roars from across the room, making the Duke flinch. Beelzebub turns his head back and raises an eyebrow when he sees Benjamin Brown standing in the hallway. "Take your hands off Lily!"

Beelzebub doesn't release her. "Shut up, old man. Go back to your dinner. I'm done talking with the likes of you."

Benjamin looks at his daughter for only a moment. Then he returns his gaze to Beelzebub. "I'm tired of your piss-poor attitude, Duke of Inferno. The way Master Agares spoke of you, I expected an inexperienced demon who would light a path for others to follow. All I see now is some worthless punk who preys on the weak and defenseless."

Beelzebub smiles. He hurls Lily to the ground, bashing her head against the tiled floor in the process. "Perhaps I should pick on someone my own size, like you? Hahahaha."

Bael and Mephisto emerge from behind Benjamin. The big demon smacks his lips loudly and stuffs another chicken leg in his face. "Whoa, you gunna fight him, miffter Brown? You're a little old to be tusslin', ain'tcha?"

The bald man takes ten steps toward Beelzebub and stops twenty feet away. He cracks his neck. "It's good that I'm rusty. I wouldn't want to break this buffoon in half too quickly."

Beelzebub's grin widens. "Hahaha! Do you intend to fight me? I'm fine with that, little rat. You and the rest of the humans here seem to think you're the meanest part of the hellhound. How about I knock all of you down a few pegs?"

Ben reaches up and pulls his tuxedo top off, then flicks it to the side. He doesn't say a word.

Suddenly, Beelzebub goes flying to the side. He hits the wall with enough force to break his arm. Whatever hit him moved too fast for his eyes to follow.

Rosalia gasps. "Sweet devils!"

Beelzebub shakes delirious fog from his head. Something grabs him by the back of his suit's neck and flings him across the room opposite the entrance. While flying, he barely catches sight of Benjamin Brown's face. The Duke smashes into a statue of Agares and breaks several more bones, along with a chunk of the statue's base.

He breathes for a moment and heals his body before clambering to his feet. "What are you, an enhanced human?"

Bael chuckles. "Oh, this is gonna be good."

Beelzebub's eyes dart toward the blur of movement rushing at his face. He doesn't bother to dodge. Benjamin piledrives the Duke's head with enough force to shatter concrete, sending Beelzebub skidding across the floor.

"H-hit him, daddy!" Lily's voice echoes through the room. "Make that little shithead pay!" Ben's daughter howls excitedly and pumps her fist.

Rosalia takes a step back. "Hey. Watch your mouth, fleshbag. Mister Beelzebub might have acted poorly, but you're at fault too."

"Stuff it, fatso." Lily shoots a look of disdain at the demon girl. "It doesn't surprise me that you're hanging around with that sourpuss. A lardass like you is probably the best he could get."

"W-what?" Rosalia's face whitens. "Th-that's horrible. You're horrible! Beelzebub was right!"

Rosalia's eyes fly open. She jumps at Lily and starts hitting her. "Stupid bitch! You think you're so pretty, with your fancy clothes and hair! I'll tear your fucking eyes out!"

Lily and Rosalia launch into a catfight, with the human desperately fighting the demon off while the demon rips and tears at her clothes.

However, Beelzebub ignores them entirely. He yawns audibly after healing his body again. "Was that a punch? I didn't feel it at all. Got anything stronger?"

Ben rubs his fist. "Every time I hit you, it's like punching a sack of wet potatoes. I'm guessing you regenerate your body passively. Pain suppression, too."

"Good guess," Beelzebub quips. "I'm glad we're becoming such fast friends."

Benjamin presses his foot into the ground and leaps forward, moving with the speed of a cheetah. This time, Beelzebub dodges, and Ben's fist smashes through a wall and rattles dirt loose from the ceiling above. When he pulls back, he rubs his hand. "Are you getting serious, now?"

Beelzebub's eyes travel from Benjamin's face to his fist. His skin is chunked off, and something catches the Duke of Inferno's eye. "Your fist. It's made of metal?"

"I told you... I'm not like the other humans you've slain and tortured in the Labyrinth. You haven't any clue how scary humans can be, nor the heights we once reached. My metallic endoskeleton is a daily reminder of the lengths humanity will go in their quest for domination."

"Endoskeleton?" Beelzebub rubs his chin. "Explain."

"Nah. I let my fists do the talking."

Ben raises his hand to his eye. Beelzebub's stomach quivers as the human presses his eyeball and pulls his finger away. His iris shifts color to red, and a targeting laser emits, pointing directly at Beelzebub's chest.

"If you want to be the Master of this house, you'll have to beat me first, *boy*."

Beelzebub takes a step back and raises his right hand, then forms it into the shape of a gun. "*Bang*."

A bullet of fire shoots out and strikes Benjamin directly in the face. The man gasps involuntarily and staggers backward, but immediately rights himself. His skin melts away, revealing more metal on his skull beneath.

Bael shivers. "Oooh. There it is. 'Member the supersoldiers, Mephisto?"

The Duke of Mist titters to himself. "Keh keh keh. Vanguardsss. Not many humanssss sssurvived the bionic attachment processs. Only Missster Brown could ssskip the rejection medicine."

Bael smiles, and a look of admiration appears in his eyes. "Maybe after he finishes with Beelzebub, Ben'll go a round with me."

"Perhapsss."

Beelzebub fires more heat bullets at Ben, but the cyborg ducks and dodges each one as his targeting sensors adapt to the Duke's firing patterns. He pivots left and right, then leaps at Beelzebub, batting away the demon's hand with a violent slap.

Ben stabs his hand forward and jams into Beelzebub's chest. He evaluates the Duke's body for all of two seconds, then tears the Duke's heart out and jumps away.

Beelzebub stumbles for a second, then flops to the ground. He doesn't say anything for a moment, but eventually picks himself up once his heart regenerates. "Great. Now there's a big, bloody hole in my suit."

The human stares at Beelzebub's heart in his hand. "I knew your regeneration was rapid, but that didn't take five seconds. I always thought Satan had the fastest time to full restoration, but you're well above his level."

"Thanks," Beelzebub replies. "By the way, I don't usually apologize, but I'm sorry."

Ben raises his head to scrutinize Beelzebub's face. "About what?"

A moment later, his attention jerks back to the heart as it begins to vibrate. Ben catches Beelzebub off-guard by flinging the beating organ at the Duke. It explodes in Beelzebub's face, blasts him backward, and knocks him on his ass.

"Interesting. Your cells ignited an endothermic reaction. It appears you can manipulate the weak nuclear force. No, the strong nuclear force. Both? Either way, your powers are quite varied. Fire manipulation, nuclear manipulation, and an incredible self-regeneration factor."

Beelzebub lays on the ground for several seconds before hopping to his feet. "Correct. Bael and Mephisto were forced to give up, even after they 'defeated' me. It's impossible to defeat my healing factor."

"Nothing is impossible. Demonic powers come from spiritual energy. The lower your energy, the weaker your powers, and the lower your regeneration. You're not as invincible as you think."

Ben changes his stance. He bends at the knees and aims his palm at Beelzebub. "I have a pretty good idea of your abilities, now."

"Going to put me in my place, are you?"

The old man doesn't reply. Instead, he lunges at Beelzebub and kicks his foot into the floor, sending chunks of tiling at the demon. Beelzebub doesn't flinch, but instead anticipates Ben's movement, dodging a grab at his neck a moment later.

"Your movements seemed fast at first," Beelzebub says, "but I can see through them."

"To see through my attacks, you would have to be enlightened. Sadly, you are ignorant... about a great many things."

Ben hops backward and takes a sword from a weapon rack against the wall, then readies himself to strike.

Beelzebub covers his mouth in a mock display of surprise. "Oh no. An antiquated weapon. Hack all you like. You haven't the stamina to beat me."

The cyborg jumps forward with incredible speed, and Beelzebub watches the sword, waiting for Ben to chop downward. Instead, Ben stabs it at the Duke's foot, making Beelzebub jerk his leg back. Before Beelzebub can regain his footing, Ben grabs the demon's neck and lifts him over his head, then slams him against the floor, shaking the chamber.

"Perhaps you're right, young one. I don't have as much vitality as I did in my youth, but *you* do."

Beelzebub tugs and pulls at the metal hand gripping his throat, but Ben's grip is like a vice. An unfamiliar sensation comes over the demon, as if he were breathing through his neck. An alarming amount of spiritual energy begins to suck through Benjamin's palm. A moment later, the old man's skin all across his body regenerates, covering his endoskeleton everywhere it's exposed.

"E-energy draining?" Beelzebub's eyes widen. He gags and struggles even more, but his strength begins to slip. "What... kind of... power... is this?"

"There's a reason that even Bael respects me, child. Vanguard's were the mightiest infantry corps among humanity's legions, and I was the strongest among them. I'm uniquely suited to battling your kind. Remember when I warned you that your regeneration wasn't infallible? That's because it relies on your spiritual energy. Once I drain it from you, you'll be defenseless."

Beelzebub's mind begins to swim. *Damn. I can't get him off me. I... I have to switch tactics!*

He closes his eyes, and opens them a moment later. A light as bright as the sun shoots out, bounces around the chamber, and blinds everybody inside. Bael and Mephisto yell in pain. Rosalia screams as well. Then, while Ben is blinded, Beelzebub forms a solar-whip and-

"Ah ah ah," Ben says, interrupting Beelzebub's plan. He smiles, and Beelzebub realizes that Ben didn't even blink from his solar flash. Ben uses his free hand to grab and crush Beelzebub's wrist before he can create his whip. "My vision is augmented. Did you think you could blind me and attack while I was disoriented? Parlor tricks don't work on a Vanguard."

Terror appears in Beelzebub's heart. Boiling rage replaces it immediately afterward. "Stinking filthy RAT! You won't defeat me!"

Deep in Beelzebub's mind, he imagines all his new powers. One appears that he hasn't tested yet, but considering his predicament, now is the perfect moment.

Smoke form.

After forming two signs with his free hand, Beelzebub coughs, and all the oxygen in his body vanishes. Fire engulfs his skin, causing him to explode into smoke.

Ben topples forward, lands on his stomach, and stares in shock. "What the-?!"

Beelzebub pops into existence ten feet away. He gasps for breath and trembles shakily. "Kahaha... I... I hope you enjoyed the taste of my energy, insect. It's time I stopped fooling around."

Hopping to his feet, Ben smiles. "Full of surprises, aren't you? I didn't realize you were taking it easy on this poor old man. It's about time you gave me a challenge."

A hundred thoughts flash through Beelzebub's mind. "Your skin is little more than a fake covering for your outer shell, but you possess human body parts. A brain, for instance. The wonderful thing about the human body is that it melts quite deliciously under the power of fire."

Beelzebub smiles. "Barring that, I'll melt your metal carapace into slag."

Ben shakes his head. "You will try."

Beelzebub inhales, and his body warms a hundred degrees in a single second. Three more seconds pass. Fire surrounds him and envelops him in an infernal cloak. The heat in the room increases in intensity from mildly uncomfortable to painful.

Rosalia, having beaten Lily senseless, wipes her forehead and drags the woman out the door. "Go... get that son of a bitch... Mister Beelzebub."

Bael ignores the heat, given his imperviousness to fire, but Mephisto shrinks back and slinks into the dining room to avoid the heat. Benjamin also retreats a few steps. "Gods."

Beelzebub doesn't let up. As the flames spiral around his body and grow more and more intense, he paces toward Ben. "I thought you were unstoppable. What's the matter? *Can't take the heat?*"

The cyborg gasps as the flames break a thousand degrees. He activates an energy shield around his body, but it proves useless against the temperature and fizzles out. A popping sound in his body echoes off the walls.

Suddenly, Benjamin stumbles backward. He clutches his stomach and wheezes.

"M-my compensators..."

Beelzebub forms another solar whip. He raises it above his head and lunges it at the human. The tip lashes across Ben's chest and boils away his skin, making a hissing sound like a cobra in the process.

Ben doesn't wince or show any pain, but the next time Beelzebub lashes out the whip, he dives to the side and activates a cloaking device to turn invisible, then dashes away.

Crackling sounds indicate his presence, along with a shimmer of movement rushing through the heat. Beelzebub smiles. "Ah ah ah, don't try to flee through the door. I'm not done with you."

Beelzebub quickly shoots a heat bullet at the entrance, and when the bullet impacts, he fireports over, blocking the exit before Ben can leave. The cyborg's invisible body screeches to a halt. He retreats to try and get some distance from Beelzebub's fire cloak.

"F-fine! I'll admit defeat! You win!"

Ben turns visible once again. Already his skin is beginning to fizzle and bubble while the intense heat melts his insides to mush.

Beelzebub shakes his head. "No. I own this estate. I own you. I won't forgive your insolence. After I cut you apart, I'll turn your daughters and sons to ash, and your wives, and anyone else in my way. I am Beelzebub, the Duke of Inferno. My power is an explosion of rage, and you've infuriated me like no other."

Bael stomps across the hall. "Beelzebub! That's enough!" The massive demon steps in between Beelzebub and Ben, blocking some of the heat from affecting the cyborg. Ben shudders to a stop and slumps over on the ground as his internal compensators overheat.

The Duke of Inferno scowls at Bael. "Get out of my way. I'm through with having you lot tell me what to do."

Bael lifts his chin and peers down at his junior, who has grown to nearly his same height. "Benjamin is an honored guest. There's a treaty. If you wanna fight him, you'll have to go through me."

Beelzebub *snerks*. "I already proved you couldn't beat me, meathead."

"Yeah? Don't make me turn into a Balrog. You won't like me when I'm angry."

Beelzebub and Bael eye each other for several long seconds.

Finally, Beelzebub exhales. His flames die down, and the heat in the room lowers immediately.

"Very well. I've proven my point. You won't be around forever to protect this human. If Benjamin Brown insults me again, I can't promise his safety."

"Then I can't promise yours."

"Is that a threat?"

"Yup."

The two demons stare each other down for a few moments before the younger one pivots on his heel and heads out the door. "Make your bed with humans, if you please. Someday, I will be Emperor, and I will not forget those who mocked and scorned me."

He slams the door shut.

After Beelzebub leaves, Bael turns and kneels to Ben's level. "Hey, pal, you alive?"

A grinding noise inside Benjamin's body offers the only indication of his continuing life. The cyborg wheezes for breath and his thoughts turn to mush as he tries to understand Bael's question.

"Great. Here, take my energy. We'll get you all fixed up, okay? Sorry I didn't step in sooner. Thought you had 'im playing defense."

Bael lifts Benjamin's palm and places it on his neck, but it takes several seconds for the cyborg's systems to reboot enough that he can drain energy. Once he does, though, life springs back into his eyes. His internal organs repair themselves somewhat, and his biological tissue regenerates, but his metal parts whirr clunkily and click together.

Ben's breath comes in ragged gasps. "G-goddamn. Beelzebub is strong. Was he toying with me the whole time? I thought you said he was inexperienced."

"He is," Bael growls. "Kuh. Can't believe it. Never thought I'd see you go down in a one-on-one matchup, not even against an Emperor. Well, okay, maybe Satan, but that's different."

Benjamin lays motionless on the floor. "I need repairs. That damn Duke screwed up most of my internal systems. Cripes... I'll have to talk to Ose again."

"Uh huh." Bael cocks his head. "What *did* you say to piss her off?"

"I don't know. Something about the mutual culpability between humans and demons when it came to neverending war."

"Cull-puh-bill-uh-tee? The fuck is that?"

"Never mind." Ben pulls himself into a sitting position and rubs his chest. "I'm glad you saved me, Bael. I nearly died. I'm old as hell and rusty beyond belief. I haven't fought anyone since the end of the Energy Wars."

Bael waves his hand flippantly. "Psh, ain't nothin' to it. That pup's lucky he didn't fight you a hundred thousand years ago. You'd have torn him a new asshole! I'm gonna getcha back into fightin' shape; then you'll stomp him flat. It'll be just like the good old days!"

Ben shakes his head. "No, sorry, friend. I don't feel like fighting anymore. I want to return to tending my garden and keeping the estate clean. That's all."

Several moments pass. Bael lowers his head. "Oh."

Mephisto slinks over from the dining room's doorway. "I'm sssurprissed you lossst, Missster Brown."

Neither Ben nor Bael reply. Both of them stare silently at the ground. Eventually, Ben speaks, but he ignores Mephisto's statement. "War is coming. If Beelzebub fights, that hothead will destroy everything we've built. I wish he understood the consequences of plunging the Labyrinth into war. He may have power over flames, but if he keeps his antics up, he'll be the one who's burned."

"The Overlordsss..."

Ben looks to his left at Mephisto. "Yeah. The Overlords."

Bael shakes his head. "They're busy with galaxy stuff. That's why I want your help, Ben. We've gotta get this Hero kid under control. If he catches the Overlord's attention..."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Ben says. He struggles to stand, and Bael helps him up. "I'll send a courier to fetch Ose. I hope she isn't too busy to help out little old me. Being the Third Emperor, and all."

Mephisto's eyes glow redder than usual. "If Ossse can't repair you, Marie might have the ressourcesss."

Ben shakes his head. "Pass. We haven't been on speaking terms for ages. Besides, you know Marie. She's probably the one who freed that Hero. Her schemes caused our breakup."

Bael sighs. "Maybe. Dunno. I haven't seen her in a long time."

"Same." Ben fans his face. "It's hot as hell in here. Let's air the Spire out."

"Sure."

When they step outside, Ben's eyes laser onto his unconscious daughter, whose dress was torn to shreds by Rosalia. Her face is black and blue from the demoness's barrage.

Ben stares at her for two seconds. He balls his hand into a fist. "Bastard."

Author Note:

[Check out this artwork for Beelzebub, Belial, Ose, Lily, and Rosalia!](#)

Part 067: Brother, Tormentor - Barbatos Unleashed

Splash, splash.

"Oooh! Hahaha!"

I watch.

Two mermaids, Millie and Karen, splash water at each other.

They are simple creatures. Like me. No desire to fight. No will.

Is there a difference?

I do not know.

My eyes are heavy.

I am tired.

I've used too much mana over the last few months. I want to sleep. I need to.

But I cannot. *She* waits for me. *She* always watches.

"Barbatos! Are you okay, sweetie?" Millie, the ever-doting red-haired mermaid, floats over to me and rests her hand on my leg. "You haven't said a word in three days! Even for you, that's a bit extreme."

I swallow. My throat burns. I am always in pain. Anguish. Coarse, festering agony.

"Sorry, Millie. I am tired. I am trying to... stay awake."

"Oh." Millie's face becomes crestfallen. She beckons over to Karen. "Barbatos is tired. We have to keep him awake."

Karen is one of the youngest mermaids. She is scarcely three hundred years old. A child among her sisters. "What? Millie! Let Barbatos take a nap! Don't pester him!"

"No. Millie is right. I mustn't close my eyes. I need-"

A voice speaks inside of me. *Her* voice. Uriel. My tormentor. The Archangel who has besieged my mind and body for tens of thousands of years.

Oooh, feeling a little tired, are we? Why not lay thy head down for a minute, Barbatos? Think of how good thou shalt feel.

Her nagging voice, like a poorly tuned violin, grates at the back of my skull. I shouldn't have said anything. Now she knows what I am thinking.

"Quiet, Uriel. I won't close my eyes. Never again."

Another voice appears in my mind. My brother, Artorias.

Barbatos. Resist. I can only stave off this bloodsucking creature with your help.

"I know."

Karen cocks her head. "Who is Barbatos talking to?"

Millie answers. "The voices in his head."

"Huh?"

"He's not crazy. It's a long story."

Karen stares at her sister quizzically. "I don't understand. Are the 'voices' why he can't fall asleep?"

"Mhm." Millie looks into my eyes. It hurts to see how much she loves me. She remembers. All of the mermaids do. The Dukes as well, and the Emperors.

They remember.

They know what happens when I lose consciousness.

But I can't. Never again. I won't let Uriel take over.

Thou art such a child, Barbatos. Dost thee expect me to let ye sit and conserve thy energy? As weak as thou art now, I could take over for a moment. Want me to try? I'll crush thy precious little mermaids in an instant. I'll turn them into meat paste.

Her words, like venom, echo in my ears. The longer she talks, the more visible her appearance grows in my mind — a hauntingly beautiful Archangel in a blood-red dress. I can see her curves, her voluptuous body.

She is a siren — an agent of the enemy. Any physical attraction I might feel is nullified by the memories of her past atrocities.

Artorias speaks. **Barbatos, hurry and lock yourself away. Bind your arms with as many chains as possible and tell the other Dukes to stand guard. If you fall unconscious around the mermaids, Uriel won't hesitate. She'll kill them all.**

Uriel laughs. *Hahaha, come now, Artorias. Listen to how thou dost play the doting older brother, even after all this time. Barbatos, if ye rest thy eyes for a moment, I solemnly promise I shan't hurt thy cute little mermaids. After all, 'tis not monsters, but demons I despise. I'm not indiscriminate, like the filthy bloodskins who murdered my people.*

My eyes burn. I blink for a moment to moisten them. "Your promises are poison. You will say anything to take control. I won't succumb."

Several mermaids swim over as my voice echoes in the chamber. I don't usually speak this much. It burns. My body always aches. Talking does little more than fatigue me. And the more exhausted I become, the more powerful Uriel grows.

Uriel's long white hair grows visible in my mind. Her moccasin sandals. The six colored rings on her fingers, each one engraved with the initials of her brothers and sisters. Raphael. Michael. Gabriel. Uzziel. Camael. Samael.

The evil woman stretches her hand toward my mind's eye. It grows like a specter of death, dwarfing me with its size. *Thou art exhausted, Barbatos. Do as thy brother says. Find a dark, secluded place, somewhere that I won't be able to cause any harm. Oh, that's right, such a location doesn't exist! Haha!*

Uriel's light laughter burns my soul. I lower my eyes, unable to look at the mermaids surrounding me.

I am cursed. I deserve this curse. My greed, my desire to become the strongest demon, and my willingness to commit any act that empowered me... they are the reasons I suffer.

Artorias and I knew the rule. *No demon shall consume the energy of an angel.*

I thought myself invincible, so I ignored Satan's one binding rule.

I was wrong. I paid the price for my indiscretion.

Artorias appears more vividly in my mind. He has the same look that he always did — a slender, muscular Baron of above-average height. Dozens of bones, all taken from humans and angels, wrap around his arms, waist, and neck. His piercing eyes, the eyes of a military commander, gaze upon me with a look of anger.

During my youth, before we merged, I considered my brother a vicious, bloodthirsty killer. He fought Uriel on several occasions but barely escaped with his life. The other demons looked up to him, but not me. I disrespected him. I treated his counsel and guidance as if it was poison. In the end, my mistakes caught up with me.

My brother is a kind soul, one who willingly gave up his life to merge with me. He protected me during those early years. The time when the Archangel's Holy Energy ravaged my body. When the other demons could not bear to look at my deformed skin, or the scars, or any other part, Artorias was always there. He still is.

How many friends have died? How many enemies? I have lost count.

War brings no joy. It brings no victory. Only a slowly increasing trickle of death awaits those who walk the path of violence.

If only I knew as a young Lord, what I know now. If only I had the willpower to resist my bloodlust... perhaps my brother and I would still be together in the flesh. Perhaps I would not suffer under the twisting, burning, endless misery of Uriel's torment.

I hate her. I love her. I hate her more. She has taught me, without intending to, how worthless such notions of 'demon rank' and 'prestige' are.

My eyes droop.

No!

I must remain vigilant.

Before my eyes can shut again, I form a sign with my hands. My armor bends inward and impales my stomach. The awful pain brings me back.

Awake!

I mustn't close my eyes again. It's too dangerous.

Millie spots the blood trickling down my armor. "I'll get a rag, Barbatos."

I rasp out a reply. "Th-thank you, Millie."

Art thou capable of staying awake forever? Uriel asks. She leans toward me and looms even larger in my mind. *It matters not if it takes thee one day or one thousand years. Thou shalt close thy eyes. And when ye do...*

"I won't. I won't. I won't."

My eyes droop again. The blood loss is making me woozy. Have to... have to cauterize the wound. Fire. Need fire.

I stumble to my feet. My armor grinds together against my skin, sealing in my demonic energy and preventing me from losing too much power. I limp over to a single torch on the wall and pause.

If I remove my armor for a moment, in my current state, I might lose too much mana.

But... if I pass out from blood loss, that will have the same result.

Uriel snickers. *Heh, look at the panic on your face. Why not ask every Duke and Emperor to stand guard? Then, when I come out, they can suppress me.*

"No. That's... what you... want. You'll kill them- kill everyone. Like you did before."

My words choke out, along with blood. I stabbed the wrong area. Clumsy. There's internal hemorrhaging. Who can heal a wound like this? Not the Blood Pits. It will take too long to get there. Too much energy to open a portal. Belial? She can heal me. Where is she? I don't know.

Brother. Cauterize the wound. It's risky, but you'll have to try.

"Yes, Artorias. I know."

Wincing, I ready myself for the pain. As soon as I form the appropriate magic sign, my magnetism peels the armor away. I grab the torch and jam it against my stomach. Hard.

The pain is no worse than what I experience daily.

A rush of red energy floods out of my body. I close my armor to seal the remainder inside, but weakness hits my legs. My strength gives out, and I flop to the ground.

"Barbatos!!!" Millie leaps from the water and splashes over to me. She drags herself across the ground and stops by my head. "Ancient dragons, give me strength! What's wrong? Are you okay?!"

Millie's tears drip onto my face. I wheeze out words of warning. "Hurts. Hurts. Can't stay awake. Run. Get out. Uriel. She's... she's taking over."

Uriel's voice speaks again, louder than before. *Yes. Good, Barbatos, good. Rest easy, knowing I'm in charge.*

No! Barbatos! WAKE UP! Don't you dare give up! You're stronger than this! You're stronger than the Archangel!!

I wheeze in pain. "I'm... not... I'm too... too..."

Shut up, Artorias. It's not like thou understand the pain thy little brother feels. Besides, I promised I wouldn't hurt his stupid little mermaids, and I'll keep my word. All I'm going to do is kill a few worthless bloodskins.

Heh heh heh... yes. I have many targets in mind. I wonder how much playtime I'll have? I can't wait to stretch my legs.

Moments pass.

My eyes begin to shut.

I can't take it anymore. I can't resist her power. I can't stay awake.

All I can do now is pray that the others will stop her.

"Millie... get... away..."

Darkness overwhelms me.

"Barbatos? Long time, no- GUHK!"

A flash of movement. The demon explodes and blasts across the walls.

Uriel smiles. "One down. Ten trillion to go."

The hallway where the lone demon was walking falls silent. Uriel listens for a moment but doesn't detect any other demons idling nearby.

Bits and pieces of metal crack and fall from Barbatos's armor, slamming onto the ground. Uriel glances down at the disgusting withered body of her captor. "What a shame that I must stay in such a loathsome form."

Inside her mind, Artorias rages. **Accursed Archangel! Stop this madness! Don't you see? Barbatos is trying to live a life of peace! You shouldn't become the monster you once decried-**

"Silence." Uriel waves her hand and trudges through the exploded remains of the demon she just killed. "I care little for what thy pathetic brother wants. If demons didn't wish to face my wrath, they shouldn't have slain all of my people. I am the last angel. Even if I am inside the body of a demon, I will kill every single bloodskin in my path."

Barbatos's heavy footsteps echo around the walls.

Whump. Whump. Whump.

Uriel moves her hands to create magical signs. "Dark Form."

Her aura becomes dimmer. The shadows call to her, and the walls become translucent, seemingly vanishing from existence. She looks in every direction and spots a large group of demons laughing about this and that while sloshing drinks around — a gambling den.

More pieces of armor fall off, exposing Barbatos's scarred and deformed body. Patches of white creep over his skin, replacing the demonic red with something holier. Something that demons in the current era

haven't seen for tens of thousands of years.

"Oy, Boldor, pass me the bones, will ya!" A shrill voice rings out, and several other demons laugh about some crude joke.

Uriel approaches.

She rounds the corner and steps inside the cantina. Smog fills the air, and a disgusting mix of tobacco and a thousand other chemicals swirl before her nostrils. A demon at the entrance spots her arrival. He raises an eyebrow. "Uh, welcome to the pub. Haven't seen the likes of you around, stranger. What's your name?"

Uriel narrows her burning red eyes. "My name is unimportant. Do you happen to know where I can find Bael? I need to have a word with him."

The demon raises an eyebrow. His tiny horns indicate he isn't a Lord, but probably a grunt. "Ehh, Bael? Ain't seen him in my entire life. This place is a bit outta the way. Say... don't I know you from somewhere?"

Turning away from the demon, Uriel's expression turns nasty. "I ask the questions here. If thou hath no answers, thou art useless to me. Die."

Uriel swings her fist. The demon explodes violently, spattering blood and gore across the room. The roaring laughter and cacophony inside the gambling den instantly falls silent.

Everyone turns to look at the newcomer.

A demon yells in alarm. "W-what the devil?! Ganje?! Hey! Who do you think you are, marchin' in here and killing one of us?!"

Several demons whisper to each other.

"Hold on a second, ain't that fella Barbatos?"

"Yeah. I think he is. Didn't recognize him without the armor. What's going on? Did Ganje get on his bad side?"

Uriel cocks her head. "Someone tell me where I can find Bael."

A bigger demon in the back, one with much longer horns than the rest, stands up. Uriel evaluates him instantly.

A Baron.

"Barbatos? Something's off about you. Why do you need to see- HUWAK!" The demon yanks toward Uriel as she pulls the metal on his body with Barbatos's innate magnetic force. The Baron slams against her fist and slumps to the ground. He chokes weakly for a few seconds. "W-what the..."

"Tell me where Bael is, or die."

Every demon in the room jumps to their feet. Alarm bells ring in their heads. *Something ain't right about Barbatos*, their eyes say.

The Baron gasps for breath. "H-huh... he's... he's in... Hell Harbor. H-heard he went... went there to... show-"

"I don't care *why*; I only want to know *where*. Stupid bloodskins. Thy lips never stop moving."

Uriel flicks her finger. A thousand shards of metal tear from the walls and fly around the room, eviscerating everyone inside. The horrified screams of pain go silent a moment later. One hundred demons fall to pieces, transformed from flesh and bones into bloody puddles on the ground.

The Archangel inhales deeply. "Ahhh. Nothing better than the smell of dead bloodskins. I'll make every last one pay. There isn't a corner of the Labyrinth capable of hiding them."

She smiles wickedly. Her face contorts into a nightmarish expression of pure rage and exhilaration.

"FREE. I'm finally FREE! Hahaha... I won't lose like I did last time. Even if I do, I'm taking all of them with me."

Uriel motions with her hands, and a portal appears at one of the many connecting paths to Hell Harbor.

Artorias growls. **They won't let you enter. You'll never make it to Hell Harbor, you damned butcher.**

Her vile expression hardens. "Who's going to stop me? Diablo? Heh. He's down for the count. The only one who can beat me now is Bael. That's why I'll take him out *first*."

The Archangel steps through the portal and closes it behind her.

Silence fills the room. Not even a fly stirs.

Author Note:

This is Artorias!





Part 068: The White Wedding

I think my heart is going to leap out of my throat. It's beating so hard that if I don't soothe it, It'll jump into orbit.

My entire body shakes for a moment. I quickly Wordsmith under my breath, "**Calm.**"

The jitters vanish. It's cheating, but I hate being in front of a crowd. So much for a small wedding. There must be five hundred people seated and another thousand standing past the chairs. I'm glad I chose an outdoor reception.

A kobold plays the wedding tune on the piano, just like how I taught him. He isn't a master at the piano, nor proficient by any means, but the ability of monsters to pick up and learn new skills within a few days is extraordinary. Several people in the front row, including Neil and Hans, smile at me and give me the thumbs up. *The bride is on the way.*

My unnatural calmness somehow makes me anxious. *I used the same magic on myself that I used on Amelia. Is this what the Calm spell does? I feel like a robot — no emotion at all. I shouldn't feel like this during my wedding, for Christ's sake!*

I glance to my right. On the other side of the altar, the number one bridesmaid, Samantha, stands while wearing a beautiful white dress. I'm glad to see her in clothing, for once. Somehow, she looks even

more incredible than when she wears skimpy attire.

Due to the unique situation Phoebe and I find ourselves; since neither of us has any living family members, we decided to seat all the men on the right side of the aisle and all the women on the left. Seeing a sea of tuxedos and dresses mixed in with monsters and humans makes me want to chuckle.

To my right stands an altar, along with Kar's tiny, shrunken body perched atop it. The altar has an ornate design, crafted via the Crown's vast reserve of ancient designs. Gold, concrete, and an etching of a beautiful angel atop it all serve to give it a heavenly presence, as if the Creator himself has chosen to wed us today.

Kar and I are both getting married today. It's a double wedding special. The tiny little croco-sphinx adjusts his adorable tuxedo, which I custom made with Wordsmithing. "Turtle, you seem anxious."

"Aren't you?"

He nods. "Only a little. This is my second mating ceremony, after all."

"Ah, right. I pray you and I both have long, successful marriages this time around."

Guilt wells up in my stomach at Kar's words. His first mate died, along with his family. Based on how he and Blinker have been getting along, I think she's the perfect new match for him.

On the other hand, Kar's body weighs the same when he shrinks as when he's enlarged. How are he and Blinker going to...? Never mind. It's none of my business.

The kobold on the piano starts having a little too much fun. He jams out and bangs away at a song that is decidedly *not* the tune he was instructed to play. A bunch of men nearby laugh at his antics, so I ignore him. I'm not going to be the party-pooper, not today.

Overhead, snow begins to trickle down, but it stops atop Phoebe's environmental barrier. The whiteness of the sleet only serves to brighten the place up even more. Luckily, it's nice and warm inside the environmental shield.

Across the grass, a monster truck tears across the field. The sound, like a thousand angry lions, roars louder and louder as it approaches. Phoebe bounces over a dune, narrowly misses the tree cover to the side, and slams on the brakes, screeching to a stop. Several people in the audience laugh. I facepalm.

Typical Phoebe.

She throws the driver door open and leaps out, tearing her white dress slightly. A little six-inch tall figure flutters behind Phoebe and lands on her left shoulder. Hope, dressed in a tuxedo, exits the passenger side as well.

Phoebe starts to walk toward the crowd, but Hope intercepts her, grabs her hand, and pulls her aside to whisper something. She nods and says something back, but at this distance, I can't make out their words.

Her dress repairs as she walks, and I realize Hope must have fixed it. *Good man.*

The uneven grass and dirt causes Phoebe to lose her footing once or twice, but Hope holds her arm so that she doesn't fall. Once they make it to the concrete platform, she sighs in relief. Then she begins

walking toward me.

Despite calming myself with Wordsmithing, my heart begins to beat again. Phoebe looks fucking gorgeous. I don't know what it is about women in white dresses, but it gets me excited like a kid in a candy shop.

...Maybe that isn't the best allegory.

Blinker, too, wears a tiny Barbie-sized wedding dress. She looks like a mini-Phoebe riding on the big one's shoulder, though her maroon locks stand out from Phoebe's white hair.

As Phoebe strolls down the aisle, she smiles sweetly at people and monsters to her right and left. One male Felaris lets out a wolf-whistle, only to immediately get conked over the head by his brother.

On the opposite side of the altar, our next-door neighbor, Ogie, plays the role of minister. I wasn't sure if it was a good idea making a salamander our clergyman, but Phoebe insisted. I won't refuse her requests.

It takes an agonizingly long time for Phoebe and Hope to reach the front. When she draws near, Hope pulls away from her and winks at me. "All yours, champ."

"Thank you, Hope. I'm glad you were the best man today."

"Psh. Shit, if not me, who?" Hope jokingly nudges my arm and steps to the side.

Phoebe smiles. I smile back. It feels as if I'm gazing into the sun.

I hardly believe I deserve a woman like her.

She starts to reach up and kiss me, but I push her lips away with a finger. "Uh-uh, Phoebe. We have to wait."

Phoebe blushes. "Oh. Um. Sorry. I forgot."

Blinker flies off Phoebe's shoulder and lands in front of Kar. "Oooh! We're finally gonna tie the knot! Exciting!"

Seeing her and him together, I want to laugh at their two-inch height difference. Blinker stands taller than her husband, but only when he shrinks down.

Kar grunts. "Hurgh. You are a rose in full bloom. I am honored to call you my mate."

Phoebe and I move to stand before the altar.

Ogie clears his throat. He stares at Phoebe and me expectantly.

Several moments pass.

The salamander suddenly reddens. "Oh, cripes- I forgot. I'm the one who's 'sposed ta' say something. Err... what were the words again?"

I cough into my fist. "Ah ahem, *dearly beloved*..."

The salamander nods excitedly. "Oh, I remember now! That's right. Dearly beloved... we break bread here today in remembrance of our savior-"

Blinker stares up at the salamander. "Ogie... that's not right at all! What the heck!"

The salamander stutters and stammers. "O-of course it isn't! I was, eh-hh, testing you! Yeah! I wanted ta' make sure you remembered... hehe..."

I groan. *We should have had Neil do the ceremony.*

Phoebe snorts. "Ogie, don't you remember the rehearsal?"

Several audience members begin to laugh. The salamander scratches his head. "Uhm, of course! AH-HEM. Dearly beloved... we gather here today ta' tie these four together in the eternal bondage of matrimony... ta'... never look at another with lust... until they die..."

Ogie's wife, Jeera, fumes from the audience. "That dummy," I hear her whisper to someone else. "I bet he's drunk again."

"And, ahh... together these four, Kar, Blinker, Jason Hippo, and Phoebe Berthold shall-"

"It's *Hiro*," I whisper, correcting him again.

He ignores me. "-shall bring themselves together for all eternity, swearing never ta' look at another person ever again, no matter how good-looking or beautiful."

"You said that already," I grumble under my breath.

"And uh-hh..." Ogie trails off. He stares at Phoebe and me for several long, painful seconds. "Uhh... now you kiss."

"Huh?" I blink in surprise. "You skipped over almost everything. What about the vows?"

"Yeah, whatever. That's all a bunch of crap anyway." The salamander waves his hand flippantly and yawns. "Just kiss so we can get to the cake."

By now, several audience members are about to split their guts open from holding in laughter. I sigh. "Oh well. This wedding wasn't going to be orthodox anyway."

Phoebe grins so hard her face turns beet-red. "Whatever! Ogie's right. Kiss me!"

She tugs me down to her level. I lean over and bend my knee slightly, then wrap my arms around her.

Our lips press together, as they have every night for the last week. The knowledge that she has my child, and that soon I'll be a father fills me with a joy I can't put into words.

Phoebe is my wife now. We'll be together forever.

Kar and Blinker pull each other in for an embrace, and she giggles loudly. "Oh, you! You're not supposed to kiss **THERE!**"

Kar leans back. "Hurgh. Apologies. Couldn't control myself."

The crowd applauds loudly, and several people laugh like hyenas. Hope pats my back. "You did it, Jason."

I smile at him. "Nah. We did it. I'll get you a girl next."

"Thanks, but that isn't necessary." Hope's smile slips ever so slightly. "I'm already working on it. You worry about yourself, okay?"

"Sure. Good for you, man."

His smile returns in full force. "Hell yeah."

Kar, Blinker, Phoebe, and I turn to wave politely at the crowd. Everyone stands up and claps even more enthusiastically. Their thunderous applause makes me feel like someone who won the Nobel Peace Prize. Hell, I'd take Phoebe over something like that any day of the week. She's irreplaceable.

* * *

A while later, Phoebe holds the knife over our massive four-tiered wedding cake. I considered wordsmithing one, but she insisted on baking it herself. It took three days to make each section, but Phoebe pulled through. She always does.

I salivate like a dog at the sight of her cake. It has white icing on top, and a delicious strawberry sauce in the middle, along with various berries and fruits atop of the glaze. Phoebe insisted the cake should be at least somewhat healthy for the children, and it still came out delicious. I suppose that's proof healthy food doesn't have to taste bland.

Blinker and Kar both sit on the table together, with her in his lap. A strawberry sits beside them, and they take turns cutting off tiny slivers and feeding each other. It's adorable.

Several elderly humans and monsters line up first, followed by children and the rest of the adults. Phoebe cuts one piece after another and hands them to the next in line.

Samantha walks over to me.

"Hey, Jason."

I turn to smile at her. "Hm?"

She blushes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I don't know why you're thanking me, though."

The succubus pulls on her long, black hair. "I told you Satan died, right? It's been... it killed me inside. I'm barely getting by."

Only now do I remember what she told me when Phoebe and I ran into her. Ever since the battle against Amelia, Samantha has suffered immensely.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm thanking you. After all, you've made Phoebe happy. That means a lot to me. I'm glad she's smiling. I almost feel as if she's experiencing double the happiness to replace what I've lost."

The succubus folds her hands together and looks at the ground.

"I... I love Phoebe."

Her statement catches me off-guard. "What?"

"I love her. It took me a while to understand. Maybe it's a passing feeling. Fleeting like the wind. I don't know."

I glance at Phoebe, thirty feet away. She hasn't noticed Samantha speaking to me. I don't think there's a jealous bone in her body. She doesn't even care that a succubus is talking to her husband. That's some pretty deep trust.

"I, uh... that's fine, Samantha. I don't blame you for having feelings for my wife."

Samantha wipes her eye. "I *love* her, Jason. Physically, emotionally. But... she's married to you now. I'm glad for her, I am. But... I... I don't know what to do about my feelings."

"I'm not good with emotional stuff either," I reply. "I don't know what to say. I'm sorry?"

Samantha shakes her head. "No. You don't need to apologize. I can't help the way I feel. That's life."

I fiddle with my jacket's cuffs absent-mindedly. "I'll, uh, talk to Phoebe for you, alright?"

"Thank you," Samantha says, rubbing her shoulders. Her words hold a note of finality, but she doesn't walk away.

I raise an eyebrow. "Is there something else?"

Samantha doesn't meet my gaze. "You killed Amelia. Right?"

"Yes. No. Sort of. It's hard to explain."

"Hoarhiim took over your body, but it was you who killed her."

The line of questioning makes my stomach churn. "Fine, yes. Why?"

Samantha raises her eyes to meet mine. "Satan died because he was the Black Witch's soulbound slave. When you killed her, you killed my husband."

My voice trembles. "O-oh."

"I don't blame you. I couldn't. It isn't like you killed Satan intentionally." Samantha sticks her chin out. "But, at the same time, I also know you blew away my husband several times with Holy Energy. Jason, are you an enemy to demonkind?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm not looking to cause war. I'm trying to bring about peace. I was only defending myself."

"That's what I thought." Samantha smiles slightly, as if confirming a suspicion inside herself. "Your ability... Wordsmithing. I've watched men go mad with power, time and time again. I want Phoebe to be in good hands. You won't turn evil, will you?"

"I hope not, haha."

"Well, nobody can see the future, but I'll take your word for it. Jason... you and Phoebe deserve happiness. As long as you're together-"

Suddenly, someone yells out in surprise, cutting Samantha off. I jerk my head in the direction of the altar. A demon dressed in black robes, flanked by two others, steps through a portal at the altar's base. With his face partially obscured by a hood, all I can see is a flash of a white beard. The demon sweeps his eyes across the crowd and locks onto Samantha. Several men jump away, and from somewhere unseen, Kar leaps into the aisle before them, tearing apart his suit as he enlarges.

The Sphinx towers over the newcomers. "Demons! How did you get inside?"

The lead demon, who, judging by the size of his horns is a Baron, pauses for only a moment. "I'm not here to fight. I need to speak to the Second Emperor, Belial."

Kar's jaw hangs open for a moment. He starts to raise a balled-up fist, but Samantha calls out, "Wait!"

By now, everyone has turned to look at the intruder. Hope slides up next to me as Samantha walks over to them. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. Demons. They want to talk to Samantha."

The entire pavilion goes silent. Samantha approaches the Baron and crosses her arms. "What do you want, Orias?"

Orias glances around, and his eyes lock on to me. He grabs Samantha's arm and pulls her close to whisper something. Before he can speak, I mutter under my breath, "**Hearing.**"

"Lady Belial. The catastrophe has returned. Barbatos has gone berserk! We're summoning all of the Dukes and Emperors to stop him."

Samantha frowns. She matches his volume. "Barbatos? That can only mean Uriel has awoken again."

He nods. "It is as you say. Uriel has already torn apart thousands of demons. She's unstoppable. We've sustained heavy losses. It took us over thirty hours to track you down."

Samantha licks her lips. She doesn't reply for a few moments. "You know my policy. I don't involve myself in demon matters."

Orias's whispered voice takes on a sense of urgency. "Please. My lady! We can't win without everyone's help."

A minute of silence passes. Samantha mulls over his request in her mind. Finally, she sighs. "Damn. Diablo's in a coma. He can't fight like he did last time. I doubt I'll be of much use, but we have to stop Uriel. Fine. I'll go."

"Thank you, thank you so much." The demon bows solemnly. "I'll do anything I can to help."

I undo my Wordsmithing and look at Hope. "There's a-"

He raises a hand. "I know. I read their minds. You stay here. I'll go and help."

I frown. *Hope can read minds? Since when?* "No, I'll help. You stay here and-"

Hope starts to take a step toward Samantha, but stops. "Jason, this is your wedding day. I'll go. Also... Uriel. Doesn't that name sound familiar to you?"

I meet his gaze for three seconds. "Isn't... isn't that the name of an Archangel?"

"Exactly. My curiosity is piqued. Where's that new armor you made? Time for a field test."

I glance at Hope's tuxedo and shrug. "No time like the present, huh? **Summon.**"

A circular device with two leather straps appears in midair. Hope snatches it before it hits the ground. "I'll be in touch. Stay on the alert."

He dashes toward Samantha without waiting for my reply. When he gets close, he yells, "I'm going with you!"

The color drains from the Baron's face. "No, human. This matter is demon business."

"You came to Tarus II — humanity's stronghold. Your business is *my* business now. **Wear.**" Hope finishes with a single word, causing the T-REX to wrap around his body.

The Baron stares at Hope in disbelief, but Belial beckons at my clone. "Come along. Frankly, we'll need all the help we can get." She looks at the Baron. "Orias, I don't want to hear any complaints. Jason is my friend. He's coming along."

Hope rubs his head. "Uh. I'm Hope."

Samantha blinks. "Oh, sorry."

"Happens all the time."

The four demons and Hope trudge toward the portal and step through, leaving without another word. After it closes behind them, Phoebe walks over to me. "What's going on, Jason?"

"I don't know, exactly, but Hope is on the case. There's no need to worry."

Silently, I rub the Archangel rings on my fingers.

Uriel? Why would an Archangel be alive? Why show up now, of all times? And what was that about Barbatos?

Something is rotten in the Labyrinth. I don't like it — not one bit.

[Recommended Listening](#)

Beelzebub lounges in a chair suspended between two trees. He picks his teeth clean and frowns. Once again, his flames begin to burn through his suit.

"Bloody hell."

The beautiful gardens surrounding the Slithering Spire teem with magic and wonder. In the distance, two girls and two boys play, swinging sticks like swords at each other. A bird chirps nearby, and the sun warms the planet to the perfect temperature.

Beelzebub glances over at Rosalia. She sits on the ground and picks petals from a flower. "He loves me; he loves me not. He loves me; he loves me not."

Beelzebub leans his head back. "Seven Hells. It's dull as a rock here. Rosalia, fetch me some wine."

"Eeeeh!" Rosalia shrieks, making Beelzebub jump. "I can't believe it!"

"What? What?!" Beelzebub sits up and stares at her. "What's the matter?"

She holds up the flower. "Waaa!!! It says you love me not! How can life be so cruel?!"

Beelzebub narrows his gaze. "I'm beginning to suspect you lack in intelligence. Now fetch my wine."

Tears flow from her eyes. "B-but, how can this be? I thought you loved me! I thought the flowers were always right!!"

"They are. I don't."

"UWAAAA!!!" She leaps to her feet and dashes away, only to trip over a tree root and slam onto her face. "...Oww."

Beelzebub lays back in the chair. "I wonder if demons can die of second-hand embarrassment."

Rosalia snuffles and leaves to fetch Beelzebub his wine.

A minute passes. Two. Three.

The Duke of Inferno yawns. "No, it isn't simply boring, here. It's *dreadfully* boring. All those years I spent hoping to leave the Labyrinth, and I don't have any beautiful servants yet. Only an ogre and a bunch of disgusting humans."

"Disgusting?" A female voice speaks up. He recognizes it immediately as Lily's voice.

Beelzebub cranes his neck back to stare at Benjamin's daughter. The young woman wears another white dress identical to the one Rosalia tore up before. This time, she keeps her distance. Her battered face still hasn't healed from Rosalia's vicious attack. Bruises line her eyes and cheeks, giving her the appearance of an abused spouse.

"Yes. Disgusting. Are you here to agree, or would you prefer a repeat of last time?"

Lily shrinks away. "N-no. I came to... to um... apologize. I said a lot of nasty things. Daddy taught me the error of my ways."

Beelzebub snorts. "About time. Took you four days, but better late than never."

Lily blushes madly. "You ass! You're supposed to apologize too! You yanked that door so hard that you almost broke my arm!"

"I don't apologize to insects. Maybe your arm shouldn't belong to a frail, pathetic body."

"Rrrrgh!!!" Lily snarls. "I came all this way to atone, and you haven't the decency to hold your tongue for even a minute?! You infuriate me!"

"Poor thing," Beelzebub drawls. "Are you done? Can't I enjoy some peace?"

Lily simmers down. She stares at the demon for half a minute, then crosses her arms. "I want to know something."

"Ugh."

She breathes deeply. "You beat Daddy in a fight. No demon has ever done that. How did you?"

Beelzebub rolls his eyes. "Flesh burns. Metal melts. Fire is a powerful weapon in the hands of someone adept in its use."

"I see. Have you been in many fights before?"

"Thousands. The life of a demon depends on fighting prowess." Beelzebub smiles at the change of topic. *Finally, we're talking about me.*

"Daddy beat Bael in a fight. He beat Mephisto, too."

"That's nice."

"He and Diablo fought to a standstill."

"Good for him."

The girl raps her fingers against her crossed arms. "Why are you here, Beelzebub?"

The demon doesn't lean back to look at her. "I don't follow."

"Here. The Slithering Spire. You've sat around doing nothing for four days. Don't you have any goals? Anything to work toward?"

Beelzebub shrugs. "My ultimate goal is to become the First Emperor. A few days of relaxation won't make a difference in that regard. Besides, Bael and Mephisto aren't doing anything either."

The woman slowly walks forward until she's standing in front of the demon, but also keeps her distance. "Why do you want to be an Emperor?"

"None of your business."

"I know. I figured you might tell me anyway."

Beelzebub opens his mouth to respond, then closes it. After a moment, he replies. "I want power. I love the Labyrinth, but I hate it, too."

"What do you mean?"

Beelzebub picks his teeth some more. "I'm a talented demon. Lucky, too. Mostly talented. I studied hard, fought with all my strength, and crushed all who stood in my way. Because of that, I'm now a Duke. Still, I'm not a fool. I see the Labyrinth for what it is."

Lily cautiously sits on the ground. "Yeah? What's that?"

"A rat race. Demons suffer and beat one another. We tear each other apart to gain power... but we have no use for our strength."

Beelzebub's voice quivers. "Recently... something happened to me. It changed me. The more I reflect on it, the more I realize its significance. I lost. A human beat me."

Lily rubs her soft, rose-colored lips. "A human? Daddy?"

"No. Not your father. The human I fought is the one who caused all the uproar lately; the Wordsmith. I encountered him unexpectedly, and he crushed me flat. I always expected to lose against a demon of higher rank, but never a damned fleshbag. The Hero, Jason, warmed my insides up and set a burning passion inside of me. He gave me a different purpose."

The girl recoils. "Err, are you in love with him or something?"

"No, you buffoon. That's not what I mean. Jason made me fight for my life. I lost, but he spared me. My goal is no longer to become Emperor simply because I can, but so I can rebuild the Labyrinth."

"Wow. What will you do if you succeed?"

Beelzebub smirks. "Demons seek power for no reason. I'll give us a purpose, and an enemy worth fighting."

Lily's interest drains away. "Whoa, whoa. No. Beelzebub, you can't do that. If humans and demons fight each other on equal footing, billions will die. That's what Daddy says."

"So?" Beelzebub pulls himself into a sitting position. "What's wrong with that? Humans will die eventually. Demons have no purpose without war. I only wish to restore the natural balance of things. Would you prefer that my people and yours rot away and die after living useless existences?"

A moment passes. Lily looks away. "I... I don't know. I wasn't alive for the Energy Wars. Sometimes, I catch Daddy staring into the mirror. He doesn't move. It's as if he's watching a painful memory he can't forget. I don't want people to suffer as he does."

Beelzebub rubs his hands together. He stares at the woman sitting on the ground. Her white dress and dark skin contrast together, drawing his eyes along the seams everywhere both meet.

"You're naive, as expected of an insect. Demons already suffer, as do humans. Humans murder each other in droves, whether we interfere or not. I only suggest that demons and humans meet each other on equal terms. Let's acknowledge who we are and accept our animal instincts."

Lily furrows her brow. "I don't understand. Do you want to see demons die? I can understand you wanting humans to die, but not others of your species."

"Lily, you're a pampered little brat. You haven't a clue what living as an imp for two-thousand years makes you endure. It's horrible. Demons take forever to evolve, these days. There aren't enough human souls to go around. If anything, culling our numbers will allow for a greater percentage of demons to possess smarter, stronger bodies. It would be a blessing not to have to compete with trillions of others for a limited supply of promotions. I even think-

Beelzebub pauses. He glances past the woman toward the path leading up to the Slithering Spire. A single kobold dashes frantically toward the estate, panic etched into his face. He stumbles slightly but catches himself and continues running.

Lily follows Beelzebub's gaze. "Hm? He seems to be in a rush."

"Indeed. Judging by that fellow's ragged breathing, he's run for tens of miles without stopping. Kobolds are known for their incredible stamina, so it's unusual to see one out of breath."

Beelzebub's eyes flick to two lit torches on the front porch. He fire-ports over to them and materializes at the bottom of the steps. The kobold spots him and screeches to a halt. He wheezes and gasps, clutching his stomach. "Bay- Bayyy- Bael! BAEL! Where is Bael? We need him! It's an emergency!"

"Bael is inside, sleeping, most likely. What's the problem?"

The kobold glances up at Beelzebub's horns. "Yuh- you're a Duke, too?"

"Yes."

"Oh, thank the seven Hells! Aw, geez, it's awful! Barbatos is flippin' out! He tore through the Slaughterseum and killed over two-hundred thousand demons and slaves! You hafta meet up with the

other Dukes and Emperors. He's trying to enter Hell Harbor!"

Beelzebub narrows his eyes. "Barbatos? That doesn't sound right. He's a scary-looking one, but Agares told me the Duke of Steel was nonviolent."

"Yeah? Well, I got news for ya, pal. YOU'RE WRONG. I barely escaped with my neck intact! He's killing demons faster than we can send 'em! That son of a broodmother is a demon-killing machine!"

Beelzebub nods. "Very well. Bael is inside, as is Mephisto. I'll go on ahead. One of the servants will show you to their quarters."

The kobold nods vigorously. "Thank you so much!"

The kobold turns and heads inside, barely managing to stumble up the stairs to the Spire's entrance.

Beelzebub inhales and aims toward the sky. Fire ignites beneath his feet. As he takes off, he hears Rosalia's voice.

"Mister Beelzebub?"

He ignores her. *Finally, something to alleviate my boredom.*

A smile stretches across his face. "Barbatos, hm? I wonder how much of a challenge he'll give me."

As Beelzebub flies away, Rosalia stares up at him longingly. "Aw, rats. What the heck? I brought his wine and everything."

She sighs. "Oh well. Guess it's mine now."

Part 069: D'Archangel

Recommended Listening

The Labyrinth junction reveals a path ahead, as well as to the left and right, forming a plus shape. I sense the bloodskins. I smell their fear, their terror. They lurk at the edges of both hallways, ready to strike. Two Barons stand alongside dozens of grunts, one on each side. I know not their identities.

Nor do I care.

My armored feet, those belonging to Barbatos, shake the ground as I walk. I'm mostly naked, now. Only boots, gauntlets, and a helmet cover my body. Shame? I feel none. This disgusting form is merely a vessel I borrow to exact my revenge — my punishment on those who slew my brothers and sisters.

All bloodskins must die. I will force them to grovel and weep in the moments before I snuff their lives out forever.

I approach the junction. Fifty feet. Forty. Thirty.

One hundred and sixty-four demons burst from their hiding places and charge at me; bloodlust etched onto their faces.

"KILL THE ARCHANGEL! SLAY URIEL!" One of the Barons, a male, bellows triumphantly. His moment of glory is soon to come. He knows he cannot fail.

The other Baron, a female, is not so sure. "Uriel is powerful! Dodge anything she throws at you!"

"Fools," I whisper. "My advance cannot be halted. I am inevitable."

Raising a hand, I summon a wall of Holy Light, sealing off the path before me, just as I did in the Ancient Era when the demons assaulted Heaven's Gate. Both Barons slam against the barrier, followed immediately by several dozen scythers and shadow-walkers. The demons stagger backward and stare at my divine shield in disbelief.

The confusion on the bloodskin's faces would make me laugh if I weren't already furious. My rage is not a simple matter of emotion, nor is it about the loss my people and I have suffered.

I hate demonkind, but I hate myself more. Weak. Useless. I made a mistake, one which ended my life. I can never redeem myself, nor can I bring back my brothers and sisters.

All I can do is bring holy vengeance upon those who wronged us. I have no other reason to live.

That is why I have assumed the title: *Archangel of Retribution*.

The Barons quickly form hand signs, likely in an attempt to nullify my barrier. Perhaps if they focused their minds for a thousand years, they might manage such a feat. Sadly, only seconds remain.

I raise my other hand. A second wall of light forms behind the contingent of bloodskins, sealing off their escape. Their confusion turns to panic. They swivel on their heels and press against my barriers, but such weak strength will not save them.

"Uriel! You bastard! I haven't forgotten what you did!" The female Baron turns to glower at me. Her eyes burn like embers of flame, scorching the innermost parts of her soul.

"Have we met?"

"No. But I remember you. I was only an imp when you last struck. You killed over ten thousand-"

"I don't care," I reply, cutting her off. "Thy words serve only to slow me down. Perish with the rest of thy kind."

Slowly, I pull my left hand back. The second wall of light behind the attackers begins to press against the first, crushing the demons within. The Baron's eyes widen as she realizes my goal. Immediately, she forms hand signs, teleports through my barrier, and jumps at me, raising two knives to strike.

"Filthy Angel! One thousand years of suffering!!!"

A smile caresses my face. *One thousand? That's all? If only thou understood.*

I tilt my head. Her knives yank to the side. The bloodskin yelps in surprise and slams against the wall. I nod, causing the knives to jump out of her hands and follow my eyes. They float above her for only a moment before plunging down, impaling her into the floor.

"Aaaaaiiee!!!" She squirms and tries to pull away, but her efforts only cause more blood to spill from her wounds.

To amuse myself while I crush her allies, I wiggle the knives back and forth, widening the holes in her heart and stomach. Her movements grow more sluggish. She claws at the ground, trying desperately to free herself. Eventually, the fire in her eyes cools.

The Baron slumps over, dead. Her allies scream in agony as my walls compress them together. They implode from the inside out and melt together into a mass of blood and bone.

Satisfied, I release my barriers. The river of gore splatters across the floor and rushes around my boots.

The smell of bloodskins somehow soothes me. They stink of unwashed dogs, yet knowing that another hundred and sixty-four have died gives me comfort.

A tingling in the back of my mind makes me groan.

You damned monster — servant of the enemy. You could have spared them. I know angels are no better than demons, but I wish you would prove me wrong. Cease the cycle of violence. Barbatos has shirked a life of endless murder, so why can't-

"Silence, Artorias. Thy feeble attempts to dissuade me shall prove useless, as always." A throaty chuckle escapes my mouth. "Hehehe... Thy brother made several mistakes, but going without sleep for forty thousand years was by far the biggest. He weakened himself more and more as time went on. He won't wake up in a few hours, as he did before. This time, I am fully in control."

You underestimate Barbatos's resolve.

Splash. Splash. I stomp through the lake of blood and continue walking down the hallway. "Resolve won't be enough. Not this time."

I pass the junction and continue walking. One mile. Two miles. Three.

Being able to draw upon Barbatos and Artorias's energy reserves in addition to mine is a stroke of luck, but at my current speed, it will take me a thousand years to slay all the bloodskins.

I raise my hand again to form magical signs. *Summon. Summon.*

Two angels birthed of Holy Energy appear at my side. The faceless creatures stare ahead blankly and await my orders.

"Unit One. Unit Two. We'll enter a population center, soon. One, protect my flank. Two, if any Dukes or Emperors show up, slow them down. I'll finish them myself."

The three of us continue walking. Artorias bubbles up again. **What are these creations? I've never seen anything like them before. Certainly not from you.**

"Light Constructs. Aren't they beautiful? Compared to the disgusting, malformed look of thy species, these lovelies exude righteous auras befitting my people. They will serve as my agents of justice. I shall take the demonic energy from those I kill and use it to create more allies of light. We will transform this hellhole into a place where humans and angels can live free of bloodskin oppression."

Living weapons. Why am I not surprised? Your idea of freedom is little more than genocide.

"Yes. Bloodskins slew my people. I will return the favor tenfold."

An eye for an eye only makes the world blind.

"Human proverbs mean little to me. They failed to protect those who gave their existence meaning. In my eyes, they share the blame for what happened to the angels and gods."

I raise my head and peer forward. The sound of a multitude of demons catches my attention.

"Ho ho, listen to that. The fools haven't a clue what's coming."

Recommended Listening

A bloodskin stiffens. He looks around, scanning the dimly lit room. "Did you guys hear somethin'?"

I stifle a laugh. Barbatos's unique power, Dark Form, makes me invisible. It extinguishes my Holy Energy entirely and merges my body into the world of darkness, allowing me to bypass anyone standing in my way.

Silently, I walk past the demons at the entrance to the center of the chamber. It appears to be a slave factory. Barbatos's memory tells me it is the Smeltery, where laborers forge weapons and armors for low-rank demons and monsters.

However, this area also has a Keymaster. If I can catch him, I'll be able to force him to open a portal to Hell Harbor.

And if I make it there...

I stop in the center of the room and look around. My constructs wait for me in the corridor, flattening themselves against the wall so that they won't draw attention.

My eyes lock onto a figure dressed in black robes. It's my lucky day.

Grigori, Diablo's warper, sits at a table reading a book. What is it about? I couldn't care less. I'm lucky this region of the Labyrinth hasn't heard about my approach yet. I can grab him and-

"She's here!"

A squeaky voice shrieks out a warning from the ceiling. I raise my eyes to look in its direction. A goblin with a strange device on his head watches me intently. "The Archangel!"

The walls come alive. Camouflaged shadow-walkers leap into action, jumping at me from every angle. Grigori leaps to his feet to reveal a partially casted magic seal. He creates a portal, allowing hundreds of reinforcements to pour through and rush at me.

Hehe. An ambush. I fell for it.

Fortunately, the bloodskins here are no match for me.

I flick a finger, and a portal of my own appears, allowing my Constructs to leap into action beside me. The appearance of my Constructs causes some of the shadow-walkers to stiffen in surprise as they rush toward me.

Unit One summons a sword and shield of light. He pounces at the shadow-walkers and cuts five of them in half before they can react.

Unit Two creates a hole in her head. She fires several tiny blasts of Holy Energy and blows out the brains of a dozen other shadow-walkers.

The rest of the shadow-walkers fall toward me. I can't block all of them.

Why bother?

I inhale. My Dark Form converts into its polar opposite, Light Form. Holy Energy radiates from my body, blinding the shadow-walkers and burning their skin. They scream in pain and cover their eyes, only to splash against me like a pile of wet rags. I don't flinch as the eighty demons slap my flesh. They fall to the ground and try to scurry away, shrieking like banshees the entire time. My Constructs make short work of the blinded, fleeing bastards.

Holy Energy is the bane of demonkind. The kill switch. Angels created the demons. We gave them life. We formed them from the dust of the Earth to be our servants, and as such, we could end them whenever we pleased.

If only we had done so sooner.

"Thy people art lucky I lost Gungnir and the Gae Bolg, all those years ago. However, I will make do."

Raising both hands, I summon two spears of light into my grasp. The army of demons that poured through Grigori's portal only moments before slows to a crawl. The bloodskins recoil in anguish as my brilliant aura beats upon their faces.

I jump into action. Using my spears, I stab and cut apart shadow-walkers, scythers, grunts, and a variety of monsters as well. Their screams of agony mix with those my Constructs slay, forming a beautiful symphony of death.

A Demon Lord steps out of the crowd and aims his palm at me. He shoots a ball of corrosive acid, but I counter with a Light Wall, making it explode and backfire against him. He's impervious to the acid, but it catches him off-guard enough for me to raise the barrier and slam it down on top of him, flattening him into a puddle of blood.

Horried looks spread across the faces of the bloodskins.

"W-who in the hell are we dealing with?!"

"Hold your ground! There's only one enemy!"

"We have to slow him down until the Dukes arrive!"

I roll my eyes. *The foolish bloodskins always assume I'm a man. If they knew a female Archangel was responsible for their annihilation, they'd probably kill themselves out of embarrassment.*

With a flick of my wrist, I gently lob my spear of light into the crowd of bloodskins. It explodes, sending shards of Holy Energy shrapnel flying in all directions. Each of the shards tears through multiple enemies and pivots in midair to fly back and target others. They buzz around like a cloud of wasps, ripping demons and monsters to shreds indiscriminately.

My Constructs walk over to me and nod. *Done.*

The three of us watch with satisfaction as my shards of light tear apart everyone in their path. I flick my eyes over toward Grigori, who stands alone and trembles as he watches the others fall. When he meets my gaze, he panics and quickly forms signs to make a portal.

He thinks he can escape. That's adorable.

Grigori's belt has an iron engraving of a phoenix on it. I use it to yank him toward me. He screams in fright and tries to undo the belt, but his neck lands neatly in my palm, and I slam him into the ground.

"Hello, Grigori. Remember me?"

The bloodskin grits his teeth. "Uriel. You... you foul..."

"Now now, no time for pet names. Open the portal to Hell Harbor, or I'll rip thee limb from limb."

"You'll do it anyway! Piss off, you damned witch!"

"Correct. Still, I can drag out thy suffering for quite a while before painting the Labyrinth with thy innards. There are other Keymasters out there. Would not thou prefer I attack Hell Harbor, where I'll have to face the fearsome, monstrous Dukes?"

"You can't trick me. I remember what you did last time! Torture me all you please, but I'll never open the gate!!"

The Warper reaches into his robe and yanks out a knife, then stabs it into my arm. "Get off me!!"

I barely feel the blade's edge. Warpers have pitiful combat abilities.

Silently, I squeeze Grigori's neck hard enough to snap a bone. He gasps and squeezes my arm, trying to pull me off. "A-angel... scum... let me..."

I take my remaining spear of Holy Energy and slowly press it against his chest. The energy funnels into his blood, causing him to spasm violently.

"AHHH!! AHHHH!!!! IT BURNS!! TUH-TAKE IT OUT!!"

"This won't end thy life, Grigori, but it will hurt worse than anything thou hath ever experienced. I'll keep the spear pressed to thy heart until thou summon the portal."

He screams even louder and kicks like a wild minotaur. "OUT!! TAKE IT OOOUT!!!"

A sensation of air rushes past my body. I glance up at where my Holy Shards eviscerated the bloodskins, and cock my head at the sight of a second portal. My eyes widen greedily. *That one leads to Hell Harbor. Perfect.*

Then, something surprising happens. Someone walks in front of it and steps through.

Beelzebub.

The newly crowned Duke gestures with his hand, and the portal closes.

"Uriel. I've heard rumors about your existence. Release Grigori. I'll be your foe."

I slowly stand up to Barbatos's full height. I'm a few inches taller than the newcomer, and Barbatos's body is far stockier and more muscular than the Duke of Inferno.

Grigori slumps in my grasp. I toss him to Unit One, and he catches the bloodskin with ease.

"Dost thee plan to fight me by thyself?"

Beelzebub undoes his suit collar and peels off his top. He tosses it to the side. "Oh, yes. I will. I'd have come sooner if I could, but I had a date with the warm side of a bench. I hope you don't mind."

Haha. I can't believe my luck. I thought I'd have to fight the Dukes and Emperors all at the same time, but this buffoon wants to fight me one-on-one.

I plant the butt of my spear on the ground. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy this."

Part 070: Art Is An Explosion!

Recommended Listening

Beelzebub's eyes flick over to Grigori's limp body. I step between him and his ally, using Barbatos's bulk to form a wall between them. "Here to save thy little friend?"

The Duke meets my gaze. "Why should I care about some insignificant nobody? Kill him if you like. I'm a little surprised, though. After all the tales Agares spun regarding the might of the Archangels, I never thought you would stoop so low as to torture weaklings."

"Grigori has the key to Hell Harbor. Once he unlocks the gate, I'll kill him. It's only business. He has what I need, so I'll take it."

Beelzebub smirks. "Attacking the weak and defenseless is something I can get behind, but I didn't expect such actions from an angel. Why are you trying to get to Hell Harbor? Shouldn't you be fleeing in the opposite direction? You won't last long against all the Dukes and Emperors."

I bristle at his words. My blood-red eyes threaten to burn a hole in the Duke of Inferno's skull. "Dost thou think the Emperors capable of stopping me? The Dukes? The truth is far from thy imagination, little one. Diablo is out of the picture. Satan is dead. Unless thy precious First Emperor makes a grand appearance, that leaves Belial and the new upstart, Ose, but neither of them can compare to Diablo."

Beelzebub readies two fireballs in each hand. "Regarding that, we agree. However, it won't matter. Your genocide of my people ends here; you bedeviled witch. I'm your worst nightmare. Your nemesis."

"My nemesis?" I scoff. "Hilarious. It took the combined might of four Dukes and Diablo's full power to imprison me the last time I emerged. What can one Duke do alone?"

Beelzebub closes his eyes and inhales. Suddenly, the oxygen in the room sucks toward him. The change in air pressure makes my ears pop. I stand firm as the wind enters his body.

Then, all goes still.

After a moment, I take a knee and clutch my throat. I can't breathe.

He sucked the room bone dry.

I glance up and meet the bloodskin's gaze. Beelzebub's body trembles as he holds in the air.

I can last a while; he can't. The fool is still new to using his powers.

Finally, Beelzebub exhales. A violent maelstrom of oxygen bursts from every pore on his skin, knocking me back a foot or two. I stabilize myself with magnetic control over my metal boots and gauntlets, only to see a wall of flame rushing toward me.

Unit Two jumps in front of Beelzebub's attack. She holds up her hand to summon a wall of light, blocking the flames with ease.

Beelzebub narrows his eyes. "Light Manipulation. Since you're a wielder of Holy Energy, I should have expected as much. I'm surprised you can use it while possessing Barbatos's body."

I stand up straight. "In a way, being devoured by this bloodskin was the best thing that ever happened to me. I possess all of Barbatos's magic, all of mine, and also..."

I smile. *Beelzebub doesn't have to know about Artorias.*

The bloodskin trapped in my mind appears as a mental image. **What's the matter, Uriel? Scared that if he knows too much, this little Duke will beat you? You are a coward, after all.**

"Shut up," I murmur. "Beelzebub, thy manipulation of fire is quite impressive. I witnessed thy battle against the Black Queen. Thou must feel confident about thy abilities if ye think defeating me will be a simple task."

Beelzebub smiles. In his hand, another fireball forms. "I'm only feeling you out. I've yet to get serious."

He shoots the ball at me. The superheated flame rushes at my face. I hold my hand up, freezing it in midair.

"Thou are far from being the only one who can control the power of fire, little bloodskin."

"What?!" Beelzebub's smile dissipates. "You, too? But you're an angel! Fire belongs to demonkind!"

I smirk. "When I was an Archangel, my official title was the Archangel of Protection. However, I also had a nickname: *The Flame of God*. Beautiful, isn't it?"

I clamp my hand shut, and the burning, red ball dissipates. Beelzebub glares at me. "You must think neutralizing my primary power will end me."

"Not especially, but *this* will." I raise my hand, and a hundred knives tear from the demon bodies lying around us. They sail at Beelzebub and-

He disappears.

The knives crash together and clatter to the ground uselessly.

I quickly scan my surroundings.

Where did he go?

Beelzebub reappears a foot away with a fireball lit in his hand. I jerk my head toward him just in time for the demon to fling it against my chest, exploding it with such power that it sends me flying back. Before I can hit the wall, Unit Two catches me and thumps me onto my feet.

I blink in surprise. "Teleportation? I've never seen thou wield such a power."

The fires from Beelzebub's initial attack earlier continue to burn the bodies of his deceased comrades. He smiles. "Demons gain new abilities when we evolve, stupid Archangel. There's a lot about me you have yet to discover."

The moment he finishes speaking, a light as bright as the sun erupts from his body.

My brain screams in alarm. "GAAAAUGH!"

Every nerve and receptor howls, spins, and tumbles around. Stars dance in my vision. I claw at my eyes futilely, but no matter what I do, I can't see a thing!

Beelzebub gasps. "Confound you, damn winged freak! How can you still see?!"

Despite the burning agony in my eyes, I smile. *Unit Two has no eyes.*

A scuffle breaks out. Something heavy hits the ground. A wave of heat washes over my legs. Beelzebub laughs. "Hahaha! This little false angel is no match for me!"

A moment later, my connection to Unit Two severs. She dissipates into the ether.

My vision returns, though it's blurry like glass during a snowstorm. I can barely make anything out.

A hazy figure stands amidst a field of flames. "Your toy fell without you to protect it. Now you only have the one left."

"Oh, Beelzebub. How little ye know."

I make a motion with my hands and Unit Two reforms beside me. "Be more careful this time. He's a crafty one."

She nods, and Beelzebub takes a step back. "You rebuilt it?!"

"My Constructs are creations of magic. So long as I possess spiritual energy, I can rebuild them over and over." I gesture to Unit One. "Hand me the Warper. Both of thee, work together to take out this trash. After my vision returns, so will I."

Artorias speaks in my mind. **You will fall. I've seen this raw strength only once before in Satan. You underestimate Beelzebub's power. He will overwhelm you.**

"Unlikely. One Duke cannot hold a candle to the might of an Archangel. After I slaughter him, I will continue to Hell Harbor and finish off the rest."

Artorias purses his lips. **We shall see.**

Recommended Listening

The Duke of Inferno rockets to the ceiling, clearing fifty feet in an instant. He spins in midair, plants his feet, and pushes off with all his strength. Summoning as much firepower as he can, Beelzebub slams into Unit Two, erupting with the wrath of a Phoenix.

Unit Two explodes into a thousand fragments. Uriel summons her again, and Unit One grabs at the Duke while its comrade reforms.

Beelzebub senses the Construct reaching for his shirt collar. The Duke makes a quick hand sign and explodes into smoke, causing Unit One to stumble. Beelzebub reforms behind him and unleashes a river of flames upon the light construct, melting it into particles.

Uriel growls. *Damn him.* She weaves hand signs, and Unit One reappears. Unit Two opens a hole in her head and fires several shots of Holy Energy, but Beelzebub transforms into smoke once more, allowing the bolts of light magic to pass through himself harmlessly.

The moment he becomes physical, Beelzebub rips off his left arm and flings it between the two constructs. It explodes in midair and blows them to smithereens, forcing Uriel to recreate them.

"Not so fast," Beelzebub says. He fire-ports to a flame three feet from Uriel and jumps at her, batting her hands away before she can finish the signs. With her vision still blurry, Uriel grabs at the hazy figure of Beelzebub but misses him by a few inches.

Beelzebub regenerates his arm and summons two solar-whips. He begins lashing at the Archangel, cutting deep into her flesh. Uriel drops the Warper and holds up her fists to block her face, exposing her stomach and legs in the process. Beelzebub punishes her by striking at her vulnerable areas.

The whips strike her ten times every second, spinning and crossing her body with such fury that the Archangel staggers back. "Impudent shit! When I wrap my hands around thy neck...!"

Beelzebub lets up for a split second and jumps at the Archangel. He slaps his palm against her chest and inhales, absorbing the air around him. He sends the oxygen through his heart and into his hand. A thousand degrees of fire explode inside the Archangel, boiling her blood from the inside out.

Wordlessly, Uriel opens her mouth to let out an empty scream. Her body leaps back of its own accord to smash into the ground. She loses motor control for a few moments and kicks spastically, like an angry infant.

Uriel's natural regeneration activates. She gasps for breath and wheezes, acting as if she's smoked a hundred packs of cigarettes in one sitting.

"Sh-shut thy... mouth... Artorias... thou knoweth... nothing..."

Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. *Artorias?*

Not wanting to give the Archangel a chance to heal, Beelzebub walks over to her and blasts the Archangel with a constant stream of flames. Fire pours from his body and tears across Uriel like a million angry fire-ants, chewing and biting her skin. Uriel screams in pain and swings at anything she can, but with her vision still blurry, she doesn't land a hit on the Duke.

Beelzebub grins as wide as a Cheshire cat. "Hahaha, look at you — the almighty Archangel. No wonder Barbatos defeated you. You're nothing. If the other Dukes and Emperors had trouble imprisoning you, that only speaks to how weak-"

Shik shik shik!

A hundred pieces of metal slam into Beelzebub's back, cutting him off mid-sentence.

"W-what?!"

The shards embed deep into his spine, severing his motor functions for a moment. His flames cut off, and the Duke flops to the left. His eyes widen. "How did you-?! You couldn't even move!"

Uriel chokes out a pained laugh. "Kah... haha... hahaha... f-fool. I don't need to weave signs... to manipulate metal. Suffer."

She flicks her eyes to the left, causing Beelzebub to tear off the ground and slam against the wall. Knives, rods, and a hundred other implements fly at the Duke, stab him a thousand times, and pin his outspread arms crucifixion-style.

Uriel gasps for breath and slowly pulls herself to her feet.

Beelzebub tries to turn his head, but a dozen knives stab through every extremity and prevent him from moving. He opts to turn one functional eye toward her, given the other was stabbed out.

"Good move. W-what now? I don't feel pain, you wretched beast. You won't be able to kill me, either. I'm immortal."

Uriel raises her eyes. She glares at the Duke pinned to the wall. "I'm waiting for thy last-ditch effort to break free. A trick, perhaps. Show me that confidence. Where did it go?"

Beelzebub tries to swallow, though the discomfort in his throat indicates something is impaling it. "L-like I need to. You're a mess. You're about ready to keel over, stupid little bird."

Uriel motions with her hands. Unit One and Unit Two reappear. She scowls at them. "Worthless! How could'st thou perish under such weak attacks?!"

Both of the constructs bow their heads contritely.

"Save thy excuses for someone who cares! Unit Two. Blast the Duke with holy energy. Full power. Eradicate every cell of his body. I don't want him coming back."

Beelzebub stares in silence at the winged figure of light that walks up to him. Its face opens.

WHAM!

A laser of holy energy crashes into Beelzebub's head.

Everything goes dark.

Beelzebub's eye opens.

I regenerated?

He blinks. The sight that greets him shakes him to his core. Belial, the Second Emperor of the demons, stands between Uriel and Beelzebub, keeping her back to the Duke and protecting him from the Archangel. Alongside her stands a faceless warrior covered from head to toe in seamless metal. A Baron and two Warpers lurk off to the side, keeping themselves out of Uriel's immediate grabbing range. Beelzebub recognizes the Baron as Orias, the Baron of The Stars.

Beelzebub coughs. "Kuh! B-Belial?"

The demoness in the white dress ignores Beelzebub. She turns to Orias. "Take your Warpers and leave. You'll only slow us down."

The Baron glances at the Archangel. "I can assist you."

"I know, but this isn't your fight. Evacuate the nearby living areas. I'm counting on you."

The Baron of Stars nods. "Very well. As you wish."

One of the Warpers opens a portal, and all three of them step through, vanishing into the ether.

Across from Belial, Uriel stands with her two constructs. However, to Beelzebub's surprise, she is missing an arm. The Archangel makes a motion with her remaining hand, and water forms in midair. It

attaches to her stump and slowly transforms into flesh, replacing her lost limb.

Beelzebub narrows his gaze. *Water manipulation, in addition to fire and light? No, more importantly, what is Belial doing here? Who is the steel-clad warrior?*

Belial nods to the armored man. "Remember. No killing. If we hammer Uriel hard enough, she'll lose power, and Barbatos can resurface."

The man gestures to the piles of burning bodies lying on the ground. "You're asking me to go easy on her? I can't do that. Look at all the demons she's killed."

Uriel glowers at the two figures protecting Beelzebub. "Belial. Thy ambush caught me off-guard, but I'm none the worse for wear. Tricks won't defeat me. I've grown far too powerful for that. And besides... bringing a metal-clad fighter here was a foolish mistake."

Uriel flicks her eyes at the armored warrior, and Beelzebub flinches. *He's dead.*

* * *

Nothing happens.

Uriel hesitates. She furrows her brow and flicks her fingers to no effect.

"By Heaven's name! What manner of metallurgy could create a suit impervious to my magnetism?!"

A moment passes. The warrior shakes his head. "According to Centurion, the Transforming Replicant Exosuit is a hardened plastoid carbon-fiber alloy formed from ultra-dense nanites. It's not metal, Uriel."

The suited figure's words tickle Beelzebub's ear. *I've heard his voice before. But where? Who is he?*

The Archangel takes a step back. "Tch. Those terms thou uttered are unfamiliar to me. They sound distinctly... *human.*"

"That's because they are," The man replies. "I'm human. My name is Hope."

Hope? Beelzebub digs into his memory. *I've never heard of a human named Hope. Who the devil is he? Why is he fighting alongside the Second Emperor?!*

Belial holds up her hand. Each finger transforms into razor-sharp blades. "Uriel. I don't want to fight you, but I will if you make me."

Hope nods. "I agree. If you're an Archangel, then there's no reason for us to fight. Calm down. Sit with me. Talk. We can resolve your grievances peacefully."

The Archangel's glowing red eyes brighten dramatically. "PEACE?! Worthless, bloodskin-loving maggot! The demons slew my people! They tortured and killed every last angel! They burned us to the ground! I'm all that remains! I'm the last one! And thou dost believe me capable of listening to reason?! Shove thy words where even the Creator cannot gaze!"

A knife flies from the darkness straight at Hope's back.

Beelzebub sees it coming. "L-look out!"

The weapon slams into the armor at the speed of sound, only to bounce off harmlessly. The smoldering hatred in Uriel's eyes lessens. "That armor is stronger than it looks. Mere steel shouldn't protect thee

against such a swift strike. Let's see how Satan's toy performs!"

Her eyes dart to Belial. A dozen knives fly at the Demon Emperor. Belial's body flattens, and she becomes as thin as a twig. Her bladed fingers stretch out and dart at the knives, batting them out of the air effortlessly.

Her mouth appears in midair, connected to the thinnest pieces of flesh. "Not good enough, Uriel. I remember our last fight. I trained to ensure I wouldn't lose again."

The human raises his hand and pokes at the air, as if pressing invisible buttons. His helmet melts away, exposing his head. "Uriel, please. Don't fight us. Don't you see? I'm this era's Hero. We're not enemies, no matter how you might feel about the demons."

Beelzebub's eyes widen. "Jason?!"

The human turns back to look at the demon pinned to the wall. "No. I'm Hope. Think of me as his twin brother. Sit tight. I'll get you off that wall lickety-split, alright?"

Hope turns back to face the Archangel. Uriel eyes him silently. "I remember now. Thou art the Wordsmith. Barbatos observed thy battle versus the Black Queen and Satan from afar. Thou dost possess some modicum of potential... but sadly, thou art misguided."

The Archangel lowers her arms. "Wordsmith. Thy allegiance rests with the wrong species. Why dost ye ally with demons? Forget Satan's whore. Join me. We must work together to rid the galaxy of Hell's taint and oppression. Our goals align perfectly."

Anger builds in Beelzebub's body. *How humiliating! I can't believe my saviors are the Hero and the Traitor! I sit here pinned to a wall while they reap the glory of defeating the Archangel! When the other demons hear about this... they'll... they'll...!*

Hope and Samantha continue to stare at Uriel, oblivious to Beelzebub's building rage behind them. The man extends a hand toward the Archangel. "You're wrong. I'm not on the side of demons. Neither is Samantha. We're only here because we value peace. More killing and destruction is not the proper way to fix the past!"

The Archangel shakes her head. "I care not about the past. I care about the future. Demons are hateful creatures. They're wretched abominations my people should never have created! We gave them life, and they repaid us with death! They deserve to die!"

Samantha molds her body back into its original, alluring shape. "Hateful? The only hateful one here is you! And what do you mean by 'not caring about the past'? That's all you think about! Besides, I remember history a little differently from you. I was there when the angels tried to quell the imp uprising! I remember the genocide you wrought upon my people!"

Hope holds up a hand. "Now isn't the time to point fingers, Samantha. It doesn't matter who started it-"

"It does!" Uriel takes a menacing step toward the human and demon. "We gave the imps life! They chose to spit in our faces and revolt! The ungrateful little shits deserved all the pain we gave them!"

Samantha's face reddens. "Life?! You birthed us into slavery! We were little more than your chattel! Your puppets to shine your shoes and fetch your wine!"

"All life has a purpose. Thine was to be slaves. Tis' no difficult matter to comprehend!"

Beelzebub's rage boils hotter and hotter inside his mind.

Traitor. Hero. Traitor. Hero. I can't pull myself off this wall. Can't even move a muscle. Humiliation. Defeat.

Beelzebub's eye widens. *No. That's it! I know what to do. I'll show them. I'll show them all!*

He slowly inhales oxygen, funneling the air into his stomach to boil a fire unlike any other.

The Duke of Inferno twitches and spasms. He flinches on the wall as every cell in his body begins to agitate.

Hope waves his hand at the quarreling women. "Please! Calm down! Yelling at each other won't solve our problems!"

The Duke's eyes open. He gasps for breath. "I win."

Hope suddenly spins to face the Duke as Centurion's nanobots send a message to his earpiece. "WARNING! THERMONUCLEAR DETONATION DETECTED! SEEK COVER!"

"Holy shit! Samantha, look out!!"

Part 071: A New Hope

"WARNING! THERMONUCLEAR DETONATION DETECTED! SEEK COVER!"

Centurion roars in my ear like a tiger howling for blood. My eyes bolt open, and I swivel around to see Beelzebub's entire body convulsing.

"Holy shit! Samantha, look out!"

"FIVE SECONDS TO DETONATION. FOUR. THREE..."

Instinctively, I aim my mind at Samantha. "**SHIELD! SHIELD! SHIELD! SHI-**"

My mind melts away. A supernova explodes ten feet from my face, and every cell in my body screams in agony.

I open my eyes. Everything is still.

The taste of metal permeates every corner of my mouth. A hundred bells clang in my ears. My vision is little more than a wild splash of colors and images. Cat. Dog. Car. Plane. Cloud. Tree.

I can't move. There's no pain, but invisible anvils crush me against the floor.

Somewhere between one second and one eternity passes. I open my mouth to speak, but whatever comes out, I can't hear it.

Finally, the colors melt away. Black and white flashes of heat replace them, followed by a sensation of burning across my skin.

"Ahhunn..."

I let out a pitiful whimper. At least I can speak.

"-ope? Hope?"

Someone's voice speaks to me.

"...God?"

"No. It's me, Samantha. Are you okay? I healed you as best I could."

I can't see her at all. I blink my eyes. "I'm blind."

"You'll have to fix that. Anything involving a brain is beyond me. I did what I could with the burns and broken bones."

"**Heal.**"

I croak out a word of power, causing my vision to return. The darkness of the Labyrinth replaces the pure black and bright white from before. It takes me several seconds to pick out Samantha's face from the gloom surrounding us.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I reach up to rub my face. My hands scratch my skin, reminding me of pressing sandpaper together. I wince and pull myself up.

"What happened?"

Only now can I fully understand the scene around me. I sit not in a small room like before, but a massive cavern. There are no walls anywhere in sight. The floor around me is pure black and covered in a cross between ash and soot. One look at my body reveals my tuxedo is in tatters, with only a few strips clinging to my skin through static electricity. Similarly, Samantha's white bridesmaid dress is gone, burned to a crisp. She doesn't notice.

Samantha shakes her head. "I think... I think Beelzebub blew himself up. You saved me. I would have died if it weren't for you." She smacks her lips. "Eugh. I'm nauseous. My stomach won't stop turning."

I speak again. "**Light.**"

A bright light appears above me, illuminating the floor around us. A shiver goes down my spine.

I still can't see the walls or the ceiling; only the ground stretching out endlessly into the darkness. Beelzebub is also nowhere to be seen. I think he died.

"Incredible," A deep voice says from behind me. I leap to my feet and spin around to see Barbatos- no, I mean Uriel, the Archangel, standing and staring at the cavern around us. She looks up, down, left, and right. "Such devastation. Thou should'st consider thyself lucky I was here to protect thee, young Hero."

"Protect me? I shielded myself."

The Archangel chuckles. "Heh... amusing. I created several Light Walls at the moment of Beelzebub's detonation and enveloped us in their protection. I didn't particularly want to protect Satan's whore, but I knew ye would think better of me if I did."

I glance at Samantha and shrug. "I mean, the Archangel called you a whore, but she did save us, too. Do those cancel out?"

"Uriel didn't save my life out of the kindness of her heart. She isn't good enough to do that." Samantha crosses her arms and glares at the Archangel. "Still, thank you. I would be dead if it weren't for you."

Uriel ignores the succubus. "Tell me, Hero, now that thou hath seen the devastation bloodskins can unleash, will ye stand apart from the demon whore at thy side and join me? If ye striketh down Belial, the temptress of man, thou shalt earn thy place among the legends of times past."

The color drains from my face. "What the hell? After saving Samantha, now you want me to kill her?! Are you insane?"

The Archangel shakes her head. "Hardly. 'Tis a reasonable proposal. Since time immemorial, angels and humans have always walked arm in arm as brothers and sisters. Perhaps after a hundred thousand years, humans may have forgotten, but I have not. I want nothing more than to save thy people from slavery at the hands of the bloodskins."

Samantha rolls her eyes. "Oh, that's *rich*. You're the ones who enslaved imps in the first place. Slavery wouldn't exist if it weren't for you."

"Quiet, wench. I have little patience for thy silver-tongue."

"What?! You're the liar! All you utter are falsehoods!"

I watch silently as the Archangel and Demon Emperor bicker, each trying to compel me to join their side. Thinking back on what I've witnessed, not once have I seen Samantha kill or injure someone else. On the other hand, Uriel's aura drips with bloodlust and murder. If I had to compare the two of them, I can't see myself sympathizing with the Archangel.

However, Uriel's hatred isn't likely to have sprouted from nowhere. The fact that a Demon Duke, Barbatos, trapped her within his body implies she met some horrible end at his hands. Who can say if her quest for vengeance is unwarranted? I've already realized, unlike Jason, that killing is sometimes necessary.

After all, not even one day ago, I killed hundreds of orcs to save a human village. If Uriel is a monster, then I share a similar stain on my conscience.

One lingering issue, however, is that the Archangel pursues a grievance from a hundred thousand years in the past. None of the demons alive today had anything to do with the murder of the angels. It's not right to judge children for the sins of their ancestors!

* * *

No. I'm overlooking something. Samantha is an Emperor. She's old enough to remember the angels and the war, along with their destruction. Surely the other Dukes and Emperors also remember. In that case, Uriel's grievance is legitimate. The same corrupt leaders of demonkind who exterminated the Angels and Gods continue to live today.

I pause for a moment to itch my arms. They tingle every so often, causing me to notice other weird sensations in my body.

While Samantha and Uriel take menacing steps toward each other and yell, I glance down at my arms. With the light illuminating them, I see...

What the hell?

My skin is mottled and gross. Tiny worm-like objects crawl all over my limbs and chest. Bugs? Spiders? No, something else.

* * *

Son of a bitch. That's right. I was wearing the T-REX when Beelzebub exploded. What the hell would a nuclear blast do to nanites?

I slap the button on my chest. Nothing happens.

My armor is destroyed. What if the nanites embedded inside of me?

"Observe."

I speak aloud, making the other two turn to look at me.

My body's status pops up in front of me, detailing my current state via a series of images and diagrams.

Physical Condition: 45%.

Stage 3 Radiation Poisoning detected

Stage 3 Cancer of the kidneys, lungs, heart, and brain detected.

Lymphomatic cells detected within 14% of the bloodstream.

1,603,978,801 defective nanites detected throughout body.

"Holy fuck," I mutter aloud. I turn to Samantha. "**Observe.**"

Her condition comes up.

Physical Condition: 90%.

Stage 1 Radiation Poisoning Detected.

Stage 1 Cancer of the heart detected.

Lymphomatic cells detected throughout 3% of the body.

Samantha raises an eyebrow. "Is something wrong?"

"You're in better condition than me. Beelzebub's attack infected my entire body with cancer. It also did something to my suit, since it embedded over a billion nanites into my bloodstream."

"Are you okay?"

I shake my head. "I don't know how to target something the size of a nanite. Maybe if I had the Crown, things would be different."

Uriel sighs. "I apologize, young Hero. I wish I could have protected thee. Now, the horrors of the bloodskins will affect thee for the rest of thy life, as they have mine."

I rub my head. "Actually, I'm pretty sure once I return to the Core, Jason can heal me."

Uriel's somber expression freezes. "Oh."

The Archangel's eyes shift. I can't see her face, but her expression seems to be something akin to... disappointment? Why that emotion, of all the possibilities? I'd expect her to be glad that I haven't suffered any permanent damage.

Something doesn't add up. I can't bring myself to trust this Archangel. Ever since I first laid my eyes on her, she's acted in her self-interest. She doesn't look at me like a person. She thinks of me as a tool.

Just like Jason does.

But I'm not a tool. I'm a flesh and blood human. I'm sick and tired of people treating me like a nobody, or a servant who must do this and that. *Protect the Core, Hope. It's your job, Hope. Do this, Hope. Do that, Hope.*

Shut the fuck up, all of you. I barely survived a nuclear blast, and Uriel only looks relieved that she can still use me. She's happy I'm not... *defective.*

If I'm going to kill any demons, it'll be for my sake, not hers.

I shake my head. "Come on, Samantha. Let's return to the Core. I'm not helping this Archangel. I've heard enough."

Uriel narrows her eyes. "Thou art leaving?"

"Yeah. I am."

Samantha meets my eyes. "Hope, we came here to fight Uriel. We can't leave."

I shake my head. "I'm not interested in dueling an Archangel. She saved my life, after all. Both of you have history, and I'm not going to piece together who started what. However, I'm not going to help her kill anyone either. Her quarrel with demons isn't mine."

The Archangel takes two steps toward me. "Disrespectful child! How dare thou turn down my alliance! Thou art a Hero. Angels created the Heroes. Thy life would be insignificant and worthless, were it not for our sacrifices!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I speak the truth, boy. Thou art little more than a child who has grown attached to the likes of bloodskins. I know not why or how, but I won't allow thee to walk away. Thy lineage is mine to control! Thy *life* is mine to use as I see fit."

Samantha pales. "W-what? That's terrible! Even for you-"

"SILENCE!"

Uriel flicks her eyes toward the succubus. The ground shifts under Samantha, and a dozen knives burst out of the Labyrinth's floor to rush at her.

With her body weakened by radiation sickness, Samantha can't react in time. The knives impale her limbs, spin her around in midair, and slam her into the dirt. Samantha coughs up blood. She wriggles to try and free herself, but she can't move.

"Samantha!" I turn to run to her, but an invisible wall blocks my path. "Uriel! Let her go! What's wrong with you?!"

"Hero, thou art a misguided fool. If I cannot change thy mind, then I will at least make certain the bloodskins cannot seize thy power for themselves!"

A warning tingles in the back of my mind. I duck reflexively as a knife sails over the back of my head and lands in Uriel's palm. She frowns. "Impossible. How could a mere human dodge an attack like that?"

A buzzing feeling hisses throughout my body. I jump to the side, duck, and hop two feet into the air to avoid several shards of metal flying at me from my left and right.

As my body moves on its own, a realization strikes me. Something's different. I've never moved like this before, not once in my life. I'm not athletic, even after Wordsmithing my body to be more physically fit.

What's going on?

I don't have time to think. I evade several more shards of metal and aim my mind at my body.
"Strength! Speed! Enhance!"

This time, when I sense danger approach my body, I snatch the handle of a knife before it can impale my back.

Uriel's tongue flicks out. "What happened? How have thy movements quickened? How art thou keeping up with my attacks?!"

I shrug. "Dunno."

Before she can say anything else, I aim my palm at her. **"FIRE!"**

A blast of Holy Energy sprays out and flies at the patchy-skinned demon-angel hybrid. She watches the beam approach and catches it in her palm, absorbing its energy without taking damage.

"Silly boy. I am an angel. Manipulating holy magic is child's play."

I flick my eyes to Samantha. Uriel hasn't paid any attention to the succubus since she engaged in battle with me, and Samantha's been slowly molding and shifting her body to free herself from the knives.

I'll give her more time, then.

"Hey, Uriel. Doesn't it piss you off that you're trapped in that hideous demon body? I bet it's still better looking than your original form."

The Archangel gnashes her teeth. "Impudent shit! When I walked the cosmos, all knew of my name and bowed at my feet! I stood atop a precipice of beauty, surrounded by the likes of the Valkyries and the Earthmother herself! A shriveled little boy like thyself would have counted himself lucky to court someone of my class!"

More danger appears in my mind, but this time I can almost make out a voice, but I don't have time to listen intently to what it says. I duck and dodge several knife attacks, then turn to Uriel.

"You only think of me as a weapon against demonkind. Maybe I'm naive, but I always thought angels sat on clouds and played harps. You're more of a demon than the demons I've met so far."

"Speak not of what ye don't know!" Uriel bellows. She stomps her foot, causing the ground to shake violently, knocking me off my feet. "The damned bloodskins took everything from me! EVERYTHING! If ye choose not to be my ally, then thou art my enemy! Burn in the lake of fire!"

She forms several signs with her hands, and flames surge from her chest, screaming across the short gap toward me. No time to dodge!

I'm dead. I know I'm dead.

I tuck myself into a ball and flinch. Warmth washes over my body.

A moment passes. Two. Three.

Uriel speaks again, her voice softer now. "That fire was over eight hundred degrees. How is he still...?"

I blink and pat myself all over.

She's right. What the hell? How did I survive that?

A voice speaks in my head again.

PILOT AGHSK NNBSSPP.

I recognize the voice as Centurion. Why can I hear him?

He clears up.

PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR, HOPE HIRO. THE TRANSFORMING REPLICANT EXOSUIT WAS DAMAGED DURING THE NUCLEAR ATTACK. ALL SYSTEMS HAVE SWITCHED TO BACKUP MODE. I HAVE ADJUSTED MY OPERATING PARAMETERS ACCORDINGLY.

It takes me a moment to understand Centurion's words. "You... you merged with my body?"

AFFIRMATIVE. CENTURION'S SYSTEMS ARE UNABLE TO CONNECT TO THE EXTERNAL FUSION POWER SOURCE. CENTURION HAS ADJUSTED ITS SYSTEMS TO DERIVE POWER FROM YOUR BIOLOGICAL PROCESSES. EXCESS BODILY WASTE WILL BE EJECTED AS A HARMLESS AEROSOL BYPRODUCT.

I jump to my feet and feel my arms again. Within seconds, the bumpiness on my skin from before vanishes, replaced instead with a clean, metallic texture resembling armor.

A warning signal appears in my mind again. I'm so distracted by my thoughts that I don't move quickly enough. Uriel's knife stabs into my spine, only to bounce off my skin and hit the ground with a *clang*.

I get it now. Centurion's nanites have merged with my body to form invisible armor.

My vision shifts. Something moves around in front of me. I swat at the air, but quickly realize my eyes themselves are changing.

ADJUSTING OLFACTORY, VISUAL, AND AUDITORY RECEPTORS TO OPTIMUM LEVELS. PROCESS COMPLETE. ENABLING NEURAL CONTROL OF CENTURION'S PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SYSTEMS. ONLINE.

I blink in surprise. *Holy shit, does that mean I can control Centurion with my thoughts?*

Centurion replies to my mental query. *AFFIRMATIVE, PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR. CENTURION'S SYSTEMS AND SUBSYSTEMS ARE NOW CAPABLE OF ACCEPTING MENTAL STIMULI AS COMMANDS.*

Uriel scowls. "Thou have yet to activate thy Wordsmithing, yet somehow, thou hath vastly improved thy fighting skills since awakening! How is this possible?!"

What happens next surprises me. Samantha, having shifted her body enough to melt around the knives, leaps from the ground and transforms her arms into two swords. She chops down and hacks off Uriel's right arm. The sudden assault causes the Archangel to scream in pain and retreat several steps while forming an invisible wall to block Samantha's ambush.

Samantha transforms her hands from blades into hammers. She smashes against Uriel's invisible wall, battering it so hard that shockwaves ripple outward, making my insides quiver.

Centurion evaluates the situation. *ARCHANGEL-HYBRID DESIGNATED URIEL HAS FORMED A WALL OF SOLID LIGHT. ERROR. THIS EXCEEDS CENTURION'S TECHNICAL PARAMETERS. UNABLE TO EXPLAIN THE PHENOMENA.*

"Uriel's using magic," I say. "I don't know how her magic works, but it seems she can control metal, fire, and light."

Uriel staggers back, and Samantha changes her method of attack. She dives into the ground and burrows inside the scorched floor of the Labyrinth. Uriel flicks her gaze to where Samantha disappeared.

"Tch, foolish female." Uriel motions with her hands, and the ground trembles. A moment later, Samantha explodes from the dirt, almost as if something had spit her with incredible force. She sails into the darkness and lands somewhere unseen.

My vision suddenly changes, startling me — the world shifts to hues of red and black.

THERMAL VISION ACTIVATED.

"Uh. Thanks, Centurion."

A blip of red in the darkness catches my eye. Samantha slinks around, careful to stay in the shadows where Uriel can't see her.

The succubus makes a motion with her hands and races at Uriel. Her speed multiplies by a factor of ten. She covers the quarter-mile in under a second and slams against the Archangel's invisible wall, breaking through it as if it's made of glass. She crashes into the Archangel with thunderous strength, causing both women to tumble and roll into one another. Before Uriel can react, Samantha stretches, bends, and twists, wrapping herself around her opponent like Silly String.

Uriel gasps and struggles, trying desperately to unravel the demoness from her body. "Get... off... me!"

Samantha's fist transforms into a hammer again. She smashes it against Uriel's face over and over, pounding and pummeling the Archangel senseless.

Uriel motions with her hands and quickly forms a single magic sign, despite Samantha's intense barrage. Two winged figures of light appear; the same ones that stood beside her before the blast went off.

"Samantha! Look out!"

The blank face of one opens up. A hole appears in its head, and it fires several shots of holy energy at its master.

The bolts slam against Samantha's body. She screams. "Aieee!!"

The succubus turns to swing her hammer at the winged pseudo-angel, but the other jumps forward and summons a sword of light. It chops off her hand, causing her to scream again.

"Paha, foolish bloodskin! BURN!" Uriel forms another sign to summon fire from her pores. She releases it outward, scorching every inch of the succubus wrapped around her. This time, Samantha's anguished cry churns my stomach. Her pitiful wailing makes me realize she can't hold out much longer.

I've seen enough.

"Remove."

With a single word, I teleport Samantha off Uriel's body and over to me. Her stretched form is covered in blood and burns, making her look like a mass of burned Jello. I can barely tell where her head begins and her legs end.

Samantha slowly twists herself back into a humanoid shape, but her badly burned body makes my stomach lurch. The succubus clutches her severed hand and winces. "Ahh, it burns! Shit... shit..."

"Regenerate. Clothes." I quickly heal her arm and cover her naked body with a simple jumpsuit. Then, I step between her and Uriel. "That's enough. You've both gotten the anger out of your systems. Uriel, if you hurt my friend again, I'll have to get involved."

The Archangel's eyes explode with rage. "No! That's it! I've had it with thy cowardice! I'm done playing nice! Thou hath made thy bed, now sleep in it, *forever!*"

Uriel forms signs once again. I grimace.

There's no backing down for me, now. I have to fight the Archangel.

I look at Samantha. "Sorry. I can't protect you and fight at the same time. **Return.**"

"Wai-!" Samantha starts to say something, but disappears and returns to the Core.

Centurion booms in my mind. *PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR! CENTURION DETECTS A BUILDUP OF ENERGY INSIDE THE ARCHANGEL-HYBRID ENEMY!*

"Yeah, I bet you fuckin' do. Let's take this cunt down a peg or two."

Part 072: Crossroads of Fate

[Recommended Listening](#)

Two combatants face each other on an empty battlefield. After scorching away every trace of life for several miles in every direction, Beelzebub's attack obliterated a circular cavern the size of a small city, giving Hope and Uriel plenty of space to move around.

The Archangel weaves a dozen hand signs, causing a chunk of the ground behind her to jump into the air. Fragments shoot from it rapid-fire and sail at Hope like an earthen machine gun.

Hope dives to the side, allowing Uriel's dirt bullets to miss him by an inch. "Centurion! I could use a little help, here!"

EVALUATION OF THE ENEMY COMBATANT REQUIRED. PLEASE CONTINUE TO FIGHT SO THAT CENTURION'S ANALYSIS SYSTEMS CAN DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO COUNTER THEIR ATTACK.

"I don't have time for that!" Hope aims his palm at Uriel. **"Freeze!"**

A wall of ice instantly envelops the Archangel. Hope dashes toward her, but the Archangel shatters her restraints instantly, causing the Wordsmith to retreat. Uriel punches her broken prison, sending a hundred icy shards flying at Hope. The Wordsmith tucks his face between his arms, allowing the ice bullets to explode against his armored limbs.

"That backfired," Hope grunts.

Uriel's light-form angels fly into the air. The female opens her head again and begins firing holy energy at Hope, tracking his movements as he ducks and dodges around. The other angel summons a bow and arrow, then flies around to Hope's backside, flanking him in the process.

WARNING, PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR! THE ENEMY HAS SURROUNDED US!

"No shit!"

Hope aims his mind at Unit Two while still dodging her attacks. He grabs her with telekinesis and yanks hard. She lurches downward and piledrives into the ground, breaking several limbs in the process.

Unit One aims an arrow and fires. It leaves the bow at twice the speed of sound and strikes Hope square in the back, blowing the wind out of his body and sending him sprawling in the dirt.

MINOR DAMAGE SUSTAINED, PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR! BEWARE OF ATTACKS FROM THE REAR!

Hope coughs violently. "Kah... n-no kidding. You think?!"

His eyes shift again. A graphic interface pops up, highlighting several areas on Uriel's body. *PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR, I HAVE LOCATED SEVERAL STRESS POINTS ON THE PRIMARY TARGET! STRIKE THEM TO CAUSE SEVERE DAMAGE!*

"Finally, something useful."

Hope spins on his heel and bats another of Unit One's arrows out of the air, but he hits it in such a way that it bounces off his hand and slams into Uriel's chest. The Archangel trips and falls on her rear.

"Argh! Unit One! Don't strike me, imbecile!"

Hope teleports atop the Archangel's shoulders, making her jerk her head back in surprise. "What-?!"

The Wordsmith stabs his armored hand down and plunges it deep into her shoulder. "**EXPLODE!**"

Hope's hand detonates with the force of a stick of dynamite, blasting him up into the air. He careens around wildly and smashes onto his face, twenty feet away.

WARNING! MINOR DAMAGE SUFFERED! DEPLOYING NANITES TO EXPEDITE THE RECOVERY PROCESS!

"Thangs, Senshureeon," Hope drawls. It takes him a moment to shake off the disorientation from his unexpected flight. He claws himself to his feet a moment later and scowls at the Archangel as she stands up and dusts herself off at the same time.

"Thou art an innovative opponent, Wordsmith. I forgot short-range teleportation was one of thy abilities."

Uriel's severed arm, while gruesome, only requires a few moments to heal. Hope watches silently as drops of water fall away, and a new arm regrows itself.

Damn. Uriel can regenerate her wounds using water magic. If I'm not mistaken, that means she has control over light, metal, fire, water, and earth. Ridiculous. I thought most magic users specialized in one or two elements!

Centurion replies. *THE ARCHANGEL-TYPE ENEMY POSSESSES A WIDE VARIETY OF ATTACKS AND DEFENSES. IT IS A FORMIDABLE OPPONENT.*

Yeah, thanks for that, Captain Obvious.

Uriel narrows her eyes, sending more pieces of metal flying at Hope. He swats them out of the air, batting them away as if he were a pro-Badminton player. "I'm so sick of your bullshit!"

Hope teleports again, this time in front of her. Uriel lunges her hand to grab at his neck, but Hope teleports behind her, making her miss. He slaps his palm against her back. "**SEAL!**"

The Archangel hops away. "Had ye chosen to listen, I wouldn't have to strike ye dead!" Her eyes dart to more metal on the ground, then back to Hope.

Nothing happens.

Hope takes two steps back and narrows his eyes. "Give me your best shot."

The Archangel pauses for a moment, then forms a hand sign.

Nothing happens.

"My magic. Why can't I use it? My reserves shouldn't be anywhere close to empty."

A smile creeps over Hope's face. "That's what I thought. It only occurred to me a few seconds ago, but I should be able to disable the magic powers of others. You're defenseless."

Uriel stiffens. A bead of sweat trickles down her face. "Shut up, Artorias. This development was *not* within thy predictions."

Hope cocks his head. "My name is Hope, and I don't recall predicting anything."

"Imbecile, I am not referring to thee," Uriel says. She waves a finger, summoning Unit One to her side, his bow and arrow held at the ready. Unit Two limps toward Uriel as well. The construct motions with her hands and heals herself, repairing her broken limbs within a few seconds.

Hope exhales. "Now that I've taken out your magic, you won't be any trouble at all. How about I beat some sense into you? After what you did to Samantha, I won't forgive you easily."

"Thou art amusing. I need not use magic to defeat thee, Wordsmith." Uriel glances at Unit One. "Summon two spears and pass them to me."

Unit One nods. His bow vanishes, and two spears appear, one in each hand. He gives them to Uriel, and she expertly spins around, twirling each one like an extension of her body.

"I held off a hundred thousand bloodskins all by myself during the War in Heaven. My mighty spears, Gungnir and Gae Bolg, were weapons crafted by Camael, the Archangel of Divination. While I no longer possess my artifacts of power, fake weapons like these will still be enough to display my combat prowess."

"Camael? Never heard of him."

"*Her*. Camael was my wise sister, the one who gave every Archangel and Hero their soul-bound weapons and items. Perhaps, had thou not evolved into a demon worshipper, ye might possess an artifact of thy own."

Hope shrugs. "Technically, Jason has Solomon's Crown."

The Archangel gurgles unpleasantly, a sound vaguely reminiscent of a laugh. "Were my sister to recommend an artifact for thee, I'd suggest a shovel. That way, I could dig ye a grave!"

Uriel lunges at Hope with frightening speed. Both of her Pseudo-angels fly into the air, getting distance from their creator.

Hope dodges the first spear, but his reflexes aren't fast enough to duck the second. Uriel stabs his stomach with her left-hand spear, then lifts him into the air and slams him into the ground as if he were a hammer.

WARNING, PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR! MODERATE DAMAGE SUSTAIN-

I know!!

Hope's eyes widen. One of Uriel's spears lunges at his mouth as he lies on the ground. He flinches and jerks his head to the side. The spear stabs the ground beside him, rattling his teeth from the force of the blow.

Hope bellows, "**PUSH!!**"

A wave of energy surges from his body, throwing the Archangel a few feet into the air, just long enough for Hope to press a foot into the dirt and kick away, then backflip off his hands into a standing position.

He wheezes painfully. *Uriel's movements are totally different from before! I thought she was a mage-type, but she's a warrior-type too! How can Barbatos's giant body move like that?!*

The moment the Archangel hits the ground, she jumps at him again, raising both spears above her head to slam against his body.

"BARRIER!" Hope yells again, creating a wall in front of himself, anything to get a little breathing room. To Hope's surprise, Uriel stabs the wall with a spear and vaults over it, flinging herself into the air like a bat outta hell.

Christ's sake! Did Uriel invent parkour? She's ridiculous!

Uriel falls toward Hope again. This time he steps deftly to the side and slaps Uriel's spear away, catching her off-balance and making her slam onto her shoulder.

"GRAVITY!"

Hope yells again, increasing the gravity around her body by a factor of ten. The Archangel shakes wooziness from her head and climbs to her feet. Her movements slow dramatically.

"Haah... thou art a worthy opponent, little Hero. I applaud thy improvisation skills, at the least."

Hope retreats several steps. "Yeah? Well, you're, uh... really good with spears!"

EXCELLENT RETORT, PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR.

Oh, shut up, Centurion.

Several minutes pass.

The Archangel slowly breathes, as does Hope. Both of them eye each other, sizing up their conditions.

Uriel is the first to break the silence. "When I gaze upon thee, I cannot help but see the mirror image of King Arthur. He was a valiant warrior and the mightiest servant of the gods. Tis' a shame that thou will not change thy mind and abandon thy demonic comrades. Were ye to do so, I could see thy feats eventually eclipsing the Hero King's."

Hope points at the Archangel. "I don't fight because it's my duty or because people tell me I must. I do it because I want to protect those I love. You expect me to commit genocide for a matter unrelated to my life. As long as that is true, I will resist."

"Hmph. Thou mayest think my methods barbaric, but tis' far from the truth. Perhaps ye believe slaughtering trillions of bloodskins to be an unspeakable atrocity?"

Hope nods. "An atrocity. Yeah. That's a pleasant way of phrasing the issue."

"Yet thou dost ignore the billions of humans and angels slaughtered during the Energy Wars. Thy decision is based on ignorance. Undoubtedly, thou must not know the lengths demonkind went to, to eliminate the humans and angels."

Hope shakes his head. "I don't know the details or the number of lives lost, no. It was a war, though. People die during wars. That's why I want to prevent another one. Besides, demons didn't kill us all.

Millions and millions of humans are still alive today. You're proposing something far more extreme than what they did."

Uriel scowls. Her eyes turn into slivers of red beneath her black helmet. "Thou dost believe that the demons did not kill all of thy people, so inevitably, the demons spared humanity out of pity? Nay. The demon leaders were eager to wipe out not only the angels but the humans as well. 'Twas only due to the actions of several key figures that humanity still lives on today."

Uriel continues. "I lived inside this Duke's mind when the great purges occurred. The mind wipes — the cullings. The cowardly human leaders sought out only their own benefits. They sold out the rest of their species to become soul food for the bloodskins. They agreed to imprison their fellow man and woman across a hundred planets. They cozied themselves up inside of ivory towers of riches and opulence and left the other ninety-nine percent of their people to rot under bloodskin rule."

The Archangel lowers her eyes and shakes her head. "Thy people only continue to walk the cosmos because they hold some value for the demon leaders. Souls give demons power. The more of thy people that live, the more power the demons will amass. Thou art little more than food in their eyes. They turn you into spiritual energy so that they can become Lords, Barons, Dukes, and Emperors."

Several moments pass. Hope swallows. "You're talking about... the River Styx."

"Aye. Angels served no purpose to the bloodskins. They killed my people off without batting an eye. The only reason the fiends have yet to rain down upon your pathetic fortress is that they have yet to formulate an efficient method of breaking thy spirit. Eventually, they will. You will all perish, and they will enslave the remnants once more. Is that the future you want?"

Hope hesitates. A thousand questions appear in his mind. "Well... no, but I still don't think you're going about this the right way."

The Archangel nods. "Perhaps not. However, my time is limited. Right now, Barbatos slumbers within me. While he rests, I control his overwhelming power. I must strike a blow, hard and fast, against the filthy bloodskins. I must wipe out their upper ranks, then work my way down. I don't believe I can kill them all, but without leaders, they will present less of a threat to humanity. I must beseech thee to assist me. Failing that... stand aside. Allow me to complete my task at hand."

Hope meets the Archangel's gaze. "You want me to let you go? To allow you to kill them?"

"Aye. Thou need not draw blood, but simply allow me to do so in thy stead. I see the sin trapped within thy gaze. Thou hath done something similar before. Repeat that which ye already know, and soon, the demons will become little more than a faint nightmare in thy past."

"Uriel..." Hope trails off. His throat dries out as he considers her words.

I didn't kill the orcs on Maiura. I only made them kill each other. However, even if I didn't plunge a knife into each one's gut, the result was the same. After everything the demons have done... after all the things Neil has told me... is Uriel correct? Is she right?

Hope relaxes his posture. He aims his mind at Uriel. "**Normalize.**"

The gravity around Uriel returns to normal, and her powers return as well.

"I'm sorry, Uriel. I can't help you. I won't kill if it isn't necessary... but at the same time, I can't deny that you have a point. I'll let you do what you must. Just stay away from my friends. Samantha is not your enemy."

The Archangel evaluates him for a moment. "I apologize, Wordsmith. I misjudged thee. Thou may presently lack some modicum of resolve, but the look of a great Hero rests within thy gaze. As you request, I will accept thy terms. I will not kill Belial, the Second Emperor, unless she gets in my way. However, I have my own request to beg of thee."

"Oh yeah? And what's that?"

Uriel stabs a finger at Hope. "The Temptress of man must be watched by you at all times. She is dangerous, vicious, and a psychopathic monster capable of inflicting incredible harm upon thy resistance. I care not if thou believe she hath turned over a new leaf. I know well the extent of Belial's treachery. Have ye yet witnessed her transformation powers? Her ability to perfectly mimic anyone she wishes?"

"No. I haven't. So, what, Samantha is a shapeshifter or something?"

"Indeed. Belial might be called the Emperor of Passion by her fellow bloodskins, but in my lifetime, we referred to her by another title. *The Great Deceiver*. Her ability to infiltrate and destroy humans and angels from the inside was unparalleled. The Titans conducted regular drills to determine if she were in their midst. She single-handedly slew hundreds of angels via backstabbing and betrayal."

Uriel stomps toward the human and looms over him. "I will leave the filthy worm alive... but thou must always keep thy gaze trained on her. All bloodskins are equally evil, but some are worse than others."

Hope nods. "Fine. I promise."

"Good," Uriel says with a smile.

Hope turns his back to her and walks a few feet away. The Archangel holds up her hand.

"Wait. I would ask one last favor of thee before ye return to thy people. Thou need not accept if ye find my request troublesome."

Hope tilts his head back. "Oh? What is it?"

"The bloodskins bar entry to Hell Harbor via powerful magic. Beelzebub's attack obliterated Grigori, Diablo's personal Warper. Finding another Keymaster could prove troublesome for me, especially after Beelzebub's attack. Might I trouble thee to open a gate to Hell Harbor via thy Wordsmithing?"

Hope frowns. He pauses for a moment to consider Uriel's request.

"Hell Harbor? I don't know what that place is. I won't be any help."

Uriel touches her chest. "I will provide thee with the planet's location. Use thy magic to search my memories."

"Err... I don't know if I can... do that..." Hope trails off. He turns back to Uriel, a look of curiosity on his face. "...But I suppose I can try."

* * *

Several seconds later, the two of them stand two feet apart. Hope presses his hand against the Duke's patchy white and red chest. "**Remember.**"

Immediately, images of an unfamiliar world dance in Hope's mind. Demons and monsters living together in harmony. Beautiful fields, clouds, an off-color sky...

Hope smiles. *Found it.*

The vision shifts. Hell Harbor vanishes, and something else replaces it.

A different memory. Not something from Barbatos, but a memory from Uriel.

"No, stop. Not that one." Uriel's body twitches. "Don't... don't look at it. Don't look!"

Hope tries to pull away. His body refuses.

"I... I can't! Th-this emotion! It's so raw! It's-"

The world shifts around Hope. Uriel's memory, an awful nightmare from her past, materializes around him physically, almost as if he were living it himself.

A series of words appear in his mind.

The War in Heaven.

Part 073: Face-Off

[Recommended Listening.](#)

Winged figures in white robes rush through a narrow, underground passage. Pebbles knock around under their sandals, and small patches of grass poke up to brush their soles. One of them, a woman, stops to grab my arm. "Archangel Uriel! The demons are coming! They're barely twenty seconds behind us!"

I nod, though I don't intend to. I'm experiencing Uriel's memory. It's disorienting, not being in control of my body, but I have no choice except to follow through. I don't know how to leave her consciousness.

Uriel's expression turns grim. "Worry not, sister Hana. Retreat to Heaven's Gate! I'll hold the fiends here."

The woman shakes her head slightly. "I'll stay with thee and render assistance! Tis' impossible to hold them off by thyself! If ye stay here, only death will greet thee!"

Uriel touches her sister's arm. "I am an Archangel. Leave! I need to be alone to demonstrate the fullest extent of my power."

Hana stares at me for two long seconds. The look in her eyes makes my stomach churn. Something about her makes terrible dread fall on my shoulders.

She nods. "Very well, Lady Uriel. Please, fall back to the gate once everyone departs. Take care."

The woman runs past me, her black hair dancing in the stillness of the cavern.

The ground shakes. A few more angels flee to safety behind me. I glance at a puddle on the ground, where ripples of movement bounce around inside. My face, that of a fair woman with white hair and delicate robes, reflects on the surface of the water.

That's me? Uriel?

Her loosely-fitting red gown, earrings, light pink lips, and deep blue eyes make me want to lose myself in her gaze. Uriel's appearance is somehow elegant, yet fierce. She's a warrior first, and a woman, second.

She's stunning.

I look away from the puddle, but only because that's what Uriel's memory commands me to do. I raise both hands to summon four constructs of light.

"Units One and Two, stay at my side. Protect me from any Burrowers. Units Three and Four, guard the gate. Let none slip past."

The faceless constructs nod and jump into position. I recognize the first two as the false angels Uriel summoned to fight me, but the shapes of the other two are far different, resembling tools more than people. Unit Three is a floating orb with circles of energy that spin around and oscillate in various directions. Unit Four is a cube floating in the air. I can't help but wonder why their appearances are so dissimilar from Units One and Two.

Uriel turns to face the entrance. "Wretched bloodskins. There's only one way in, and that's through me. Thou shalt try to bypass me, only to fail and perish."

Thousands of laughs and squeals come roaring around the hallway. I lift my hands again. "Gungnir. Gae Bolg."

Two spears, one red and the other gold, materialize in my hand. The red spear, Gae Bolg, burns with the elemental power of lava. In Uriel's grasp, it becomes a mountain-wrecker, capable of ripping through steel with ease. The other, Gungnir, shines luminously with the power of holy magic. Its purpose is to kill demons, and that's what it does best.

* * *

The first ten demons round the corner a hundred feet away and burst out of the darkness. By the looks of them, they consist of a few bladed-arm Scythers, a couple of demon grunts, and a few other types I don't recognize. "Tasty meat! Woman! Get her!!"

"I don't think so," I say. I nod at Unit Two, and two Light Walls appear, barring the path. The demons slam against the first wall and stumble back in surprise. Unit Two slams it down, crushing them into pulp, while maintaining the second wall's position to prevent leakage.

I smile. "First to arrive, first to die."

Uriel's voice is charming and attractive, but also gruff and to the point, even cruel at times. She may look like a princess, but she has the spirit of a warrior.

The rest of the demons leap into view. They stomp through the blood of their fallen comrades, ignoring the fate of those they once considered allies. The ground shifts beneath me, and I hop back lightly, impaling a saggy-skinned demon with Gae Bolg as he leaps at me from below. Gungnir follows its brother, allowing me to bypass his defenses with its holy enchantments. I sever his head and let him drop to the floor.

With a wave of my hand, I manipulate the Earth to seal the hole, then return my attention to the mass of demons before me.

They scramble and jump and slam against the remaining Light Wall. Over and over, they pound against it. Dozens of strikes per second send electric pain running up my arm and into my heart. The wall, created by Unit Two, is linked directly to my body.

I lift a finger again, and a new Light Wall appears flat across the ceiling. It slams down, pulverizing a hundred demons in the front. Some of them press against it and manage to hold out, but I lift and slam it down again, killing them as well.

"I can keep this up all day," I say, taunting the demons on the other side. "Chokepoints are my specialty. Keep trying to break through! Thy futile actions only serve to amuse me!"

The wall to my left vibrates. Uriel's thoughts appear in my mind as she considers the new threat. *Hmm. It seems the demons are about to reach the second layer.*

"It's time to get serious, Unit Two. Maintain your wall at the main entrance, and form a second one where the demons emerge next. I'll be on crushing duty. Unit One, keep protecting my backside.

A drop of sweat slides down my face.

"My family members need not worry," I murmur. "I'll kill anyone who threatens them."

The wall explodes outward. A massive troll jumps through, along with hundreds of other, smaller demons. The mass of small demons tries to enter, but the appearance of another Light Wall stymies their efforts, leaving only the giant, twelve-foot troll to face me.

The monster lifts his massive claws above his head and swings them down, intending to crush Unit Two. I leap at him and deflect his fist away with Gungnir. The thin metal pole seems like it should lack striking power, but its density is much higher than its size implies. I easily parry with Gungnir and drive Gae Bolg into the monster's stomach, wrenching hard to tear a hole through his gut.

The troll bellows. "GROOOOAAAR!!" It ignores the pain and backhands me. I flinch, expecting some severe pain, only for the troll's hand to freeze for a moment. A glance to my side reveals Unit Four, the cube, spinning and revolving rapidly in midair. The monster flinches, then falls forward and slams into the ground far harder than I expected, shaking the cavern. I don't hesitate. While it lies on the ground, I impale Gae Bolg into the monster's skull and scorch the fiend's head into mulch with the power of lava.

* * *

Minutes pass. Another hole forms as the shriveled monsters and demons tear through the walls. I place a pre-emptive Light Wall to block the new hole, but between myself and Unit Two, we can only form four walls at once, and we're already using three.

I glance back through the hallway behind me. "Units One and Two, on my mark, drop the walls and fall back. Let's hold them off in the next hallway. Camael's enchanted iron surrounds Heaven's Gate. They won't be able to dig through it."

The two constructs nod. As soon as I give the signal, the three of us retreat to the final chokepoint and form a new wall. A smile spreads across my face. "Camael formed these walls herself and enchanted them with Holy Magic. Any devil stupid enough to try and claw through will suffer a painful reminder of why Angels are their masters."

This time, when the demons slam against the first Light Wall, no others dig through the ceiling or floor. After all, they can't.

Minutes pass. I continue to slam down walls and crush the demons as they repeatedly rush to their doom.

"Imbeciles. The definition of stupidity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different outcome. My barriers will never falter! Thy advance stops here!"

The circular gate behind me glows blue from the power of transportation magic. A flash of light makes me turn to see what's happening — a single angel steps through, one I recognize immediately.

"Michael? Why hath thou come?"

My white-haired brother stares at me for a moment while rubbing his stubble. "I've received word from Zeus. Fall back. We're going to deactivate the gate. The demons will not be able to reactivate it."

"No! Don't be foolish. I'll hold them off forever if need be. Once the demons take over the entrance to Heaven, we won't have a path back to Earth!"

"We can always make another portal. Come, sister. Let's return."

"Michael, are you daft?" I glance back at the demons before me and slam another wall down, crushing more of them. "I have this under control! If we retreat, the energy we need to make a new portal will cost an incalculable number of lives! I won't accept a loss of that magnitude!"

When I return my gaze to him, Michael's shoulders sag. "Damn. Why won't you follow orders? I'm trying to help you."

The Archangel of Courage gazes at me with the eyes of a stranger. Uriel's thoughts turn suspicious. *Something isn't right? Why is Michael acting in such a selfish manner?*

Immediately, my thoughts turn to the angel from earlier, Hana. Her expression when she left was identical to Michael's. It's almost as if-

Michael dashes at me. My heart flutters. Adrenaline takes over. "M-Michael? GUHK!!"

His hand transforms into five knives. Before I can react, he pierces my heart and lunges with a swift, precise impaling motion. He grabs me by the throat with his other hand and slams me against the ground, knocking the wind out of me. My constructs quickly move to attack him, but Michael releases his grip on my throat, and that hand becomes a long, stretchy sword. It zips around, slashing and cutting apart each construct like a finger flowing through a brook.

My constructs fall to pieces. Unit Two lasts the longest by creating a light wall, but in the end, even she turns into scattered particles as well.

The demons outside stop their frenzied attacks. They slowly enter the chamber, and their grins beat down on me.

Michael's hand wriggles inside my chest, cutting me even more. I stare in horror as his face, that of a brother I love more than life itself, transforms into... something else. Red skin replaces white. His hair lengthens. His clothing morphs into strips of fabric that barely cover a bulging female chest.

Uriel's thoughts play in my head. *Michael is... a demon?! Who is she? Why can she transform into my brother?!*

The demoness pulls her hand out. "You left me no choice. I won't kill you, though. My husband has business with you."

"Huh... huh... hus...band?" My body trembles. The gazes of several demons swoop up and down, examining every piece of me.

"Satan. The leader of the demons. I apologize, but it didn't have to end this way."

The woman raises her head to two nearby demons. "Artorias. Come here."

"Aye," A demon adorned in bones says. War paint decorates his body, giving him the appearance of a savage beast. His hawk-like eyes, capable of boring through steel, meet Belial's without a trace of humility. He looks upon the Emperor of Passion as an equal, a fellow general in the army of demons.

"You're in charge of the Archangel. Keep an eye on her. If she moves, stop her. No killing. Satan wants her alive."

More demons creep through the hallway. They grimace when they touch the holy-magic imbued floor, but one of the demons motions with his hands to send dirt spraying out, covering it so he and the others can walk on it safely. Only Artorias ignores the agony coursing through his feet.

The Demon Baron nods. "I won't allow the Archangel to move an inch."

The woman, Samantha, rises to her feet. To my horror, her body changes again. She assumes my form, matching my hair, eyes, skin, clothes, and everything else. She holds up a hand. "I'm going in to help Berith secure the gate. Wait for the signal."

Artorias smiles, an expression of malice mixed with confidence. "Stick to the plan, and the pathetic little birds will fall today."

Samantha turns and steps through the portal. I can't see what's happening on the other side, given it isn't transparent like the ones in the Labyrinth Core. However, I know that whatever Samantha is about to do, it will go down in the history books as a heinous act of backstabbing and treachery.

Several demons walk up and loom over me. One of them punches his palm. "Hey, cutie. You killed a lot of my brothers. Think I'll let'cha off easy? Until Belial gives the signal, you're all ours. Always wondered what it'd be like to have an angel-"

"You won't touch her," Artorias says, a warning tone in his voice. The tall, muscular witch doctor rubs his palms together. "Anyone who so much as eyeballs this Archangel with a bad intention will end up buried fifty feet inside the mountain. I'm only warning you once."

The first demon scoffs. "Hey! The hell?! I just wanna have a taste; not even a bite. I bet this pretty lady hates demons 'cause she ain't ever been with one. I'll turn her into our little toy. Like a puppet, I'll move her mouth with my hand."

A smaller demon dressed in rags and a multi-pocketed belt saddles up beside the first. "Neugh! If you want her, you gotta go through me'n my brother first!" His shrill, nasally voice makes my ears ring.

"You heard my brother," Artorias says, continuing to eye the demon from before with a death-glare. "Leave."

The young demon hesitates, but eventually relents and takes a few steps back. "Tch. Always playin' by the rules, *Baron of Earthquakes*."

Artorias doesn't respond. He stares the other demon down for several seconds until the latter loses his nerve.

I cough. "S-saving my... kah... my life... won't indebt me to-"

"I didn't save your life, Archangel," Artorias says with a smirk. "Satan wants you alive, and that is what he'll get. You'll soon wish for death over whatever horrors the First Emperor has in mind."

The agony in my chest slowly hurts less and less. Uriel doesn't move a muscle, instead closing her eyes and sending healing energy to her heart, regenerating it slowly.

Uriel thinks to herself again, and I hear her thoughts. *If I heal quickly, I can deactivate Heaven's Gate! That will at least protect my brothers and sisters. I don't care what happens to me after that.*

I want to smile, but I can't. Uriel is strong. Even with demons towering over her and the threat of unspeakable acts being committed against her helpless, weakened body, she still wishes to fight.

Suddenly, the portal shifts. A white-haired angel's head flies through, detached from its body. The man's face, frozen in horror and shock, echoes the fate of many to come. It slaps onto the ground with a squishy *splat*.

"That's the signal!" Artorias yells, jabbing his finger toward the gate. "CHARGE!"

All the demons rush past, screaming and cackling. Their bodies transform into a sea of red as they dash through the portal at astonishing speeds.

Artorias grabs my arm and drags me off to the side, then tosses me against the wall. He frowns and stares at my chest. "Oh? Regenerating, are you? Not on my watch."

He weaves a hand sign, and a stone knife appears in his grasp. He lunges it into my heart, sending blinding pain through my mind. Then, he shatters my elbows and knees, making movement impossible. Surprisingly, I don't make a sound. Tears pour down Uriel's face, but she refuses to scream.

Barbatos, a thin, gangly little creature, skulks over to me. His long tongue flicks out. "Heh, she looks tasty, Artorias." His eyes dilate as they follow the blood spilling from my body.

"Don't get any ideas," The older brother says. "Satan forbade us from consuming angels. You know the rule."

Barbatos glares daggers at Artorias. "Yeah? Why should I care? You know what they say about Satan! He's a devil-damned traitor! A selfish, stuck-up glory hog who abandoned us for millennia!"

Artorias sighs. "Satan had his reasons. I do not question the First Emperor; I merely obey."

Barbatos rolls his eyes. "Oh, geez, what a surprise! My brother, the kiss-ass! Use your head, bro! Why do you think Satan wants this bitch alive? He's gonna swallow her and take all her powers for himself!"

"No. I'm sure he wants to question her or something. Stop spinning wild tales. Your delusions never cease to embarrass me."

Artorias looks over at the cavern's entrance. The demons flooding through barely give the two guards and their prisoner a sideways glance. Those in the rear ranks don't even notice her status as an Archangel.

Barbatos leans down. He slowly rubs my thigh, caressing his hand up and down. I try to cough out a weak protest, but the pain is so blinding I can barely think, let alone speak. I've never felt so vulnerable in my life.

"Come on, Artorias! Just one taste! That's all! I promise!"

Artorias frowns. "Stop that. Don't piss me off."

The little demon jumps to his feet. "Nyeh! I see how it is! You plan to watch over this bitch and get a promotion again! All you do is suck up to the Emperors! Just once, why not try'n do your own thing?! If we eat the Archangel, we'll be the new Emperors! We'll be so powerful that nothin' can stop us!!"

Artorias grits his teeth together. His hand lashes out so fast I can barely follow it with my eyes. He backhands Barbatos and sends the little runt slamming against the wall. Barbatos bounces off the enchanted steel like a ping-pong ball before crashing to the ground, sputtering and coughing.

"Damn you, Barbatos! I can't stand your unceasing lust for power and lack of discipline! Think, imbecile! Archangels are the embodiment of holy energy! If you eat her, you'll-!"

Barbatos leaps to his feet, fury etched into his face. He pounces at Artorias like a feral tiger and headbutts the Baron, knocking him backward and interrupting Artorias's lecture. "Screw you! I'm sick of this! I'm sick of you! Of rules! The Archangel is MINE!"

Uriel's eyes widen in astonishment. Barbatos's body begins to bulk up. His scrawny little arms increase in size as they rapidly add muscle mass.

What follows is a fight between two brothers. Artorias, a Baron one full rank higher than Barbatos, begins furiously defending as Barbatos unleashes a hellish fury exceeding his limits. The little Lord charges his elder brother, who, surprisingly, seems unable to do much in retaliation.

Barbatos's fist strikes Artorias's jaw, sending the Baron of Earthquakes flying. He crashes against the wall some thirty feet away, twists in midair, and lands in a crouched position. Artorias motions with his hands to try and summon his magic, but a look of anger rapidly spreads across his face instead. "Gah! Accursed angel-metal! I can't use my magic!"

I don't know what type of magic he's trying to use, but Barbatos does. The little brother laughs like a hyena. "Nyehehe! Not so tough now! I'm done having you tell me what to do! Pissing me off when you ain't got any dirt to fling was a big mistake, moron!"

Barbatos charges Artorias like an enraged bull. Despite Artorias's superior demonic ranking and physique, against his berserk little brother, all he can do is defend passively.

Suddenly, shards of metal leap out of a pouch wrapped around Barbatos's waist. They spin around in the air, guided by the Lord's magic, and rush toward Artorias. The Baron of Earthquakes gasps in surprise as several of them impale his feet, pinning him in place. A second group splits apart clamps onto his wrists, and wrenches his arms behind his back. They magnetically attach, forming crude, makeshift handcuffs.

Defenseless, and unable to move, Artorias can only stand in place and take a beating as Barbatos punches, kicks, and batters his older brother from side to side. With one final hurrah, Barbatos pounds Artorias's head, ripping his feet off the ground and sending him hurtling to the side. Artorias lands in a head not far from me. His body seizes for a moment, then falls still.

Barbatos's long, spindly tongue snakes out of his mouth. "Nyehehe! I won! I beat you, fair and square!"

His eyes flick to me. A bolt of terror shoots through my heart as the Lord's bloodlust strikes my very soul. He dashes over to me, lunges his hand down, and grabs me by the neck.

"Nobody's gonna save you now! Stupid angel bitch! Nyehehehe!"

The last thing I see is his maw rushing at my face.

Everything goes black.

* * *

The pain I expected doesn't appear. Instead, I fall into a bottomless abyss. Death. Emptiness. The Void.

Tears fall down my face. Uriel's voice speaks in my mind. *I died to a pathetic little Lord. Maybe even a grunt. How shameful. I failed everyone. I let my guard down, and the bloodskins tore me apart for it. Now my family will suffer because of my weakness.*

I hate the bloodskins. I hate them all.

But... I hate myself more. For being weak. For trusting in a familiar face.

I... hate...

Suddenly, the world changes. Once again, I appear in the chamber that leads to Heaven's Gate.

But something is different.

It's wrong.

Two red claws hover over my head — demon claws.

They lower and press against my face. Barbatos's shrill voice speaks again.

"Aaaaooooo!!! OH, sweet devils!! Ahh, it burns! It aches! My stomach, it's... it's on fire!! Gwaaaahh!!!"

I roll around randomly, from left to right, grabbing and rubbing every part of my body. The smell of melting flesh floods the air.

Artorias grunts. "Barbatos... you dense... imbecile..."

I hear the sound of metal snapping. A moment later, Artorias's face appears above me as I roll on the ground. The look of resignation on his face tells me everything I need to know.

"Stupid, stupid... your skin is turning white. You won't last much longer. I told you... I warned you!"

My voice comes out again, but it's much more pitiful. "Ahh... kill... me. Hurts. Wrong. I was wrong. Art...or...ias... big brother..."

Several moments pass. My grip begins to lessen. I can feel my mind slipping. That is, Uriel's mind, but also Barbatos's. They've merged.

Uriel's confusion dissipates. Suddenly, her mind snaps back to reality. Barbatos's soul loses partial control of his body, allowing the Archangel to take over.

"Ha... haha! Yes... this is it! My chance! You foolish bloodskins... haha..."

Stop! Get out of my head! Barbatos's inner voice yells. A hint of frantic terror tinges his tone. *T-this is my body! Mine!*

Not anymore... haha... hahaha... Uriel laughs wickedly. *Thou didst bite off more than ye were capable of chewing, worm. Now... suffer the consequences!*

Barbatos's arm jerks around erratically, waving from left to right. The little Lord desperately tries to fight off Uriel as she takes over more and more of his body, but compared to the vast ocean of the Archangel's soul, his is little more than a puddle in a desert.

"Broth... brother... she's t-taking... taking over... I can't win... sorry... sorry... kill me... kill me..."

Tears roll down Barbatos's face as he struggles to spit out a warning to his brother. Immediately, Artorias's gaze darkens.

"Damn you. You couldn't just listen, could you? I... I only have one choice."

The older brother weaves signs with his hands. "I'm going to put all of my energy into you. My soul. That's... that's the only way. It's all I can think of. I have to counter the holy power inside your body somehow."

He looks back at the flood of demons passing through, but whatever he searches for, he doesn't find it.

"Kill... me... kill... me..."

"I won't. Stay strong, Barbatos. I'll get you out of this. Your big brother is here for you. I'll never abandon you. Especially not to some damned Archangel's wrath!"

With his arms still bound behind his back by Barbatos's magnetized shackles, Artorias can only slide over to me and press his face against my chest. Immediately, Uriel's takeover begins to falter.

"No. Stay out," The Archangel gasps. "I must take over. Leave! Don't help him! Let Barbatos become mine."

Artorias winces. He closes his eyes and concentrates with all his might. "Damn you, Archangel. I won't retreat. Barbatos is my brother. I love him more than life itself!"

Artorias wheezes and gasps. Sweat pours from his brow onto my chest like a showerhead. His breathing slows as he pours more and more of his soul into Barbatos's chest.

"Damn you... Barbatos. Why... couldn't... you listen-"

Artorias's words come to an abrupt end mid-sentence. He flops to the ground lifelessly.

A minute passes. Two. Three.

Suddenly, Artorias speaks, but within my mind. Barbatos's mind. *Our* mind.

"I'm... alive?"

Barbatos releases a gasp. He flops onto his back, and our vision turns to the dead Archangel beside us. Her face is missing.

Recommended Listening

"Hahh?!" A noise jumps out of my mouth, but it isn't English. I stumble away from the demon-angel hybrid and fall on my ass.

I'm back in the crater. In reality.

Uriel's body sags. She falls to her knees and stares at the ground.

"No... no... those horrible memories..."

Barbatos's husky voice doesn't match the beautiful siren song I heard in the vision. It isn't Uriel's... but she has to use it.

"I'm sorry. It was unintentional."

The massive demon fixates his blood-red eyes on the ground. He shakes his head. "Quiet... Artorias. Thou hath no right to speak."

It takes me a moment to understand her words. "Artorias. Can you hear him? In your thoughts?"

She tilts her head slightly. A nod. "All three of us live in the same mind, but only Barbatos controls the body. I take over when he slumbers. That's how it's always worked."

Chills go down my spine. "Barbatos killed you. He... he tore off your face."

"He did."

"You're trapped inside of your murderer."

"I am."

Moments pass. My body begins to shake.

"That's awful. Horrible. Nauseating. I can't believe it. You had to watch all those years... you had to see..."

Uriel raises her head. Barbatos's head. Tears flow from her blood-red eyes. "The bloodskins tore my people apart. I could only stare, unable to intervene. For all his talk of peace and harmony of late, Barbatos did nothing to stop the bloodshed. That's why... that's why... I must..."

"Avenge them."

"Yes."

The two of us meet each other's gaze.

"Hero. Albeit unwittingly, thou hath seen my history. My sins. Will thou accept my plea? Will thou summon a portal to Hell Harbor?"

Uriel's plea requires all my mental fortitude not to weep like a baby.

Slowly, I nod. "Yes. Of course."

We both rise to our feet. I gaze at the huge, monstrous demon standing before me, but instead see something else in its place. A tortured woman. A prisoner. She lost everything that mattered to her. Her

friends, family, and even her freedom. Trapped in the body of her tormentor, she only has a short time left before he reawakens.

She has a job to do. I'll help her however I can.

I aim my mind at her. **"Heal. Restore. Energy."**

Uriel stares at me silently for a moment, then balls her hand into a fist. "I thank thee. I see now why thy name is Hope. Long has it been since I met someone as compassionate and forgiving as thee."

"There's no need to thank me. I'm a Hero. It's the least I can do."

The Archangel chuckles. "Heh... thou art a better Hero than many others. Thou deserveth the title. I know not what dangers await, but verily, thou shalt overcome them."

I bow and smile at her. "Thank you. I think you're a beautiful, stunning, strong woman. I'm sorry you've lived such a hellish life."

"As am I."

Uriel gestures to the air. I inhale and force myself to remember the images and pictures she showed me of Hell Harbor.

Centurion blares in my mind. *PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR, CENTURION IS ABLE TO INTERFACE WITH YOUR NEURAL PATHWAYS TO ASSIST IN THOUGHT RETENTION. WOULD YOU LIKE TO ENABLE MY ASSISTANCE?*

I nod. *Yes. That'd be great.*

UNDERSTOOD. RECONTEXTUALIZING KNOWN VARIABLES INVOLVING THE LOCATION KNOWN AS 'HELL HARBOR'. PROCESSED. TRANSMITTING NOW.

An image as clear as a photograph appears in my mind. It takes me a moment to understand, but when I do, my jaw drops.

Your neural interface reminds me of Solomon's Crown! It also helped me picture information like you do!

ERROR. CENTURION DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THE TERM 'SOLOMON'S CROWN'. PLEASE ELABORATE.

Never mind.

I speak to the air between myself and Uriel. **"Portal!"**

The air trembles for a moment before tearing in half and allowing a circular rip in space to appear. Several dozen demons on the other side spot the Archangel and I. They scream and run away, but I can't hear their words.

Uriel forms two spears of light once again. "I owe thee a debt, Hero. Thou hath done a great service today. Not only for me, but for the long-dead angels, and humanity as well. I will do my best to ensure thy name ends up in the history books."

"It's the least I can do. Give 'em hell, Uriel."

She stares at me for a moment, then leaps into the portal. After a moment, I see her walk around to my side so we can see each other. Her two constructs jump through as well, and I close the portal behind her.

Maybe I should have gone with her.

I don't know. Should I? I could have helped a lot.

...No. My body is still weak from the cancer cells. It's best I return to the Core. I gave Uriel nearly all of my energy. It'll have to do.

I speak again to the air. "**Return.**"

Part 074: Rip And Tear

Dozens of demons walk around us in the entrance to Hell Harbor. Several Barons line up, ready to fight against that evil woman, the Archangel Uriel, but there's a feeling of dread in the air. Everyone is on edge.

I poke the big demon beside me. "Mister Bael, sir? Why are we waiting?"

It takes him a moment to look down at me. "Oh. Sorry, cutie, but we can't. Not till Ose 'n Belial get here."

"But Mister Beelzebub went in there all alone! We have to hurry and help him!"

Mephisto slithers over to me. His bony fingers stretch out and rest on my shoulder. "Beelzebub isss a fool for going againsst the Archangel alone. Our oddsss of defeating Uriel with all the Dukesss and Emperorsss is asstoundingly low. The leassst effective method of defeating her isss to fight her all by ourssselvesss."

Bael rolls his eyes. "Yeah, well, things would be different if the boss were here. He knocked her out with one punch last time they tussled. Without him, looks like I'll hafta do the heavy lifting. If Beelzebub runs out and gets 'imself killed, it proves he's thicker than me."

"What?! No way! Mister Beelzebub can't die! He can regenerate from anything! You crushed his head into pieces, and he still came back!"

"Yeah. Maybe that's true. But I didn't have Holy Energy. Uriel does. No tellin' what that'll do to 'im."

"Holy Energy? What's that...?"

Mephisto rubs his bony fingers together. His voice hisses like ice. "A corrosssive power ussed by the angelsss. Pray it never ssstrikeysss you. It will melt the flesssh from your bonesss and cripple your nervousss system. Your pain will be endless until the moment you expire."

"Oh... okay."

I start pacing back and forth. Dozens of thoughts swirl in my head. *Geez! How can anyone say Mister Beelzebub died? He's fine! I bet he beat that angel all by himself! He's strong, and good-looking, and smart, and cunning, and good-looking, and wise... he can take out an Archangel by himself! Sure he can! He even beat that stupid human and made it look easy! Mister Beelzebub is amaz-*

Whoomph.

A rushing of air catches my attention. I turn to the middle of the building's floor and stare at a portal that's appeared. To my surprise, there's a human standing on the other side. I immediately recognize him as the Hero who fought and defeated Beelzebub only a few months ago.

Suddenly, a massive red and white-skinned figure leaps out of the portal and rises to his full height. My eyes widen in horror.

"I-it's Mister Barbatos! I mean, Uriel!"

Several demons nearby leap away in fear. Two winged angels spring out beside her, and the portal closes a moment later. Bael and Mephisto turn to look, only to immediately jump into a defensive position.

"Shit! She made it inside?! What scum-sucking turncoat gave her the key to Hell Harbor?!"

Mephisto yanks out a translucent dagger. "That doesssn't matter! Everyone, get ready! We musst-"

Before Mephisto can finish speaking, one of the two angels next to Uriel leaps into the air. Its face changes into a hollow hole, and an instant later, bolts of light shoot out, lasering through the heads of several nearby demons. I stumble back in surprise and scramble to get away, as the sounds of chaos erupt around me. Several Barons fall to the ground, dead, in a matter of seconds.

"Rosalia! Get out of here!" Bael bellows. He uncoils a massive chain from around his body and flings it at the angel in the air. I rush to the exit, only for a bigger demon to smash into me and knock me to the side. He tears out the door, screaming in terror, as do several monsters and other creatures.

"Graaah!" Bael jumps at the Archangel and swings his giant flail down. Uriel dodges it, moving too fast for my eyes to follow. The spiked-ball slams into the ground, rattling the building and sending a shockwave throughout its foundations. Tiles fall from the ceiling and crash against the floor, exploding into dust on arrival.

The Archangel laughs wickedly, her voice identical to Mister Barbatos's. "Bahaha! Puny little demons! Tremble before the might of Heaven! Bow before the Creator's judgment!"

"Screw that!" Bael howls. He yanks on his flail's chain and swings it in a wide arc. It passes through Mephisto harmlessly and impacts the Archangel, but stops short upon hitting an invisible barrier. Shockwaves from the impact ripple outward, rattling my teeth and chest. I climb to my feet and toward the exit, but pause and linger outside the door to watch.

"Thou art merely delaying thy death," The Archangel says. "Move with haste and join thy comrade in death's embrace! Today is the day thy filth vanishes from the universe!"

"My comrade?" Bael pauses. He narrows his eyes. "Beelzebub? What did you do to him?!"

An evil look appears in Uriel's eyes. "*Nothing*. The buffoon blew himself up. My body remained unharmed, rendering his trump card worthless!"

"Even for Beelzebub, that's reckless. Damn him." Bael yanks his flail back and catches it in his hand. "You're many things, but a liar ain't one."

"Angels are the agents of perfection, justice, and cleansing," Uriel says, raising one of her two spears of light. "When I make a promise, I keep it. Dost thee remember my words when last I appeared, Bael?"

The Duke of Pain slowly starts to spin his flail around. "How could I forget? You went out screaming like a little bitch. *I'll return and kill all of you! Nyeh nyeh nyeh.*' You've got a way with words."

The weapon picks up speed in his hand, creating a vortex. The wind slowly rotates around the room at first, but rapidly transforms into a hurricane engulfing the entire building. Chunks of the roof tear off and

enter the makeshift tornado, turning into battering rams as they careen around the portal facility and smash against the walls.

Uriel narrows her eyes. "Pah. Dost thee intend to blow me away? A stiff breeze will do nothing against the might of the Archangel of Retribution!"

I glance toward Mephisto, only to realize he's disappeared. A moment later, Uriel shrieks in pain and swats at her back. Mephisto hops away, clutching his transparent knife. He glowers at her. "Now!"

Bael releases his flail. It flies at the Archangel like a mudshark rushing toward its prey. Uriel barely has a moment to glance at its spiked head before it smashes into her face and pounds her through the building's wall. The shock from the impact blasts the portal facility to smithereens, sending debris flying in every direction. I go flying, unable to grab onto something to save myself.

Crack.

I hit the ground violently, and the world turns dark.

* * *

Aaaoo... My head hurts.

A few moments pass as I get my bearings. The sounds of a terrific battle not far away make me look toward where the Harbor Annex used to stand. Only a few pieces of metal, tiling, and wood remain, along with the heavily reinforced warp-gates in a semi-circle.

Blood pours from wounds at Uriel's sides. Several undead creatures leap at the Archangel and her two faceless angels. She spins and twirls her spears around, eviscerating them three at a time like an expert in undead butchery. Mephisto hovers in the air twenty feet above, weaving sign after sign frantically.

While Bael rushes the Archangel and slams against her barriers over and over, ravenous creatures leap from the ground and tear at Uriel with huge claws. They look like a cross between hellhounds and demons, but undead. I don't know what they are. I've never seen them before!

"These abominations stand no chance against the Creator's might!" Uriel laughs. She stabs one of the monsters through its head and flings it into the air toward Mephisto. It passes through him harmlessly, but he still pauses his hand motions for a moment and shakes his head.

"Your ssslaughter of my people endsss here, you winged hag!" Mephisto yells.

"Gahhh!" Bael stumbles back as one of Uriel's constructs hits him in the face with its shield, then stabs him with a sword of light through his stomach. The faceless angel wrenches its weapon in the Duke's chest, drawing blood. Bael swats its head and pounds it to pieces with a single blow, but Uriel reforms it a moment later with her magic.

The Duke of Pain takes a moment to recover and clutches his wound. "Give us back Barbatos, you dirty pig!"

"I'd sooner die," The Archangel replies coldly. She claps her hands together, and a gust of wind explodes from her skin, blowing away Bael and all of Mephisto's undead creatures. Before anyone can

recover, she weaves several signs, summoning two new constructs in the mayhem. One of them is shaped like a cube, while the other is an orb of light with energy spinning around it.

The cube rapidly begins to spin and swirl in random directions. My body increases in weight, and I slam to my knees. A moment later, all my strength gives out, and I fall flat on my face. The force of a building presses against my back, threatening to turn me into a puddle of blood.

I can barely see what's happening. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the orb trembling. A hail of fireballs blasts out of it, flies up into the sky, and slams into the ground, exploding like bombs and pulverizing dirt into mulch.

Bael howls in pain. "Aaaugh!"

I twitch my head just enough to spot him lying in a pool of blood. The fire scorches the ground but doesn't appear to burn him.

What happened?!

After a moment, the Duke of Pain jumps to his feet. He slips in the mud and nearly falls, but manages to keep it together. How he's able to stand escapes me. I'm going to turn into mush in seconds. Everything hurts!!

He inhales, and strength returns to his body. "Alright. I've had it. Enough is enough. I ain't holding back anymore."

[Recommended Listening](#)

Bael's bones begin to morph and shift. His horns increase in length and bend around to face forward like two spears of bone. His muscles triple in size, as does the rest of his body. His back splits apart, allowing scorching flames to pour from the gap.

Every second that passes increases the strain on my delicate feminine frame. My vision starts to darken. The stress on my brain... is... too much.

Suddenly, the pressure vanishes. I take a breath reflexively and wince in pain from all my fractured ribs.

A monstrous howl makes me flinch in fright. "**GROOOOAR!!**"

I jump to my feet and hide behind a pillar. Bael stands fifteen feet tall now and towers over the tiny little Archangel. She looks like an imp compared to his monstrous size. Black wings sprout from his back, and fire engulfs his skin.

"The Balrog form? Haha... Thou art desperate, little Duke."

Uriel jumps back and forms a barrier barely in the nick of time. Bael bangs his fist against her invisible wall with ten times the power from before. Her constructs go flying from the force of the impact, and the wall shatters into a thousand fragments. He snatches his flail and swings it so fast I can't even see it move.

It smashes against the Archangel and sends her sprawling across the ground. She rolls and flips through the dirt, yet somehow leaps into a standing position and lands unharmed.

Uriel's four summoned creations try to reform, but Bael is too fast. He leaps at the cube and crushes it in his giant palm. "PUNY LITTLE ANGELS! DIE! DIE! CRUSH TO DUST!!"

Uriel's smarmy attitude vanishes. "What in Heaven's name?!" She forms another barrier, but Bael tears through it like it's made of paper. He grabs the Archangel and slams her into the ground over and over, treating her like a wet rag that needs the water beaten out of it. Uriel tries to break free of the Balrog's grasp, but his grip proves inescapable.

One of her angels opens its face and fires bolts of Holy Energy at the rampaging monster. Bael ignores the construct as if it isn't even there. He continues slamming the Archangel against the ground without stopping. "POUND! POUND! DIE! DIE!"

Mephisto watches from the air. Despite Bael's onslaught, Mephisto's expression turns grim. "Bael! You mussst control yourssself! Don't lossse yourssself to rage!"

"SHUT UP! STUPID GHOST! USELESS IDIOT! GROOOARR!!" Bael opens his mouth and blasts a wave of heat at the Duke of Mist. Mephisto flinches, and to my shock, the fire scorches his bones and burns away the rags covering his body. Mephisto falls and hits the ground with a sickening *crunch*.

I thought nobody could hurt Mephisto! How did Bael-?!

The Balrog continues to pound and smash the Archangel. He eventually holds her up, inhales, and unleashes a massive wave of fire upon her unmoving form.

Uriel doesn't scream. She hangs limply in the monster's grasp as the flames engulf her.

A moment later, Bael grows bored of his unmoving prey. He drops Uriel, then turns his attention to her three remaining constructs. A few seconds later, they explode into fragments as he tears them apart.

My heart trembles. *W-we did it! We won! But... why is there this sickening feeling in my stomach?*

Immediately, I realize why. Bael aims his head at a village barely visible in the distance and inhales deeply. He spits a ball of flame as big as his head toward the local settlement, decimating several structures in the area and killing Devil knows how many demons and humans.

He's a loose cannon!

I quickly run over, terror in my heart. "Mister Bael! You have to stop! Don't attack other demons!"

Bael whirls around to roar at me. "TINY WOMAN! YOU NO SCARE ME!"

He inhales again. I jump to the side and roll, then run as fast as I can, circling the Balrog. Bael unleashes a wave of fire, spinning to face me as he tries to cook me to a crisp. I roll underneath him and dive into a crater, making myself as small as possible.

The sounds of Bael's flames cease. "WHERE GO?! YOU HIDE, ME FIND!"

After a moment, the Balrog gives up. He forgets about me entirely and turns his attention to the Archangel again. I peek over the crater and watch as he picks her up by the head. "NOT SO BIG NOW!"

WEAK ANGEL! PATHETIC!"

Uriel coughs. "B-Bael... it's me... Barbatos. You did it... you beat her. You won. I'm back."

Bael narrows his eyes. "BARBATOS? THAT YOU?"

"Yes... you won. You can... revert now..."

"No! Bael!" Mephisto jumps to his feet. His entire body is only a skeleton without any clothes to cover him. "It'sss a trick! Don't fall for it!"

Bael turns and glowers at the Duke of Mist. "YOU SHUT UP! ME NO LIKE YOU! LITTLE BONEY MAN!"

Uriel's armor, what little she wears, has melted to slag on her hands and feet. I can barely make out a smile underneath her melted helmet. "Bael, Mephisto is your enemy. You have to fight him..."

"FIGHT? BONEY?"

"Yes. Fight Boney. He... he thinks thy demonhood is tiny."

"WHAT?! THAT BASTARD!" Bael flings Uriel against the ground. Several of her bones snap, but she doesn't try to retaliate. Instead, she watches as Bael turns his attention toward the Duke of Mist. "I NEVER LIKED YOU! LITTLE RUNT! NOT FIT TO BE DUKE!"

Mephisto shakes his head. "Oh, for devil'sss sssake..."

The Balrog leaps away from Uriel and slams his fist into the dirt where Mephisto stands. Before he can land his punch, the aetherial Duke floats underground, leaving the Balrog to tear the soil apart while he searches for his prey.

While both Dukes battle, all I can do is hang back and stare in horror.

I can't help.

I'm too weak.

Mister Beelzebub always said so. He called me useless. He called me ugly.

He didn't mean that, did he? Am I useless? I can't walk ten feet without tripping. I can't muster anything beyond the weakest healing magic.

Mister Beelzebub was right. I'm incompetent. All I can do is watch while the remainder of the Council battles against an ancient Goddess for our right to survive.

What purpose do I serve anymore? Without Mister Beelzebub... I'm nothing.

Why? Why did he have to die?

No. That's not right. Uriel said he blew himself up. He must have detonated every cell in his body. He did it, hoping to kill her. It was a brave sacrifice. I know Mister Beelzebub. He would never allow this Archangel to beat him. No matter what, he'd stand up for himself and put his pride on the line.

I cautiously rise to my feet and peer over the crater's edge. Uriel weaves water around herself. Her bloody wounds and broken bones quickly mend. It doesn't take long before she finishes healing herself

and cracks her neck. Bael continues to pound and tear at the ground while trying to get to Mephisto. He doesn't see her weaving hand signs again.

She's going to attack him!

I quickly jump over the edge, run up to the massive demon-angel hybrid, and leap at her back.

Something hits me. I don't know what, but it hurts. My vision turns spotty. I hit the dirt, hard.

A voice speaks. "Cannon fodder. How bold for a bloodskin as weak as thee to enter this battlefield. Allow me to grant ye a quick death!"

I open my eyes and blink back tears. Ice rips through my veins as I spot Uriel standing over me, her palm aimed at my face. A ball of light forms in her grasp. "If only thou had fled with the rest of the vermin, ye might have survived today's battle. Now, thou shalt die."

I can't move. I'm scared! Oh devils, what have I done?!

My body shakes uncontrollably. The Archangel smiles. Her blood-red eyes stare into my soul.

Suddenly, Bael appears. He grabs the Archangel and crushes her in his grip, then flings her away, out toward the sea. I follow her with my eyes until she impacts the water. A small tidal wave rushes toward the coast and splashes against the seawall.

The Balrog stares toward the ocean. "That won't be enough to end Uriel's rampage — still, thanks for the distraction. I needed the Archangel to take her eyes off Bael for a moment. You saved me the trouble."

Bael's gravelly voice sounds far more composed than usual.

What the heck?!

"Bael? Is that you?"

He glances down at me. "No. I'm currently possessing the Duke's body. I thought it would be a good way to surprise the Archangel. Luckily, his intelligence drops to negative-three in his Balrog form, so possessing him becomes a simple matter."

"Possessing him? Who are you? Why are you controlling Mister Bael?"

Bael sighs. "I'm Ose. The new Third Emperor. Controlling my subjects is my right, don't you know? Mephisto! Come out!"

Mephisto peeps out of the ground. "Bael?"

"No. Ose. I'm manipulating the dumb one's mind. My physical form is on that mountaintop over there, about fifteen miles away." Ose swings Bael's huge arm to point off in the distance opposite the ocean.

"Oh. Wonderful. Ssso glad you could join usss. What took you ssso long?!"

"The messenger only told me to meet up at Hell Harbor five minutes ago. Luckily, I can travel quickly anywhere I please. Oh. She's back."

A massive wall of water rushes at us. I shriek in fright, but Ose slaps Bael's hands together, summoning a shockwave to slice the miniature tsunami in half. It washes against the ground to either side of us harmlessly.

Uriel flies out of the gap and hits the ground with a *WHUMP*, sending mud flying. "Deceitful backstabber! How in character for thee to attack me from behind!"

Ose cocks Bael's head. "Oh, sorry. Did I hurt you? Perhaps I should have been more gentle. I'll take your feelings into consideration next time."

The Archangel pauses. "Hm? Who art thou? Certainly not Bael. He's hardly eloquent."

"For the third time, I'm Ose. The new Third Emperor. Soon to be First, after I smear you across the dirt."

"Ose?" Uriel glowers at Mephisto and me. "I see. Thou art controlling Bael."

"Wow. Give this angel a cookie. She pieced it together." Ose claps Bael's palms together slowly. "Bravo. Bravo."

"One Emperor won't change anything. Show thy face, coward."

"I'm not a coward. I'm brilliant. Much smarter than the rest of the rabble." Ose points at her chest. "Bael's transformation gives great power at the cost of intelligence, but by controlling his body, I transform him into an unstoppable juggernaut. It's hardly cowardice to use the best tools at hand."

Uriel motions with her hands. Two spears of light form in her grasp while her four constructs rematerialize. "Thy confidence appears impregnable. However, bloodskin Emperors always think themselves undefeatable. Belial lost to me. Thou shalt, as well."

"I don't think so," Ose says. "You were barely holding on before. No matter how strong you pretend to be, you won't beat my genius. I've planned your defeat ever since the last time I saw you fight."

"Enough talk." Uriel flicks her eyes, and metal from the Annex rushes over to her and encases her body in makeshift armor. "I hate chatting with bloodskins."

"It must kill you to live in the mind of one."

"Damn right!" Uriel swings her spear at the Balrog, and a gust of wind flies out, barely knocking him back an inch. "It's my definition of HELL!!"

Part 075: The Meaning of Pain

[Recommended Listening](#)

The Archangel charges at me. My eyes instantly jump around as I gather data about the Balrog's fighting capabilities, as well as the situation around him.

There are five enemies. Uriel is the first. The other four are light constructs. The winged constructs appear to be a melee and caster-type, while the cube is a gravity manipulator and the orb is an artillery bombardment-type.

Hypothesis: Uriel shares her energy between each construct.

Analysis: Unlikely. Uriel has demonstrated the ability to manipulate not only Barbatos's magic but Artorias's as well. However, she can't control more than one element at once. Therefore, her constructs are part of her intent to shore up her weaknesses.

Conclusion: I should eliminate the constructs first, then prevent her from rebuilding them.

Uriel's stabs her spears at my face. I bat them away and lunge Bael's tail out, manipulating his body as if it were my own. My control over his hulking form borders on perfection. His strength, coupled with my intellect, creates a versatile warrior capable of crushing anyone in my path.

My spiked extremity strikes the melee-construct. It deflects with a shield and chops at my tail.

Injuries sustained: None.

Uriel continues to stab and strike at me, weaving the occasional hand sign whenever she dodges to hit me with one of her spells. Bael's Balrog form is immune to many forms of elemental damage, allowing me to ignore the majority of them.

A warning appears in the back of my mind. *Incoming metal shards. Danger level: Medium. Actions taken: Duck, deflect, dodge.*

As I fight the Archangel, a voice speaks inside my mind; Bael's.

HEY! WHY ME NO MOVE?

I'm in control for a while. Take a nap and let the genius fight.

YOU NOT BELONG! LEAVE HEAD!

Quiet, you. Don't distract me.

I force the Balrog's body to inhale deeply, then immediately blast a concentrated cone of flame to incinerate the melee-type construct. The caster-type tries to protect its comrade with a light wall but moves too slowly. The first dissipates into particles, leaving only three others for me to eliminate.

Uriel notices. She weaves signs to reform the construct, but I won't let her.

I grab her arm and crush it, then fling her at the artillery-type orb construct. It explodes into particles when she hits it.

Uriel winces and jumps to her feet. "Gah! Damned Emperor! How has thy speed reached such a level?!"

"Mental prowess. Becoming an Emperor unlocked my analytic acuity. You wouldn't understand."

Uriel intends to distract me with words. Her attempts are pathetic and futile. I only served a tertiary role the last time she emerged, but this time, things will be different. I will prove the ultimate victor.

Mephisto summons several ghouls. They leap out of the ground and grab Uriel's leg, pinning her for a moment. I didn't ask him to do that. Whatever, I'll use him to my advantage. The Archangel swings her undamaged arm down and smashes one of the ghouls in the face, blowing its empty rotted head across the land. Black blood flies in every direction, splattering the dirt. She kicks it off and starts to roundhouse swing the other off her leg at me.

She is far too slow.

I leap into the air and flap my wings, rushing at her like an arrow whistling through the wind. Bael's massive body plows into the Archangel, and I punch her over and over, dealing crippling damage to her makeshift armor. Several shards of metal break off and embed deep into her skin.

Bael screams again. *MY HEAD! NOT YOURS! GET OUT!*

Silence! I'm winning a battle you nearly lost.

The moronic Duke continues to push back, but his resistance is futile. I thoroughly command his body. A low IQ individual can't take back his mind from a seasoned psychic prodigy.

Out of nowhere, my body doubles in weight — ah, the gravity cube. I nearly forgot. It hovers twenty feet away and spins rhythmically, trying to suppress my movements. I wave a wing and hit it with a gust of air, disturbing its oscillation for a moment.

Before I can finish the cube off, something impales my stomach. A spear. Damn. I didn't even see Uriel move. She must have-

What?

Before I can register Uriel's attack, the second winged construct forms a Light Wall between the Archangel and myself and throws me into the air. The light barriers are troublesome. Bael can shatter them with a single punch, but they're hard to see and can catch me off-guard. I'll have to make a note.

STUPID WOMAN!! I WANT YOU LEAVE NOW!!

The idiot continues yelling at me. I ignore him. Pivoting in midair, I spin around with Bael's wings and lunge at the remaining winged construct. It forms barrier after barrier, desperately defending against my punches and flames. Every time I shatter a light wall, another appears.

It's making me... angry!!

"You imbecilic little shit! Die!"

I try to swing at it again and go for the kill, but my right arm stops responding — Bael's arm. I can't move it.

MY MIND! NOT YOURS!!

Devil's sake! He's fighting back! How is that possible?

Stop resisting, Bael! You're making my job harder- WAH!

Tendrils of water wrap around each of my limbs, lift me in the air, and slam me against a rock. I try to struggle out of their grip, but my control slips even more. Neither arm will follow my commands.

GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT GETOUTGETOUT!!!

Bael's awful screams grow more unbearable every second. With a labored sigh, I retreat from his mind and return to my body, fifteen miles away.

* * *

I open my eyes. A beautiful mid-day vista greets me. The mountaintop I sit cross-legged upon overlooks a field of flowers, a forest, a small lake, and three nearby villages. Ordinarily, I wouldn't be able to see the battle against Uriel from this distance.

But I am no longer ordinary.

Now, I possess the powers of an Emperor.

Untold potential rests in my grasp. Finally, I am the one controlling demon society. For too long have I languished under the fist of idiots ruling other idiots. I offered wisdom and council, but none heeded my call.

I am Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration; the greatest mind that demonkind has ever beheld.

* * *

And Bael kicked me out of his head!

That absolute idiot! I hate his ignorance, and his thick skull, and his shitty temperament, and every other part of his stupid body!! He's a worthless piece of garbage!!

* * *

Control your emotions, Ose. Subdue them. Bael is simply such an idiot that he beat me with his advanced stupidity. Fools didn't lead demon society for a hundred thousand years by accident. Satan intentionally engineered our civilization to be idiotic.

Breathe. Inhale.

Great. I'm all better, now.

I jump to my feet and smooth my clean, pristine white uniform down. Sometimes I like to wear dresses. Other times, a suit. Given this battle will be pivotal for securing the future of demonkind, military regalia seemed most appropriate.

The Annex, which once stood proudly by itself next to the ocean, is gone. Only the iron portals remain, each one allowing demons to come and go from various points in the Labyrinth.

I aim my mind at the Annex. A thin bolt of lightning shoots from my eyes. It instantly strikes a spot fifty feet from Uriel, causing my body to zap to that position. I materialize in the thick of a battle, as Bael

goes berserk and hammers the Archangel and her four constructs. Dammit, I had taken almost all of them down, but she rebuilt them and healed herself again. Thanks, *Bael*.

The Duke of Pain is a troublesome idiot.

Bael pounds through barrier after barrier, but Uriel keeps her cool and reforms them continuously. Now that Bael's mindless rampage has returned, it will only be a matter of minutes, possibly even seconds, before she figures out his attack pattern and goes in for the kill.

Whatever, I'll use him to my advantage.

While Bael attacks, I weave several signs and conjure up the elemental attribute of lightning within my mind. The dynamic potential of my energy agitates for several seconds as I build up my power. By the time Uriel notices the sparks of electricity arcing off my body, she doesn't have time to react.

Nobody ever does. That's the point of a lightspeed-attack.

KZZAAT!

A multi-pronged energy blast shoots from each finger. Four bolts target each of Uriel's constructs, while the fifth explodes against her metal armor, electrifying her and boiling her insides. The demon-angel hybrid screams in pain as she tumbles backward, narrowly missing Bael's fist in the process. Uriel spins head over heels until she comes to a stop several hundred feet away, half-buried in the mud.

Bael turns to me and snarls. "HEY! YOU THE ONE IN MY HEAD! STUPID WOMAN! ME CRUSH! ME SMASH!"

*Devils. I hate the fat bastard **so** much.*

The huge brute charges at me. I zap over to Uriel and leave an electrical afterimage in my wake. That should confuse him for a bit.

As soon as I appear, Uriel smiles. "Eat dirt, little Emperor." The ground explodes underneath me.

I wince, but no shrapnel hits my body. When I blink my eyes, though, I realize I can't see. Uriel blinded me. A light-mine?

Something hits me in the stomach and my face.

Uriel grabs my long hair and swings me around. The disorienting rush of motion and wind against my skin makes it impossible to right myself. I hit the ground with the force of a hurricane, causing stars to dance in my eyes.

The pain doesn't last long. Compared to my durability when I was a Baron, my body has become practically indestructible. Evolving into an Emperor did more than enhance my mental acuity and give me new powers. It also reinforced my defenses substantially.

I weave signs and discharge electricity from every pore in my skin, making Uriel yelp in surprise. I hear her hit the ground to my left.

Gotcha.

Vague shapes become visible in my vision, though they're fuzzy and indistinct. They give me enough detail to see. I can barely make out the contours of Uriel's body as she staggers to her feet.

Zapping behind her, I plant my hand against her back and unload as much electricity as I can muster.

Uriel explodes into particles of light. No, wait. Her construct? Damn! I grabbed the wrong one!

Whump!

A steel rod strikes my back, jarring my vision. This time, pain explodes through every inch of my spine. Uriel grabs my hair again and punches me in the face. *Wham! Wham! Wham!*

It hurts. More than before, but I've had worse. That's the thing about being born a demon. Our lives are nothing, if not painful.

The next time Uriel's fist strikes my face, I discharge electricity. Her scream of pain is more intense than before. She stumbles back, falls to the ground, and writhes around, trying to shake the sensation of touch back into her electrified palm.

I still can't see properly, but a solution appears in my subconscious. I weave a sign and shock my skull to reset my nervous system. My vision clears up instantly.

Electricity. It's versatile, powerful, and robust. Perfect for a genius like me.

Uriel sets her jaw and clambers to her feet, but her footing is unsteady. "Hack... cough... thy powers should not... not be this formidable..."

"Everyone underestimates me. It's a blessing, in some ways. It means I always outperform their expectations."

Uriel's eyes rove my body, probing for a weakness. A moment of distress. Her arm is probably still tingling, so she isn't able to efficiently weave two-handed magic signs. All four of her constructs are gone, too.

I wonder what she'll do.

She narrows her smoldering red eyes and meets my gaze. "Art thou toying with me, bloodskin?"

"Something like that."

"Thy kind are like rats. Should one perish, a whole swarm will rise to take its place. I see now that killing the council off will barely make a dent." She shakes her hand, desperately fighting to return feeling to it.

"Oh? I assumed you planned to exterminate all the demons. That's what you said the last time you showed your ugly mug."

Uriel's breath slowly evens out. "Nay. Knowing how little time I have before Barbatos awakens, I intended only to take out as many demons at the top of the hierarchy as possible. However, upon witnessing thy battle prowess, I now see my folly. Even a newly arisen Demon Emperor can rise to the level of the ancient devils! I spoke to a child before coming here. He believed that only the old guard from

before the Energy Wars were my enemies. He was wrong. All of thy kin must perish to restore balance to the universe."

"Oh, listen to *you*. Smug. Self-assured. The Archangels always were a bunch of sore losers," I reply, smirking at the heavily-breathing demon-angel hybrid. "Your people considered themselves the arbiters of justice and freedom, but in the end, they were no better than the demons! Now they're dead. You're nothing but a fossil — a relic of a dead era. Eliminating your stench from the galaxy was the best thing Satan ever did."

Uriel jumps to her feet. She doesn't bother attacking. "Dost thou think thyself better than me?! In thy eyes, humans art little more than food for thy river of souls! The angels gave thy people life, but ye repaid us with bloodshed and violence! We protected the humans, but thy barbaric ways only grew more genocidal with time!"

My face twitches. "I saw your *protection* in action. You enslaved demons, and then you used humans for your gain. Don't pretend we're any worse. Demons only take from humans what we need, while limiting their growth for their own good. Humans who grow in power won't stop at killing us. Once they eliminate all their enemies, they turn on themselves. If you think a universe without demons is ideal, you must be covering your eyes to ignore the horrors humanity and angelkind has committed."

"Filthy bloodskin. Our magic gave thee life."

Uriel clenches her fist, the one I electrocuted, and slowly extends a finger. She shakily points it at me. "I was there when Uzziel created the first imp. She birthed thy people out of love, not malice. All we asked for was for thy kind to serve us. We gave thee a purpose. A reason to live! Spitting in our faces was thy response."

"Love, hm? Is that what you called it? I wasn't alive during those formative years, so I can't say what happened. I only know what I've gleaned from the originators. If you were so kind and forgiving, then why did you attempt to exterminate the imps when they demanded their freedom?"

The Archangel hesitates. A moment of self-reflection appears in her eyes. "I don't know, Ose. That was a long time ago."

"So was the extermination of the angels, yet you seem to relish mentioning that event over and over. Either the past is the past, or you must admit you're a hypocrite. I won't let you have it both ways."

Uriel's fist shakes. She retracts her finger. A smile appears beneath the half-melted section of her helmet. "I do not require thy *permission* to do anything."

She flicks her other hand. The ground explodes around her, and she sucks underneath it, vanishing into the soil.

I quickly leap back. "Mephisto. Uriel went underground. Where is she?"

The Duke of Mist hovers above me. He glances around warily. "My ghoulsss report ssshe isss burrowing around quickly. We mussst beware. Her Earth Manipulation isss one of her ssstrongesst assetsss, besssidesss her magnetissm."

The planet shakes. Uriel bursts back out of the ground, startling me. Her metal armor is gone, replaced instead with dirt all across Barbatos's naked body. I can barely see her eyes through all the debris.

The Archangel jumps at me. I electrically transfer to the side and shoot lightning at her, but she shrugs it off without complaint and summons her constructs again. Again! Every time I destroy them, they come back!

The orb-bombardment-construct begins rotating, sending bolts of water flying at me. I dodge reflexively and dash over four hundred feet away with my electric-jump. The water splashes harmlessly against the ground, but a shiver goes down my spine.

Her new method of attack isn't random. She shed the metal and replaced her armor with electric-conductive soil. Then she followed up with a water-based attack.

She's targeting my elemental weaknesses. I underestimated her.

"LITTLE WOMAN!" Bael's voice behind me makes my heart skip a beat. I turn and look just in time to see a fist swinging down at my head. Luckily, I zip to the side and dodge the attack, making him hit the ground harmlessly. Being able to move at nearly the speed of light saves me more often than I'd like.

"Bael! Get ahold of yourself!" I yell.

"SCREW YOU! NO TAKE ORDERS FROM DUMB WHORE!!"

The demon leaps at me. I spot Uriel out of the corner of my eye. She watches and smiles.

"Nobody... nobody insults me, you stupid baboon." I pop into the air behind Bael and kick as hard as I can, slamming him into the ground. Before the Balrog can recover, I shoot a hundred lightning bolts at him, targeting several points of his nervous system. Each one splashes against his back and explodes.

The moment I land, I know something is off. Bael jumps up without hesitating. He must be damn-near immune to my lightning element.

I can't fight the Archangel and a Balrog at the same time. Not even as an Emperor. If I have a super-form, ultra-form, or omega-form, I have yet to discover it. There hasn't been enough time. Promoting from Baron to Duke is a massive undertaking, but from Baron to Emperor in the same day? It's tearing my power cognizance to shreds.

Mephisto appears at my side. "Ossse, we mussst work together. My undead are ineffective againsst sssingularly ssstrong enemies. I lossst the power of Leviathan, ssso I do not know how besst to assssisst you."

"Keep Bael busy. Insult him. He can't hurt you. Keep popping out of the ground and play whack-an-imp if you have to. I need him off my back."

Mephisto nods. "I undersstand. Do your besst. You are our lassst hope againsst the Archangel."

A thought materializes in my mind. *No. We still have the First Emperor. Will he show? I doubt it. We're probably on our own.*

Mephisto floats over to Bael and stabs the big brute with his knife. Bael mostly ignores the pain, but still swats at Mephisto in annoyance. "STUPID GHOST COME BACK! HE WANT MORE BIG SMACK!"

"Your broodmother sssmellsss like an angel," The Aetherial demon says, cutting deep with his first insult. Hell, even I would be offended under different circumstances.

"HOW DARE YOU! NOBODY INSULTS BROODMOTHER LIKE THAT!"

Bael begins swinging at the Duke of Mist, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Now I can focus on Uriel-

...Wait! Where did she go? She was standing next to the Annex only a few moments ago. Damn!

The ground rumbles beneath me. It's Uriel!

I transmit away at the last second. Uriel bursts from the dirt and grabs my electrical afterimage, which explodes in her grasp. The current does nothing to her.

Uriel pivots in midair to face me. She kicks her foot into the ground, sending a cone of dirt bullets firing in all directions. I throw up an energy shield and deflect them.

This battle is a stalemate. I can't hurt her, and she can't hit me. Hmm. How should the genius change her strategy, I wonder?

Three seconds pass.

Something clicks in my head.

Perfect.

I zap behind the Archangel. She instantly swings to hit me, but this technique is undodgeable.

Body Possession.

My hands weave a dozen signs in a fraction of a second. By the time Uriel's fist is about to connect with my face, I've already finished. I duck her swing and slap my hand against her back.

Transfer.

Our battle ceases. My vision fades to black, then reappears a moment later, staring back at my own beautiful face.

I've done it.

It takes a moment for me to reorient myself. Suddenly, horrific, agonizing pain blazes through my entire body. No, Uriel's body. Barbatos's body.

Agony like nothing I've ever felt in my life.

Lava and ice pour across every one of my cells. Someone douses me in acid, then hurls me into a vat of boiling oil. I can't think, only scream wordlessly.

The pain is so senseless that I age a thousand years in one second, revert, and re-age once more, only for my skin to melt off and reform over and over.

Haha.... unbearable, isn't it? This agony is what Barbatos suffers daily.

Uriel's voice speaks to me. It's barely a whisper compared to my unending shrieks.

"MAKE IT STOP!! WHAT'S GOING ON?!"

The combination of demonic and holy energy in one body should be more than anyone can handle, yet Barbatos has lived this unending torture for a hundred thousand years. Thou art a newcomer, so ye haven't a chance of overcoming it.

Uriel's body appears in my vision, in between the blinding flashes of superheated fire in my veins and arctic breeze chilling my skin. Her figure is that of a white-haired woman with fair skin and blood-red robes. It contrasts with Barbatos's disgusting black and white mottled skin.

Haha. How very predictable of thee, Emperor of Infiltration. I wondered if ye might attempt something as foolish as combatting my soul directly. What was thy hope? Did ye intend to strike me down while I was defenseless? To cause me such pain that I would return to my dormant state? How unfortunate. No pain thou art capable of inflicting will ever compare to that which I've suffered for the shorter part of eternity.

My head pounds like a hammer against an anvil. Each beat of my heart sends more fire into my mind.

"H...how... can you... move... with this much... PAIN...?!"

Simple. I adapted to it. We did. Barbatos, Artorias, and I all share our senses.

Another voice appears in my mind. A male voice, one I don't recognize.

I am sorry you had to find out like this, Ose. You cannot stay in our mind. Controlling Barbatos's body will prove impossible to one not attuned to our constant suffering.

"Who are... you?"

Artorias. Barbatos's brother. I sealed myself inside of his body to try and counteract the Archangel's energy. I only partially succeeded. We can barely match her powers if we are both awake. When he sleeps, she takes over. I can't muster the strength to take over.

A moment passes. I blink back a flood of tears.

"So... that means... it takes the power of... two demons... to resist the Archangel?"

Yes.

Uriel's smile evaporates. *Planning something, Ose? Dost thee honestly believe thyself capable of incapacitating me?*

"Hehehe... maybe. I see, now. You're not invincible. You have a weakness."

Already, I'm growing used to the pain. It's still blinding. I can't move a muscle. But I don't need to. The *real* battle is here, in Barbatos's mind.

"Artorias... where is... your brother?"

Asleep. Comatose, you might say. Nothing can wake him, now. We must wait until he recovers from forty-thousand years without rest before he can take over again.

"I don't... don't have... forty-thousand years. I don't even have... ah... forty minutes. I need to wake him now."

Uriel smiles. *'Tis impossible. Demons far smarter than thee have tried. They failed. Thou shalt, as well.*

"Haha... that's where... you're wrong. There are no other... demons... smarter than me. I'm the best. A genius. It's already over."

I blink slowly and inhale the pain. Everything hurts, but I must bear it. I'm the only one here who can save demonkind.

"Barbatos. Barbatos... wake up."

A minute passes.

No response.

Uriel laughs. *Haha... a valiant effort. If only someone had thought to command the Duke to stop sleeping, perhaps they'd have saved millions of bloodskin lives!*

I ignore Uriel's sarcasm.

Opening my eyes, I turn to my body, standing rigidly, its palm held in midair. I look like a mannequin.

It takes me a moment to focus, but I pull out of Uriel's mind and return to mine.

Something hits me across the face. Uriel's fist. She waited for me to leave.

Again and again, she hits me. I can barely perceive my surroundings. The excruciating shock from Barbatos's body lingers like a phantom pain in my mind, turning my movements sluggish.

Uriel continues to batter me against the ground. Surprisingly, I can't feel her fists anymore. It doesn't hurt. She was right. Nothing compares to their shared agony.

The Archangel laughs. "Hahahaha!!! Fall to pieces, bloodskin fiend! What's the matter? Did my agony rip thy soul apart? Can't move a muscle anymore?!"

I smile, even as her fist strikes me again. *That's right. It did. I'll never think of pain in the same way again.*

Raising a palm, I make a single sign. My body transmits out of Uriel's grasp, and I appear fifty feet away next to a puddle of water. Glancing down, I stare in surprise at my face. Cuts, bruises, and lacerations cover every inch of my once-beautiful figure. The Archangel didn't hold back.

However, my face doesn't hurt. Nothing does. I've lost my ability to perceive pain.

The sound of something rushing at me from behind stirs my instincts. I duck a spear of light as Uriel swings at my neck. Pirouetting on my high-heel, I spin around and grab the Archangel by the face.

"Mgmm?!"

Her word of protest almost makes me laugh. A thousand volts of electricity shoot from my hands into her eye sockets, making her leap back and clutch at her face.

"Ahhh!! Ye damned-"

I interrupt her. "You said nothing hurts you anymore, Uriel. You're wrong. I heard your scream of pain earlier. You're going to all this effort to dissipate my electricity. Why is that, I wonder?"

She clutches her face for several seconds. When she pulls her hands away, I shrink back slightly. Her eyeballs, now completely melted, give her hideous visage an even more frightening appearance than before.

Jackpot! Uriel did have a weak spot after all.

"Nnn... my eyes... I can't see..."

"Electricity isn't like other elements. Your brain uses neuro-transmitters to send signals all across the body. It's your greatest weakness, and you know it."

The Archangel breathes heavily for a few moments. "Haah... haah... thou must think thyself quite the overachiever."

"Yes. I am, but enough small-talk. It's time for Barbatos to return, little miss Archangel. You've controlled him long enough."

Uriel quickly forms signs. Healing water appears in midair. She splashes it into her eyes, and I smile. "That was exactly what you shouldn't have done."

I transmit beside her and grab both sides of her head. Using every ounce of electrical power in my body, I blast apart the soil surrounding her skull and pour electricity into Uriel's brain. Her teeth grind together, and her limbs spasm wildly.

"AHHHHH!!"

Uriel shrieks in agony. She tries to grab me, but her body seizes up, unable to counteract my electricity.

Heat builds between my hands and her skin. The temperature rapidly climbs to several hundred degrees.

"Barbatos! Wake up! WAKE UP!"

I scream into the Duke's ear as loudly as possible. The demon-angel hybrid goes limp in my grip, but I keep the current going for several seconds longer.

Finally, I release her and hop away.

Barbatos's body slumps forward and flops to the ground. His jaw hangs open, and a wave of drool spills out. Smoke pours from his ears, nose, and mouth.

All goes silent.

Swallowing, I kneel to get a better look at the big guy.

I... I think I killed him.

"Uhh."

A sound comes out of his mouth.

"Barbatos? Uriel? Which of you is in there?"

"Muhh..."

Now that Barbatos's eyes have healed, he slowly raises them to look at me.

"Os... Ose..."

I narrow my gaze. "Who are you?"

The demon's two blood-red orbs smolder like coal in a fireplace.

"I'm... Art... Artor... ias."

Recommended Listening

Darkness. Fire. Hellfire.

An eternity passes. Every piece of myself scatters across the cosmos. I'm no longer an individual, but a million people — a billion.

Where am I?

Who am I?

What is my purpose?

I don't know.

Ah. A light. I see it. It sits in the sky before me, yet its warmth spreads across the cosmos. The heat warms me from the inside out.

I love heat. Warmth. Fire. It giveth life, and it taketh away. Life began in a primordial soup of fire and thunder, yet that same heat can burn it away. Sear it to ash.

The light draws nearer. I reach out and touch it with a hand. My hand. I forgot what a body was. Perhaps, an eternity ago, I was not a scattering of consciousness spread across the cosmos, but an individual — a person.

A demon.

Yes. That's right. Me. A demon. I remember now. Beelzebub. That was my name. Why am I here, in the Void? Am I dead?

The Archangel. Uriel. I intended to kill her. I detonated my body. I regret nothing. I had to kill her, no matter the cost. The other demons will remember me with fondness. "He sacrificed himself to save us," they will say.

Wait. Who's there?

A voice. I hear someone.

Beelzebub.

"Who are you?"

I am the One. The Alpha. The Omega. The Creator.

His voice. Hers. It's rapturous. Sweet and sensual, like honey in my ears.

"Creator. Why can I hear you?"

You can because you must. Your time is not up. You have a task you must perform. There is yet a role you must play.

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

You devoted your life to selfishness and greed. You were arrogant. Condescending. You treated those around you like dirt. In every meaning of the word... you were a complete and utter asshole.

I stare at the light in surprise. "Wow. You don't hold back, do you?"

I mean, you were the worst. I don't think I've seen many beings more irredeemably terrible and awful than you. Seriously, do you get off on stomping others into the dirt? Have you not a shred of decency in your body?!

"Um."

Ah, sorry. I lost track of my thoughts.

"It's... fine. I get it. You think I'm terrible. You want me to change. That's the condition for my return, right?"

Hm? No! No, heavens no. Haha. No. Definitely not. No.

"I'm confused."

Same. Look, I'm going to keep it real for you, okay? I'll make this nice and simple. You have a part to play. I'm not saying you need to change. It isn't a condition for your return, but you're going to be unhappy and ruin the lives of those around you if you keep your assholery up.

"Uh. Okay."

Yeah. I want you to know, Beelzebub, despite your life and the tribulations you've faced, you're not the same demon you used to be. You're stronger, now. Faster. Smarter. You have a chance to make a difference. Don't make the universe worse than it already is. There are enough assholes out there. It took me a while to get rid of Satan. I don't want to deal with another troublemaker.

I sigh.

"Haah. I understand. So that's how it is. Very well. If you allow me to return to my original form, I'll promise to try and be a better person. Does that work for you?"

Sure does. Fo'shizzle.

"Excuse me?"

Nothing. A slip of the tongue. Oh, by the way, I'm not the one returning you to your body. That was already happening thanks to your powers. I just wanted to say hello. I don't have any magic left anymore. I exhausted it a long time ago.

"What? You tricked me?!"

Yeah, kinda. Anyway, you promised me you'd be a good boy. Sayonara! Have a good one, old buddy old pal!~

"No! Screw you! I can't believe you're the Creator! I hate you! You stupid old-"

Suddenly, the light disappears. A vortex sucks me from the cosmos. Searing, white-hot light pummels every inch of my body.

"AAAAAAAAAAHH!!!"

I scream into the void.

* * *

"Mister Beelzebub! Mister Beelzebub!"

A woman's voice awakens me. I close my mouth and sit up. Sweat pours down my body.

I'm alive.

Turning to my left, I spot the darkened shadow of Rosalia's face. Tears stream from her eyes. "Oh, my devils! I can't believe it! You finally stopped!!"

"Stuh... stopped? Huh?"

"Stopped screaming! You've been screaming and thrashing for three days straight! It was horrible!!"

I finally turn to take in the scene around me. I'm in a darkened room, lying on a stone cot. The walls press in on both sides. A torch attached to a wall provides the only light, and it barely gives any at all.

Ah. The Healing Chambers. I recognize this room now.

My heart skips a beat. "Ah! Uriel! Where did she-"

I freeze mid-sentence. Horrible, burning pain explodes in my mind. Only now do I notice the pain I've suppressed for the last few seconds. Fire belches from my mouth. "AAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

"Oh no! Not again!!" Rosalia ducks a wave of fire as I clutch myself and try to repress the flames boiling in my stomach.

I lower my eyes and gaze in horror at my body. My red skin hangs onto my bones by only a few threads. My arms are misshapen and deformed, as are my legs. My body has regrown, but it belongs to someone else, not me!

I force myself to stay quiet by clamping my jaw shut and pouring fire through my nose.

F-focus. Think. It's only pain. Slow it down. Heal. Regenerate. I... I need to concentrate. That's all!

After several minutes, the pain slows to a crawl. My open wounds begin to seal, and the blood stops flowing from them. My bed, still drenched in a hundred secretions, sticks to my skin and smells something terrible.

Rosalia peeps up from the side of the bed. "Are... are you okay, Mister Beelzebub?"

I close my eyes and slow my breathing. It takes me several minutes to respond, but finally, after resetting my body to its original condition, I slide off the bed and stumble against the wall.

"I'm... I'm fine. Just... had to heal. That's all."

Haha. The Creator must be a practical joker. Returning me in such a pitiful state. I can't believe people saw me in such a condition. I'll never live it down.

"Yay!" Rosalia jumps to her feet and wraps her arms around me. "You're back! I'm sooo glad! After we found out you exploded yourself we found your body in a giant crater and you were screaming and rolling around on the ground but Ose helped control your powers until we could get you to the Healing Chambers oh and then there was the fight against Uriel it turns out she had another person in her head named Artorias and he's really nice he used healing water to try and heal some of your skin even though you kept exploding anytime he touched you so he had to give up but it was no big deal because he's a cool demon and we're waiting for Barbatos to pop up again but Uriel hasn't shown up at all in his thoughts for over three days so the Labyrinth isn't in crisis anymore ahh I'm so glad you're back though I missed you and didn't sleep at all while I waited for you to come back because-"

"ALRIGHT, ROSALIA!" I quickly shove the woman off me. Fire explodes from my body. "For devil's sake! Stop yammering on with that awful voice of yours! I've barely been awake for ten minutes! You can tell me all that later!"

She smiles at me giddily. "I love you, Mister Beelzebub! I'm so glad you woke up!"

"Yes. You said that ten times already. Now... where are my clothes?"

She cocks her head. "I hung them up yesterday, but you exploded and burned them to ash. Besides, I don't mind if you're... um... naked."

"I *do*, you damned cow." More flames shoot out of my armpits. I stop and glance at the embers occasionally leaking through my skin. "Hmm. I can't control my magic. It's shooting off randomly."

"Well, you exploded your entire body. It's probably having issues for now, but they'll go away. You'll learn to control the fire again. You always do!"

"Yes, true. Praise me more."

I glance around for something to cover myself. A towel, anything. The only thing I find is an empty bedpan.

It'll have to do.

I grab it and press it against my front. "Come, Rosalia. We're returning to Hell Harbor. I need to find out what happened. Explain to me on the way."

"We? You mean, both of us?"

"Yes. Why? Does that surprise you?"

"You always said you were going to leave me behind, but I knew your heart wasn't in it!"

"Devil's sake. Just shut up and come along."

As I push past her and shove aside the animal-skin covering the doorway, Rosalia falls into step beside me.

"I'm glad you're back, Mister Beelzebub. Really."

I sigh.

"I am, too."

Part 076: Mindgame

"Return."

My body materializes inside the Labyrinth Core. Teleporting often tends to disorient me, but this time is different. I barely notice the difference in air pressure.

The moment I arrive, a Goblin sitting in front of a nearby console turns and gapes at me. "Ah! You're back!"

"Yeah."

"Holy shit! Everyone's been waiting for you! I... I gotta tell 'em! GUYS! GUYS! Hope is back! He made it out alive!!"

The little guy jumps onto the computer's console to get some height. He yells and waves his arms, and within a minute, several hundred monsters and humans rush over to crowd around me.

"Did you beat the Archangel?"

"He doesn't have a scratch on 'im!"

"That's our Hope! He makes it look easy!"

"We gotta tell Neil!"

Goblins, Harpies, and even a few Salamanders chatter excitedly. The humans are less excited but much more relieved. A black-haired youth, Henry, rests his hand on my shoulder. "Samantha appeared in the Core and told us what happened. She's at the hospital and is receiving treatment for radiation sickness if you want to go see her."

I stare at him for a moment. "Yeah, sure, maybe later."

Uriel's vision still lingers in my mind. Samantha's betrayal. A shapeshifter who infiltrated the enemy and tore them apart from the inside-out.

Now she's in our ranks. She claims to be on Phoebe's side, but can we trust her?

I shake the worry out of my head. "Henry, where's Neil? I need to speak to him."

Henry nudges a kobold. "Where's the commander? Is he in his office?"

The kobold shakes his head. "Nah, he's inspecting those new armor thingamajigs. Over at Gate Three."

"Alright, thanks."

Henry and I pull away from the others and head toward the third gate. He looks me up and down. "So you fought the, err, demon... Archangel... person, huh?"

"I did. Our fight was brutal... in many ways. What did Samantha tell you?"

"From what I gathered, Neil grilled her for half an hour. She only shipped off to the hospital ten minutes ago after telling us what she could. How the heck did you survive an atomic explosion?"

"Luck, mostly. I made a barrier to protect us in the nick of time."

"Well, good on you, then."

Our boots rap against the stone floor, and as the third gate comes into view, the sound of lumbering footsteps appear from nowhere. "Rabbit! You're back!"

I turn back and smile at the giant reptile towering over me. "Hey, Kar. I survived. Somehow."

Blinker flutters off his shoulder and zips over to poke my nose. "You're crazy! I can't believe you took on an Archangel all by yourself! Did you win? Lose?"

"Let's just say it ended in a stalemate," I say, keeping my tone diplomatic. "That's why I need to see Neil."

Kar rubs his scaly face. "Hurgh. Butterfly and I had to skip our honeymoon. Turtle and White-hair are working hard to make more of those armor systems. There's no time to rest when the demons are running amok."

"Sorry about the wedding."

Blinker lands on Kar's shoulder. "It's no big deal! I got to eat like FIVE crumbs! Do you know what that will do to my skinny little body?!"

Kar's scales redden slightly. "Nothing I would mind, my little Butterfly."

"Oh, Kar, you're the sweetest!"

I glance away from them, toward the portal. Immediately, I spot Neil wearing a T-REX. He and another officer poke and prod at it, chatting about something I can't make out.

Kar follows my gaze. "The commander was worried about you. He said it was reckless for you to rush off after the succubus without any backup."

"He's not wrong. Some crazy things happened."

"Oh?"

I glance at Henry and Blinker, then back to Kar. "I fought the Archangel to a stalemate. What bugs me is that after I spoke to her, I realized she wasn't in the wrong."

Henry crosses his arms. "What do you mean?"

"Her goal is to eradicate demonkind. She didn't seem to take any issue with monsters, and I quickly realized that she was an ally to humanity. Look, don't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you guys, okay? I need to talk to Neil first."

Kar's expression turns solemn. "I would never tattle on a bosom brother. This little lady here, though..." He pokes Blinker with his thumb.

She swats him back. "Hey! Whaddya mean by that!"

My smile turns anxious. "I don't know how to say this gently, so I'll be blunt. I found out that at the end of the Energy Wars, demonkind killed all of the angels at once. Humans lost the war, and human

leaders agreed to enslave our people at the hands of the demons. Someone sold out humanity to our enemies."

Kar doesn't display any emotion. "I've always suspected as much."

Henry, however, looks mildly disturbed. "Someone sold us out?"

"A long time ago, Henry. A hundred thousand years or so. It didn't happen yesterday."

"Wow." Henry wipes sweat from his forehead. "Did... did you learn anything else?"

My memory returns to Samantha. The infiltrator. The shapeshifter.

I can't tell the others about her just yet. Not until I talk to Neil.

I shake my head. "Not much else worth mentioning. Uriel did tell me about how the demons imprisoned her inside of Barbatos's body. She had no way to escape, and could only watch as the demons genocided her people. Frankly, I think she has every right to seek revenge. I didn't help her, but I didn't stop her either."

A flash of anger crosses Henry's face. "Damn right. I'd have done the same. It was a demon who killed Piper. They're all brutal murderers in my eyes."

Kar appears less certain. "I don't know, Rabbit. Many atrocities happen over the course of several lifetimes. Gouging out the eyes from an enemy who takes our vision only leaves both of us blind."

"It sure feels good though," Henry counters. "Fair is fair."

Blinker nods. "I agree. If someone hurts Kar, I'm gonna snap 'em in half! You don't wanna see me when I'm angry! I start shedding dust! It's ugly!"

I thumb toward Neil. "I'm gonna chat with the commander. Thanks for listening."

"Any time, Rabbit."

I frown. "By the way, why that nickname?"

"I call people by titles appropriate to their true selves. Since you are the opposite of Turtle, you are Rabbit."

Kar's explanation doesn't help. I'm even more confused. "How am I his opposite? We're 99% identical, even on a cellular level."

The Sphinx shakes his head. "To me, the differences are as plain as night and day. I can easily tell you apart. Turtle is slow and methodical. You are quick-thinking and a risk-taker. Hundreds of other discrepancies appear if one looks for them. You might be Turtle's clone, but you are an individual who lives his life differently. Don't let others bog you down with physical similarities."

Slowly, I narrow my gaze. "Were you always this eloquent?"

"Perhaps not. Absorbing the power of the Sphinx may have... altered me... somewhat. You appear very different now compared to when you left the wedding. Have you undergone a change, little Rabbit?"

"Nope. I'm the same as ever. Haha..." I let out a quiet laugh, even as I remember the awakening of Centurion inside my body.

It's best I don't tell the others about that, just yet. Maybe I can still get the nanites out.

Kar shrugs. "I am wrong more often than I am right."

"That's for sure," Blinker snarks.

* * *

A minute later, I leave the other three behind and head toward Neil. He swivels on his heel to face me before I can catch his attention. "Hope! You're back!"

"Yeah. Sorry I ran off like that. Super irresponsible of me."

The commander waves away his lieutenant and swaggers over to me. "No problem at all. Frankly, I'm glad you went, rather than Jason."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're a bit more practical than your doppelganger." Neil winks and wraps his arm around my shoulder. The instant he touches me, he frowns and pulls away. "By the gods! What's wrong with your skin? It feels like metal!"

"Uh... it's a bit of a story. Can we talk? Somewhere private."

Neil's smile evaporates. "Did something happen?"

"Yes. Where's Jason?"

"I don't know." Neil rubs his nose. "Last I heard, he was headed to the hospital with Phoebe to see the succubus. Did you need to talk to him?"

"No. I want to avoid Jason for the moment. I don't know how he'll react. Can we go somewhere more private? "

The Commander doesn't hesitate. "Sure. Let's go to my new favorite inn. I'm tired of sitting in my office."

"As long as it's private."

"Trust me. It is."

Trees zip past us as Phoebe cruises down the path toward the Core. While I sit in the passenger seat, Samantha sits directly behind me in the backseat.

"I wonder if Hope is alright?" Samantha asks absentmindedly. I catch a glimpse of her leaning against her window and staring out at the trees via my rearview mirror. "Uriel beat the tar out of me. It's hard to imagine that Hope could deal with her after his armor system broke down."

Phoebe flicks her gaze to Samantha for a moment before returning to the road. "It did?"

"Yeah. He couldn't activate his armor-device again. He mentioned something about nanites."

I stroke my chin. The power of the crown provides a thousand possibilities for what happened. "You said Uriel erected a barrier at the last second, right?"

"Mhm."

"Maybe the radiation from the blast affected the T-REX's electronics. All that matters is Hope is back, and he's alive. I'll heal whatever injuries he has."

The military facility appears not far in the distance as we exit the forest cover, along with the warp-gate to the Core. A few harpies flying overhead wave at us. I wave back.

"Yeah, he mentioned something about radiation. I don't understand it, though."

"Mmm. Are demons bad with technology in general?"

Samantha shifts in her seat. "Yeah. Terrible. I can't operate the toaster you made for me. Too many buttons. A few demons are pretty good with technology, but we mostly rely on the monsters to do that stuff."

"Yeah? Why are monsters good with gadgets and gizmos?"

A long pause follows.

"I don't know, Jason. That's the way it's always worked."

"Fair enough."

We continue onward in silence for a few minutes. Phoebe pulls up to the front gate, and the soldiers wave us through. Several of them nod and smile at her. They always do. Everyone loves Phoebe.

Once we drive through the warp-gate, Phoebe slows her truck to a stop on the newly installed vehicle platform. A device spins us around and moves to the side, out of the way of supply vehicles and pedestrians.

Phoebe looks left and right. "I don't see Hope. Can you use your magic to find him?"

"Sure. **Locate.**"

My mind exits my body and hunts all around the Core for Hope. Within two moments, I frown. *He's not here.*

After several seconds, I jump through a portal to another world, Maiura. I travel dozens of miles almost instantly, and my mind materializes inside a tavern where Hope and Neil sit off in a corner by themselves. I start to pull away since I don't like intruding on private conversations, but Hope says something that catches my attention.

"Yeah. She's a shape-shifter. She can mimic anyone's appearance. I never realized. How can we trust someone like that?"

I decide to listen.

A waitress walks over and puts two big glass mugs of beer down. Neil grabs one without hesitation and hands the other to Hope. "Here. You need one of these."

Hope stares at it for a moment before shrugging. "Yeah. This time, at least. Christ. How am I going to tell Jason? She stuck the knife in Uriel's back and twisted. Trusting a demon is hard enough, but a shape-shifting succubus?"

My heart flip-flops.

They're talking about... Samantha...?

Neil nods. "Succubi can manipulate the emotions and feelings of the opposite sex. It's like I warned you, Hope. She's twice as dangerous now that you've told me about her past. On top of manipulating my men, she could be plotting to kill me and take over my position. Or you. Or Jason. Hell, even Phoebe."

"I don't know if I'd go that far."

"I know what you're thinking. People can change. Hell, even demons can change. Look at Paimon. Until that bastard, Lorvos, gutted him, Paimon was our guy. I wouldn't want to suspect the demon female just because of some vision from an archangel."

"Right. That's my point. Think of how devastated Phoebe and Jason would feel if we just walked up and said, 'Yo, we think your succubus friend is plotting to take over the Core.' They'd call us conspiracy theorists."

"Mmm." Neil and Hope both pause to swig their beers. I raise an eye at Hope. When did he start drinking alcohol? I hate the taste. If he's my clone, shouldn't he hate it, too?

No, that's not important. It's irrelevant how Hope wants to unwind. The bigger issue is what he said about Samantha. Shit. Now that I've overheard him, how can I bring it up without him realizing I spied on him? It wouldn't be right.

Christ. I'm the worst. I can't keep listening. I should stop.

Neil smiles at Hope. "By the way, I know you were a little depressed at the wedding. It was written all over your face."

"Aw, Neil. It's no big deal. I'm happy for Jason and Phoebe. They deserve each other."

"Sure, sure. But you need to think about yourself. Did I ever introduce you to my assistant, Debra? She sometimes pops over at the Rust Bucket."

"Uh, I dunno. Maybe once or twice."

"Great! Well, she has this cute sister. Single. Why don't you let me introduce you to her sometime? I think you'll like her..."

Feeling uncomfortable with what I'm hearing, I retract my mind to my body.

When I open my eyes, my heart jolts in surprise when I spot Phoebe's face mere inches from mine. She quickly pulls away, blushing. "Oh! You left us for a while! Several minutes! Did you find Hope?"

I blink. "...Yeah. He was... busy."

My eyes travel to my rearview mirror. Samantha's gaze meets mine. "Was Hope okay, Jason?"

"Yup. Fantastic. Looked like the picture of health. Probably healed himself with Wordsmithing. I think it's fine for us to give him some time alone."

Phoebe cocks her head. "Huh? We just got here! I didn't drive for thirty minutes just to waste my time driving back!"

"Phoebe..." I start to protest, only to realize that doing so would mean I'd need to mention what I saw. "Well, okay, fine. Let's jump out and say hi to the Core personnel. Are you okay to walk?"

"I'm only two weeks pregnant. I think I'll manage."

"Right. Sorry."

When we get out of the truck, I turn to Samantha as she slams her door shut. "Say... I had a question..."

"Hmm? About what?"

"It's... well, about the, err..." I pause, unsure how to bring up her ability to shape-shift. *What if it isn't true? What if it is? Maybe nobody else knows, yet. I can't just ask her such a random question out of the blue! Crap! Jason, you idiot!*

I open and close my mouth for a few moments. Phoebe rounds the truck and grabs my arm. "Jason... stop gawking. She might be a succubus, but you'll make her feel self-conscious if you stare."

"No- I didn't mean anything like that!"

Samantha blushes. "Look, if you're having weird thoughts..."

"I just wanted to ask about your, um, horns!"

"My horns?"

"Yeah. Is it true that demon horns get bigger the more powerful they are?"

Samantha crosses her arms. "Well *yeah*. It's not exactly a secret. I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"N-never mind."

My face turns beet-red. *At least I didn't ask Samantha about the shape-shifting. I'll ask Phoebe about it later. Privately.*

A young man approaches us, interrupting my awkward dorkiness. "Hey, uh, Mister and Miss Hiro? Do you guys have a moment?"

It feels weird hearing Phoebe referred to by my last name. I'll have to get used to it.

Phoebe nods. "Oh, sure, Henry. What's the matter?"

"Nothing urgent. I was hoping to wait for the Commander to come back. A kobold tech discovered a bunch of files while he was flipping through the planetary databases. They're locked, and nobody can decrypt them. Not even Kar."

"I thought Bahamut's passwords unlocked everything in the system."

"They did. We can see what the files are, but nobody has any idea what they say. We don't understand the language."

"Okay. I can help with that. Show me." I tap the Crown to emphasize, but the youth doesn't seem to understand. Most people don't know what Solomon's artifact can do.

A minute later, the two ladies, plus Henry and I, all walk over to a large terminal built into the wall. A dozen screens list off numbers, coordinates, and a bunch of other miscellaneous things, but the one at the bottom right catches my attention.

A crudely drawn error message appears onscreen. I only know it's an error message because of the way it's flashing and how it looks like a warning.

Immediately the Crown gets to work. The words appear in my mind.

GHA'NUNG. SHATA RUFTAT A'A 'ATS'UTHSAG SU GIAKA-THFTATT GANUNT U' HUGHHA'. IANAIAASHU'UCTHAG 'UAGHUNG UT AGAUNTS GANUN FTAGH. L'UTHAAG AS XUIA' UGHN 'UTK.

I can read the words, but I have no idea what they mean. They come off as gibberish.

A moment later, the Crown translates them.

WARNING. THESE FILES ARE RESTRICTED TO DUKE-CLASS DEMONS OR HIGHER. UNAUTHORIZED VIEWING IS AGAINST DEMON LAW. PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK.

I rub my eyes. The language hurts my head. It's awful. Nothing on Earth resembles it.

I wonder what language it is?

Someone touches my arm. I glance back to see Samantha staring at me. She doesn't blink. "Jason. Can you read that?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Her eyes widen. "You've gone far enough. You don't need to see anything else."

Instantly, I feel more alert. Warning bells sound in my head. *The files are restricted to Duke-class demons or higher. Samantha is an Emperor. Holy shit. She can read the language too.*

I keep my tone diplomatic. "You know what this warning is?"

She licks her lips and glances at Phoebe. "I do. Don't pry any further."

"I'm human. Telling me not to look at something makes me want to look even harder."

"I know. That's the best and worst thing about humans. Trust me. I'm not saying this for no reason."

Slowly, I lift my chin and peer down at her. Several memories click into place.

Shapeshifter.

Manipulator.

Backstabber.

Succubus.

Emperor.

Have I been blind? Have I ignored the signs? Samantha is the wife of Satan the Devil. If Hope is correct, then she had something to do with the death of the angels. She can shapeshift and manipulate the minds of men.

"If I decide to look, what will you do?"

Samantha immediately notices the suspicion in my eyes. She takes a step back, as if I've wounded her. "Nothing. I'm not going to fight you over it, Jason. I'm not your enemy. I'm trying to help."

Phoebe pulls on my sleeve. "Jason, what's wrong? You're giving Sammy a weird look."

I set my jaw. "A lot of puzzle pieces seem to be falling into place. Samantha, you can shapeshift, can't you?"

The succubus raises an eyebrow. "Um, yes. Why? What are you getting at?"

"Yeah, Jason. What *are* you getting at?" Phoebe walks over to Samantha's side and glowers at me. "This isn't like you. Not at all."

"I'm wondering why the Second Emperor of the demons joined us, and what she has to gain. I never questioned her motivations until now. If I'm wrong, then I'll deal with the consequences. But... if I'm right... then we might have one hell of a mole in our midst."

Samantha stares at me in shock for a few moments. "I... I never meant... anything negative. I'm trying to help!"

"Help who? Me? Phoebe? Humanity? Monsters? Demons? Why don't you want me to view these files?"

Phoebe looks at Samantha. Samantha looks away, guilt in her eyes. "I can't say. Jason... demons aren't the biggest threat. They never were. If I say anything else, I'll be breaking a law that has governed our people for a hundred thousand-"

"I don't care about your demon laws," I reply, cutting her off. "Knowledge is power. By saying I shouldn't look at these files, you're denying humanity some level of power against the demons. Whose side are you on?"

"Jason!" Phoebe starts to put her hand on Samantha's shoulder. The succubus pulls away — her lip quivers. A single tear falls down her cheek.

"It's always *sides* with men. You only think about war! And death! Conquest! I'm on nobody's side; I'm on everyone's side! I... I just wanted peace! Do whatever you want! View the files, then! I don't care!!"

She glares daggers at me, then rushes away, moving so fast that Phoebe trips over her afterimage. My wife stumbles and bangs her knee. "Gah! Hell, Jason! What are you thinking? Samantha's supposed to be our friend! MY friend!"

I rub my face, unsure of what to do. Henry's soft footsteps move a foot or two away. He doesn't want to be near me.

"I don't know, Phoebe! All I know is that Samantha is acting very suspicious. Tears or not, I don't like it when people lie to me."

"There was a better way to confront her if you had issues, Jason. Now, look what you've done. You've hurt an innocent woman's heart."

"I'm not so sure she's innocent."

Phoebe stares at me for a few moments, then turns away. "I'm going to find Sammy."

"Wait, Phoebe. She might be dangerous."

"Piss off. Enjoy whatever's on that computer. I want nothing to do with it."

She staggers to her feet, rubs her knee, and storms off.

A drop of sweat runs down Henry's head. "Um."

"Yes, I'm still going to look at the files, Henry. Don't even ask. After what just happened, I might as well. Hopefully, we'll find something worthwhile."

Turning away, I stare at the screen. My vision shakes slightly, and I wipe a tear away. *What kind of idiot yells at his wife's best friend? What the hell is wrong with me?*

Ignoring the maelstrom of stupidity swirling around in my head, I return my gaze to the warning message, which has yet to disappear. Hundreds of words sit in the background behind the warning, but at a much smaller font. With the giant red warning obscuring them, I can't make out exactly what they say, but they look interesting.

I lean over and tap on the monitor, but nothing happens. Solomon's Crown activates. A dozen tiny dots scattered across the screen catch my eye, each positioned in a different area. When I look at each one, I notice that they form a star-pattern, and at the center, I spot a slight blemish on the screen.

A button I didn't see before, shaped like a punctuation mark, reveals itself under my intense scrutiny.

I press it.

An entirely new window appears, with a barebones file explorer made of circles and dots. The strange language outlines each file and what it can do.

I press the first one I see. *ABERRANT CONTAINMENT*.

A message pops up. *ERROR. DATA CORRUPTION DETECTED*.

"Oh. Isn't that swell."

Henry doesn't say anything. I glance at the next button. *ESTABLISHMENT OF THE OVERLORD PROTOCOL*.

Looks interesting. I press it. The screen changes again. A massive wall of text appears, along with a bold headline at the top.

DEMON AND VOLGRIM CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT - CIRCA 4417 A.D.

* * *

What the fuck is a Volgrim?

Part 077: Treaty, Traitor, Terror

I frown in annoyance. *The heater in Neil's SUV isn't working. It's freezing cold outside.*

Neil and I drive toward Meldora, the city on Maiura I liberated not even a week ago, and the harsh bite of a snowstorm chews through the rig's steel-clad exterior, chilling the inside of the car. Maiura's weather cycle can be described as chaotic at best, and already we're experiencing its worst days.

I rub my arm as I drive. Centurion speaks to me inside my mind. *PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR, YOUR BODILY TEMPERATURE IS FOUR DEGREES BELOW OPTIMAL LEVELS. WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO REDUCE MY THERMAL DAMPENING?*

I speak out loud. "You can do that?"

AFFIRMATIVE.

"Don't bother. **Warm.**"

The temperature in the car increases noticeably. Neil glances at me and shivers. "Who are you talking to?"

"It's a long story, Neil. You interrogated Samantha upon her return, right?"

"Mhm."

"Well, I was wearing Phoebe's new nanosuit when Beelzebub detonated his body. I don't know exactly what happened, but the radiation must have embedded the suit's nanites into my bloodstream. I can hear Centurion in my mind."

Neil purses his lips. "I see. So the reason your shoulder felt like steel was..."

"The nanites hardened my skin. It's as if I'm always wearing the suit. It gave me a bunch of other perks too. The downside is that I had to suffer radiation poisoning to wear it."

Centurion replies. *NEGATIVE. THIS CENTURION UNIT HAS SCRUBBED ALL CANCEROUS CELLS FROM PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR'S BODY. PILOT ZERO ZERO FOUR IS RUNNING AT 100% EFFICIENCY.*

I blink. "Uh. Never mind."

"Never mind, what?"

"Centurion healed me. I thought I'd need Jason and the Crown to purge the radiation from my body. It's my lucky day."

Neil loosens his suit collar. "So you say. How are you holding up? I mean, you fought an Archangel. That couldn't have been easy."

"It wasn't. Uriel nearly beat me several times. I stripped her powers away with my Wordsmithing, and even then, her melee combat skills were ridiculous."

"You can do that? Remove someone's magic?"

"Apparently."

A moment passes. Neil glances out the window at the sea of snow surrounding us. The capital city of Meldora looms in the distance. It's a tiny village compared to Hero City, but still the most populated settlement on Maiura. The torches at its gates signal the watchful eye of its few remaining soldiers.

"Have you told Jason about this newfound aspect of Wordsmithing?"

"Nope. I wanted to talk to you first."

"Good. That's very good." Neil says. He eases back in his seat and smiles. "You're advancing quickly. It wasn't long ago that Jason barely held his own against the First Emperor of the demons and the Black Queen, and now you're beating an Archangel without any help."

"Technically, Samantha was there. She did a bit of damage."

"Sure, but you sent her away to face the enemy alone. That was brave of you."

I hesitate. A few thoughts rustle under the surface, making me wonder how I should respond.

"I only wanted to protect Belial. She might be an Emperor, but the matchup against Uriel's powers was uneven."

"Protecting those weaker than you is admirable as well."

"Thanks."

"Mhm."

Meldora draws ever closer. Soon it's only half a mile away. I can faintly make out the torches of men standing in the snow, peering at our vehicle.

"I let Uriel go."

"Oh? Why?"

"She showed me a vision. An image of the past. Something revolving around the demons and how they attacked Heaven. I believe her grievances were... legitimate."

Neil stares ahead stonily. "Do you think you did the right thing by walking away?"

"Kinda. I don't know. I even opened a portal to Hell Harbor to give her access to the demon homeworld. I didn't know that was even a place until she told me."

"Why didn't you go with her if you thought she was doing the right thing?"

The city gate comes into view, and Meldora's soldiers barely give us a once-over before letting us through. The poor men are freezing alive. As we drive past, I speak a word of power to warm their bones and dry their clothes. The feeling might not last long, but it's the least I can do.

I drive further into the city and slow to a crawl as I scan for people walking in the road. Given the hellish sleet falling from the sky, I'm not surprised by the empty streets as far as the eye can see.

"Like I said. Uriel's grievance seems legitimate... but it isn't mine. The demons didn't do those awful things to me."

Neil's voice softens. "But they did. By annihilating the angels and gods, the demons won the war and enslaved humanity. I think you should have helped her kill as many of the bastards as humanly possible. It's only my opinion, though."

"I don't like killing, Neil. Not unless I have to."

"So you say. Ah, right there. That building." Neil gestures toward a wooden structure covered in snow. Smoke belches from a chimney above, while light shines through the windows. "That's the place."

"Doesn't look like much. Pretty small."

"Yeah, you're not wrong. However, after all the killing those orcs did, Meldora is a bit of a ghost town. We'll have lots of privacy inside."

Neil and I hop out, and the bitter cold plunges through my veins like a hundred daggers. Wind beats my face, and snow batters our car.

I shout over the wind. "Christ! Why couldn't you have picked a pub in a nice, warm, tropical location?!"

"Haha! Because everyone would be there!" Neil replies.

I ignore Centurion's second offer to warm my body. The ten feet to the door takes longer than I'd like, and by the time we step inside, my boots are already waterlogged.

Neil slams the door shut behind us. The pub is empty, save one man sitting at the counter, his legs propped up on the stool beside him. He looks at us as we enter. "Oh? Does ye need a drink in this storm? Be ye humans or demons, laddies?"

"Human. Very, very human," Neil says.

"Take a seat then. I'll have the missus pop over in a jiffy."

"Sure."

Neil gestures to a spot off in the corner. The warmth of the fireplace next to the booth feels amazing. As soon as we sit down, I Wordsmith for Neil and I both. **"Dry. Warm. Clean."**

Our clothes and bodies flash-clean themselves. Neil glances at his boots, which are now in mint condition. "Damn. Not bad. I could get used to this."

"I find my magic hard to use, sometimes. Too many possibilities. The thought of all the effects my lips can unleash makes my head spin."

"Too many choices?"

"Exactly. I suffer from choice paralysis. There are so many ways I can Wordsmith that I can't wrap my mind around *what* to say."

"You thought of taking Uriel's powers when you fought her. That was clever."

My gaze wanders to a window behind Neil. From inside the pub, the snow looks almost pleasant, like something I'd see on a Christmas card back home.

"Sure, but I feel stupid for not thinking of it sooner. Or at least, for Jason not thinking of such a thing. It would have made battling Satan and his minions much easier."

"To say the least," Neil replies. "If you remove a demon's magic, they should become weak enough that even a slightly enhanced human can fight them on equal terms. Still, you shouldn't beat yourself up over it. Divorce yourself from Jason's actions and yours. You're two different people who do things uniquely."

"I keep telling myself that."

Both of us sit in silence for a few moments. Eventually, I break the ice. "Neil. Do you remember how I told you I let Uriel go? How she showed me a vision of the past?"

Neil barely reacts. "Sure. What about it?"

"Have you ever heard of the War in Heaven?"

"I have not."

"Me neither. It seems to have been a huge event." I rub my chin thoughtfully. "The demons launched an assault on the angels and gods. Uriel was the frontline soldier. She slew tens of thousands of demons and prevented them from entering a gate to Heaven, one similar to our warp-gates in the Core."

Neil smiles. "She sounds like a brave warrior."

"From what I saw, she was. Uriel stood against the horde all by herself. However... someone attacked her from behind. They, uh, stabbed her in the back and allowed the demons to pour through."

"Who?"

I don't hesitate. "Samantha. She's the one responsible for the demons killing off the angels."

Neil stares at me in surprise. "I expected you to say many names... but now I don't know what to think. That succubus was the backstabber?"

"Yeah. She's a shape-shifter. She can mimic anyone's appearance. I never realized. How can we trust someone like that?"

Before Neil can reply, the bar owner's wife comes over and plunks down two fat mugs of beer. She smiles sweetly at Neil, but he ignores her and continues to stare at me incredulously. The lady rolls her eyes and walks away.

The commander shoves one of the beers at me. "Here. You need one of these."

"Yeah. This time, at least. Christ. How am I going to tell Jason? She stuck the knife in Uriel's back and twisted. Trusting a demon is hard enough, but a shape-shifting succubus?"

Neil sips from his mug and averts his eyes from mine. "Succubi can manipulate the emotions and feelings of the opposite sex. It's like I warned you, Hope. She's twice as dangerous now that you've told me about her past. On top of manipulating my men, she could be plotting to kill me and take over my position. Or you. Or Jason. Hell, even Phoebe."

"I don't know if I'd go that far."

Neil's eyes lower to stare at the table. "I know what you're thinking. People can change. Hell, even demons can change. Look at Paimon. Until that bastard, Lorvos, gutted him, Paimon was our guy. I wouldn't want to suspect the demon female just because of some vision from an Archangel."

"Right. That's my point. Think of how devastated Phoebe and Jason would feel if we just walked up and said, 'Yo, we think your succubus friend is plotting to take over the Core.' They'd call us conspiracy theorists."

"Mmm." Neil and I pause to take a drink. The moment the liquid hits my tongue, a gagging reflex starts to take hold. Centurion yells in my mind. *WARNING! INVOLUNTARY EXPULSION REFLEX DETECTED! LIMITING THE EFFECTS OF TOXIC SUBSTANCE K3-11248. TOXIN NEUTRALIZED! NO ILL EFFECTS INCURRED!*

I stare at the beer silently. It tastes like water now. *Thanks, Centurion.*

Neil sets his glass down and smiles at my half-empty cup. "By the way, I know you were a little depressed at the wedding. It was all over your face."

I wave his concerns away. "Aw, Neil. It's no big deal. I'm happy for Jason and Phoebe. They deserve each other."

"Sure, sure. But you need to think about yourself. Did I ever introduce you to my assistant, Debra? She sometimes pops over at the Rust Bucket."

"Uh, I dunno. Maybe once or twice."

"Great! Well, she has this cute sister. Single. Why don't you let me introduce you to her sometime? I think you'll like her. Looks a bit like Amelia. Might help you get over your loss."

I release a long-held breath. "I'm fine, Neil. Thanks. I don't need a woman in my life right now."

"Shut up, you terrible liar, you." Neil laughs, shaking his head. "We ought to play poker sometime. I'd never lose to someone with such a poor poker-face."

"Don't be so sure," I counter. "I can always give myself a royal flush with Wordsmithing."

"Heh, *right*. If cheating is allowed, I'll have a look at your cards to even the playing field."

We both laugh at his little joke. Afterward, I finish off my beer in one big gulp. Centurion tells me it's nullified the alcohol content, so it appears I can't get drunk anymore. That's either good or bad, but I don't know which.

Neil sets his empty mug down. "Hope, I have to ask you... where do you think we should go from here?"

"I don't follow."

"The demons. They run everything. Holing up in the Core won't last us forever. If your suspicions about the succubus are right, then for all we know, the demons could be plotting to take us out in our sleep. We won't know what hit us."

I rub my chin thoughtfully. "If that was their intention, why wouldn't Samantha have finished us off after Beelzebub's attack?"

"I considered that very thought. But remember, the goal of the demons isn't to kill humans. They need to make an example out of us. We're supposed to be their food and their source of soul energy. If

Samantha- well, if Belial decided to kill us, it wouldn't prevent more humans from eventually rising to fight again."

"Sure. But the only reason humans can combat the demons is that Jason freed the best and brightest from Bahamut. He made the weaponry we use to stand half a chance against our oppressors. If she kills him and me, then..."

Suddenly something clicks in my mind.

"Holy shit, Neil. I just realized. If Jason and I die, humanity is doomed. That's not conceit speaking. Without our Wordsmithing, humans can't fight back against the demons."

Neil waggles a finger. "Not true. We can reach a point where humans have the technological prowess to stand against our enemies without assistance. The problem is that while the demons have gained power over a hundred thousand years, we've lost it. It will take a great deal of time to restore a sense of balance between the sides."

"I guess so. I'm not trying to make myself sound ultra-important, but I feel like the demons are going to target us, the Wordsmiths, eventually. If that happens, humanity loses."

"You're not wrong. That will certainly be the case for the foreseeable-"

Neil pauses. He frowns and reaches into his pocket to pull out a palm-sized square gadget. The little black box has a screen on it, and reminds me of something from Earth...

Ah. It's a pager. Err, why would Neil have one of those?

The commander glances at the small display on the front. "Son of a bitch. We finally sit down to talk, and someone messages me from camp. I guess we have to go."

"Is that a pager?"

"No clue. I asked Jason to make a device that would allow people to reach me anywhere. He created this. It uses magic to receive short messages."

"So... it's a magical pager."

"I suppose."

Sighing, I climb out of the booth. "Well, okay, then. Nothing to do about it. Let's go see what they want."

Henry and I lean forward and stare at the screen. A video begins to play. The quality is abysmal, with artifacts and glitches present. It's in color, but file degradation has rendered a lot of the information difficult to see.

"Repair."

I speak a word, and instantly the screen clears up.

The scene appears to be a barren, rocky planet. Several massive skyscrapers loom in the distance, but their designs are unlike anything I've seen before, made mostly of glass and metal. They twist into the sky

and form several ornate shapes. Very different from the tall rectangles on Earth.

A thousand demons stand, weapons and claws at the ready. Scythers, shadow-walkers, and a dozen other types all stand in a military formation and prepare to attack.

One demon I don't recognize stands in the front. He's a fellow with some facial hair and a nasty scar across his eye, and judging by his horns, he must be a Baron, possibly a Duke. He points toward a solitary hooded figure. "I've heard enough from you, paleskin. I won't allow my people to stay and cower in the Labyrinth for all eternity! I won't allow you to banish us so that you can take over the galaxy for yourselves!"

The figure's hooded face is impossible to make out. However, beneath his hood, I spot six faintly luminous eyes, arranged vertically in two rows across what must be his head.

The hooded figure 'speaks,' but his voice seems to come from everywhere, and not from the place I'd expect his mouth to be.

[Yuia knugh sha 'iaftat, ganun. Wa ha'a a s'aasx.]

The crown translates for me.

You know the rules, demon. We have a treaty.

The young demon takes a menacing step toward the mysterious figure. "I don't give a shit about your treaty. You lied to us! You gave us a few planets as a pittance, and kept the rest of the galaxy to yourselves! The demons and Volgrim were supposed to be allies! Equals!"

[Duat Duafttu knugh aftuias shut? Aftuias xuia'... untiaftu'gunasuun?]

Does Diablo know about this? About your... insubordination?

Another demon steps out of the crowd. She wears a sultry black robe that presses against her flesh. She slides up to the leader and wraps her arm around his. "We don't care about Diablo, do we, Lempo? Besides. Diablo agreed to the treaty without consulting the rest of our people. We want to rewrite the terms!"

The hooded figure's tone maintains its neutrality. [Tha sa'nt gha'a rau'. Yuia ha'a nu tax un sha nassa'. I ghuftft ru'gu'a shut ft'aathh ur ashutht... ftias unftx untha. Laa'a.]

The terms were fair. You have no say in the matter. I will forgive this breach of ethics... but only once. Leave.

The shrouded one turns his back on the demons and struts away. Lempo, the demon leader, grows noticeably angrier. "Hey!! I didn't say we were finished, you Volgrim filth! If you walk away, I'll consider this a declaration of WAR!!"

The figure pauses. He turns around and raises a hand. His skin is grey and mottled, and the six fingers tell me it doesn't belong to a human.

"Yuia ha'a nu aiashu'usx su gathfta'a gha'. Ir xuia a'a ft'a'a anuiagh su unthia' sha hutsuftusx ur nx laulfta, gha ghuftft 'aun ru'a ialun xuia."

You have no authority to declare war. If you are brave enough to incur the hostility of my people, we will rain fire upon you.

"So that's how it is, then?"

Lempo begins to weave signs with his hand. Before he can finish, a voice yells from the demon force's flank. "Lempo! Stop! What are you doing?"

I recognize the voice as Diablo's. The Emperor of Annihilation strides up, his black and red robes hanging off his body and trailing behind him all the while. Lempo ceases his incantation and quickly bows. "Emperor Diablo! I apologize. I did not mean for you to-"

"To get involved? To learn of your treachery?!" Diablo grabs Lempo by the shirt and slams him into the ground. "You little shit! How dare you stand with claws at the ready against our allies! I would kill you on the spot if it weren't for your rank!"

The younger demon growls. "I'm... I'm only doing what you refuse to! Stupid old man! The Volgrim are taking us for a ride! They scarcely give us a pittance while they take the lion's share of the galaxy! It isn't fair!"

Diablo freezes. He glances at the Volgrim standing thirty feet away. "I apologize for my subordinate's behavior. He doesn't know his place."

The Volgrim slowly places his hands together. [I an nus tu tha'saun. It shut sha ulunuun anung xuia' laulfta? Thas gha ha'a ftaan... ianrau?]

I am not so certain. Is this the opinion among your people? That we have been... unfair?

"Of course not. The humans have worlds to live on. We have the ever-expanding Labyrinth. We live comfortably."

"Lies!" Lempo struggles in Diablo's grasp. "We live like rats in the darkness, while the Volgrim live in towers of steel and glass! We helped them defeat the fleshbags! We should reap the reward!"

WHAM.

Diablo slaps the youth's face so hard the ground shakes. He instantly goes limp in Diablo's grip and offers no more resistance.

The Volgrim, however, doesn't miss the exchange. [I taa. Su shut ut sha ulunuun ur nanx un xuia' tuthuasx.]

I see. So this is the opinion of many in your society.

Diablo stands up straight. "No. A vocal minority. I'll take care of them. I'm... I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

The Volgrim bows his head. [An aluftugx utn's anuiagh. Thut ut sha tathung g'uial su thugh ial un sha ftats ru'a xaa't. Ir anusha' allaa't, sha Fuianga't ghuftft saka g'aas urranta.]

An apology isn't enough. This is the second group to show up in the last five years. If another appears, the Founders will take great offense.

A moment later, the female demon who grabbed Lempo earlier clutches her throat. All the demons behind her do as well. Every single one of the two-thousand demons, including Lempo, begin to wheeze and gasp, as though something was choking them with two thousand invisible hands.

Then... their heads explode.

The sounds of two-thousand fleshy balloons detonating makes my stomach churn. Henry grabs his mouth beside me and recoils from the screen in horror.

Their bodies flop to the ground. Only Diablo remains.

The Third Emperor stares silently at the Volgrim. "Damn you. I could have stopped them. You didn't have to use force."

[Anung nx laulftha, guttans ut lianuthag ftx gaash. Onftx shuta ghhu ag'aa ghush sha Fuianga't a'a aftftughag su ftu'a. Ir xuia ghuth su taa ragha' ur xuia' ruftsh gua ftuka shata sugax, shan xuia thuiaftg thuna ial ghush a tuftiasuun.]

Among my people, dissent is punished by death. Only those who agree with the Founders are allowed to live. If you wish to see fewer of your filth die like these today, then you should come up with a solution.

A bead of sweat rolls down Diablo's face. "Of... of course. I apologize for the trouble, Executor Nufaris. It won't happen again. I promise."

* * *

The video cuts off.

Henry stares in disgust at the screen. "What the hell was that? I've never seen two thousand heads explode at the same time."

"Can't say I have either. Christ. Whatever these Volgrim are, they're dangerous. Even Diablo looked spooked."

The young man wipes his face with his sleeve. "What was that one guy saying? His words made my head hurt."

"Nothing important. He threatened the demons and said some other stuff. More importantly, one of my biggest questions was answered today."

"Yeah? What's that?"

I tap my lip and turn to look at each of the warp-gates in the Core. "We've scoured the database of known planets. Every single one had humans living on it. If humans are the cattle for demons, then why do demons live inside the Labyrinth? Why don't they take the lush worlds and relegate humans to the dark corridors of Hell?"

"I don't know. Why not?"

"Because of some ancient treaty. The demons must have agreed to something along with these 'Volgrim.' That's the obvious answer. I feel like I'm missing puzzle pieces, though."

Behind me, the screen with the Volgrim video makes a loud *BEEP*.

I turn to look at it. A message appears onscreen.

UNAIASHU'UCTHAG ATHTHATT GASATHSAG. INRU'NUNG P'ATUGANS OTA.

The Crown translates for me.

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS DETECTED. INFORMING PRESIDENT OSE.

I blink in surprise. "Err, it says it's contacting... 'President Ose'. Who's that?"

Henry looks at me worriedly. "I don't know. Never heard of him. Maybe we should turn this off. It sounds ominous."

I reach over to turn the computer terminal off. "Yeah. You're probably right. I need to speak to Samantha anyway. Maybe she can tell me what-"

The moment before my finger makes contact with the screen; something leaps out of the monitor and flies into my eyeball. There's no pain for a moment, but a split-second later, I feel a burning, festering agony inside my brain.

"Ahh!! Shit! Something... in my... head!!"

A blur of movement. The floor rushes at me.

"Mister Hiro?! Holy sh-"

Henry's voice fades away. A woman's voice replaces his.

"Ah. I see. So you're the one who opened the forbidden files. I should have known."

Part 078: The Knowledge-Seeker

Bael flops on the floor of the destroyed Hell Harbor Annex. Having recently demorphed from his Balrog form, the Duke of Pain is sapped dry of all his energy. He groans. "Aaaooo... I'm dead inside. You guys go on without me. I can't move a muscle."

I glance from him to the remaining demons — Barbatos, whose body is now controlled by his brother, Artorias, as well as Mephisto and myself.

Not ten minutes ago, I fought for my life against Uriel and eked out a win. Now the body she possessed stands across from me, as much of an ally as if it were Barbatos himself.

It amuses me how quickly the tides of battle can shift.

Artorias touches his chest. "My apologies, Emperor Ose. I was unable to stand against the Archangel. I could only watch as she continued her bloodthirsty rampage."

"Don't blame yourself. Until your brother wakes up, I expect you to take care of his body." I brush my long hair back and walk over to a nearby data terminal. Despite the fact Uriel destroyed its screen, I can still access its data. I touch my hand to the monitor and send a pulse of electricity into it, powering it up. A moment later, my mind interfaces with the machine.

I locate the one I'm looking for: a Baron named Orias. His current location shows up as a bright-red dot somewhere within the Labyrinth.

With my free hand, I weave a magic sign and transmit my mind into the machine, leaving my body to stand behind like a robot on autopilot. I travel through the magic pathways across the barrier sealing Hell Harbor from Hell itself and through a thousand miles of the Labyrinth until I reach my target.

My astral form pops into existence at the Baron of the Stars' right side. "Orias. It's Ose."

Orias sits on the ground with a series of gems spread out before himself. Each one is huge, nearly the size of my fist. Rubies, Diamonds, and Aquamarines mix to create a beautiful array of colors from every part of the rainbow. The Baron of the Stars polishes them quietly, using his fingernails to carve them down to the perfect size for his magic.

When I speak, Orias tilts his head slightly to glance up at me. The giant, multicolored gem embedded in his forehead shines even in the dim lighting, giving him a calm, regal appearance.

"Ose. You don't appear alarmed. Can I assume you've defeated the Archangel, or will you need my help?"

I shake my head. "No, you're fine. I only came to swap information. We defeated Uriel, as you expected."

The white-haired Baron smiles at me. His eyes reflect the tranquility of an ancient demon, one even older than myself. Having awakened alongside Satan and the other Emperors during the Ancient Era, his knowledge of demonkind's history touches back to our first moments of cognizance.

He is not worried about Uriel, nor was he ever.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that," Orias says, returning his attention to the aquamarine gem in his grasp. He continues gliding his nail across its surface, scraping it down to a perfectly symmetrical shape. "I thought I might have to dig into my hoard for once. Too bad. It's been ages since I saw any action."

A hint of guilt passes through my mind. "Sorry. In terms of seniority, rather than me, you should have been the next in line to become an Emperor."

"No, no, we need someone with bright, intelligent eyes like yours to guide us," Orias says, never taking his eyes off the gem in his hand. As he manipulates the beautiful blue jewel, I catch a glimpse of the various gemstones embedded in his wrist and arm when his sleeve retracts for a moment. Unlike the other demons, Orias lacks any innate magical energy. However, by pulling power from minerals dug from planets, he gains incredible abilities far outstripping those of similarly-ranked demons. I can only wonder how powerful he might become if he were to reach the level of Emperor.

"Sigh... I'm too old to be anyone's leader. I'm glad you've decided to take over in Diablo's stead. He'd want that."

Orias pauses.

"That reminds me. Now that I know you were successful, I can call off the reinforcements from the Hidden Alcoves. I'm sure they were feeling incredibly tense, wondering if you would succeed or not."

Orias reaches to his left, where a small heap of tiny, randomly assorted gems rests. He plucks a black onyx gem from the pile, crushes it in his palm, and closes his eyes. A faint burst of energy leaps out of his body, disperses a few feet above his head, and travels in several dozen directions simultaneously.

I watch as Orias completes his magic ritual. Once he finishes, I clear my throat. "I did have a small task to ask of you if you can find the time. I'd like to know how many demons Uriel slew during her latest appearance. If you'd be so kind as to gather the numbers for me..."

"Naturally," Orias says, smiling. He returns his attention to the aquamarine gem in his hand. "You need only ask, Emperor Ose."

"That's what I like about you," I say, turning away from the Baron of Stars. "Your straightforwardness."

With a motion of my hands, my astral body vanishes. A moment later, I reappear in my original form, inhaling reflexively. "Orias is going to count the casualties for us. I'm returning to the Labyrinth to search for survivors. Mephisto... if you're looking for corpses, you should come with me."

The Duke of Mist rubs his bony fingers together. "Yesss, I musst replenisssh my ghouls." "

"Fantastic. That's the go-getter spirit I'm looking for." I roll my eyes. "Bael, you stay here. You won't be any help."

"Damn straight," Bael grunts back. "I need to nap for a few months. Going Balrog twice in a row is tiring."

"You poor thing," I say, before beckoning to Artorias. "You're going to help me clean up Uriel's mess. Come along."

"I wanna go, too!" A chubby demon girl jumps out from behind a rock. "I have to find Mister Beelzebub!"

"Who are you? Never mind, I remember. You know Beelzebub is dead, right?"

"No, he can't be! Mister Beelzebub can regenerate from anything!" The girl runs over and grabs Bael's shoulder. He groans in pain, but she ignores him. "Remember? You crushed his head a bunch of times, but he kept coming back!"

Bael weakly swipes at her hand. "Urgh... no touchy... my body hurts. Anyway, sure, that kid can live through anything, but I doubt he'll return this time."

"Nnn!!" The girl kicks Bael's foot, which makes the big lunk howl in pain. "I'll show you! Mister Beelzebub is the bestest demon ever!"

I sigh. *I'm surrounded by idiots.*

A few minutes later, Artorias weaves several complex magic signs, and we step through his portal into a realm of pure darkness.

"Where is this place?"

I ask the question to nobody in particular. A massive void in all directions, and a floor charred black by a terrific explosion is all I can see in the darkness all around us. I shoot a bolt of electricity into the distance, and it fizzles out before it can hit a wall.

Artorias replies. "We're in the Labyrinth."

"Surely you jest. The Labyrinth has no wide-open spaces like this anywhere. The Slaughterseum is the closest, and this empty expanse dwarfs it."

The chubby young demoness stumbles over a loose rock and bangs her knee. "Oww."

I'm no fan of the darkness. Using my inner electricity, I transform my skin into an electric current, brightening the area around us. Despite my luminescence, we still can't see anything but the floor. No walls or ceiling appear even if I squint.

Mephisto cranes his neck to look in all directions. "Ssso much for corpsssesss. All that isss left isss assssh and dussst."

The Duke of Mist slides over and nudges a block of coal with his foot. "Forget sssurvivorsss. We'll be lucky to find a few ssscattered bonesss."

"Now now, let's not lose our optimism," I say dryly, though I know he's right. "Start poking around. Everyone go in different directions and-"

Suddenly, in the distance, a terrific *BANG* startles me. A momentary flash of light makes me jerk my head to the right. "What the hell was that?"

The sound of footsteps pattering away catches my attention. I can barely make out the plump demoness, Rosalia, running into the darkness.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

She doesn't answer, which annoys me. She'll probably get herself killed if that was an enemy. Maybe I should let her die. Survival of the fittest is my life philosophy, after all.

Artorias raises a hand. "Do not worry. I will protect her."

"You will?"

Instead of answering me, the Duke weaves a magic sigil with his hands, turning his body into a light-form, not unlike my electricity. He walks after Rosalia while illuminating the darkness. "Rosalia. Stop. Don't run off on your own."

Hearing Uriel speaking through Barbatos's body was unnerving. Her voice dripped with poison. But Artorias is more talkative than his brother and yet much more solemn than the Archangel. I don't know if I'll grow used to it anytime soon.

Mephisto looks at me. "I'll go thisss way." He trudges in the opposite direction. I wonder to myself if he'll hit a wall before Artorias and Rosalia do.

As for myself, I transform into pure lightning and jump into the sky. It barely takes me a split second to reach the ceiling and adhere to it, but when I do, I instantly calculate the maximum reach of the explosion. Beelzebub's detonation created a four-mile in diameter crater, obliterating everything within its radius.

I zip over to a wall at the far end and then to the opposite side to confirm. My calculations prove correct.

The distant sound of a male screaming at the top of his lungs turns my blood from electric to ice. I transmit to the source and arrive right as a small explosion detonates, knocking me back and stunning me.

When I wipe the spots from my eyes, I see a disgusting creature rolling on the ground. Several arms and legs extend from its body in all directions, and its head is misshapen and disgusting. After a moment, I come to the shocking realization that it is none other than Beelzebub himself. I only recognize him by his voice as he screams in pain. "Aaahhhh!!!! Aaaauughhhh!!!"

Every few seconds, he grows a new limb and detonates one of the others, blowing the body part to pieces and sending blood and innards all over the place. The stench of rotting and burned innards churns my stomach.

"B-Beelzebub! What's wrong with you?"

He doesn't answer, and instead only continues to scream and wail. "Gahahaaaughhhh!!!"

Rosalia comes into view, along with Artorias. Artorias recoils in disgust at Beelzebub's pitiful condition, but Rosalia moves in fearlessly. "Mister Beelzebub! I knew you'd be-"

"Stay back!" I warn her. "He keeps spontaneously exploding! I think he's lost control of his powers."

As I say that, one of his legs explodes even more intensely than the other limbs before it. Rosalia yelps, but Artorias forms a wall of light to protect her from the blast.

Beelzebub continues to flail about helplessly. Rosalia presses against Artorias's wall. "Mister Beelzebub! Get ahold of yourself! You're not supposed to scream and cry! It isn't like you!"

"The Duke isn't himself," I say, taking a step back. "Don't get too close. He's in hysterics. What happened?"

Artorias walks up behind Rosalia and stares uneasily at Beelzebub. "Spawn of the Devil. Give me a moment. I'll do my best to help ease this child's pain."

Before I can ask *how* Artorias plans to pull that off, the Duke takes three steps toward Beelzebub and shrugs off another explosion. He grabs one of the Duke's bloody arms and winces. Immediately, Beelzebub goes limp and breathes softly for a few moments as he wheezes for breath.

Rosalia leans down beside Artorias. "What's wrong with him? Is Mister Beelzebub going to be alright?"

Artorias wipes sweat from his chest. His breathing appears noticeably more labored. "A-aye. He... should be fine. I'm absorbing his pain into myself. He... he can't control his body right now since his mind is suffering. I don't mind a little extra pain if it helps him."

Rosalia nods and leans in to look at Beelzebub. For the first time, I notice an odd emotion in her eyes. Something very *un-demonlike*. Love.

I could be wrong, of course, but Rosalia looks at Beelzebub with more adoration than any mere servant should. It's revolting. I turn away and gaze into the darkness.

Love is a human characteristic. Demons shouldn't experience it. All it does is weaken the giver and strengthen the recipient. Demons care only about ourselves. It's what makes us strong, and humans weak. Supporting another demon instead of one's self is antithetical to our identity.

Disgusting. Ah, well, at least Rosalia's sentiments are directed toward a fellow demon, and not a filthy human. *That* would be where I draw the line.

A smile stretches across my face.

I should bar humans and demons from romanticizing one another. Then, when Belial inevitably breaks my rule, I'll sentence her to death. Now that would be a delicious twist of fate.

"Ose. Emperor Ose!" Artorias yells, interrupting my thoughts.

I turn back to the group of three. "What?"

"I stabilized Beelzebub's condition. However, we need to get him to the Healing Chambers. His body and mind have lost their resonance. It will take him several days to fully recover."

"Fine, fine. Do what you must. I'm going to continue searching for other survivors. Let me know if his condition worsens."

Artorias stares at me. "I doubt it could get worse than this."

Nodding, I pivot on my heel and stride into the darkness.

Several minutes pass. I find a piece of flesh and a few scattered bones, but the chance of finding survivors other than Beelzebub diminishes every step I take. Eventually, I reach the edge of the crater.

Several tunnels that used to connect to our weapon factory line the wall. I don't immediately recognize which ones go where.

A buzzing sensation in the back of my head draws my attention. I close my eyes and connect to the microchip I implanted in my brain dozens of millennia ago. It's a unique device that allows me to use various computer terminals scattered around the Labyrinth remotely, even when in the Reality Dimension.

Several images appear in my head. One of them makes my heart catch. The face of a human appears. I don't recognize him.

Whoever he is, he's trying to access files regarding the Overlords. How would he know about those? Ah, it seems he already unlocked them. He's viewing them right now!

Confound it all. I hate humans who dig into things they shouldn't.

The man covers his mouth in shock and recoils from the screen. When he does, a second human comes into view. A black-haired youth. It appears that both of them have seen files regarding the Overlords. Seven Devils. I bet it was Belial who tipped them off. I knew she was up to no good.

I open my eyes and quickly weave several hand signs. My mind astrally projects outward and leaves my body.

After a minute or so, I fly through walls and race across the Labyrinth at an astonishing speed. Soon, the Core appears as a hotspot of computers and electricity, drawing my gaze. When I arrive, I immediately spot the intruder speaking to his friend. I enter his mind without a moment's notice.

His entire life's history appears before me. Jason Hiro. Human. Male. 18 Years old.

He's the bloody Wordsmith!

"Ah. I see. So you're the one who opened the files. I should have known."

The Hero stumbles around and clutches his head. His thoughts reply to my mental intrusion. *What the hell? Who are you?!*

"I'm Ose, the new Emperor of the demons. You're Jason Hiro, leader of humanity. I've heard about you in passing once or twice."

Yeah? It's nice to be famous. Get out of my head!

"I can't do that. You accessed files regarding the Overlords. For a demon, that's a death sentence. Your punishment will be far worse."

The human tries to open his mouth to speak, but I stop him from doing so. "Don't get cute with me. I know about your ability. Wordsmithing. You can make anything happen by uttering a single word."

He nods, but his motor control quickly falls into my grip. His movements become noticeably dulled.

Shit. I didn't know a demon like you existed. Leave me alone!

"That option isn't on the table, child. You're going to do as I say. I'll start by having you kill anyone who saw those files; then, we can erase the data. After that, I'll lobotomize you. You won't be a threat to the

demons ever again."

I chuckle inwardly. *A threat*. Adorable. One human, no matter how mighty, can never meaningfully resist the power of demonkind. However, allowing him to agitate the Overlords would be unwise.

Jason struggles for several moments. It annoys me what a fight he's putting up as I try to move his arms and legs. *I'm not doing shit, you crazy bitch! Get out of... of my head!*

Heroes have access to Holy Energy, but that shouldn't prevent me from controlling him. After all, I've manipulated angels before. No, instead, something unseen fortifies his mind far beyond its natural limits. An artificial barrier of some sort. Perhaps he bolstered his mental defenses with Wordsmithing.

Cunning. I'll give Jason that much, but his feeble efforts will prove useless against my genius.

I weave a few signs with my physical body, and a moment later, the magic travels to my astral form. A bolt of electricity arcs from a nearby computer terminal and shocks Jason's heart. The man gasps and falls on his back, unable to think clearly for a moment.

Perfect. Jason's defenses are down. I'll start by overwriting his personality, then move on to his ego and motor controls. After that, it should be a simple matter of-

Hm? Something's not right. I still can't access his subconscious. Not even a Hero should be able to resist me. It's almost as if there are two minds here.

No... no it can't be. There's a second consciousness inside Jason's body! It's waking up. I must have disturbed it when I...

"Who's there? Where am I?"

The voice speaks. It's masculine. I don't recognize it, but yet, somehow, he sounds familiar.

I try to pull out of Jason's brain, but a barrier forms, sealing me in. What the hell? That shouldn't be possible! I'm in my astral form!

A phantasm of a human male appears in the darkness of Jason's mind. Elaborate robes of purple, gold, and red flow off his body and spill across the ground. A crown with dozens of jewels sits atop his head, and he carries a scepter in his right hand. His aged face, still in its prime, along with his black and grey hair, speaks to his age and experience.

He's a king. A human king. He looks familiar. Have I seen him before?

The man looks me up and down. "Why, hello there, good-looking! How are you on this glorious day?"

A sense of unease sprouts in my stomach. "Who are you?"

"Come now, ye beauteous one! Tis' shameful to ask a question before answering the one who asked first!"

"Ugh. I'm feeling *dandy*. Now tell me who you are."

The man twirls his scepter and does a little tap-dance. "What, you don't recognize me? I'm King Solomon, the most incredible, brilliant, and accomplished human who has ever lived!"

"Given what I know of humans, that isn't saying much."

Solomon slaps his knee. "Aha! You have a delightful sense of humor!"

"I wasn't joking."

The king stops his dancing. His face turns stern. "I died. I remember it well. The fact I have returned must mean you revived me. My question is, for what nefarious plot?"

"I did no such thing. You just happened to be in this Hero's mind, and you woke up. Release me at once, foolish human, or I will detonate my astral form and fry his mind to ash."

Solomon cocks his head. He stares at me curiously. "Nothing you say makes any sense. What Hero are you referring to?"

I wave my arms around at the void surrounding us. "Jason! You're part of his mind, are you not?"

"Hm. Perhaps I am. He must be the wearer of my Crown. One moment, please." He nods slightly at me. A barrier of light appears around me, sealing me in place. My heart pounds like a sledgehammer as the ancient king vanishes into the void.

A minute passes. Two minutes. Three. I bang against the barrier, but it saps my strength when I touch it. I can't break free.

King Solomon. His name is familiar. Is he another Hero? Why would two Heroes be in the mind of one? How?!

He reappears suddenly, his face as hard as steel. "I spoke to Jason. I understand, now. You don't belong here, 'Ose.' Trying to take over this young one's mind was quite the cowardly move, but luckily I've dealt with your type before. Begone."

The barrier vanishes. A weight I hadn't noticed vanishes from my chest.

But something else appears.

An emotion I haven't felt in ages.

Anger. Rage.

How *dare* this human make a mockery of me?

Me. Ose. The most brilliant demon who has ever lived. A prodigy far above her peers.

I crafted the Labyrinth into a finely tuned machine. I wrote the treaties that gave us freedom. I subjected the humans to carefully crafted routines that increased their soul output and kept them under our control.

And now... this so-called *king* thinks he can tell me to leave?!

Nobody... nobody tells me what to do. I make my own choices.

"Listen here, little human. It will be a frigid day in Hell before--"

Solomon holds his hand up, interrupting me. "I see that look in your eyes, but I told you to leave. When I issue a command, you obey. Leave. *Now*."

A whirlwind of pressure suddenly rushes against my mind. Ten trillion numbers and equations hit me, disorienting me with their relentless onslaught. Images of a hundred thousand animals, bugs, technology

I can't fathom, images of the universe...

Every moment, the pressure increases dramatically. I stagger back and pull away.

My astral form returns to my body a minute later. I stumble forward and fall on my face, sweat drenching every inch of my body.

"Haah... haah..."

I can barely breathe! What the hell? Who... who WAS that human?!

He's powerful. Brilliant. I've never felt so small... so insignificant in my entire life.

* * *

No. That isn't true. I have. Once. When I was a child.

Once, I felt helpless in the presence of a human male.

However, that was a long time ago. I don't want to remember the past.

Slowly, I flip myself around to lie on my back and slow my breathing. My entire body aches. It's as if I haven't slept in a thousand years.

Whoever Solomon is... he's no ordinary human. He's more than a Hero. He's a genuine threat. He'll be the end of demonkind if I don't stop him.

I'm not doing shit, you crazy bitch! Get out of... of my head!

I squeeze my skull hard and roll around on the ground. The pain in my head intensifies as I battle with the woman in my mind. Gahh! It hurts! My head hurts!!

* * *

Suddenly, the pain vanishes. I breathe evenly and open my eyes to see Henry's panicked expression a few inches away. "Mister Hiro! Are you okay? What's going on?"

I blink twice to make sure I'm not hallucinating. "Someone entered my mind: a demoness named Ose. She tried to take control of my body, but something happened. I don't hear her voice anymore."

Henry nods. "Right, right. Is she gone, then? Did you force her out?"

"I think she is. Maybe." I sit up and rub my eyes. "Sweet, salty Christ. My head feels like someone dropped an anvil on it."

"Henry holds his hand out. "I'll help you to your feet, Mister Hiro."

I shake my head. "No... there's still something in my head. I feel it. It's like two gnats are buzzing in each ear."

A moment passes.

"Hello? Are you Jason?"

A man's voice speaks to me from my left. I turn and look, but there's nobody there.

Uhh... what?

"Can you hear me? Wakey-wakey."

The voice speaks again, this time to my right. I turn to look in confusion, but there's nobody there.

"I hear you. Who's speaking? Someone invisible?"

The voice replies. "Nope. I'm in your head. But worry not, young Hero! You have not developed schizophrenia! Focus your mind, and behold my wondrous visage!"

I'm getting so tired of people invading my mind. However, unlike the demon lady from before, this man doesn't hurt my head at all. Heck, his voice feels somewhat pleasant, like the warmth of a cozy fire.

I close my eyes. After focusing for a moment, the speaker appears in my mind. To my surprise, he wears Solomon's Crown, along with a bunch of kingly garments.

"Hey! Who are you? Why are you wearing my crown?"

The man stares at me for a few moments before cracking a grin. "Ahaha, a wonderful jest! *Your* crown, hm? I was not aware that your name was Solomon!"

"It isn't. Wait, hold on a second..."

I stare at him for a few moments.

"Are... are *you* Solomon?"

"Nailed it! Yahtzee! Goodness, how long have I slumbered? It seems nobody recognizes me these days. I used to be the talk of the world for thousands of years!"

"You did? No, more importantly, why can I see you? Or rather, how?"

Solomon shrugs. "I'm not yet certain. Shouldn't take me long to figure out, though. Nothing ever does! That's the beauty of being the smartest person in existence!"

A few moments pass. Solomon creases his brow. "Hmm. I see. After I sealed the artifacts of power in the Labyrinth, I placed a powerful barrier of Holy Magic around my crown and expired. Then, after some time passed, you came along and found it. Is that about right?"

I nod dumbly. "Uh. Sure. You *died*?"

"Indeed. It was quite the prolonged and unpleasant death, I might add. I couldn't take a chance that heroic artifacts might fall into the wrong hands, especially mine."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Solomon waves his hand flippantly. "As Archimedes used to say, nothing lost, nothing gained, am I right? Anyway, let's get back to the topic at hand. I've got this unbelievably beautiful demon woman trapped in your mind. On the one hand, I despise demons, but on the other, I do love me a voluptuous lady. I don't know whether to kill or release her."

"You can kill her?"

"Oh, yes, without a doubt. The worst thing a psychic can do is enter a mind protected by my Crown. In fact, during my conquest of the seventh legion of Hell, there was an entire regiment of psychics I

dismantled from the inside out! The poor fools didn't know what hit them."

I open my eyes and see Henry staring at me silently. The kid notices me stirring. "What's going on, Mister Hiro?"

"I developed a second personality," I reply. "No big deal. I've had several of those already. Solomon, get Ose out of my head. No killing, please."

A hazy apparition of Solomon appears before me, as though he's standing next to Henry. However, the youth doesn't see him.

"No killing, huh? Well, aren't *you* the principled one. If it were my mind, I'd obliterate any intruder ruthlessly. At the least, I'd turn them into a vegetable."

"By all means, make it hurt. Teach Ose a lesson about entering minds she shouldn't. No killing, though."

"Sure, sure. You're the boss."

Solomon flashes me an *okay* hand-sign and vanishes.

He reappears not fifteen seconds later and spins his scepter around, then does a little dance. "Tadahhh! 'Tis done! She'll be smarting for a while!"

"That didn't take you long."

"Of course not! Don't you know who I am? I'm the Knowledge-Seeker! The mightiest, most brilliant, cunning, dashing Hero who ever lived!"

I flick my eyes to Henry. He continues to stare at me in confusion, likely wondering why in the hell I'm talking to myself and looking to his side.

"Mister Hiro...?"

"Henry, nothing that's happening right now will make the slightest sense to you. Contact Hope for me. I need to chat with him."

The youth fiddles with his fingers. "Oh. I already did that. When you went into convulsions, I sent an emergency message to Neil."

"Perfect. What rank are you?"

"Rank? Do you mean military rank, Mister Hiro?"

"Mhm."

"...Private."

"Nice. You're a lieutenant now. I like you."

Henry's eyes widen. "What? A-are you sure, Mister Hiro?! I'm too young for such an honor!"

"Yeah, well, I'm too young to save the universe. Everyone starts somewhere. Go to the gates and wait for Hope and Neil. Let them know where I am when they get here."

The youth nods excitedly. "Yes! Yes, of course, Mister Hiro! Thank you very much!" He quickly marches away to wait for Neil and Hope, leaving Solomon and me alone.

King Solomon slowly scans the room. "Hideous. Absolutely hideous."

"I beg your pardon?"

He beckons toward the wall of servers. "Warp-gates, computers, men in military uniforms, but no decorations, gah! This appears to be a military center, yet I see no symbols of patriotism, no gold or jewels to draw the eye. How can you lead such a ragtag group of warriors? Where's your sense of heroic pride?!"

"I don't follow. Do you know where you are?"

Solomon rolls his eyes. "Of course. We're in the center of Hell, in the Labyrinth Core. You appear to have taken over the Devil's base from the inside-out. Not bad for a young upstart."

"Uh, thanks, I guess. We've only been here for a few months. We spent most of that time building technology to combat the demons. They could invade at any moment. I haven't had time to focus on the, err, *aesthetics* of the place."

Solomon groans. "Ugh. Well, lucky for you, I'm awake now. You're probably not aware, but I'm the greatest mind in the universe. I devised tens of thousands of military strategies. With me assisting you, we'll be unstoppable."

"You mentioned your brilliance a few times," I mutter. "Before that, though... I need to ask you a question. Ose appeared in my mind because I discovered a video file I shouldn't have seen. It pertains to the existence of these... these creatures. They look human, but they aren't."

"Alright. Go on." Solomon stares at me expectantly.

"They're called Volgrim. Have you heard of them?"

A moment passes. Cracks appear in the King's smiling facade.

"Volgrim. I hoped never to hear that name again."

"You know who they are?"

"I do."

"Are you going to tell me?"

A long silence follows. Solomon looks away. His expression turns somber.

"They're aliens, Jason. They come from halfway across the galaxy. And... they're... *unstoppable*."

I observe the King quietly.

"Unstoppable?"

"You haven't a clue."

My eyes drift to the monitor. It now sits on a black screen since we turned it off. The reminder of what I saw a few minutes ago floats in the blackness; that of two thousand demon heads exploding simultaneously.

"Tell me. I need to know what I'm dealing with."

"The truth hurts, Jason. Are you sure you want me to tell you?"

"I am."

Solomon traces a circle on his palm. "So be it."

Author Note:

This is Orias.



This is also Orias.



Part 079: Trust Issues

The hallucination before me, shaped like that of a noble king, begins pacing back and forth. I know he's a mirage, given his ghostly appearance and how only I can see him. Unlike ghosts from old cartoons who wore bedsheets over their heads, Solomon is a man with carefully combed blonde hair and blue eyes. The purple, red, and gold colors across his body give him a stylish, flamboyant appearance capable of turning heads.

Extravagant. That's how I'd classify Solomon's appearance.

Solomon ceases his bravado and self-glorification as he meets my gaze. "The Volgrim were an enemy unlike any other that humanity had fought. Hell, they still are. When they arrived at our doorstep in the year 2139, it took everyone, including me, by surprise."

"2139? That's over a hundred years after I entered the Cryopod."

Solomon cocks his head. "What do you mean? Why did you enter suspended animation?"

He continually surprises me with his knowledge of technical subjects. How in the hell would a king from the friggin' Bronze Age know what a cryopod is?

"It's a long story. I had a troubled life. Saw an opportunity to be of use to science rather than simply... ending it."

"Suicidal thoughts?" Solomon averts his gaze. "Few heroes have ever felt that way. Hell, none that I knew did. I'm surprised."

"I didn't know I was a Hero. I was a kid with no friends living a life in poverty. I considered buying a pistol and ending it all, but the ad requesting a guinea pig for science caught my eye. And then... I ended up a hundred thousand years in the future."

"That's unnerving," Solomon mutters. He resumes his pacing. "Anyway. In 2139, the Volgrim appeared with a massive fleet of Warships. Humanity had already begun to colonize the Moon and Mars, but we had no idea they had been monitoring us for decades, possibly even centuries. The aliens knew everything about us: Our culture, our beliefs, and even our military capabilities. They issued an ultimatum. Either we would bow to their will and accept them as our masters, or they would annihilate us."

I cross my arms. "That's it, huh? That must have started one hell of a war. No way humanity would go down without a fight. I've seen enough alien movies to know that much."

Solomon sighs. "Haah... not quite. The leaders of every country held a vote. They decided unanimously to cooperate with the Volgrim."

"Bullshit. You're lying."

"I am many things, lad, but a deceiver isn't one of them." Solomon stares out at the monsters and humans milling about. I see a question form in his mind, but whatever it is, he decides not to ask. "I don't think you understand the severity of the situation. Ever since the third World War, Britain had taken the

lead in military technology. They possessed the most advanced weaponry on Earth, but they were the first to capitulate. Nothing we had compared to Volgrim warp-drives and orbital cannons. To say their technology was a million years more advanced than humanity's would be a gross understatement."

I pull up a chair and sit down. "Okay, forgive me for interrupting your story, Solomon... but how the hell do you know all this? Didn't you live and die around one thousand years before Jesus Christ?"

Solomon smirks. "Heroes never die. Provided one had a legendary artifact gifted to them by Camael, their soul would seal inside of it after their death. I lived on quite comfortably inside my Crown long after my physical body expired."

The ancient king pauses for a moment. "Hm. Of course, heroes could also end up inside ordinary objects, too, depending on how their lives ended, but that's a story for another day."

Slowly, my eyes rove up and down his frame. Solomon's ghostly form is much more transparent near his legs compared to his head and chest. He seems to hover in midair.

"What's that like? Living inside an artifact, I mean."

"It's wonderful. Fantastic. Certainly not boring or dull in the slightest." Solomon rolls his eyes. "Heaven's sake. It's terrible. I lucked out compared to other heroes. My crown was bequeathed to many men and women as the years passed. It tended to stay among the ranks of nobility, and later the church, so I usually had someone to converse with. Heaven knows that any hero trapped inside a melee weapon had a rough time once people began using firearms."

His words make me remember Joan. She exited her sword when Amelia touched it. I wonder if she lived a lonely life filled with boredom as well.

"I think I get it. You ended up inside a Crown, and those are typically worn by nobility, so you at least got to witness the world change as the years passed. That doesn't seem too bad."

* * *

A moment passes. Solomon chuckles.

"Heh, that's funny. You're funny. I didn't sit back and passively watch, Jason. Don't you know what my Crown can do? Its special power?"

A sense of astonishment washes over me. "It gives the wearer... nearly unlimited knowledge... oh my god."

"Exactly. Friends in high places knew that anyone who wore my artifact would possess nigh limitless knowledge. Most major innovations in technology were created as a result of someone using me to think up new ways to progress humanity."

"Wow. That's super cool. But... then that must mean, when the Volgrim arrived..."

Solomon snaps his fingers. "Yes! You understand! The Pope of the Transhuman Fundamentalists, Father Clarence Jackson, was my wearer at the time. I never offered my opinion on world events, no matter how dire. However, he believed that the end was near if we allowed the aliens to control Earth."

"Ah, so he must have been the one to lead a crusade against them, right?"

Solomon stares at me silently for a moment. "Jason. You do know what a Pope is, correct?"

"Uh... I suppose a...?"

"A pacifist."

"Right. Duh. I knew that."

Solomon groans. "Anyway. Clarence decided to do something out of the ordinary. He loaned my Crown to a woman named Victoria Rothschild. She used her influence to create an army on short notice-

I hold my hand up. "Hold on; I need to stop you there. *Rothschild*? Is that the name I think it is?"

Solomon shrugs. "That depends on what you're thinking. Spell them out for me."

"You know... the wealthy banker family. There are- well, *were* tons of conspiracies about them. Rumors like how they owned trillions of dollars of wealth..."

"All true, I suppose." Solomon waves his hand flippantly. "After she received my Crown, Victoria built a big army, yadda-yadda, two hundred years of continuous war followed, and eventually humanity lost."

I blink slowly. "That's it? I expected a bigger, grander end to the tale."

"Oh, certainly, many things happened. Much of it was political, some of it military. The most important events occurred at the end of the wars, when the leader of humanity decided to surrender. Given she had lived for over three-hundred years and witnessed many catastrophes, including the destruction of Earth, I was surprised she held out as long as she did."

"I'm surprised humans allowed a single person to lead them. What about the United Nations?"

Solomon smiles. "Marie Becker, the Supreme Commander of Earth, took control of the planet as the result of a 98% popular vote. The only people who didn't want her in charge were the other leaders of Earth. Fortunately for her, the common folk remembered her significant achievements during the war, and she won in a landslide."

"Wow. That sounds impressive."

The king's smile slowly morphs into a smirk. "Marie manipulated the votes, but it was probably for the best. I found her political and military finesse to be ideal for the job."

"What?! She cheated! How can you be okay with that?!"

"Trust me, Jason. If you had lived then, you might understand. That being said, Marie surrendered, but under the condition that humanity would be given several worlds to live on in peace. There were a bunch of technical clauses, but I wasn't around for those."

"You weren't?"

Several moments pass. Solomon looks away, toward the Great Doors separating the Core from the rest of the Labyrinth. Despondency appears in his eyes.

"I emerged from my Crown to perform one last heroic feat. I took as many Holy Artifacts as I could find and hid them throughout the Labyrinth, in the hopes that someday if humanity should stand up

against the demons and Volgrim, they might have a fighting chance. Then, I perished. I don't know what happened after that."

Solomon lowers his head. "A hundred thousand years. It passed in the blink of an eye. Honestly, Jason... I haven't yet come to grips with my awakening. I thought I departed this existence forever to be with my loved ones. It's strange. I looked forward to my death, but once I died and came back, I couldn't tell you what it was like."

"You didn't dance on clouds and play the harp with angels?"

"Nope. Nothing like that. I felt my body weaken. A terrible exhaustion took me, and a moment later, I opened my eyes and found myself staring at a beautiful demon woman."

"Ose," I murmur.

"That's the one. Ravishing."

"Mmm."

Solomon smiles again as he reflects on whatever he and Ose discussed. "You're in a hopeless situation, Jason."

His sudden change of topic catches me off-guard. "I beg your pardon?"

"I don't know the universe's present situation. After a hundred thousand years, though, I can only imagine how powerful the demons have become, let alone the Volgrim. Do you have a plan for the future?"

I shake my head. "Nope. I'm trying to avert a war and keep the demons at bay. I can't risk attacking them, or they might send a billion grunts to our doorstep before night falls. Hope and Neil seem more confident about our odds of success, but I don't know."

"Hope? Neil?"

"The commander and, um, my clone."

"Clone?" Solomon blinks in surprise. "You cloned yourself? Even with my Crown in your possession, that must have taken a while."

This time, I'm the one who smiles. "You know I'm a Hero, right?"

"I gathered that much by the Heroic Energy surging in your body."

"My power is called Wordsmithing. Well, I mean, that's what *I* call it. It might have a more technical name, but I don't know."

Solomon nods. "Interesting. Explain."

And so, I do. For over ten minutes, I explain the events of the past several months to Solomon. My life, arriving in the Cryopod, Hoarhiim's orb, the discovery of my powers, my battles against a monster, a human, and even the First Emperor.

After I finish, Solomon whistles. "Psseew... good lord. That's a lot to take in. You battled Satan and didn't die?"

"Yup. He's dead now. After Amelia died, Satan turned into dust."

A spark appears in Solomon's eye. "Right... you mentioned Samantha... but surely her name is Belial, correct?"

"Mhm."

"The Second Emperor of the demons?"

"...Yes. What's with that tone? You're starting to worry me."

The king shakes his head. "It's probably nothing. I remember a little rumor from the ancient ages regarding Julius Caesar and how he met his unfortunate demise."

"Was she involved?"

"Who can know?"

"I'm alarmed now. Christ. After what Hope said..."

"Your clone? What happened?"

I glance shiftily to the side. "Well, I kinda sorta accidentally but intentionally overheard him mention that Samantha is a shapeshifter, and not long after, I confronted her about it. She stormed away, along with my wife. I feel awful for saying anything, but she saw those Volgrim tapes, and-"

"Slow down. What Volgrim tapes?"

"Well, on the terminal behind me, there's a file regarding something about a treaty, and it also has a very graphic video of a Volgrim leader guy doing... something awful. You don't want to see."

Solomon narrows his eyes. "Don't feign indignation on my behalf. Show me."

"It's gruesome."

"Such is war. I've seen things that would shrivel your stomach into the size of a pea, Jason. I want to see whatever that video is."

I groan and spin my chair around to face the monitor. "Okay, okay. Whatever you say, Your Majesty."

Less than a minute later, I tap around and bring up the file list. Solomon holds his finger up. "Wait."

He scans the files one by one, reading each title carefully. "Overlord Protocol. Brainwashing. Incredible."

He continues to mutter to himself for a few minutes. Occasionally, he has me tap on this file or that. I can read the words, but they're all incredibly stiff and stilted, written almost like Legalese.

Solomon, however, has no such trouble. After a minute, he nods. "I understand now. Fascinating. Play the video."

I comply but look away. Solomon doesn't see the world through my eyes, but through the rubies circling his crown, so he's still able to watch the video.

He winces as the demon heads explode. "Gods. You weren't joking. How grisly! Nufaris has expanded his power since I last saw him. And he's an Executor, now! He shot up the ranks."

"You know him?"

"Sadly. Nufaris was the Elder in charge of monitoring Earth during the decades before the Volgrim assault force arrived in 2139. Given how much he learned about humanity during that time, the Founders gave him the title of Ambassador and later made him a general during the Energy Wars. I'm surprised he rose to the very top of the Volgrim hierarchy."

"Mmm." I nod, pretending to understand what he means. "Any thoughts about these files?"

"Plenty." Solomon rubs the bridge of his nose. "Where to begin, where to begin..."

He doesn't get to answer. Henry's voice rings out, nearly giving me a heart attack. "Mister Hiro! I brought Neil and Hope along, just as you asked!"

I swivel in my chair to face the two newcomers. Hope and Neil's eyes widen as they look at me. My doppelganger is the first to speak. "Jason! Are you okay? Henry says you had trouble standing."

"I'm okay, now. Ose tried to hit me with a mental assault, but Solomon's Crown protected me. After that... uh..." I glance at Solomon's ghostly visage. "Well, I made a new friend."

Hope follows my gaze, but stares right through Solomon at the monitor behind him. "...The computer?"

"Not exactly. Solomon's Crown isn't an empty vessel of knowledge. The king is still alive inside of it. I can see him now."

Hope doesn't appear convinced. "So, to be clear, the demon woman attacked your mind, and now you have an invisible friend?"

"When you put it that way, you make me sound a little crazy."

"You said it, not me..." Hope trails off and glances at Neil. "Maybe I should inspect Jason's head. Just in case."

Solomon chuckles. "Heh... Jason, use your Wordsmithing. Speak the word, 'Project' and make my apparition visible to them."

Out loud, I ask, "I can do that?"

"Of course. Once you told me Wordsmithing's premise, I instantly comprehended a million ways you could use it. You've scarcely tapped into its power."

"Oh. Okay. Neat. **Project.**"

To my surprise, Solomon's ghostly body becomes noticeably less transparent. His form shifts, turning him into a halfway flesh-and-blood creature.

Neil's eyes widen. Hope gawks. "Whoa...! You're Solomon?"

The king immediately extends his arms out and makes a sweeping gesture with his scepter. "Indeed, young man! I am none other than he, the wisest, most brilliant, and good-looking man to ever walk the Earth! Women clutch me tightly, men cower in fear, and children line up to hear tales of my accomplishments!"

"Ah. That's... nice," Hope says, looking unimpressed. "...Good to meet you. I guess."

Neil nods. "I'm pleased to have the Wisdom King on our side. I know of your feats, your conquests. Napoleon spoke of his contact with you on many occasions, and Saul mentioned your taste in architecture once or twice."

Solomon's grandiose expression and body language melt away. A look of surprise appears on his face. "Saul? My kingdom's lead architect? My nephew?! Is he alive?"

Neil nods and smiles. "Indeed, Your Majesty. I will tell him you've arisen as soon as possible."

"Please do!" Solomon's expression turns giddy. "Incredible! I thought all the people from my era had perished, but one remains! I can't wait to see him again!"

Hope and I wince simultaneously. The knowledge that everyone we've ever known from Earth is long-dead still keeps us up at night, whether we want to admit it or not.

Solomon laughs, but I sigh.

"Um. Hope, Neil. I need to tell you two something. I, err, screwed up earlier."

I didn't want to come out and say this so awkwardly, but the longer I put it off, the worse it will sting.

Neil, Hope, and Solomon's smiles evaporate. Hope crosses his arms and frowns. "What's wrong?"

I grit my teeth. "Look, uh, the moment Phoebe and I heard you returned from the battle with the Archangel, we drove over to the Core with Samantha. I arrived, but you guys weren't here. So... well, I used my Wordsmithing to find you."

Hope nods slowly. The color begins to drain from his face. "Yes... and?"

"I used the word, 'Locate.' I saw you two sitting at a bar. I was going to leave, but... I overheard something. I shouldn't have listened, but it caught my attention. It's terrible, I know, but-"

Neil interrupts me. "Pause. You *spied* on us? Listened to our conversation?"

Hope glances at Neil, then at me. His expression looks aghast. "What the hell, Jason! I can't believe you'd do that! I'd never snoop on you!"

"It was an accident," I say quickly. In the back of my mind, I groan. *Somewhat of an accident, anyway.* "I didn't mean to overhear. You and Neil discussed Samantha, and I heard you saying she was a shapeshifter. That's all. I felt terrible I heard anything at all, but-"

"There's no *buts*!" Hope yells. "That's messed up! What else did you hear?!"

"Nothing else. Like I said-"

Hope looks away and covers his eyes. "I... I wanted to tell you what Neil and I discussed as soon as I came back, but this is... I can't believe it. What a breach of privacy, Jason."

Neil shakes his head in dismay. "Unbelievable."

A tinge of panic enters my voice. "I only heard the one thing! I swear! Come on, Hope, you and I are identical! You'd never eavesdrop on someone intentionally, and neither would I! You know that!"

Hope shakes his head. Slowly, he pulls his hand away from his face and gazes at it. "Are we, Jason?"

"Are we what?"

"The same person. Kar told me he could tell the two of us apart at a glance. We have the same face, but we're still different. I, for one, would never listen in on a private conversation."

I glance at Solomon, looking for help. The king avoids my gaze. *You're on your own, pal*, his body language says.

Hope and Neil stay quiet for a few moments. Hope swallows audibly. "Christ. You can say whatever you want, Jason, but that was a huge breach of trust. Imagine if you came home and I was in bed with Phoebe. How would you feel?"

I lower my eyes. "Like a knife in the stomach."

"Exactly. Don't use that 'identical twin' crap on me. We aren't the same. You and I lead different lives. Let's go, Neil. We came here for no reason, after all."

Hope and Neil shake their heads in dismay. I start to open my mouth but think better of it.

Maybe they overreacted... but can I blame them?

As the two walk away, I gaze inward to evaluate my actions. Neil and Hope are rapidly becoming good friends. I don't know Neil very well, but I consider Phoebe to be my best friend. What if Hope listened in on a private conversation between the two of us?

I would feel exactly the same way as he does, now — betrayed. I have to apologize later. I have to fix this.

Solomon whistles. "Pssseew... goodness. You bungled that conversation."

"No kidding. Fuck me, dude. I have to apologize to Samantha, Phoebe, and my fucking clone, now. I'm *such* an asshole."

Solomon shakes his head. "No. You're a child. You may have the powers of a legendary Hero, but everything I see indicates you have much to learn. Everyone makes mistakes, Jason."

He looks away. His voice tightens. "Everyone."

"Including you?"

Several moments pass before Solomon replies. "Especially me. Heroes live a lonely life. I had many women, the favor of the gods, incredible intelligence, and good looks... and somehow I managed to ruin everything with one careless act. It took me thirty years to correct my blunder. I died before I finished."

"What happened?"

Solomon looks away. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Sorry."

The king glances down at his hands. He sighs. "To err is to be human. Those who possess power also possess the capacity to blunder a thousand times worse than the average man. Be exuberant that you need only apologize to amend your situation. Your feelings now will be nothing compared to those felt when you commit an irreparable error."

Solomon smiles listlessly. "Indeed. Once you commit a cardinal sin, you will no longer be the same person. There's no turning back from a mistake like mine."

Unease creeps from my stomach into my throat, like a wraith reaching up to slowly snuff my life out.

"You know what? I won't wait. I'm going to apologize to my wife and Samantha right now. I won't put it off."

As I stand up, Solomon nods. "A wise choice."

I walk toward the warp-gate to Tarus II, and Solomon floats along beside me.

"Say, Jason, bit of a random question here, but on a scale of 1-10, how attractive would you say your wife is?"

"Eleven or twelve. Why?"

Solomon purses his lips. "You're in luck, my boy. I have a way with the ladies. Leave the talking to the professional."

I nod silently. Inside my mind, I think to myself, *this won't end well*.

Solomon glares at me. "I heard that."

"Sorry."

This is Solomon.



Part 080: The Next Generation

Author note: The entire middle section of this part was rewritten as part of the HFY re-releases and updates. Check out the original version here: https://reddit.com/r/klokinator/comments/ecglou/cryopod_refresh_80_original_version/

"Whaddya mean Phoebe left?" I ask, while staring at the guard in disbelief. "She was here only four minutes ago!"

As usual, people mill around us in the Core. A goblin here, a lady there. The man before me shrugs. "They seemed agitated. I didn't want to bother Miss Berthol- I mean, Miss Hiro. She got in her truck and left. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary."

I shake my head and sigh. "Yeah, I know. Christ. I thought she'd go hang out in a corner or something. Now I have to chase her down like a weirdo. Thanks."

"Anytime, Your Majesty."

The soldier nods at me and spares only a passing glance toward Solomon's eerie ghost figure. As he pushes past, the young man seems slightly unnerved. His discomfort at the presence of a half-dead spirit might make me laugh under different circumstances. Sadly, my mind is focused entirely on finding my wife so I can apologize to her and Samantha.

Solomon watches as the soldier walks away. "It's been quite literally thousands of years since someone looked me in the eye. I'm used to staring at people's soul energy, not holding conversations on equal terms with flesh-and-blood beings."

I turn and start walking toward the gate to Tarus II. "How does that work? Staring at, err, 'soul energy,' I mean. When I spoke to you in my mind, I thought we were talking man-to-man."

"Nope. You appeared to me like a shapeless blob of milk floating in the air. The projection you saw was little more than your imagination filling in the blanks for my brilliant countenance. Of course, my Crown did provide a little assistance."

After stepping through the portal, I yawn to pop my eardrums. "Neat. Do you think Phoebe went to Hero City, or elsewhere? Maybe she and Samantha went out for a picnic."

Solomon groans. "Jason. When women are mad at you, they wish to be left alone, but generally, a *picnic* is not at the top of their itinerary. They'll probably chat with each other for a while, and that will be the end of it. A few boring, sexless weeks await, and you'll move past your differences."

A moment passes. I sweep my gaze around, and Solomon steps in front of me. "Do you love Phoebe?"

"Of course I do. That's a stupid question."

"And she loves you?"

"Uh. Well, yes. I don't want to use a cheesy word like 'soulmate,' but..."

"Then you have no reason to worry!" Solomon laughs while grinning like a Cheshire cat. "I've had a few million quarrels with women. For one thing, having infinite knowledge meant I was always correct, and they didn't want to admit their arguments were vastly inferior to mine. However, I often learned to say I was wrong to put an end to the quibbling. My life became much simpler as a result."

I force myself not to roll my eyes. "At least you're humble about your intelligence."

"Indeed." The king snaps his fingers. "Can't you use your Wordsmithing to find Phoebe? The sooner you apologize and own up to your mistake, the sooner we can move on to more important matters."

I stare into the distance, but I can't see Phoebe's truck anywhere. "I can use my Locate spell to track her, but after what happened with Hope, I'd rather not. I'll go home and pray she's there. It'll have to do."

"Mmm. The spying thing. Even though I barely know you, I can see your heart was in the right place. I'm sure your copycat will accept your apology."

"You're probably right. I dunno."

The two of us walk and float through the warp-gate to Tarus II and down the steps out past the security perimeter. Once I arrive on the paved road, I stand off to the side and exhale. "Man, something's bothering me about what Hope said. I called us identical, and he immediately insisted we were different. I don't understand how that can be true. I cloned him from myself barely a week ago. I could understand a few minor differences, but he acted like he was born on a different planet."

"Wasn't he?" Solomon rests his hands on his hips. "You made him here in the Labyrinth. You were born on Earth. That seems like a different planet to me."

"I mean, okay, *sure*, but that's nitpicking. My point is that Hope had all of my memories, my looks, my emotions, everything was identical right up to the moment of his creation. What the hell could change in a week?"

"I don't know," Solomon replies. "Not about him specifically, anyway. A person's world can change in five minutes, though. What experiences do you and he share, and what have the two of you lived differently?"

I ponder Solomon's question.

A minute passes.

Two.

Three.

"Well, Hope fought Uriel while I stayed behind. I barely know how that went. I'm married to Phoebe... but he has nobody. Now that you mention it, there are a few other differences. I didn't think they were major at first, but maybe you're onto something."

"Of course I am, you simple-minded child! I'm the bloody Knowledge-Seeker. I'm always right." Solomon groans again and spins on his heel. "Why don't you try looking at things from his perspective? If he really *was* you until the moment you created him, but you're the one getting married while he isn't,

how would you feel if you watched Phoebe get stripped away by another man? Even if that man was technically you?"

"Well, I'd... I'd feel pretty terrible."

"Precisely. Awful, alone, confused. Hope has to reinvent his entire identity. Why, it would be like stepping from one epoch of humanity's timeline into another! A jarring and unwelcome change of scenery that would force one to adapt. Surely you know what I mean."

"I do. You're referring to the Cryopod."

"Indeed. You told me you were frightened and scared when you first emerged. It's a natural sensation when one arrives at an unknown destination. For example, if a man comes home to his faithful wife and sees her in bed with another, his existence will shatter. In an instant, he will call into question every moment they shared, every secret, and deep inside his heart, he will shift into a different person entirely. For Hope, he shares all of your memories, so I imagine that right as he was growing comfortable in his new life, met a nice girl, became a Hero that saved everyone from demons and monsters... he was suddenly torn out of all of that and told he needed to rebuild again. That's two major blows to his psyche in one year, and you're both barely out of your adolescent phases."

I stare ahead numbly, looking not at Solomon, but through him. "Wow. I never thought of that. I've been a terrible friend."

"Simply dreadful."

"I should have put myself in his shoes and talked to him more."

"Agreed."

"Solomon, your snark isn't helping."

"I don't care." The King chuckles to himself about something. "Heh, the first step to solving a problem is to recognize there is one in the first place. Even the wisest sometimes struggle with that."

"Including you?"

"No."

This time it's me who groans. "You're so humble. I'm going to make a vehicle. Gimme a sec."

I take a minute to imagine the inner workings of my Ferrari. Its contours, the engine. Before I finish, Solomon speaks. "Hold on. What are you imagining?"

"A car. I have a Ferrari I like to drive."

"Yes. I can see the image in your head. But a vehicle that drives on wheels will be significantly slower and more dangerous than a hovercraft or even a spaceship. Here, let me assist you."

Solomon closes his eyes. A moment later, his mouth opens.

"SAEN DHA WUSNR UL DHA WERR I LAAN DU RAA DHA FAISCRA AED DHA ELDARUFA FIRD UID DHA FIL ELN SHAARA ELN RAD'R SERR AID E NEIRR."

Solomon speaks a series of unintelligible, screechy sounds that nearly make me yank the Crown off my head. Whatever he's saying, they aren't words. Even the Crown can't translate them for me.

He opens his eyes. "There. I've loaded up a basic template for a miniature spacecraft. With this, you can house a crew of up to four people comfortably."

Solomon's design appears in my mind. The ship looks like something from a sci-fi movie, with a sleek silver hull, a pointed nose, an engine on each wing, and a hyperdrive in the back.

However...

"Why the gold lining and baubles? Why did you design this ship with all these rubies and gems all over the hull? I don't understand Bedazzling the exterior of a spaceship."

Solomon scoffs. "You're the bloody Hero! You need to travel in style! People respect and fawn over those who cover themselves in riches and jewelry. It's only natural for the almighty Hero to make people stop and stare when he flies past."

"I think you're going a little too far."

"Psh. I knew you'd complain. I resisted the urge to make the entire exterior solid-gold, but you still whine like a billy goat."

"I'm not whining."

Solomon rolls his eyes. He flaps his hands at me and says in a mocking voice, "*I'm not whining.*"

I sigh. "Solomon... I don't know if anyone has ever told you this before... but you're an asshole sometimes."

"Only sometimes? It's supposed to be constant."

"At least you don't deny it."

I aim my mind at an empty area of the road and speak aloud. "**Ship.**"

Within five seconds, the spacecraft materializes and gently *plunks* onto the asphalt. It's much bigger in person compared to my mind, standing twenty feet tall, thirty feet wide, and about eighty-feet long. Considering all of the internal mechanisms, it's probably significantly smaller inside.

The entry platform lowers. I walk over to it and grumble to myself about the stupid rhinestones, rubies, and gems embedded all over the side of the craft. *A Bedazzled spacecraft is the opposite of badass.*

Solomon follows me. Once inside, I gaze around and take in the sights. It's much roomier than I expected, with a single unbroken hallway leading all the way to the beds in the back, bathrooms in the middle, and an open dining area along the way. I expected something akin to a large RV, but it's more like a small house.

I make my way to the cockpit and sit down. Thanks to the Crown, I know what every button, knob, and dial does, but it still feels very... *alien*.

Solomon sits in the co-pilot seat. "We should give this beautiful lady a name."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something extravagant and mysterious, exuding warmth and wealth."

"None of those adjectives belong in the same sentence."

"Bloody hell, not this again. Always with the complaining..." Solomon trails off. "Ah, I've got it! How about Esther?"

"You want me to name the ship... *Esther*?"

"Sure! It's a beautiful name! Esther was one of only two women to have an entire book of the Holy Bible devoted to them. The other was my great-great-grandmother, Ruth."

Solomon pauses for a moment before continuing. "Have you, perchance, ever read the Bible?"

"A bit, but only if one of my foster families dragged me to church. I'm more into ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. The Bible didn't do it for me."

Solomon purses his lips. "So that's how it is, eh?"

"I read about you!"

That satisfies him. "Good. My appearance is the most important part of the entire Bible."

"Okay, now you've gone too far. You're *not* more important than Jesus."

"Sure, I am."

"Bullshit!"

"It's true."

"Yeah, okay. If you say so."

I turn away from him and activate the ship's thrusters. Several button presses later, it ascends into the sky. A sensation of disorientation hits me as we ascend. The gradual climb is so smooth that looking through the windows outside is more like watching a television screen. I don't feel the movement at all.

Solomon reads my mind. "Inertia dampeners."

"Cool."

By the time Esther has hovered a hundred feet up, my eyes raise to the stars above.

Solomon leans back in his chair. "Let's take a detour, Jason."

I've spent months using my new powers, and never once did I consider venturing into space. Now that I'm here, I can't believe myself. I was an idiot.

Thousands, millions, perhaps billions of specks of light dot the sky. Far in the distance, Tarus II's sun, Vorus, burns radiantly. Its light would usually damage my eyes, but thanks to ultraviolet shielding on Esther's front window, it doesn't.

Two small moons orbit Tarus II. Esther highlights several points of interest in the space around our planet, including a comet and an asteroid caught in orbit.

Solomon rubs his hands together. "Breathtaking, isn't it? I remember my first time leaving Earth's atmosphere. I saw several videos of astronauts and the Moon Landing, but entering space is different compared to watching videos or looking at images."

"Yeah. It's something else. Takes my breath away."

"The Volgrim and the Demons own much, if not all of the galaxy by now. The stars we see are only those nearest us within a thousand light-years or so. I would be surprised if any of them were free of the reach of our enemies."

I slump in my seat. "A hundred thousand years is a long time... but surely there must be some planets they haven't defiled yet? Is it even possible to colonize millions of planets in only tens of thousands of years?"

"Perhaps not thousands," Solomon murmurs. "But the Volgrim are an ancient species, descending from ancestors millions of years older than humanity. They had plenty of time to colonize the galaxy long before they met our species."

Solomon's eyes turn distant. "Humans believed they were alone in the universe for thousands of years. Despite our awareness of angels, beings who once lived among the stars, we arrogantly viewed ourselves as the lone seed of life drifting throughout the infinite void. We were wrong. Even I held incorrect assumptions, as I did not learn of the Volgrim's existence until the rest of my species did."

"The Milky Way is a single speck among billions of other specks. Our pretty little spiral houses tens of thousands of habitable worlds, and the Volgrim have long since laid claim to most, if not all of them. They watched humanity's rise from the primordial soup with the same dispassionate gaze as they did all the other planets teeming with life. It was only once we achieved a certain technological epoch that their worried gazes fell upon us. Thus began the Energy Wars."

"You mentioned the Energy Wars before," I say. "I know we ultimately lost, but did we stand any chance of winning at all?"

"Solomon sighs. "No. We were about as threatening to the Volgrim as an ant to a boot. Even had I joined my intellect with King Arthur's might and Joan of Arc's courage, we would have inevitably lost the war, so powerful was the fist of our oppressors."

"I have Wordsmithing, though," I say. "Maybe you three couldn't have saved humanity, but I could. I should have been able to do *something*."

"Don't blame yourself, Jason. I suspect you entered the cryopod as part of the Creator's divine will. Had you fought on Earth, you might have perished along with the rest of humanity. Things are not always as they seem."

I sigh. "Maybe so, but I still feel guilty every day. I wish I had done something. I wish I could go back and fix everything."

"Regret is a crucial part of life's adventure," Solomon says, solemnly. "Everyone has regrets. Even me."

A few moments pass. The ancient king sighs. "We've admired the view. Now, let us return home. I thought taking a short break from all your worries to see a purer form of the universe would do you some good. Sadly, duty calls."

Instead of turning the ship back toward Tarus II, I stare at the moon orbiting Tarus II. "Hey, maybe this is a stupid question, but how hospitable would you say Kelkin is? Tarus II's moon, I mean."

Solomon glances at the displays on Esther's scanners, detailing the readouts on the distant grey globe. "It resides in the brown-level Goldilocks zone. While technically colonizable, Kelkin isn't self-sustaining. Given its lack of atmosphere and methane-ice surface, it would take a tremendous amount of effort to terraform."

"Right..." I mutter. "But I have Wordsmithing. The Volgrim and Demons don't."

Solomon stares at me for a moment, then turns to gaze at Kelkin. "Oh. That's an interesting idea. You're smarter than I expected, Jason Hiro."

"Your compliments feel like insults."

"Haha, take my words however you like."

A smile spreads across my face. "That's the trick, Solomon. We might not need to seek out colonizable planets. Maybe I can make my own and expand humanity's borders in a way that even the Volgrim can't."

Solomon taps his chin. "Terraforming is a costly feat the Volgrim only use when a planet is already sufficiently within the Goldilocks zone. A moon like Kelkin would be terrible for their technological capabilities. They could transform it into a habitable world, but it would take centuries and require an enormous amount of resources. If your Wordsmithing is capable of turning barren, desolate worlds into functional Earths, you'll have a huge leg up on the Volgrim."

Solomon leans forward. A huge smile spreads across his face.

"So how about it? Try terraforming the moon."

Immediately, I shake my head. "Sorry, Solomon, but no can do. I don't have a millionth the magical capacity I need to pull off world-scale Wordsmithing. Hell, just trying to create a couple of generic three-story buildings nearly killed me. If I want to terraform Kelkin, it will take me several years, working in tiny increments. The only solution that will speed up the process is a massive boost to my mana capacity."

Solomon's smile disappears. "Oh. I see. I don't yet understand all the intricacies of your life and powers. My apologies. Perhaps I'll spend tonight performing a deep-mind search to see if I can come up with a workaround."

I raise an eyebrow. "What do you mean by 'deep-mind search'? That sounds... invasive."

"You're wearing my crown, Jason," Solomon says, offering a kindly smile. "The moment you put it on, my artifact downloaded all of your memories and knowledge, just as it has with countless other people. Where do you think I obtained my knowledge of theoretical physics, quantum mechanics, and other such complex scientific branches? I combined the experience and memories of countless geniuses to advance my own knowledge of the universe!"

Slowly, I nod. "So... you can see all of my memories? All the embarrassing stuff that's happened to me? All of my, um... private thoughts?"

Solomon facepalms. "Yes, yes. Don't you worry, though, boy. That unflattering moment from when you were fourteen and Lindsey rejected you is a far cry from some of the things I saw in Einstein's memories. Your minor blunders are hardly worth my attention when I've seen things that would make former world leaders blush with shame."

Solomon's words make me lower my eyes. "...Sh-she didn't reject me..."

"No, no, my dear boy. *You* rejected *her*. Of course."

Hearing Solomon bring up one of my embarrassing moments from high school makes me want to crawl in a ditch and die.

I tap Esther's controls, turn the ship around, and head back to Tarus II. "...Let's call it a day."

"Haha. Yes, let's."

The atmosphere of Tarus burns around the ship as we begin our rapid descent.

I glance at Solomon. "So, uh... I have a question."

"Hmm?"

"You're the first Hero I've met. In-person, I mean. Can you tell me more about yourself? Your magic?"

Solomon rubs his chin thoughtfully. "I never experimented with my magic. I was lucky to be born during a time of relative peace. I engaged in minor skirmishes against the demons here and there occasionally, but I never needed to exercise my heroic powers on the field of battle."

"Oh? What were your abilities?"

Both of us gaze out at the long reach of a massive ocean as we fly lower and lower into Tarus II's atmosphere. "I don't know. My attributes leaned heavily toward intellect, rather than strength and agility. I think I possessed some ability to conjure holy energy, but I never used it in my day to day life."

"I guess you didn't need to. You know, being a king and all."

"Mmm." Solomon turns his head to look at me. "Say, Jason... something has been bothering me for a while. Regarding your status as a Hero, that is."

"Like what?"

We quickly fly past the ocean and over the mountaintops. Hero City, built on a plateau, grows visible in the distance. Several of Bahamut's pyramids rise in the distance, giving the oddly modern-looking city a hybrid feeling of past-meets-present. It proves quite jarring.

"Heroes typically were men and women of great influence. The Heroic Aura sought out those most likely to use their abilities for the greater good. Commoners rarely gained such power. Therefore, this begs the question of why it would possess you. After all, you are a relatively normal youth. Were your parents wealthy or famous?"

I shake my head. "I don't remember them. I know my mother died before my second birthday. My father gave me up for adoption."

"He did? Strange." Solomon shakes his head. "Do you remember who he was?"

"No. The little I know is because of a few official documents I used to travel with between foster homes. As far as I'm concerned, my parents both died when I was a child."

"Mmm."

My answer seems to satisfy Solomon, and he gazes at the specter of Hero City as we fly closer. While I bring the ship down to land in an empty field, the king nods slowly. "So you didn't know your parents, and you have the Heroic Spirit. Perhaps they knew of your importance. They might have been wealthy aristocrats or descendants of a royal bloodline. That would explain your abilities."

"I suppose that's possible. My father didn't leave me any money though, so I don't think he was wealthy. You might be grasping at straws. Didn't you imply the Heroic Aura sometimes possesses those not born from an important bloodline?"

"I did, but a circumstance like that was scarce. Only a dozen or so cases that I know of."

The ship touches down a hundred feet from the city's perimeter. Forty curious onlookers peep out from behind a building. They must have seen Esther's arrival, and now they're worried we might be enemies.

Solomon chews on his thumb. "You know, Jason... the last time a Hero appeared was around the beginning of the 20th century. I always wondered what happened to his descendants."

"That does sound strange," I say, noncommittally. "I don't know anything about the past Heroes, though. Well, other than Joan and Arthur."

"Those are the ones everyone's heard of, along with me," Solomon says with a wink. "How unfortunate that so many have forgotten the names of Jephthah, Caesar, and Sir Lorent."

Solomon and I both stand up and walk toward the exit hatch. The ramp extends down, and when the crowd of onlookers sees us, a collective sigh of relief fills the air.

A few men, along with one Salamander, wander over. I recognize Ogie immediately.

"Sweet 'n salty walnuts! You scared the stools out of us," the Salamander says. "What in Sam-heck is that flyin' bullet thing?"

"It's a spaceship," I reply, not wanting to go into much detail. I notice several people looking at Solomon questioningly, so I decide to take him down a notch. "This guy is a ghost friend of mine named Solomon. He's nobody important."

The king gawks. "I beg your pardon?!"

"Yeah, you heard me, grandpa. Wave at the townsfolk."

Solomon grumbles something under his breath. I only make out a few choice curses.

Several minutes later, he and I arrive at the front of Bahamut's old palace, now redesignated my official home.

The king curls his lip up. "You're slumming it, then?"

"What? This is the best place in the city! Huge rooms, full course meals, all that good stuff."

"The aesthetic is dreadful. It looks like an average-sized office building. Have you no Heroic pride?"

"We went over this already."

"I don't care. It's still shameful. I'm surprised Saul allowed my spiritual descendant to live in such a horrid environment. When I see him next, I'm going to gouge his useless eyes out."

I cringe at his vivid description. "I don't think you need to go that far."

"Yes, but after all the training I gave him, he's making me look bad. Maybe I'll only flay an inch of skin from his body. Even I can be merciful."

I decide not to comment. We enter my home, and every step becomes unbearable as Solomon comments on this drab ornament or that ugly trinket, or how the lighting isn't complimentary. Multiple times, he begs me to use my Wordsmithing to change the walls to gold and silver. I do my best to tune him out.

We make our way upstairs, and eventually, arrive at my bedroom door. When I open it, I catch the tail end of Phoebe speaking. "-his fault. I think he misunderstood. That's all."

"Yes, but it was hurtful. After everything I've done to help the humans, I just... I thought people would treat me differently. They still act like I'm part of a demon conspiracy to kill-"

Samantha stops talking. She turns around to the doorway as Solomon and I enter. I wince at the tears on her face. "Uh... um... bad time? I can come back later..."

The succubus quickly looks away and wipes her face. "It's fine. I should return to my room anyway."

"Wait, hold on." I hold my hand up. "Samantha- I'm sorry. I came all the way here to say that. I overheard Hope saying something, and I jumped the gun. I shouldn't have accused you of anything. That was wrong of me."

The succubus's tail flicks around nervously. Samantha continues to sit on the bed without making any effort to get up, and stares at her crossed legs. "An apology. I don't know why, but I didn't expect that."

Phoebe stares at me. Her face shows anger, but everything else about her appears contemplative, as though she's spent the better part of twenty minutes playing devil's advocate on my behalf to try and explain my actions.

She's too good for me.

"I'm glad you came, Jason. We were talking about you the whole time."

"I, uh, figured as much."

My wife's eyes look to the ghostly figure standing beside me. "You brought a friend?"

Before I can reply, Samantha turns around to look at me, but she registers Solomon as well. She starts to say something, but pauses a moment before speaking. "Do I know you?"

Solomon shakes his head and beams a grin at her. "I'm Solomon. One of the ancient kings, also known as the smartest being in existence. I doubt we've met, for I could never forget one as beautiful as yourself."

His flattery doesn't affect her. "You're right. I'd remember someone as braggadocious as you. You do look familiar, but it's probably the whole royalty getup. I've known a few kings."

Solomon slides over to the bed and sits down, though his body makes no impression on the covers. "I wish I'd been one of them."

"Smooth." Samantha rolls her eyes and turns back to me, forgetting Solomon exists within the span of two seconds. "Jason. I should have told you I was a shapeshifter. I owe you an apology too. I didn't realize that humans would value appearances so much. If it makes you feel any better, this is my natural body. I don't enhance it in the slightest."

I blink. "Wait... I think there's been a misunderstanding... I wasn't worried about you abusing your, um, sex appeal. It was more of an espionage issue."

"How so?"

A bead of sweat drips down my back.

Come on, Jason! You just apologized, and now you're going to imply she's a shapeshifter who wants to infiltrate us for some nefarious purpose?! Talk about ruining the goodwill you just built!!

...No. I have to tell the truth. I have to tell Samantha what I saw. No more lying.

I lean against the wall. "Here's the deal. I used 'Locate' and overheard Hope and Neil talking. They said that you... that you betrayed Uriel. You killed her or something. I don't know the details. On top of that, you can manipulate the emotions and feelings of those around you, and you can change your appearance. It was wrong of me to jump to conclusions, especially after you saved my life and Phoebe's in our battle against Amelia and Satan. However, surely you can see how combined with not wanting me to see the files about the Volgrim, I might assume you were-"

"You saw the files?" Samantha interrupts me. Her voice turns cold as ice. "After I warned you not to look... you examined them anyway?"

"I did."

Samantha lowers her head. "Jason... you crossed a line you shouldn't have."

"So *what* if I know about the aliens? What's the big problem?"

Samantha flicks her eyes to Phoebe uneasily. She wants to keep the information about the Volgrim as tight-lipped as possible.

A moment later, she seems to realize I'll tell Phoebe later anyway, so there's no point being secretive.

"The *problem* is that nobody but the Emperors and Dukes know of the Volgrim's existence. No other demons, no monsters, and certainly no humans... nobody. It's part of our treaty. Due to issues we've had

with uprisings in the past, the Volgrim only agreed to a cease-fire under the condition that we keep our arrogant elements in check. The moment word gets out about them and reaches any loose-lipped fellow; their weapons will train on us."

"Alright. I suppose you have a point. I don't really understand, but if that's the case, why let anyone have access to files like we found?"

Samantha pulls on a loose string of hair. "You used that Crown, didn't you? Nobody should be able to decipher the computer files left behind except Ose. She's the one who devised all the systems that keep humans and demons in check. I don't know much about technology, nor do most demons, but she's a genius when it comes to it. Under normal circumstances, nobody I know could decipher those files. You're probably the only person who can."

A slight tinge of pride burns in my heart. *Yeah, damn straight! I'm a genius too!*

Solomon smirks at me. His thoughts transmit into my mind. *Only by using **my** power.*

"Well, Samantha, it's too late now. I saw the files. Oh, and when I did, Ose appeared inside my mind. She tried to take over my body, but she awakened Solomon instead, and he saved me."

A lightbulb pops up above Phoebe's head. She looks from me to my crown and then to Solomon. "Ahh! Solomon! His crown! He's the man who... oh my gosh!"

Solomon snaps his fingers. "Yes! Now you understand! Tis' I, the most incredible, brilliant, and good-looking man who ever lived! I'm surprised it took you this long to realize!"

Phoebe's surprise melts away instantly. "Oh. You're *that* kind of person."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

Solomon might be the most knowledgeable man in existence, but even he doesn't know *everything*. The thought comforts me.

Samantha shifts on the bed and turns her whole body toward me. Seeing the front of the voluptuous succubus instantly gets my hormones raging, but I immediately suppress them.

"Jason, we both made mistakes. Let's call it even and move on, okay?"

I nod. "That's fair."

In the back of my mind, a nagging concern buzzes like an angry blowfly. Despite my immediate agreement with her words, I pivot on a dime. "Well, one thing. I do have to ask... What happened with Uriel? Can you explain that to me?"

She shrugs. "It was a long time ago. Some people change in a day; some people need a few years. How much would you change if a hundred thousand years passed?"

"A lot, I suppose. I still would like to know what happened, though."

* * *

The succubus sighs.

"I did what Satan ordered. Back then, we all did." Samantha grips her leg firmly. A look of unease appears on her face. "It was part of a day in history known as the War in Heaven. Ninety-nine percent of all demons died, as did the majority of all angels. It was a bloodbath unlike any other. My job was to infiltrate and eliminate the forward guard so our forces could enter Heaven. I followed my orders. We made it inside. There isn't much to say otherwise."

"But... you killed Uriel, right?"

Samantha's face turns ashen. "No! I would never do that! I wounded her badly, yes, but I hate killing. I'm a pacifist, Jason. I only fight if it's necessary."

"Sure, but you rushed back to the Labyrinth earlier to battle her as soon as that one Duke guy gave the word."

"He's a Baron, and his name is Orias." Samantha shakes her head in annoyance. "I have obligations to the demons, Jason. More importantly, Uriel is a threat not only to my people but yours as well. She's a dangerous, unhinged lunatic who kills for sport. By the time Hope and I arrived, she had slain nearly a hundred thousand of my people. Would you prefer I let her rampage around unchecked?"

"I suppose not."

"Good." Samantha waves her hand at me, flippantly. "Perhaps you should ask Hope what the battle against her was like. He nearly died, after all."

The succubus seethes for a moment. "I wonder why Hope would say bad things about me after we fought together. Perhaps I should speak to him. The two of you are very aggravating sometimes."

Phoebe smiles and rubs Samantha's shoulder. "Yeah, that's men for you. But he's all mine!"

"Tch. You can keep him," Samantha says. However, despite her words, a trace of a smile appears on her face.

I breathe a sigh of relief. *Samantha doesn't hate me after all. Thank god.*

* * *

Several minutes later, Samantha stands up and adjusts her clothing. "Well, um, sorry for weeping like a child. I'll be heading to my room now, Phoebe."

Phoebe waggles her fingers in the air. "See you around, Sammy. Drop by anytime!"

"Trust me; I will."

Samantha walks past me as I sit on the bed. She stops a few feet away. "Jason, if you don't keep hold of Phoebe, I'll take her for myself."

"What?"

"Ta-ta~!"

She leaves the room and closes the door.

Now only Phoebe, Solomon, and I remain.

My wife glances at the ghostly man sitting beside me on the edge of the bed. "So... how is this going to work?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Her cheeks burn red. "Is Solomon going to follow you everywhere? All the time?"

The king responds before I can think of an answer. "Oh, there won't be any problems. Just pretend I'm not here! I'll stand and watch silently as you two do whatever it is that young newlyweds do!"

Phoebe's expression flattens. "That's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"I don't like lecherous old men. That's why." Phoebe points at the Crown. "Make sure you take that off, tonight."

"Yeah. I will," I say with a smile. "No way this voyeur's getting a peep show."

Solomon's face turns crestfallen. "B-but Jason! I thought we were friends!! Phoebe is far more beautiful than the fairest lily in the bluest pond! Please, don't take away the only thing this poor old man lives for!"

I lift the crown off my head. Solomon vanishes, leaving Phoebe and me alone.

"Yeah, that sealed the deal."

I set the crown on the dresser beside the bed, then turn to my wife and smile. "A lot of stuff happened today."

"Mhmmm..." Phoebe flops onto her back and traces a circle on her collarbone. "I'm still mad at you for making Sammy cry."

"Aw, c'mon. I apologized!"

"Yes, but you didn't apologize to *me*."

"I'm sorry."

Phoebe closes her eyes. "Okay. That'll do."

Grinning giddily, I reach for my belt buckle. "Great! Now that we're married, let's get out of these clothes!"

"Somehow, I knew that would be the only thing on your mind."

Inwardly, I wince.

Images of two thousand demon heads exploding appear in my mind.

"No... not the only thing."

Part 081: Like Uncle, Like Nephew

"Gnuh?"

I grunt reflexively as Phoebe yanks the curtains open. I wince and flip over on the bed to put my back to the window, all while squeezing my eyes shut. The wintery sunlight radiating around the room is colored pure white due to the snow on the city's environmental barriers. It's the most blinding light I've seen in ages.

"Guhh... five more minutsh."

Phoebe clears her throat. "Ahem, I don't think so. You have to wake up, Jason. Every time you say 'five more minutes' and I leave you alone, thirty minutes pass, and you fall asleep again. Lazy boy."

"Grr... I don't wannawakeup..."

My eyes droop. A moment later, icy cold hits my body as Phoebe yanks the covers away. "Up! Up! Up!"

"Noooo!" I protest weakly, then sigh. "**Awake.**"

One second later, I bolt up in bed while feeling as if I've been awake for two hours.

"Are you awake now?" Phoebe asks.

"Yeah. I'm good."

I continue to wince from the glare of the sunlight, but it's less pronounced than a few moments ago. My eyes wander toward Phoebe's nude, ripped body, as she grabs her clothes for the day and a towel. Her finely toned abs and muscles give her a sexy, powerful aura. She reminds me of an Amazonian warrior. "I'm going to take a shower. Are you coming?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. In more ways than one."

"Jason!"

"You opened yourself up to that one."

"Yeah? Well, you're immature!"

"Nah, I'm just getting a headstart on dad jokes."

Phoebe smiles and rubs her belly. "Aww, that's sweet. But, um, what are dad jokes?"

"Think of the worst jokes you've ever heard, then multiply them by the power of puns. Those are dad jokes."

"I still don't follow."

"Trust me, you will. Give it time."

I slide out of bed and wrap my arm around Phoebe's shoulder, pulling her in for a passionate kiss before we head into the shower.

* * *

* * *

Thirty minutes later, I dry myself off with Wordsmithing, then instantly style my hair and clean my breath. To say my body is the pinnacle of health would be an understatement. I used to offer to do the same for Phoebe, but she thinks it 'builds character' to brush her teeth and hair. I don't understand her, sometimes.

I wander back into the bedroom and summon blue jeans and a black sweater, then grab Solomon's Crown off my bedside dresser and set it on my head.

"Rise and shine, Solomon. I hope you had some good sleep."

The king materializes beside me. "I don't sleep, sorry to disappoint."

"Oh. Really? I hope you weren't bored all by yourself."

"Hardly. Your sex was passionate enough to keep me interested. I found your technique lacking, though. A wild woman like Phoebe needs a strong man to tame her. Perhaps I can give you pointers sometime?"

Several seconds pass. I gape at Solomon's ghostly figure.

"Y-y-you *watched* us?! I thought you couldn't see anything! That's why I took the crown off!!"

Solomon rolls his eyes. "You don't need to get all flustered. I can see everything around my crown, regardless of whether someone wears it or not. In any case, you should thank me. Now that I've seen how you copulate, I can improve your technique and drive that feral lady to new heights of pleasure! If you wear the crown next time, I can even possess your body and-"

"No!! Holy shit, absolutely not!! I can't believe you'd-"

"Jason?" Phoebe's voice speaks out from the bathroom. "Is something wrong?"

My face pales. I haven't wordsmithed Solomon to be visible yet. Phoebe can't hear or see him, only me.

"N-no, it's nothing. I'm just, err, talking to someone on the... the *phone*."

"Oh, okay~! I'll be out in a few minutes!"

Sweat pours down my back. I glare at Solomon and keep my voice low. "Goddamn you, you pervert. What the hell is wrong with you? Are you a *voyeur* or something?!"

Solomon's expression flattens. "Jason. I am no longer a flesh and blood being. I have no sexual urges left in my body. I have long ago forgotten what the sensations felt like. I thought you'd appreciate my help. If I bother you that much... I won't watch anymore."

His sudden change in tone calms me down. I lower my eyes and take a few moments to contemplate his position.

Solomon was an ancient king who died and became trapped inside his artifact. He's lived in the crown for well over a hundred thousand years, his only friend the crown's bearer.

Solomon reads my mind. He nods. "It is as you imagine. I have made many friends with those who wore my crown. I watched all of them die. I..."

He trails off and looks away, toward the sunlight outside. "I am lonely. Seeing two young ones in love fills me with much joy... but also sorrow. It reminds me of the past I lost. The wives I loved who I will never see again. The children they bore who grew old and died."

Solomon goes silent for a moment before continuing. "You know, Jason, there is one adversary no man or woman can conquer. Humans, Gods, Angels, Demons, and even the Volgrim pale in comparison to its power. Time. It is relentless. It continues onward, forever, no matter what we wish. Enjoy your life, Jason, and your time with Phoebe. Don't make the mistake I did."

Both of us fall silent. I slump down to sit on the edge of the bed and stare at the wall. "I'm sorry. I don't know you well, and I can be insulting, sometimes, with my assumptions."

"Everyone has faults," Solomon says. He sits beside me. "For example, this old man has forgotten how civilized people interact. I suppose most people don't watch their friends going at it like jackrabbits, eh?"

"N-not usually, no."

"I mean, wow! I was surprised by all that biting! Why must you use your teeth so much? Her breasts aren't going anywhere! You don't need to hold them in place while you deliver the final thrust-"

"Solomon!"

"Hah! Look at you blush!" Solomon laughs. He swats my back, but his hand passes through it. A slight tingle on my spine indicates his touch, but I barely notice the sensation. "Watching you squirm is truly hilarious!"

"Okay, fine, I'll let it slide. Christ, please don't offer any commentary. I'm still learning as I go."

"You'll be an expert in no time with moves like those."

"No commentary!"

"Fine, fine. Spoilsport." Solomon flops back on the bed. "I'll be quiet, for now."

A long minute passes. Phoebe hums to herself in the bathroom, making up some tune in her head as she gets ready for the day. I glance back at Solomon. "Hey, let's go see Saul today. He'll be super excited to see you again!"

Solomon grins from ear to ear. "Ah, yes! I'm looking forward to that! It's been so long since I last saw his face! I wonder how many wrinkles he has! He's probably ancient by now!"

"Nah. Saul looks maybe forty or fifty. No grey hairs at all."

Solomon's smile fades. "Really? That's odd. How has he managed to survive all these years?"

"Bahamut. She used magic to enslave humans and monsters. They gained immortality and lost control of their free will. She forced them to serve under her for the last hundred thousand years. Saul and Phoebe were both her slaves."

"Oh. That's unfortunate."

"Yeah. All of Bahamut's slaves are nearly as old as you. Older, in a few rare cases. You'd be surprised how many humans she used her magic on."

"Indeed. You mentioned Bahamut's riddle magic before, but even I didn't know about the power of the Sphinx. She must have guarded her secret closely."

"Mhm. It's strange that I knew the answer to Bahamut's riddle, though. It was common knowledge in my day. Why wouldn't any potential slaves have guessed the answer?"

"Life is full of mysteries," Solomon replies. "Oh. Phoebe finished."

I lift my head and look toward the Bathroom. Phoebe steps out, wearing a white sundress with long sleeves and a skirt that reaches down to her knees, along with satin gloves and pantyhose. Across her chest and under her dress, I can somewhat make out the unmistakable round lump of the T-REX.

"A dress? I thought you weren't the type?"

Phoebe's face pales. "You don't like it?"

"I do! I'm just surprised to see you wearing one, that's all. You usually prefer wearing leather armor and carrying a sword at your hip."

"Oh. I see." Phoebe quickly smiles to cover up her embarrassment. "Well, Samantha told me recently that I'd look more attractive if I dressed as a woman should. I'm not used to wearing such feminine clothes, but since we have the nanite armor, I can be ready for combat within seconds."

To emphasize her point, Phoebe presses the button under her top three times. A flood of nanites rushes out and covers her body from head to toe. I happen to catch Solomon gawking as he watches in stunned silence.

When the nanites finish, Phoebe holds out her hand, and a sword of nanites forms and hardens. She swings it around expertly and assumes a two-handed pose, before chopping down hard with it and cutting a dresser in half. The razor-sharp blade makes mincemeat of the furniture. When she finishes, Phoebe retracts the sword, and its nanites combine with the rest on her body.

"See? Easy as kicking the dog! Also, fix that dresser for me, will you, sweetheart?"

"Mhm. **Repair.**"

I turn to look at Solomon. He continues to stare and ogle the fully armored woman before him, her faceless helmet evoking a certain sense of danger. "By the Heavens... what manner of creation led to this suit? I never saw any development like this, not even during the Energy Wars! The tensile strength must be off the charts!!"

"Yup. It resists piercing, bludgeoning, bullets, flames, acid, anything you can imagine. It filters out toxins in the air, enhances bodily strength-"

Phoebe cocks her head. "Are you talking to Solomon?"

"Oh, right, yeah. Sorry. **Project.**"

Solomon's body solidifies, somewhat. Phoebe tilts her head slightly. "Good morning, Solomon! How was your sleep?"

Immediately, I scream in my mind, *DON'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT SEX!*

Solomon gets the hint. "It was wonderful. You look positively radiant today, with or without that suit of armor."

"Aw, you're such a sweetheart!"

My wife doesn't pick up on Solomon's underlying meaning, but I do. I silently swear to myself that I'll pay him back in spades for spying on us.

Phoebe goes silent for a moment, and her suit begins to melt away, leaving her standing in her dress once again. She walks over and steps into her fur-lined brown boots, and I put my sneakers on.

She beams sunshine at me. "Alright, Jason! What do you want to do first?"

"First? We're going to take this guy to see an old friend. After that... well, I want to see Hope. I still have to apologize to him."

Phoebe's smile dissipates. "Yes, you should get on that as soon as possible. The longer you let the dead air sit between you, the harder apologizing will be."

"I know."

Forty minutes later, Phoebe and I walk down Main Street, arm in arm. The cold of winter presses against the energy shield surrounding Hero City, but heat generators inside keep the chilliness at bay. I can't see the sun above, but its light shines through the snow and amplifies, expanding everywhere and brightening every inch of the city equally. It's somehow worse than if the ground were covered in snow!

Several people wave at Phoebe and me, only to stop and stare at the man floating beside us. One woman stares with eyes as wide as saucers when Solomon floats through a fire hydrant as if it doesn't exist.

Solomon waves at people and says hello to everyone he can, but few offer a reply. He glances around now and then; a question etched into his face. Finally, he vocalizes it. "Where does Saul live? I assume he lives in a unique building that stands out from the crowd, yet all I see are rectangles and squares."

"Saul doesn't live in the city," Phoebe replies. "He's a bit reclusive. He has a home out near the outskirts of town."

"Ahh, that explains it. He would feel ill living around such drab architecture in this city. He must prefer the beauty of nature to the emptiness of this city."

"Yeah... sure. I guess you could say that..."

Phoebe trails off and looks away. The lie in her voice is impossible to miss.

Solomon doesn't notice. "Haha, that scamp! I can't wait to see the look of surprise on his face!"

Phoebe looks at the king again. "By the way, Solomon, if you don't mind me asking, why do you two have such similar names? You know... Saul... Solomon..."

"Didn't I tell you? He's my nephew. My sister named him after me, hoping he would take the throne someday. Of course, that destiny was not in the cards."

Solomon's words get my attention. "Destiny, huh? Do you believe in it?"

"Of course I do, as any God-fearing man should. Our actions are all part of the Creator's master plan. We do only as He plans for us."

"Mmm. I'm an atheist. I don't believe that stuff myself."

Phoebe tugs my arm. "Jason... don't be rude."

"Oh, there's nothing rude about it," Solomon says, waving his hand about. "Let the fools think what they will. Who am I but the Knowledge-Seeker, also said to be the wisest human who ever lived? Surely my thoughts on the matter can be disregarded."

I sigh. "Aw, c'mon. That's not fair. Even smart people can fall for scams."

Solomon stops floating. He turns to look at me seriously. "Scams? Do you think the existence of the Creator is a scam? Do you not realize that angels and gods lived and that I met them?"

Phoebe and I slow to a stop. "Sure, I do. But you've never seen the Creator yourself, have you?"

"I have not, but the angels have. Raphael, specifically. He was one of the original Archangels, the eldest of his people. Do you not wear his ring? He would tell you many stories if you simply asked."

"Yeah... huh. I need to talk to the angels eventually. Been meaning to ask about Uriel."

Solomon stares at me quizzically. "Uriel? I used to believe that she died thousands of years before I walked the Earth. When you mentioned her name so casually, it took me off-guard. I struggle to understand how she lived in demon captivity for a hundred thousand years without anyone knowing."

"I don't know the details. All I know is that somehow, she ended up inside of Barbatos's body."

"Mmm. I see. That only raises more questions."

Several minutes pass as we continue walking toward Hero City's outskirts. The crowds of people dwindle, and soon we only see a few merchants, a bus or two, and birds pecking at the cold ground.

Phoebe points to the edge of a cliff up ahead. "Saul lives over that ridge at the bottom of the bluff."

Solomon shakes his head. "Hm. I never expected him to be the nature-type. You think you know a man..."

It only takes another minute for us to arrive and peer over the edge. Solomon looks down. His face turns to confusion. "I only see a small thatched hut! I thought we were going to Saul's home!"

Phoebe nods. "That's the one."

"Impossible! Surely, you jest."

"I'm not known for my comedic chops."

* * *

I teleport Phoebe and myself to the bottom rather than having us walk down and around the cliff. The moment we arrive, a loud *crack* sounds off from behind the house. Solomon cranes his neck but can't see the source. "What's going on? What was that noise?"

Phoebe and I shrug at the same time. I stifle a laugh.

We walk around behind the hut and spot a wiry-looking man wearing a fur coat and some animal skins. He raises an axe in the air and slams it onto a plank of wood, chopping it in half.

He splits three logs before Solomon finally speaks. "S-Saul? Is that you?"

"Yes, tis' I-"

Saul turns around to smile at us. The moment he spots Solomon, his eyes widen. A look of horror spreads across his face. "K-K-King S-Solo...mon?!"

"Saul! My nephew! It is great to see you!" Solomon dashes over to his nephew, oblivious to the look of panic on his face. "How have you been, young one? I missed your humorous antics from all those years ago!"

Saul's mouth turns dry and cracked, even as sweat pours off his forehead. "I've- we did- that is to say... how are you alive?! I thought you died!"

"Haha, nay! Nay! I lived long and prospered by sealing my spirit in that crown on Jason's head! Forget those little details; I'm pleased to see you again!"

Saul nods mechanically. "Yes. Yes. I am, as well. I had thought- *hoped* we might never see each other again."

"Hahaha! Always with the jokes! I remember when you vanished from my court one day, I sent out a legion of my finest to try and find you. I was so certain you were kidnapped for ransom, yet no country came out with a list of demands!"

Saul's voice cracks. "I ran away."

"Yes, yes, good! Fleeing your would-be assassins... just as I expected of my brilliant young nephew! But what is this place you live in, now? Where is your tower of gold? Your silver sword and brass armor?"

Saul's eyes flick to me with an expression that says, *help me*.

I shake my head. He's on his own.

The bearded man wipes sweat from his brow. "I-I don't enjoy those m-material possessions in the way-"

"Nonsense! Haha! You were the finest architect in all of Israel! Surely you have a good reason for living out in the middle of nowhere in a ramshackle hut!"

Saul frowns. "I quite like my home. It's small, cozy, and I don't usually have any... unwanted visitors."

Solomon freezes up. He takes a step backward. "Oh... oh, heavens... I didn't realize..."

"But now you do." Saul's tone goes cold. "I like my life, now. I thought I would never see you again. Why did you return? Why have you come back to haunt-"

"I understand completely!" Solomon yells, interrupting his nephew. "After your kidnappers tormented you, they must have taken away a part of your humanity! You forgot your love of gold and jewels! It's fortunate that I found you, or you might have wallowed in misery for the rest of your days."

"Ahh, no! That isn't the case at all!" Saul grips his shirt with white knuckles and struggles to put words together. "I don't like gold or jewels or riches! I never did! That's you, not me!"

"Hah, I remember differently, my boy, and my memory is eidetic. It's a steel trap that nothing escapes. Have no fear, for I shall educate you in due time regarding the finer aspects of wealth and luxury. Soon, you will be back to your old self, and we can return to the good old days!"

Saul opens his mouth to protest, but his shoulders slump. He gives up. "Yes... sir. I suppose so."

Phoebe nudges me. "*Jason. Say something...*"

I don't know what she wants from me. This silly misunderstanding is an issue for the ancient hero and his nephew to settle, not me. Saul appears disconcerted about his uncle's past and their relationship from back then, but I don't know much about either one. I don't think it's my place to interfere, even if Solomon is making his nephew feel isolated and depressed.

I tap the crown, which gets Solomon's attention. "Hey, uh, I still need to talk to Hope. Sorry to cut this short, but..."

"It's no problem at all! I think I understand my nephew's plight." Solomon pats Saul on the back, though his hand makes no physical contact. "I'll be seeing you around, my favorite pupil! Have a great day!"

Saul doesn't meet his uncle's eyes. "Yes... you too."

The three of us walk away, and Solomon whistles jovially, blissfully unaware of how much his nephew can't stand being around him.

It's only now that I realize the mess I've gotten myself into. Solomon isn't simply some random man inside the crown, but a loudmouth who thinks himself infallible. He's cocky, arrogant, and doesn't take no for an answer.

And now I have to live with him as long as I choose to use his artifact of power.

Sigh... I miss when the Crown was a device I used to make myself super smart. Those were the good old days.

Solomon glances into the sky. "Hey, if we're heading to the Core, why not give Esther a call? She can pick us up if you activate her remote signal."

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "Esther? Who's that?"

"It's the name Solomon gave his spaceship."

"Oh. I like it. Very beautiful."

"Haha! You have wonderful taste, my dear," Solomon laughs.

The ancient king sends me the mental specs to create a control device, and I summon it with Wordsmithing. "**Remote.**"

A gadget with a single button appears in my hand. I press it. One minute later, a distant crack of thunder sounds off, and Esther rushes into view, stopping far more suddenly than I'd expect before

slowing to a hover in midair and descending.

Many minutes pass as we board and fly over to the warp-gates. When we arrive and depart, Phoebe pats the ship's hull. "That was interesting. I've never flown before. It felt the same as... not flying."

"Inertia dampeners," Solomon replies without looking at her. "Makes for a nice, smooth ride."

"If you say so."

We head over to the guard outpost. The guard on duty waves us through, and after we cross, I poke a soldier walking past. "Hey, Brian, question... do you know where Neil is? Or Hope?"

The man shakes his head. "Nope, sorry. Last I heard, they asked not to be disturbed."

"They did? Okay. Thanks."

We continue walking. I stop a few other soldiers, but they all give the same line. *Hope and Neil wish not to be disturbed.*

I pause after stepping inside the Core. "Ugh. Nobody will tell us where they are. Maybe I should use Locate..."

Phoebe quickly dashes my thought against the rocks. "After what happened last time, don't take a chance. Let's check Neil's office first."

"Right. Sounds good."

It only takes a minute for us to walk across the massive stadium to Neil's office in the back corner. When we arrive at the doorway, I hear Neil's voice before I see his body. "-the corridors. If these reports are accurate, then those slaves need to be liberated. We can't leave them in demonic hands."

Hope's voice, or rather, *mine*, replies. "I don't know, Neil. Even with the T-REX suits, we'll have to fight demons on the way in or out. They won't give up human slaves without a- who's there?"

The three of us enter the room right as Hope spins to face us. "Jason. Phoebe. Christ, here I thought you'd take a hint from the soldiers."

Neil glares at me. "Go away. I'm not interested in talking to you. Neither is Hope."

"I just came here to apologize. That's all. You're right to be angry, which is why-"

"Save it," Hope says, cutting me off. "I already know what you'll say. You'll apologize for spying on us, make a big deal about it, and we'll have to forgive you. Except that isn't going to work, not this time."

My jaw drops. "What? I'm not coming here to start a fight, Hope! I know you're mad, but it was an accident!"

"Yeah? How many more accidents will I have to sit through, Jason? It wasn't a mistake. You wanted to hear what we were talking about and ended up biting off more than you could chew. I know you and how you think."

I'm flabbergasted. I don't understand where Hope's hostility comes from. Solomon helped me to understand the difference between Hope and me, but it doesn't make this sudden confrontation any easier.

Hope growls a few curses under his breath. "Get lost. Neil and I are doing important shit. You go back and manage the colony or whatever. Spy on our conversations if you like."

"I'm not going to do that..."

"Of course, you aren't. It's true what people say, Jason. *Trust nobody, not even yourself.*"

"That's... that's not..."

Phoebe and I stand silently for several long moments, meeting Hope's gaze the whole time. He stands resolute, unflinching, and unwilling to listen.

I can't persuade him. I don't have the right words. Even if I did, he wouldn't listen. I have to let him cool off. This situation isn't going to fade away as quickly as it did for Phoebe and Samantha. Hope's anger is too fierce right now. Backstabbing and betrayal cuts deeper into one's psyche than a simple accusation ever could.

I nod. "Fine. Sorry we bothered you. If you want to contact me... feel free. Any time."

Hope rolls his eyes. "Yeah. I'll get right on that."

The three of us turn and head out the door, and I feel Hope's gaze burning a hole in my back the entire way there.

I pissed him off. Royally. But... there's something else... some undercurrent rippling beneath the surface. I can't put my finger on it. I've stepped on a beehive... but they have yet to sting.

I can only pray my intuition is wrong.

Part 082: End of Chapter One - Birdy

Recommended listening.

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

Ose's high heels slap against the floor as she strides into the deepest, darkest region of the Labyrinth. While she walks, monsters and demons ogle her with looks of lust and curiosity. *I wonder what the newest Emperor is doing down here*, their eyes say.

Ose ignores the covetous gazes of grunts. The sounds of prisoners screaming in pain as demons torture, rape, and devour them fill the air, making her quicken her pace.

I can't wait to leave, Ose thinks to herself. One man's cry for pity suddenly cuts off, making her pause in front of a cell before continuing onward. It isn't fear or terror that tugs at Ose's mind, but disgust.

Faith's End, the Labyrinth's sole prison complex, is a mass of tangled rooms and corridors, extending for miles in any given direction. Rats scurry about here and there, while every so often, a goblin will race across the ceiling and duck into a hole. Their kind lives in the bedrock of the Labyrinth.

A pungent odor strikes Ose's nose. She doesn't react visibly, since that would be undignified, but her throat catches nonetheless. *Rotting flesh. You'd think these worthless goblins would at least clean up the messes in the cells after a demon has his fun.*

Ose's heartbeat slowly increases in tempo as she continues rounding corners. Her destination draws nearer. *No rats. No goblins. No signs of life. This way is the correct path. Unfortunately.*

The sounds of screams fade away behind Ose. The further she walks down this particular corridor, the quieter the Labyrinth becomes. Where lit torches once lined the walls, maintained by goblins, darkness looms instead. She enters the Forbidden Area, the place where the master of Faith's End lurks.

Silence swallows the world around her. Soon, the clicking of her high heels pound like drums, echoing against the walls while making her hands twitch.

She pauses for a moment to collect herself. *There's no reason to be afraid. You're an Emperor now. Calm down. Breathe. Inhale.*

I'm not the scared little girl I once was.

Those days were a long, long time ago.

Ose begins walking again. This time, it's her pounding heart, not her heels, that boom in her ears.

A man shrieks in agony up ahead, piercing the silence. Ose flinches instinctively. His cry of pain comes from a door further up the corridor. The door is one of many lining the walls, nondescript in appearance, and seemingly unimportant. However, Ose spots a faint stream of light emanating from a crack at the door's bottom, revealing its *occupied* status.

Slowly, tentatively, Ose takes one step, then another, carefully pressing her heels down so that she doesn't make a noise.

The man bellows again, his voice hoarse. "Oh, god! Please! NO! NOT THAT! ANYTHING BUT-GAAAAHH!!!"

Ose winces. Even outside the door, the sound of burning, blistering flesh reaches her ears. The sizzling noise makes her stomach roil.

Ose places her hand on the door handle, inhales, and yanks it open.

"Gressil!"

She speaks a single word while intending to add more, but after saying the warden's name, she loses her nerve.

Inside the room, a fireplace stands lit, causing smoke to fill the air. Given the Labyrinth's lack of chimneys, the gag-inducing black smoke washes across her face, tearing the breath from her chest.

Two round pillars stand in the center of the room, each one as wide as a tree. They rise from the ceiling to the floor, nearly fifteen feet tall in total. A human male and female, each in their 30's, stands chained with their backs to each pillar: the man on the left, and the woman on the right. With their naked bodies covered in blood, cuts, and bruises, the pitiful nature of their torture sends nausea crawling up Ose's stomach.

The man and woman hang limply, their broken arms twisted behind themselves and suspended with chains and shackles to the pillars. The man wheezes and gasps, a fresh burn still festering on his body, while the woman rests motionless against her pillar, dead.

Ose's eyes don't linger on the humans, or the table of torture tools standing between the pillars and the door, but instead, travel toward the prison warden.

The master of the dungeon.

The cruelest, vilest, most despicable demon in the Labyrinth.

Gressil.

The 9-foot tall demon, a two-headed monstrosity with a birdlike-beak on his right head, and a horrifying melted face on his left, turns to face the Emperor.

"Ose. How rude of you not to knock."

Glowing red eyes dot Gressil's four arms, his chest, and legs. Each glowing eyeball swivels and spins in seemingly random directions. Underneath Gressil's flesh, lumps form and disappear, as if something were trying to escape the warden's body. His left head slumps forward, its eyes closed. The eye on its forehead stares ahead blankly and doesn't glow like the others scattered around Gressil's body. The entire head appears to be sleeping, but Ose knows better.

The Emperor of Infiltration swallows slowly and smoothes her uniform. "I... apologize. I didn't mean to... to interrupt your *playtime*."

Gressil cocks his long, pterodactyl-like head. "Aren't we formal, today. Have you come to join in on the torture?"

The warden's monotone voice never fails to send a spasm of nerves racing down Ose's spine. "N-no. I know you've been busy... *brother*. You probably haven't heard the news."

Gressil raises his clawed hand to scratch his beak. "You'd be shocked how few people want to talk to me these days."

Ose somehow manages a weak smile. "They're missing out."

A moment passes. Gressil's eyes lower to the table between him and Ose. He slowly brushes a claw across the assortment of bloodied knives and forks sitting atop it as he considers which toy to use next. "Don't keep me in suspense. It's not often I get a visit from my little sister."

"I'd never dream of making you wait."

A trickle of sweat drips down Ose's face.

"I-I'm an Emperor now."

Gressil doesn't meet her gaze. Instead, he plucks a knife from his table, then reaches over and caresses the man's chin. "Is that all?"

"I came to order you- that is, to ask for something. I need a favor."

The human trembles as Gressil's claw digs into the underside of his chin. "No... please... not the knife again... mercy-"

"Quiet. I'm talking to my sister. Don't be *rude*, or I won't let you die when I'm done."

Gressil's words bring the human's complaints to an instant halt. His desire to pass away overrides all the logic centers of his brain.

Gressil continues to play with the man's chin. "A favor. How strange. Now, what, pray tell, could an almighty Emperor of the demons need from little old me? I'm nothing more than a humble flesh-melder."

"I wouldn't normally, Gressil. I hate to impose. You don't have to. In fact, never mind. This- this was a mistake."

Ose's nerves get the better of her. She starts to step out of the doorway, but Gressil's voice stops her dead in her tracks.

"Why are you leaving?"

Ose stops, one foot primed and ready to drag her out the door. Every fiber of her being screams at her to leave, but her body won't move.

"I... I... I'm not- the demons- there was an accident. Barbatos. Uriel. He fell asleep. There-"

Ose babbles incoherently. Her mind begins to race as a sickening, primal fear seeps into her mind. Nothing scares her more than being in the presence of her disgusting, torturous, barbaric older brother.

Gressil holds up a claw. "Oh. I thought you were going to pester me about something important."

Ose gathers her courage and turns to face Gressil. "It is important. I defeated Uriel... but the Archangel killed half of the Lords, and most of the Barons. Our ranks have been decimated. And on top of that... we still have the humans to deal with."

Gressil's casual demeanor fizzles away, and his expression turns icy. He pulls away from his prisoner and rises to his full height. "Oh? Humans, you say?"

"You *know* what's going on," Ose growls. "It's *your* fault we're in this predicament."

Gressil feigns ignorance. "Is it? My memory is quite poor these days."

Ose takes a step toward her brother. "You were supposed to guard the last cryogenic container. How did a human manage to slip past you? That shouldn't be possible!"

Gressil smiles. "Heh... heh heh... amusing. Is that what you think? A little rat skittered by when I turned my back?"

"What?" Ose's breath catches.

The Emperor of Infiltration stares at her brother for a moment. A sinking realization appears in the back of her mind.

"You... you let the human go? Even for you... that's..."

Gressil laughs.

"Haha. Come, now, Ose. Ask yourself: why would I let an insignificant fleshbag slip past me? Isn't the answer obvious?"

The prison warden slowly waggles a finger at Ose.

"...Because I thought it would be fun."

Ose stares, dumbfounded. "Fun? You let a Hero roam around for *fun*?! He's destroying everything!"

Gressil smiles. "I know. That's the point, sister. All your silly machinations, your little tricks and schemes... they always did annoy me."

Ose lowers her eyes. Rage boils in her mind, but she forces herself to suppress it. Even as a freshly minted Emperor, she hasn't the power to punish her brother for the wrench he tossed into her plans.

"*You annoy me*, Gressil."

Gressil laughs. "Haha. Is that all you have to say? I find your courage lacking. Stop wasting my time. If you've no more business here, then leave."

"Fine. Far be it for me to keep you from your *hobby*," Ose says, rolling her eyes. "With the demons decimated, we need new forces. The humans have already begun making advanced technology, and I believe they will soon improve even faster. I would like for you to make me a new demon warrior. Something that can stand up to technologically advanced humans."

Gressil smiles. "Haha. No."

"What? No?! What do you mean?"

He turns to the human male and bends down to wipe the knife on the man's shoulder. "Your request doesn't interest me. I despise your orderliness and the way you treat humans like livestock. They deserve torture and death. Nothing more, nothing less."

Ose calms her nerves. "I agree. I always have. However, I have to be practical. Demons need humans for soul energy. If we kill them all off-"

Gressil suddenly swings his hand around. He backhands the deceased human woman with enough force to rip her head off and send it flying. It smashes against the wall with a tremendous *bang* and explodes into a mass of bone and gore.

The prison warden clenches his fist and breathes through his nostrils like a mad dog. "There is no *if*. Demons do not require soul energy to live. Your need for control disgusts me. You have to put *everything* into a box, don't you, little sister?"

Gressil rises to his full height again, but this time a menacing look appears in his eyes. "You think you're better than the other demons. Better than *me*. Isn't that right?"

Ose slides back half an inch. "N-no. I didn't say that..."

"You don't have to." Gressil begins walking around the table. He approaches his sister, and any trace of strength leaves her body. The massive monstrosity towers over her. His shadow stretches out like an invisible hand and crushes her spirit with its oppressive weight. "I know your thoughts. I know you better than you do yourself. You require validation — approval from the other demons. You wish to prove that the other Emperors were nothing compared to you. Isn't that right? Answer me. ANSWER ME!"

Any semblance of calmness leaves Gressil's voice. He lunges a hand out with frightening speed and grabs his sister by the throat, then slams her against the wall. Immediately, Ose claws and grabs at him, but no matter how she wriggles, she can't pull his hand away.

"B-brother... you're... hurting me..."

"Good. You deserve to suffer. While you forget your roots, I live them. Every breath I take is a reminder of what the humans did to me. They can never suffer enough." Gressil's tongue flicks out and licks his beak in a circular motion. "I'm a freak — a sick, twisted reminder of what humans do to our people. And you... you want to... to reward them! You want to give them cushy lives so they will spawn more of their brood!"

"No...! That isn't right... kah..." Ose wriggles and tries to kick her brother away, but she can't tap into the electricity inside of her body. Her strength reserves diminish every second, leaving her defenseless before Gressil. "Th-think of the demons... we have to-"

"Forget the demons! They can burn for all I care! I'll throw them into the Lake of Fire myself if that's what it takes!" The eyes on Gressil's body begin swiveling and spinning in a frenzy. Their colors brighten dramatically.

Finally, Ose has enough. She grinds her teeth together. "Gressil... what would... would mother say... if she saw you hurting me like this?"

A moment passes. Gressil's eyes flick to his second head. A moment later, it rises and blinks its eyes. A soothing female voice speaks from its lips. "Gressil... what are you doing to your sister?"

"Mother... mother..." Gressil releases his sister and takes a step back. "No! You filthy bitch! How... how *dare* you wake mother up!"

Gressil's lower left arm swings up and punches his beak-head with staggering force. He stumbles back and gasps. "Augh!"

"You worm! I take one little nap, and you start strangling your sister?! Some demon you are! You're a failure! A disgrace!!"

Gressil reels around as his second head berates him. "No... no... I didn't mean anything by it, mother. Please... please don't yell..." He presses himself in a corner and covers his head with his hands.

"Don't you call me 'mother,' you pathetic insect! You call me by my name!" The second head screeches like a banshee, berating him mercilessly. "You can't do anything right! Freak! Monster!!"

Ose winces at the cruelty of the second head. "Mother, please don't hurt Gressil. He didn't mean anything by it... you know how he is."

The second head goes quiet. Gressil continues to shrink into a ball and whimper, but the second head takes control of his body and forces him to stand and walk over to Ose. "Oh, my beloved daughter. Why haven't you stopped by recently?"

Gressil peeks through his fingers at Ose, as if to beg her for help. However, Ose locks eyes with his second head. "Sorry, but I've been busy. Um... I'm an Emperor now! Just like you used to be!"

Her mother smiles. "Oh, that's wonderful, darling. It's good to see you devoting yourself to the path of power." Her expression hardens. "Perhaps someday, your incompetent brother will amount to something!"

"Moth- I mean... Lucifer... please..." Gressil whimpers like a beaten dog.

Lucifer ignores his pleas and continues fawning over Ose. "My precious little girl, it is wonderful to see you again. If you ever need anything, be sure and let me know."

A spark appears in Ose's eyes. "Ah. Actually, mother, there is one matter I need assistance with. Gressil said no, though. He doesn't want to help."

"I see. Well, whatever it is, I'll straighten him right up. Don't you worry! Anything for my little genius daughter!"

Ose smiles uneasily. "Mother... don't go overboard, please."

"Gressil will be fine," Lucifer replies. "More importantly, how are you an Emperor, now? Did you finally eliminate that empty-headed dullard, Diablo? Or perhaps Satan's little skank, Belial?"

"No. There was an insurgency among the humans that forced Diablo to use his Omega form. He went into a coma afterward."

"Mmm. So it's only temporary. You'd best finish him off while you can, dear. The last thing I want is my little pumpkin getting demoted! Don't taint my legacy with simple mistakes."

"I'd never dream of it," Ose replies with a smile.

Before she leaves, Ose steals a glance at her brother's cowering face. He continues to mutter words under his breath, but Ose can't make them out. "Gressil? Are you alright?"

The formerly intimidating prison warden doesn't reply. He continues to cower behind his hands, terrified of his second head.

Ose shrugs. She leaves the room and slowly paces down the hallway. The sound of Lucifer screeching at her brother sends pins and needles through her body, but she forces herself to ignore it.

Gressil chose to escalate the situation. I only did what I needed to calm him down. Now that I have what I need, I won't have to talk to him again.

Ose's expression turns to steel.

Besides. Gressil killed our mother. He deserves to suffer.

Recommended listening.

"Aaaooo..." Gressil whimpers and squirms for several long minutes, even when his mother yawns, closes her eyes, and goes to sleep. The memory of her abuse lingers in Gressil's mind.

"Damn you... Ose... waking mother like that. How could you be so cruel?"

Tears stream down the deformed demon's beak and plop onto his shriveled body. He shakes and moans for several seconds before finally pulling himself to his feet.

He stares emptily at the human man, who is now incoherent and muttering quietly to himself. Gressil presses his toothy beak together and glares at his second head. *Lucifer's* head.

"Callous... vile... despicable..."

Gressil rises to a standing position. "Birdy. I need Birdy. Where is Birdy?"

He walks around the table, grabs the man's head, and tears it off without the slightest effort. Shakily, having done his good deed for the day, Gressil walks over to the wall opposite the door and pulls a rack of keys off a handle.

"Birdy... Birdy... I need Birdy..."

That's right. Birdy isn't like his other prisoners. Birdy is special. Birdy has been his favorite for a very long time.

Birdy always makes Gressil feel better, especially when Mother emerges.

Gressil throws the door open and stumbles out into the darkness. He sniffs the air, feeling apprehensive about the direction Ose went.

Satisfied his sister headed toward the exit, Gressil's eyes flick left and right. He walks in the opposite direction. His two-toed feet, shaped more like a dinosaur's than those of a demon, *clomp* like horse-hooves against the floor. He leans against the wall as he walks.

"Birdy... Birdy... need Birdy. She'll make me... make me feel good... not like mother... mother only hurts me..."

Gressil glances around to make sure nobody is following him. He eventually stops before one door, among many. It appears unimportant, given it has the same markings as all the others. However, a faint series of scratches above the wooden doorframe reveal a name if one looks closely enough.

Birdy.

Three dozen locks litter the side of the door, as well as the top and bottom, making entry incredibly tricky if one lacks all the keys.

Gressil's anxiousness melts away. He flashes a sinister grin and quickly unbolts the door, then starts releasing one lock after another.

His heart skips several beats. "Birdy is waiting. She hears me unlocking the door. She can't wait to see me!"

A childlike excitement grips the hideous demon as he unhitches the final lock. After suffering all the humiliation from his mother, and after Ose laughed and mocked him... he'll have the final laugh.

Gressil slowly opens the door. It creaks loudly as its rusty hinges grind together.

A pitch-black room awaits. Even Gressil's demonic eyes can't pierce the veil of shadow.

"Birrrrdyyyy..." Gressil steps inside the room. The sound of something scratching the ground catches his attention.

Birdy is awake.

A muted whimper catches his ear. Gressil sighs. "Oh, Birdy. It's been a while, my pretty. I've had the worst day. You wouldn't believe it."

Gressil pushes the door shut. The pitch-blackness of the room swallows up his form. Only his glowing eyes remain, like smoldering embers to light up the night.

The sound of chains clinking excites him. Birdy presses herself against the wall with what little strength she has left.

Keeping his voice low, Gressil leans down and caresses her broken, lacerated leg. She quivers and squeaks in fright.

"We're going to have fun, Birdy. I'll hurt you in ways I've never tried before. You won't forget tonight... not for another ten thousand years."

"Nnn..."

Author note: This concludes Cryopod's first chapter. Well, the first arc. I call it a chapter because it isn't exactly a book... but you get the idea.

This is Gressil.



[Here's a Patreon post](#) detailing a bunch of stuff involving him and Lucifer. There were a ton of things that changed for their designs along the way!

Part 083: A Day In The Life...

Dreams of clouds and rabbits and the taste of Snicker bars give way to the sensation of something touching my nose.

Groggily, I swipe at it.

"Fuggin' flies. Go away..."

The thing touches my nose again. I swat at it.

"Fugginnn hell..."

Suddenly an anvil slams onto my stomach, blasting the wind from my body. I jerk up in bed, gasping for breath. The light of a supernova blasts my face thanks to Phoebe opening the goddamn blinds again.

"Wha-?! Kuhhh!"

I choke out a gasp and shield my eyes from the light.

"Wake up, daddy! It's morning! Morning morning morning!!"

The little blonde-haired girl flops off my belly and rolls to the side as I pull myself into a sitting position. I stare at her in annoyance. "Aw, man, can't you lemme nap?"

"Noooo! You promised me the bestest birthday ever!" My daughter reaches up and pokes my cheek. I summon a second wind and breathe a little easier.

The door to my room opens. Phoebe steps inside. "Daisy! What are you doing? I told you to let daddy sleep. He's tired, honey."

Daisy rolls her eyes. "No, he *isn't*. He can wake up with *magic*."

I shrug. A smile escapes my lips. "Well, she's not wrong. **Awake. Alert.**"

One minute later, I slide out of bed, my mind as sharp as if I'd slept like Rip Van Winkle. Wordsmithing is life-changing in small ways one couldn't imagine. "**Coffee.**"

A cup of Joe pops into my hand, already the perfect temperature. I summon my clothes and stretch hard, popping my back in the process. Phoebe heads into the bathroom to get ready for her big event.

I'm looking forward to a fun-filled day.

Daisy hops around on the bed. "Come on! What's taking you so long?"

It's my daughter's sixth birthday today. The terrible twos are a distant memory. Honestly, age four was the worst. That was when she started trying to snatch Solomon's Crown off my dresser. If someone wears his crown, I can't take it off without their permission, unless they die. If Daisy ever got ahold of it, I'd never get it back. She won't even share snacks with other kids, let alone a sparkly all-powerful crown of knowledge.

"**Unlock.**" With a single word, I pop open the bedside drawer and snatch his artifact out, then place it on my head. The soundproof dresser was one of Phoebe's ideas. Great for making sure that creepy guy

can't listen in while Phoebe and I try our hardest to make another baby.

Solomon materializes beside me. "Good sleep?"

"Eh, can't complain."

Daisy grabs my arm. "Where's uncle Sally? I wanna see hiiim!"

Solomon flinches. "Please don't."

"Aww. But Daisy *loves* you, Solomon. **Project.**"

His ghostly body materializes beside me, and Daisy squeals in delight. "Eee! Uncle Sally! Uncle Sally! Do you wanna play hopscotch?!"

"No."

"Chess! Let's play chess!!"

"No."

Solomon glares at me. His voice speaks in my mind. *I hate it when you do that.*

I was surprised when I learned a few years ago that Solomon detests children. I mean, the guy's had several kids of his own, but then again, in the Bible, he suggested cutting a baby apart and giving each half to two women. You'd have to be one hell of a sicko to imagine such a thing.

Daisy pounces on my back and wraps her arms and legs around me. "Piggyback! Piggyback!"

I nod and hold her legs up so she doesn't fall. Predictably, she starts tugging on Solomon's Crown, but it doesn't go anywhere. "I wanna wear Sally's crown! Make me a princess, daddy!"

"Technically, you already are," I reply.

"Yeah, but I want a crown..."

"I'll tell you what, sweetie. When you're ten years old, I'll let you wear Solomon's Crown."

"What?! Really?"

"Yup."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

That satisfies her. She returns to yapping at Solomon about something while he gives me a thousand-yard stare, but my eyes travel elsewhere.

Phoebe steps out of the bathroom dressed in a full track-suit. The skintight black fiber clings to every inch of her body, arousing me like it always does. She stops in the doorway and meets my gaze. "Enjoying the view?"

"Y-yeah. Uh-huh."

"Sometimes, I wonder if you or Solomon are the bigger pervert."

"Me. Definitely me. You look great."

Phoebe opens the door and gestures outside. "After you. Eyes up here, Jason."

Daisy yanks on my hair like a wild animal. "Mommy's big race! Zoom, zoom!"

One hour later.

"Laaadiesss and gentlemen! Boys and girls! Kobolds and salamanders! Welcome to the Superstar Arena Megadrome Shooowdooown!!"

The racetrack announcer bellows into his loudspeaker, sending excitement and cheers through the crowd. Daisy hops around excitedly as the massive trucks in the arena below all begin revving their engines. The roar of a dozen twenty-ton monster trucks is somehow noisier than the loudspeaker above us.

A series of dirt hills and miniature lakes await the challengers. The circular racetrack extends around the entire border of the arena, which itself is three times the size of a football stadium. In the center of the track, every driver has a team of medical experts on call. While I can't see her, I know Phoebe's best friend, Samantha, is watching in case Phoebe gets in a wreck. Of course, I'm also here and can heal Phoebe instantly, but it can't hurt to have a backup.

I rattle a bucket around. "Daisy. Want some popcorn?"

Hundreds of people around me scream and shout excitedly, distracting my daughter. She bounces up and down, trying to see over the head of a Harpie in front of us.

Daisy whines, "Where's mommy's truck? I can't seeeee it!"

Using my telekinesis, I levitate her a foot in the air. It's something I do often enough that she doesn't bat an eye. "She's over there. The third one. It has the lightning bolts on the side."

Daisy flails her finger toward Phoebe's truck. "I see it! I see it! It's the one with the zappers!"

"I just said that..."

Solomon sits beside me. He enjoys being around people, but Phoebe's races don't interest him much. "Children take forever to learn the value of listening."

I stuff popcorn in my mouth. "Yeah. You're telling me."

Phoebe and I conceived the idea of races several years ago. The demons suffered heavy losses thanks to Uriel's vicious attack, and realizing we weren't a threat, they retreated to the Labyrinth. Thanks to the unexpected peace, we've had six straight years without war. It afforded me the time to develop all sorts of defenses for our planet, but also recreational events.

Still, I try to be humble. I always tell people that I might be the Hero, but I'd prefer people didn't treat me like I'm someone overly important. I could have built a special booth in the Megadrome for Daisy, Solomon, and myself, but I don't want my daughter growing up with a royalty complex. We have our giant multi-story house and dozens of servants. That's good enough. And besides, in Hero City, everyone lives like kings. No beggars. No impoverished people. Only a few drunkards and loudmouths. It's all thanks to the power of Wordsmithing.

I'm surprised everything has worked out so well.

Solomon pokes me. His finger feels like a tingle of ice on my skin. "Jason. We have to visit the colony today. I know it's Daisy's birthday, but we need to improve its biodiversity dramatically."

"Right, right. It can wait a day, can't it?"

Daisy ignores us. She continues to screech and point at Phoebe's truck, yelling things like, "Go, mommy! Vroom, vroom!"

"I suppose. Why not frame it like a birthday present? You haven't shown Daisy the colony yet, have you? I bet she'd like it."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, sure. *Now* you're the expert on children."

"Hey. I've had my share of ankle-biters. That's why I can't stand them!"

"You're just a grumpy, frumpy old man."

Solomon doesn't protest. In the distance, the engines suddenly roar to life.

The announcer yells again. "Alright, everyone! Today, the undefeated twelve-time champion, Phoebe Hiro, is up against her arch-nemesis, the blood-bathed, demon-loving, baby-eating monster! That's right; she's facing off against none other than Ogie, the most despicable salamander to ever hit the dirt!"

The crowd boos and howls. Daisy joins in. "Boo! Uncle Ogre is a big fat meanie!!"

I snicker. The racing events in Hero City remind me of wrestling from my time. There are tales of triumphs, losses, rivalries, and all sorts of things like that. It's all part of a series of running gags, and everyone's in on it — even a six-year-old girl.

A minotaur at the front line howls violently. "ON YOUR MARRRKS! THREEE! TWOOO! OOONE! GOOOOOO!"

His cry lights a fire under the tires of every truck on the line. The racers accelerate and immediately hit the first bump, sail ten feet into the air and slam the ground with enough force to rattle the racers' teeth. Naturally, all of the trucks have internal momentum compensators to assist the drivers, but Phoebe is such a rabid competitor that she turns hers off. She races for the thrills, and also because she's a bit over-zealous.

If I had known seven years ago what I know now, I'd never have been able to picture Phoebe's transformation into such a sexy badass. She used to be demure and polite, but I suppose looking back, there was always a sparkle of bloodthirst in her eyes.

The first lap goes mostly as planned. The lakes of water on the opposite side of the stadium explode outward when the racers hit them, showering the screaming fans with filthy mud. I usually position myself far away from the tracks, as do the older members of our community. I'm in no mood for a mud bath.

The last-place driver suddenly jerks to the right and slams against the concrete and metal wall. I inspect the damage with my Wordsmithing, which reveals a twisted axle. I quickly repair it and send him a telepathic message. *You're good to go, Sam. Don't fall further behind!*

Thank you, Your Majesty!

I hate it when people call me that.

Sam reverses and rushes back into the action, but he's already fallen pretty far behind.

Another icy touch on my arm makes me turn to Solomon. "What?"

The king stares at me for a moment. "Have you spoken with Hope lately?"

"Ugh. I'm trying to watch the race."

"Jason..." Solomon trails off. He looks away. "You always dodge the question."

I shrug and ignore him. It doesn't matter if Solomon pesters me. Hope and I barely talk anymore. Hell, it's been three months since I last saw his face. He has a villa on Maiura, and so does Neil. Hope has his life, and I have mine. That's all there is to it.

I exhale slowly, releasing something that isn't quite a sigh. Where did I go wrong with Hope? You'd think a clone of myself would be the easiest person in the universe to get along with. Instead, he's the complete opposite of me.

Eh. Perhaps I should drop by the Core later. It's been a while. I haven't seen Kar for at least a month. Couldn't hurt to say hello.

Phoebe's trucks zooms past, and Daisy cries out. "Mommy! That's mommy! I saw her, daddy!"

"Yes, you did, sweetheart."

Absentmindedly, I check my multi-purpose watch. The race will continue for another thirty minutes. I have a lot to do today, though. Daisy's birthday party... her human and monster friends will be over later... then I have to visit the colony... Wordsmithing training with Solomon...

Jeez. I can't believe I'm thinking about something other than Phoebe's race.

There's so much to do and so little time in the day.

An hour later.

In the back of my mind, a silent dread lurks. It's been there ever since I built Hero City. I'm from a different time, a different world. Earth. A planet inhabited primarily by humans. I come from a world where people once looked down on each other for minor differences — the color of their skin, political affiliations, religion, and a thousand other discrepancies.

But... that isn't the case here, on Tarus II. Humans and monsters live side-by-side in all-but-perfect harmony. Why judge a man for looking a little ugly compared to other humans when beautiful and disgusting-looking monsters surround you?

It's not that differences don't exist. They do. Humans and monsters living on Tarus II know we have a shared enemy living in the Labyrinth. In some form, I believe demons aren't all that bad. Yes, they devour the flesh of humans and absorb souls of the departed to gain power, but they aren't inhuman unthinking freaks. Paimon demonstrated that fact, as does Samantha every day.

But... this dread never escapes me. I'm different. I try not to judge others based on how they look, but it happens unintentionally. What if I pass my biases onto Daisy? What if I let a joke slip that comes off as insensitive or offends people. I'm not some nobody on the street; I'm the figurehead of our society.

That dread hits me in waves as Daisy stares up at the minotaur standing beside us on the bus. The moment she opens her mouth, I know she's going to say something horribly embarrassing.

"Daddy, why do his horns bend all weird like that? He looks different from the other meenaturrs."

Horns, for minotaurs, are a sensitive subject. They have a whole religion about them and how their length and complexity determine the rightful successor to any given clan.

This big fellow's horns bend slightly downward, which is very different from Yamir's, the proud cook at my house. I don't know a lot about what different horn-shapes mean, but taking the bus is usually reserved for those without a vehicle. Nobody in Hero City lives poorly, but those who take the bus tend to have fewer possessions and prestige than their peers.

Solomon's Crown instantly fills in the blanks in my knowledge regarding minotaur culture. Based on his horns, this one is probably an outcast. He's one of the few who came to Hero City freely, not someone who already lived here. He's from the Labyrinth.

The minotaur tilts his head down to stare at my daughter. Then, he looks at me. He must notice the look of panic in my eyes because he merely shrugs. "Human whelps should learn to keep such observations to themselves."

"S-sorry. She didn't mean anything by it. Kids, am I right?"

The half-bull half-man quietly reaches up and touches his horns. "My family cast me out for my deformity. I am six hundred years old. This world is the only place I've found acceptance in my entire life."

I nod. "I'm glad to hear that. Sorry for Daisy's, erm, rudeness."

He turns away and stares out the windows at the massive buildings as we drive toward the northern side of the city. "Were it not for my deformity, I might not have found such a wonderful city. I wonder if perhaps it is a curse that eventually became a blessing."

Solomon, standing across from me, raises his eyebrows. "Do such things exist?"

The other passengers ignore our conversation. Several of them look like they woke up only a few minutes ago.

"If they do, one may go to the grave without knowing."

Solomon nods, satisfied by the minotaur's reply. One common theme I've noticed among their species is their eloquence and intelligence, not only among monsters, but in general. Minotaurs appear brutish and powerful, but physical altercations between them are rarer than a blood-red moon. They prefer to draw, cook, and pursue their hobbies.

Still, their intelligence lacks in some other areas. The whole horn-superstition thing, for one. Oh well, nobody's perfect.

The bus slows to a stop. I breathe a sigh of relief and nod at the minotaur. "See you around."

"You as well, Your Majesty."

I always take the bus to try and keep Daisy as down-to-Tarus as possible. The last thing I want is for her to grow up a snob with communication issues. I don't want her to look down her nose at others. It isn't who I am, or who Phoebe is. It isn't the lifestyle meant for our child.

But, at the same time, I wonder if I'm doing exactly the opposite. Is it normal for kids to make such uncivilized comments? Did she somehow pick up the trait from me?

"Daddy? What's wrong?" The bus drives away, leaving us behind.

I blink and stare at her. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"You look sad."

"Oh. It's nothing. I'm thinking about, uh, how boring your birthday party is going to be! I only invited fifty of your friends over. You probably won't have any fun at all."

Her eyes widen. "You did?! Even Kilva and Ga... Garu... Gaaaru...?"

Monster names are hard for her.

"Yep, even G'arunth. You ready to see them?" I gesture ahead to the annex I created a few days ago. It has a whole bunch of carnival rides and other things she'll love.

"Oh, yay!! You're the bestest best daddy ever!!"

"I wish that were true."

Author's Note:

This is Daisy.

DAISY



THE
CRYPOD
TO HELL

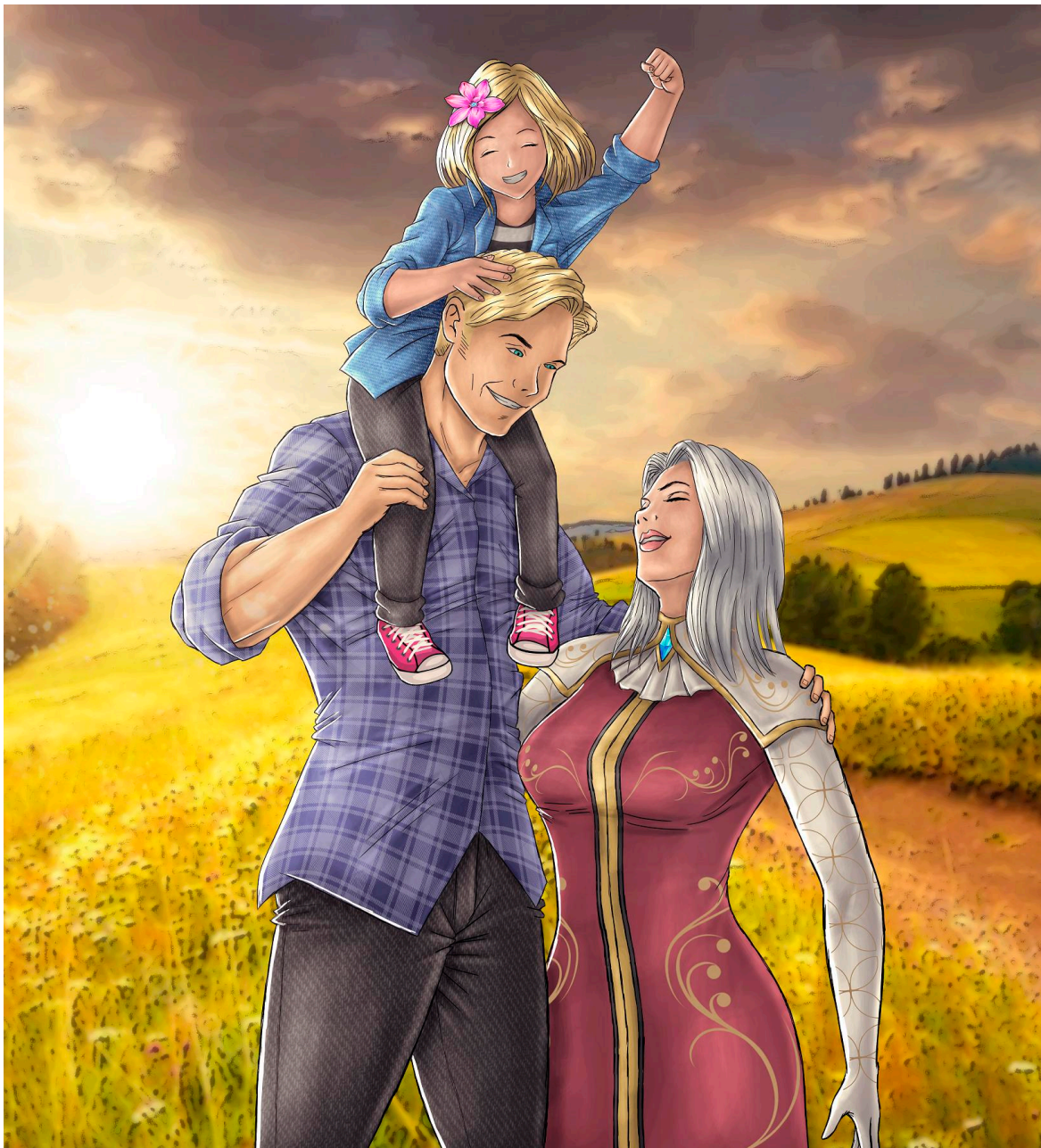
This is also Daisy.

DAISY



THE
CRYPOD
TO HELL

This is the entire Hiro family.



[Patreon post for a bunch of alternate Daisy and Hiro family artwork!](#)

Part 084: The Bestest Birthday Ever

"I'll see you in a bit, sweetheart."

I wave goodbye to Jason and Daisy. She starts pouting once she realizes I won't be going with her and Jason to her birthday party, but that can't be helped. I'll show up in a bit.

Jason manages to distract Daisy, and she follows him babbling all the while. Knowing Jason, he probably reminded her that a birthday party means candy and cake.

"Phoebe! Are you going to sit up there all day?" Samantha's voice catches my attention. I glance out of my driver-side window at the ground fifteen feet below. "Let's get a move on!"

"Give me a second, Sammy!" I quickly unbuckle the complicated five-lock seatbelt system and grab my gadget bag. After throwing the door open, I hop out, and she catches me before I hit the ground. At this point, it's such a rehearsed maneuver that I don't think about it.

"Great job! First place again." She blushes and flicks her tail around cutely. "You're not fixing these races, are you?"

"Pssh. Never. I can't help my natural talent." I slam the door shut and smack the side of the truck. "Ogie! She's all yours!"

The 'evil' salamander chuckles. "Heh, you hand mah ass ta' me 'n think I'ma fix your car for ya?"

"Mhm!"

"Damn straight." The salamander wipes his red scales down with a towel. They glisten under the light of the midday sun. "You git on over to that little ducky's birthday party. Don'tcha keep her waitin', y'hear?"

"I won't. See you later!"

The soft, moist dirt smushes gently under my shoes as I head toward the opposite end of the stadium. Samantha loops her arm through mine and pulls closer. She's a very hands-on person, and I've had to get used to it over time, but I've also grown to find it endearing.

"Sooo, Phoebe, I haven't seen you in a few days. How are things?"

"Oh, about the same as always. I started teaching Daisy a few basic fencing techniques. She picks them up very quickly."

"Fencing? Isn't that a little dangerous for a five-year-old?"

"We used sticks."

"Ah." Samantha leans her head against me and nuzzles my shoulder. "I wish I could bear a child. It must be wonderful."

"Raising Daisy is a lot of fun, but she can be a handful sometimes."

I keep my reply neutral. Samantha often laments her inability to have children. After all, demons are born via broodmothers. They're similar to ant-queens, in that a broodmother's sole purpose is to birth demons forever. It sounds... *unpleasant*. No matter how much Samantha wants a child, I doubt she'd go that far.

"You should let me babysit her sometime. I mean, you don't have to..."

I glance down at the thin strips of clothing covering the succubus's body. "You won't teach Daisy anything *strange*, right?"

"What? No! Of course not!" Samantha covers her mouth in mock surprise. "Why, Phoebe, I can't believe you'd suggest such a thing!"

"Oh, piffle." I wave at a serviceman heading to my truck, taking note of the crowds idling around the amphitheater and chatting idly with each other. "Sure, you can watch Daisy. Heck, why not show her the hospital? She likes talking to sick people."

"The hospital..." Samantha trails off.

A moment passes. We step into the arena exit, and she slows to a stop. "Say, Phoebe, have you been to the hospital lately?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, the thing is, Hope hasn't shown up for his shifts in a few months. When I asked around, the only reply I received was that he was 'busy.' Isn't that strange?"

I scratch my chin. "Do you need help? I can try and speak with Hope. He doesn't avoid me nearly as much as he does Jason."

"Well, you don't need to bother him. It's not like I can't handle a few dozen patients. It barely takes any of my time, given how much mana I possess. Besides, he's busy, so he probably has a good reason."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, *maybe*. Hope is Jason's clone at heart. I have to prod Jason to work his shifts too. They're both lazy bums. It isn't fair for you to take care of all the healing work by yourself."

The hospital was an idea created by Jason. While they existed on Earth in his era, ours works differently. People on Earth would wait days, weeks, months, and even years to fully heal. However, thanks to the power of Wordsmithing and Samantha's healing magic, the injured need only a day or so to recover from their wounds.

It's an efficient system, but it works best when all three magical doctors pull their weight.

Samantha squeezes my arm lightly. "Forget it. The least I can do is manage the hospital by myself. Jason's busy working on the colony, Hope's improving the Core... everyone has a role. This is mine."

I lean over and kiss her head. "Alright, if you say so. Anyway, let's get a move on! I need to file a bunch of papers so that I can hurry to Daisy's party."

"You got Daisy a present, right?"

"Of course." I smile, and a feeling of excitement washes over me. "I can't *wait* to see her face."

My midnight-colored truck rumbles down the road. Its engine, as always, reminds me of a purring lion, one that's only moments away from waking up and tearing apart those who draw too close.

Samantha leans against the passenger door and combs her long, black hair. Her lowered window sends gusts of warm and cool air inside, shifting every time we enter and exit the shadow of buildings and trees. Hero City is unrecognizable compared to how it used to look six years ago. Jason explained to me the concept of 'skyscrapers' and how these ten and fifteen-story buildings were hardly even as big as the ones where Jason grew up. To me, though, they seem enormous. They're taller than the towering spires at the four corners of Arthur's castle.

My mind drifts as I turn right and head down a street.

I still think about Arthur sometimes. My king. I had one opportunity to speak to him during the battle against Amelia and Satan, but I missed it. The Arthur I remember was so powerful that even the Demon Emperors feared him. How did Amelia enslave him, I wonder?

Questions with no answers are poison for the soul. I shouldn't dwell on them.

Samantha raps her fingers on the long, skinny box between us. It's covered in sparkles and glitter, with a neat little bow on top. "Daisy's present, hm? What'd you get her?"

I smile. "You'll see."

"Oh, come on. You can tell me."

"I sure can."

"Phoeeebeee!" Samantha whines noisily. "Don't be like that! I thought we were friends!"

"Haha! We are! And friends don't spoil surprises!"

Samantha puffs out her lip, then grabs the box and shakes it. "It's kinda heavy. No rattling. What kind of toy is this?"

"It's not a toy."

"Really? But she's a little kid."

A distant memory echoes in my mind. "Neither was I when my father gave it to me. You could say it's... it's a family heirloom."

Crossing her arms, Samantha pushes back against her seat. "Alright. Now I'm *super* curious."

We drive in silence for five minutes, and soon a large square building looms in the distance. It has no special designs on the outside, no sign announcing its function, or any other decorations, giving it an ominous look. Samantha raises an eyebrow. "Is that new? I've never seen it before."

"Jason created it with Wordsmithing a week ago. It's about ten thousand square feet, three stories tall... but the inside's where the fun begins."

As we travel closer and closer, the building continues to expand and take up more of the horizon before us. Samantha whistles. "Pseww... goodness. Jason's going all out."

"You're only six years old once. This is a birthday Daisy will never forget."

* * *

We pull to a stop in the mostly empty parking lot, though my space is right next to several dozen vehicles all bunched up in one area. A single wooden door at the front of the pistachio-colored building gives no indication of what's inside. One could be forgiven for thinking this place was little more than another of the five warehouses on the outskirts of Hero City.

The moment we push open the door, the blank exterior gives way to a vibrantly colored interior. The massive, hollowed-out building with dozens of skylights is filled to the brim with various machines my husband tells me are similar to the 'amusement parks' from his era.

Hundreds of children scream and shout excitedly as they ride around on a 'roller coaster.' A machine like a train zips around at high speeds, racing up slopes and in a loop as it circles the perimeter of the building, passes into the middle, and zig-zags back to the building's edge again.

I can't make out Daisy's voice from the other children, but I immediately spot a few hundred adults, including Jason, watching the children frolic and play.

I squeeze Daisy's present tightly. Anxiety hits me. "Wow... The place even more impressive than when I saw it two days ago."

Samantha's eyes are wide as saucers. "Incredible. I've always wanted to go to one of these human attractions. I lost my chance when..."

She trails off. Immediately, a guilty expression crosses her face. "Never mind."

I know what she was going to say. *The Volgrim destroyed Earth*. I can only imagine what life was like during the Ancient Era, back before the Volgrim attacked. Everything Jason tells me makes it sound like it was a marvelous time to be alive. What's even more incredible is that the world Jason has created here on Tarus II is somehow *better* than Earth, as far as our quality of life.

Still, my home is gone. Forever. It stings, knowing I'll never see Earth again.

Samantha and I walk underneath the ten-feet-tall roller coaster tracks right as a ride full of children races past. Their shrieks of excitement lighten my mood.

"Phoebe! You made it!" Jason jogs over to us, and I give him a quick kiss. "I was just telling the guys you'd never miss Daisy's birthday party."

I hold out my box. "I brought my... my present for Daisy. Where is she?"

Jason's smile melts away. "Umm... good question. She's around here somewhere. Maybe the carousel? The Spinning Wheel Of Terror? The Lavalanche? The-"

I punch him lightly in the arm. "What do you mean the *Spinning Wheel of Terror*?! That sounds dangerous!"

Jason chuckles. "Nah, it's no big deal. It spins around really fast and plasters the kids against the wall. Used to be my favorite ride when I went to a carnival. **Locate.**"

Jason finishes with a Word of Power, then tilts his head. "The archery range. Huh. I thought she'd be on one of the rides for sure."

"You gave her a bow and arrow?"

"They're plastic. Perfectly safe. The worst Daisy can do is put someone's eye out, and I'm here, so, no worries."

"I'll go check on her."

Jason holds his hand out to stop me. "Whoa whoa, hun, first you need to tell me what's in the box."

I stick my tongue out. "Bleh. Use your Wordsmithing if you're curious. Or follow along and find out."

He glances at Samantha. "Yeah, okay. Hey Sam. Long time, no chat."

"We spoke last week."

Jason shrugs. "Yeah, but that's a long time in my book."

"Well, maybe when you're a hundred thousand years old, that'll change."

"Probably, haha."

The three of us break away from the crowd of adults and head toward the archery range. I hear Daisy laughing before I see her. When she comes into view, I immediately facepalm. Her face and hands are covered in black ink. She laughs along with a few of her friends from school as they aim arrows with soft black tips at the targets. Interestingly, all her friends are boys. Daisy might be daddy's little princess, but she's also a tomboy.

The six children fire their arrows at the same time. The kobold child misses the mark entirely, while two of the Felaris children manage to hit the edges of the targets. Their claws probably make holding the bowstrings difficult.

Daisy, on the other hand, hits close to the center. Her arrow slams against the board, and the ink on its soft tip leaves a black dot close to the bullseye position.

"Nice job, Daisy!" Samantha claps her hands and catches my daughter's attention. "You're a great shot!"

"Aunt S'matha!" Daisy's tone carries a little surprise, but immediately her eyes lock onto the package in my arms. She drops her bow without a second thought and bounces over to me. "Mommy, what's that?"

"I brought you a present," I say, kneeling to hold it out. Daisy's filthy face makes me want to laugh, but I try to maintain a solemn expression, even as she wipes her inky hands across her cheeks, smearing even more blackness around. "It's a precious item, but I don't know if you're mature enough to treat it well."

Daisy's eyes widen. "I am! I'm machur! What's machur?"

I set the box down. "Ah, never mind that. Open the box."

Daisy nods. She sits down, and several of the boys walk over to see what's going on. As always, Daisy is very careful when she opens the present. She peels off every piece of tape and unfolds it carefully, rather than simply tearing the paper off. On her fourth birthday, she even went so far as to save the wrapping paper because she thought she might have a use for it someday. Now that I think about it, my daughter is a strange child.

By the time she's taken the paper off, some of the boys seem antsy, but a stern look from me prevents them from pushing her aside to open it themselves.

The box is perhaps two-feet long and seven or eight inches wide. Daisy lifts the top off, and Jason groans audibly. "Aw, Phoebe... she's only six."

Daisy pulls out a dull steel sword from the package. She holds it up and stares at it. "Mommy... this is a big knife..."

"It's a sword, sweetheart — my first sword. Your grandfather gave it to me when I was your age. Women weren't allowed to have weapons back then, so I had to keep it secret. It belonged to his father, and his father's father as well. It's the last thing I own from our family. And it's yours now!"

The kobold boy stares at it in awe. "Wow... dude! That's so metal!"

I shoot a glance at Jason. *Your favorite words are leaking again.*

Jason looks away. *Oops.*

Daisy acts unusually gentle with the sword. She ignores the chips and dents on its edge, but her eyes fixate on a small carving of a bird etched into the blade, just above the handle. "What's this, mommy?"

"That's a dove. When I was a girl, doves were a sign of peace. Putting a dove on a sword meant the weapon was only allowed to protect the user, not to hurt others. Do you understand?"

She shakes her head. "No..."

"Well, maybe when you're older. Do you remember our practice lessons? There's a sheath and belt in the box. Try them on."

I spend the next minute or so wrestling the belt through Daisy's blue-jean belt-loops. The sword stops an inch or two short of dragging the ground, but it still makes her movement awkward.

Daisy wipes her eye and sniffles. "This is the best... the best present ever... mommy..."

"Aww, sweetheart..." I quickly lean forward and wrap my arms around her. Tears form in my eyes, too, as flashes of my father's face dance in my vision.

Samantha stomps her foot. "Eee! Now I *really* want a little girl! You two are so precious!"

Not long after, Daisy and one of the boys swing sticks at each other, playing a mock sword-fight while several other kids stand around in a circle and root for one or the other.

Jason wraps his arm around me. "A sword, huh."

"Yep."

"What were you saying about some of these rides being... *dangerous*?"

"Jason... it's not like-"

I know, I'm only teasing."

We share a moment together, leaning in to kiss each other passionately. My memories float back to when we first met all those years ago.

I love him now as much as I did then. More, even. I'm closer to Jason than I've ever been with anyone else. Perhaps even myself.

We have a child. A wonderful, beautiful little girl. The pride and joy in our lives. She's not only a symbol of our love but proof that humanity can rebuild. We've suffered under the demons and lost innumerable friends and possessions, but as long as we're together, nothing can stand between us.

Samantha walks over to Daisy and starts giving her opponent tips about how to hold his sword and something about a proper stance. He needs Sam's help given how easily Daisy has been besting him.

Jason squeezes my shoulder. "You know, I chatted with Daisy on the way over. She said the darnedest thing to me."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"She told me her birthday wish. She wants a little brother. Think we can do it?"

"We've been trying. Nothing works."

Jason coughs into his fist. "Well, sure, but we haven't tried... you know... Wordsmithing."

"No... that's not right, Jason. You shouldn't use your magic to create life. Let the Creator give us a child."

Jason rolls his eyes. "Phoebe, that's not-"

"Not how biology works, right, right. Biology-*shmiology*. You always say that. I believe life is a sacred thing. Taking it should never be done in haste, nor should creating it. Besides, if you use your Wordsmithing to make me pregnant, anything could happen."

Jason taps the crown. "I have Solomon. I'm sure it'd be a cinch."

"No."

"But-"

"No."

Jason pulls his arm off my shoulder and swaggers a step away. "Haahhh, fine. Have it your way. I guess Daisy's going to be an only child forever."

I cross my arms and turn up my nose. "If that's what the Creator wishes, then so be it. Hmph."

"Wipe that look off your face. It's too cute."

I can't stay mad at Jason. It's physically impossible.

"We're going to have to try even harder to give her a brother."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "Yeah? And what if after all that exhausting, *boring* 'work' she gets a sister instead?"

"We'll keep trying."

"Damn. All that exertion, and I don't know if my heart's strong enough." Jason innocently stares up at the skylight and whistles. "Solomon. You keep out of this."

I nudge Jason's arm with my fist. "Stop chatting with your invisible friend, weirdo. And while you're at it, clean the ink off our daughter! She looks hideous!"

Jason smirks. "Yes, ma'am."

Part 085: Ambush

A silent, lumbering mass of bone stomps toward my group of commandos. Its unspeaking jowls open and close as it raises its sword at me.

"Ignite."

With a single word, I unleash hellfire upon the Skeleton Warrior. Its bronze shield and light armor prove useless against my magical flames. The monster's bones snap and crackle as the fire races from its feet to its head. A stench like a burning sewer fills the air, but Centurion immediately filters the odor before I can inhale it.

A dozen armored soldiers stand behind me: two Thundercats and ten Spectres, a formidable strike force.

"We're running out of time, Hope." Henry touches my shoulder. "Neil said-"

"I know. Don't sweat it. The demons can't guard every portion of the Labyrinth... not after the beating we've been giving them lately. I'll squeeze a few more minutes in if it means saving lives."

Unlike the other soldiers, I don't wear a T-REX, but I also don't *need* one. My body is much more durable than a standard-issue exosuit thanks to Centurion's nanites embedded in my skin. Neil's tests were quite conclusive on that front.

The Labyrinth walls stand at our right and left, while the ceiling and floor seem to press down on us. After growing used to the beauty of Maiura, it never fails to amaze me how dismal the Labyrinth's infinite darkness becomes, the longer I stand inside it.

I hate the Labyrinth. I hate what it stands for, and those it houses. Demons. They're little more than semi-intelligent flesh-eating parasites, and they seek the destruction of any who oppose them.

Most people fear demons. Their minions and moguls dwarf our population by a factor of hundreds.

Not me.

The average demon is neither a Duke, nor a Baron, nor a Lord. Most are grunts, the cannon fodder of demonkind. Despite being marginally stronger than the average human, when a grunt faces an Exosuit-wearing soldier, they don't stand a chance.

The T-REX's are more than a defensive implement. They're the ultimate weapon as well, boasting nearly perfect offense and defense. Enhanced sensory acuity, strength, agility, and an autopilot function are only a handful of the abilities the exosuits grant us.

We aren't invincible. Barons and Dukes are perfectly capable of wiping out a platoon of my best soldiers.

But that's why *I'm* here.

We continue walking down the pitch-black passage. Occasionally, a poorly-lit torch will flicker up ahead, but the all-consuming darkness swallows its light after we pass.

Few demons live in this area. We cleaned most of them out last month. My goal has stayed true for almost six years: kill the demons, rescue their human slaves, and secure a future for humanity.

Jason lives on Tarus II and leaves the dirty work to me. I accept my duty. I'll do what I have to if it means protecting the loyal humans and monsters serving under me.

Sometimes a man has to stick his hands in the muck if he wants to protect those he loves.

Centurion yells a surprise update into my head. *PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR! I AM DETECTING A MASS OF HEAT SIGNATURES ZERO POINT SEVEN MILES IN FRONT OF YOU. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS SUGGESTS IT MAY BE AN AMBUSH.*

"I thought things were a little too quiet around here. Heads up, troops, there's a trap up ahead."

Henry's voice fills with suspicion. "I don't see anything."

He will, soon. Centurion's nanites draw from my spiritual energy to enhance their capabilities. Ordinary exosuits aren't nearly as precise, but they're still leagues beyond human senses.

"Oh." Henry holds up his hand, and the rest of the group stops. "I see them now. Damn. How did you know?"

"I used my Wordsmithing to scout ahead."

"Yeah? I didn't hear you say anything."

"You weren't listening closely enough. Anyway. Let's turn the tables on the demons. **Observe.**"

Instantly, my Wordsmithing analyzes every enemy up ahead. Ten Lords, one Baron, and a hundred grunts await us. They must be confident about their odds of survival.

No, a more likely explanation is that the demons are growing more desperate every day. And why wouldn't they be? We've expanded aggressively over the last six years. Hell, I killed two Lords just last week. Wrong place, wrong time. They never saw their deaths coming.

The demonstone quarries are nearby, and we're sure to meet some stiff resistance when we arrive. Demonstone is the hardest naturally-occurring substance in the universe, even compared to diamond. It takes hundreds of miners chipping away at the same vein for weeks at a time to obtain more than a pound of the stuff, and it's our target today. Well, not the demonstone itself, but the slaves who mine it.

The ten Spectres go silent. Each commando activates their stealth mode, and jump up to adhere to the ceiling and walls. I see them only as outlines floating in the air thanks to Centurion's visual enhancements.

Henry and his comrade, Jenny, activate their energy shields and vibroaxes. The plasmoid blades hum to life, ready to rend demon flesh mercilessly.

They walk past me, and I fade into the background, preparing myself mentally to Wordsmith if they need help. Naturally, I try to conserve my energy where possible. I'll take out the Baron, but my squadmates can easily handle the grunts and Lords.

As the two Thundercats rush down the path, their tower-shields raised to protect themselves with Spectres flanking on all sides, my heart skips a beat. The Baron appears behind their ranks, a spell ready to cast. Before I can shout a warning, the Baron weaves her last hand sign, and a wall of acid rushes at their backs!

Instinctively, I reach out with my telekinesis and press down on the acid, slamming it against the ground. One of the Spectres in the rear turns around just in time for the remnants of the corrosive liquid to splash against his lower body. He hops away, only to scream in pain while swatting his legs. His limbs dissolve into nothingness, along with his nanite-enhanced armor, causing him to slam onto the ground with a sickening *thud*. "Nnnn-aaahh!!!"

"Regenerate. Heal." I quickly utter two words of power to save the soldier, then charge at the Baron. Henry pulls back and holds up his shield to protect the flank, while Jenny aims hers forward. They each flick a button, and energy bubbles sprout outward and fill the hallway, impeding the approach of the demons in front and the Baron at their backs.

The Baron whips around to face me. Her body, rotting to pieces in various places and covered in rags, gives her a ghastly appearance, almost something like a zombie. She growls at me. "Filthy fleshbag! You're mine!"

"Unlikely," I reply.

She weaves more hand signs, then jumps against the wall and melts inside of it. A split-second later, she appears at my right, having traveled a hundred feet instantly, and leaps out, a blob of acid hovering in front of her hand.

Centurion takes over and slams my heel into the ground, allowing me to backflip and make the Baron strike the wall to my left. The acid bubble splashes and dissolves a chunk of the dirt, making me shudder at the death I narrowly evaded.

I land on my hands and flip to my feet, then prepare myself for whatever she'll use next. This Baron is already several leagues beyond the typical small-fry I fight daily. In the distance, the commandos begin battling her small legion of demons, but it doesn't escape my attention that their leader is singling me out.

Her throat expands. I narrow my eyes. **"Shield."**

A wall of telekinetic energy forms between us, and just in time too, as the disgusting demon vomits a line of acid at me. It impacts the wall, tears through, and races at my chest.

"Teleport."

I vanish and reappear behind the Baron. The look of surprise on her face makes me grin. A quick punch to her lung cuts off her disgusting stomach juices, and I follow up with another word. **"Bind."**

Magical ropes wrap around the woman like ten enraged anacondas. Each one's tensile strength is enough to suspend an elephant from the ceiling. They wrap around her and constrict her body fiercely, but a moment later, she melts into a puddle of acid and enters the floor.

She's a slippery devil.

Centurion blares in my mind. *WARNING! TWO CASUALTIES SUSTAINED IN STRIKE GROUP SIGMA!*

I can't spare a glance back at my squad. The demon resistance must be fierce.

A hand formed from acid lunges from the Labyrinth floor and grabs my leg. It sears into my flesh, causing blinding pain to surge up my spine. The agony is even more painful than if I'd plunged my limb into a vat of boiling water! I barely manage to expel telekinetic energy from all of my pores, then wheeze out, "**T-Teleport!**"

I land on my stomach a hundred feet ahead, even further from my group than before. The Baron is slowly pulling me further and further away.

A hissing sound erupts from the ground as her body reforms. "Hehehe, you must be Hope, the so-called reincarnation of the Hero-King. The others tell me you've already slain ten thousand demons! When I kill you, the Council will have no choice but to make me a Duke!"

I force a smile. Even with this slippery bitch taunting me, I can't let her see how much her acid hurt me. Besides, I take at least a little pride in how much the demons fear me. They *should*.

"You haven't beaten me yet, glob-spitter. You're a one-trick pony. I have the power of the Gods on my side."

"The gods are dead. Soon, you will wish you had joined them."

Centurion quickly repairs the damage to my leg. I leap to my feet and aim my mind at the Baron. "I don't know your name, and I don't care. You're nothing but one red rat among many. **Immunity.**"

My body shifts its physiological structure to resist acid, making me impervious to the demoness's attacks. Even with my DNA rewriting itself, I don't feel a thing. I take a wide stance and steady myself as the female weaves another hand sign. "A single isolated word. I know how your power works, Wordsmith! You can't protect yourself!"

To my surprise, the Baron explodes into gas and rapidly expands throughout the corridor. A wave of nausea hits me like a freight train.

I made my body impenetrable to acid, but I didn't... I didn't realize she had a gaseous...

"Kah! Kakh!" I stumble backward. My lungs turn to fire as Centurion rapidly tries to expel the poisonous gas.

WARNING! LEVEL 5 NEUROTOXINS DETECTED! INTERNAL BIOREACTORS COMPROMISED!

Neurotoxins. Shit. This demon isn't an average Baron. She's... handpicked? Someone... expected me... to...

"Ex-expel. Expel."

I speak the words, but I can't focus my mind. Nothing happens.

The ground rushes at me. Everything goes dark.

"That was a close one."

Neil's voice greets me. I blink open my eyes and fight the urge to vomit. "Gnn... burgh... w-what...?"

A woman speaks next. "You're lucky I stopped by when I did. Neil, what did you say happened?"

I wince as a brilliant beam irradiates my face from above. The brightness reminds me of staring directly at the sun. Christ, I hate when people shove a fucking light in my face. I groggily raise my hand to shield my eyes while turning my head to the side. Red skin and a scantily covered pair of breasts greet me. I look up and spot the face of Belial, the Second Emperor of all demons.

Neil keeps his voice neutral. "There was an ambush in the Labyrinth. Hope and a few others went in to try and secure some supplies, but a large group of demons ambushed them."

Belial narrows her eyes. "Is that so? The toxin in Hope's blood is quite rare. I even know the demon who makes it. *Vepar, the Baron of Toxicity*. She's not someone who would attack humans for pointless reasons."

The succubus glances at me, a frown on her face. When it comes to me, she never smiles. "Four dead Spectres. Considering your opponent, I'm surprised you escaped. Vepar is Ose's hand-picked enforcer. Her job is to capture troublesome demons, *alive*. She only fights if ordered by a higher authority."

Neil nods. "Well, if that's the case, then we're lucky the recall beacons worked. I don't know who this 'Vepar' is, but I think you're reading into things too much."

"I wonder about that," Belial mutters.

Silently, I pull myself into a sitting position. The small chamber, which we call the Recall Zone, is where we send people injured during missions so I can heal them. Naturally, we don't send Core personnel to the hospital on Tarus... that would garner too much suspicion.

Damn. If only I hadn't been caught off-guard, then Belial wouldn't have found out. She probably doesn't understand our mission yet, but seeing her now is terrible. I can only pray she doesn't tell Phoebe or Jason. That would be disastrous.

"It's nothing, Belial. You know how tenuous our situation is."

The Second Emperor's tail flicks around slowly, back and forth. It's a gesture I've learned over several years that means she's thinking carefully.

"I find it odd that demons haven't attacked the Core in six years. Even considering Uriel's rampage several years ago..."

Neil casually walks around my bed to the same side as Belial. His eyes flick to me, then back to the demoness. He keeps his expression easygoing, but I sense a slight dread lurking beneath his smile. "I hear the demons have a new Emperor. She's running things differently compared to the old days."

"Yes. That's what bothers me." Belial's lip curls up in disgust. "Ose hates humans more than you could ever imagine. Her entire bloodline is filled with sick, twisted examples of demonkind's worst traits. I find it unfathomable she would sit back and allow humans to openly rebel. Especially given the number of worlds you've liberated from demon control."

A bead of sweat trickles down my back. "You know about them?"

"I've heard rumors. I don't oppose human freedom, you know. Nobody asked for my input at the end of the Energy Wars. I thought the punishment humans received as the losers was grotesque. Still, your so-called leaders and wealthy dignitaries accepted the terms. Considering the reward they received, it's easy to see why."

My heart skips a beat. "Reward? What reward?"

Belial fans out her nails. "Ninety-nine percent of all humans became mindless chattel for demon amusement. The rest lived their lives in luxurious opulence at Hell Harbor."

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck slowly raise. "Hell Harbor... isn't that..."

"The place Uriel attacked, yes. You might call it demonkind's new homeworld." Belial closes her hand into a fist. "Don't get any ideas. Dukes and Barons live there. A few upper-ranked Lords, as well. If all of its residents attacked today, you would die."

Belial's voice lowers. "And that's to say nothing of what the Overlords would do."

I open my mouth to ask about them, but Belial raises her hand. "I've said enough. I don't know what you two are doing in the Labyrinth, but you must stop. Poking a hornet's nest is the best way to get stung."

Neil raises an eyebrow. "And what if we're immune to their poison?"

"Don't pick apart the analogy. You know what I mean." Belial looks me up and down one last time. "Stay out of trouble, Hope. It would be nice if you showed up to your shifts at the hospital, too."

"Sorry. I forgot."

"Oh, please. Neither you nor Jason suffers from poor memories. Please stop making excuses. Sick people need assistance, and I'm only one healer."

I bow my head apologetically. "Sorry. I'll pull my weight more."

For once, Belial smiles. When she isn't frowning or putting on a grandiose air, she becomes noticeably more attractive. "Thanks. I'll see you two around."

Her high-heels *click* toward the door, and a few moments later, she slams it shut behind her.

I release a breath I didn't realize I had been holding. Belial acts very differently around Neil and me compared to Jason and Phoebe. Around them, she's a bubbly, animated person who hops up and down like a kid. Around us, though... she's more like a venomous snake, waiting to strike.

Neil rubs his forehead. "Bloody hell. That was a close one."

"Is Henry okay? Jenny?"

"They're fine. We lost Corbin, Maurice, David, and Pyrrha, though. The enemy used a device that destabilized the nanites in their suits. We're lucky anyone survived."

My jaw drops. "Since when do demons have anything capable of countering a T-REX?!"

"Never. Not that I know of, anyway. Your squadmates activated their beacons and managed to rescue you before the Baron could haul you away, but you'll have to thank Kar for providing a distraction. His

group showed up at the last second. They're the only reason you survived."

"I'll be sure and give him a round of beer on me. Christ." I shake my head slowly. A lump of pain bubbles underneath the surface. "**Heal.**" The sensation vanishes.

"You alright?"

"Yeah. Whatever that demon bitch hit me with... it was horrible. I couldn't focus my mind. I tried to Wordsmith, but nothing happened."

Neil slides over and sits on the bed beside me. He pats my back. "Belial was right."

"About what?"

"The demon ambush. It was calculated, not like your other battles. Someone's screwing with us — with you. Think about it. The demons had a nanite-jammer, and they targeted you with something that impaired your Wordsmithing. Someone is trying to capture you... and I can only imagine why."

"They want my power?"

"Maybe. We've been careful to ensure the demons don't know you're a clone. They probably think you and Jason are the same person.

"Maybe. Thanks to Jason's battle against Satan and the other Emperors six years ago, and your incursions against the demons ever since, they've probably gotten a good handle on your powers. With all the soul manipulators running around, it's not unlikely they intend to capture you. If they do, then humanity will have no defense against the bloodskin bastards. Wordsmithing in the hands of the enemy would be a disaster."

"They can't make me use my powers."

Neil shakes his head. "You're wrong. There are several demons with the ability to control minds. Even if they didn't exist, torture is surprisingly effective at making people do what they want."

"Not when a single word could teleport me back to the Core."

A long silence follows. Neil stares at the wall blankly. "The demons are crafty, Hope. They defeated the angels. Even now, while we rescue those we can and execute the strongest demons in our path, they're most likely plotting to destroy us. Never underestimate a demon's animal cunning."

"Sure, but the river of souls is drying up. The demons can't mutate more Barons and Dukes to replace those they've lost."

Neil pulls his hand away from my back and folds his palms together. "Perhaps. However, I worry about... about Ose. We don't know anything about her. She's the leader of our enemies, but we have no intel on how she works, or what her powers are. Doesn't that worry you?"

I nod. "A little. I know what magical acts Diablo, Satan, and Belial can perform. If Ose is an Emperor, she's probably as much of a monster as them."

Silently, I follow Neil's gaze to the stony Labyrinth wall. Memories play in my head from six years ago when I battled Uriel. She was monstrously powerful, and I barely managed to meet her on equal footing.

Eventually, the Demons defeated her. That alone tells me how powerful they are, and they did it without Belial or Diablo's assistance.

Ose had something to do with Uriel's defeat. I don't know what her role was, but anyone who could take out the Archangel is a serious threat to not only myself, but humanity as well.

I don't know her, and she doesn't know me. We are enemies who have never met face to face.

"Neil... why do we kill demons?"

"Because they are evil."

"And are all demons evil?"

"The overwhelming majority are, yes."

I exhale again. "You're probably right. Sometimes I wish I could live in ignorance, blissfully unaware of the evils outside the Great Doors."

Neil pats my knee. "That life is not for men like you and me. Leave it to your doppelganger. We have a higher calling."

I nod, but my heart sinks. "Yeah. I suppose. Uh, incidentally, I've been thinking about this for a while, but now's as good a time as any to bring it up. I need some time for myself. I want to return to my villa for a week or two."

Neil smiles. "Oh, sure. Take some time off. Don't have too much fun, though. If you're still there in a month, I might have to send in a rescue squad."

"No, I'll come back. Don't you worry about that, haha..."

I slide off the bed. "**Clothes.**"

My military uniform pops onto my body, and I slip out of bed to face the Commander.

Neil pats my shoulder. "Go home, Hope. We'll keep the Core running without you for a while. A little R&R never hurt anyone."

"Thanks, Neil. You're the best."

I smile at my friend as a feeling of warmth appears in my heart. Unlike Jason, Neil gives more than he takes. I always feel like I can't pay him back enough for all the advice and help he offers, which only makes me happier to be his friend.

"Return."

With a single word, I vanish from the Labyrinth and appear in front of my mansion on Maiura. A gigantic building the size of a castle greets me, each side surrounded by twenty-foot walls with razor-wire to keep out Maiura's dangerous predators. The Victorian-style mansion, created by me, gives me a sense of old-timey comfort I can't get anywhere else.

Sometimes, after a difficult mission in the Labyrinth, I have to return here. I have to remind myself who I'm fighting for.

I shove the doors open. The sound of wood striking the doorstopper echoes throughout the empty entrance.

A moment passes. Two.

"Jason? You're back!"

A voice calls out. That sense of warmth enters my body once again, and I smile. My eyes immediately swivel toward the speaker, a beautiful woman in a black and red dress.

She quickly dashes over to me and wraps her arms around my waist. "I was sooo lonely! You've been gone for, like, three days!"

I use my telekinesis to close the door. Pulling her toward me, I kiss her slowly and tenderly, allowing my hands to rove.

When we pull away, her smile has already infected me. "Haha... sorry. You wouldn't believe what happened to me today, Amelia."

Author Note: This is Hope, right after the six-year timeskip!



Part 086: Master of Puppets

"Sure, but the river of souls is drying up. The demons can't mutate more Barons and Dukes to replace those they've lost."

"Perhaps. However, I worry about... about Ose. We don't know anything about her. She's the leader of our enemies, but we have no intel on how she works, or what her powers are. Doesn't that worry you?"

"A little. I know what magical acts Diablo, Satan, and Belial can perform. If Ose is an Emperor, she's probably as much of a monster as them."

* * *

The two humans sit on the bed beside one another and hazard weak guesses regarding their recent defeat.

As for me?

I lean against the wall and watch.

My astral form affords me many capabilities that others can only imagine. Reconnaissance. Infiltration. Sabotage. I find the deepest secrets of my enemies and study their machinations from the inside-out.

I am Ose, Third Emperor of all demons.

I am... omniscient.

Well, that might be going a *little* too far, but the insipid humans cannot comprehend how badly I've already beaten them at their own game. Hope and Neil, the so-called commanders of the human military, are little more than *pawns* for my entertainment. I know their intentions and their plans.

Jason created Hope using Wordsmithing. His goal was to create a backup for himself in case he should fall. A second Wordsmith, one who could stave off the demons if need be. The humans have gone to great lengths to protect themselves, but their efforts are all for naught. My Astral Form, invisible and undetectable, allows me to watch them plot and plan their next move. Countering their feeble tactics is simpler than beating Bael at a game of Chess.

For six years, I have allowed humanity to stretch its tendrils inside the Labyrinth. I incurred some minor losses, typically grunts and lords who displeased me, but nobody essential to my grand plan. My ultimate goal is to break humanity's spirit; to send them crawling back to their worlds where they will curl up in the fetal position and beg forgiveness for daring to stand against demonkind. In that light, a few casualties are more than acceptable for reaching my ultimate goal.

When humans escaped my mental traps and took a stand against their imprisonment, it was the biggest slap in the face anyone has ever given me. I take insults personally and never forgive a grievance. This time, when I smother the last vestiges of faith from the little rats, I won't give them cushy castles and

grain, but mud huts and gruel. The ancient treaties we signed with the leaders of humanity have been long forgotten, anyway. They won't care if those separated from them by a hundred generations live in filth.

Yes, my plans are all coming together now. She who thinks through the ramifications of her actions may lose a battle, but she will inevitably win the war.

I will win the war.

The human commander, Neil, smiles at Hope. "Oh, sure. Take some time off. Don't have too much fun, though. If you're still there in a month, I might have to send in a rescue squad."

"No, I'll come back. Don't you worry about that, haha..."

Hope slides off the bed.

"Clothes."

After speaking a few parting words with his commander, Hope vanishes, leaving Neil behind. The Commander stares ahead listlessly for a long moment. A dumbfounded look slowly stretching across his face makes me chuckle.

"I don't get it... how did they destabilize the nanites...?"

Neil's eyes lower to his feet. "A mole, perhaps?"

My chuckle increases in tempo. "Hahaha..." Soon, I lean against the wall and clutch my stomach. "Hahahaha! HAAAAHAHA!!"

While Neil struggles with the deaths of a few subordinates, I desperately try to retake control of my body, though the laughter won't stop! It's too precious!

A minute passes. Neil stands up and heads to the door. After he leaves, I finally regain my mental faculties and wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes.

"Hoo... goodness! That was fantastic."

A mole, hm? Neil isn't wrong, but his life would be much easier if he only had *one* double agent inside the Core.

I smooth my white dress down and silently phase through the closed door. The hallway outside bends and twists in different directions, with doors scattered all over for patients recovering from their wounds. I hover forward, expanding my mind to locate the one I seek.

It doesn't take me more than a few seconds. Fifty feet down the hall, Room 7 sits with its door cracked open. I slide inside and swallow bile as I prepare myself for what I must do.

A human male lays in bed, staring up at the ceiling. He and I are the only people here. Gathering myself, I reach out and touch his hand — a tiny spark of electricity arcs off my finger. The man's body stiffens. His eyes shift to me, and he bolts up in bed. "Ah! Miss Oshina!"

I force myself to smile at him. "Henry, my beloved. I'm sorry I haven't spoken to you in weeks. You know how difficult it is for me to reform my spiritual body."

Henry's expression brightens. He nods. "Yes, yes! The afterlife curse. You mentioned it before- no, never mind that! I did what you asked!"

I slide onto the bed beside Henry and caress his hand. All he feels is a slight tingling on his skin, but still, his heartbeat quickens. Like all men, he's a gullible fool — easy to twist around my finger.

"You did? That's wonderful, Henry. I've been lonely, drifting between the world of the dead and that of the living. Being without you was torturous- I hope you will forgive me." I lower my eyes and pretend to pout, which only awakens his chivalrous instincts.

"It isn't your fault, Miss Oshina. It's the *demons'* fault." Henry balls his left hand into a fist and gnashes his teeth. "They did this to you. Just like they did to Piper."

Sometimes I wonder how I can stop myself from laughing. Henry's idiocy has no limits, though he isn't much dumber than the average human. "I spoke to Piper two days ago. He'll ascend to Heaven soon, my love. It's all because of your good deeds. The Creator was impressed by your feats against demonkind."

The wonderful thing about my Astral Form is that I can change my physical body as I wish. Henry doesn't see my demonic body, but a beautiful human woman instead, someone I've calculated to resemble his ideal mate. I haven't a clue what I look like, but my appearance appeals to Henry, and that's all that matters.

Henry pulls his hand away from mine and wipes his forehead. "It felt wrong, though. Leading everyone into that ambush, I mean. Why did I need to lead Hope to that Vepar lady? Aren't the demons our enemy?"

"They are, my love. Do you remember what I told you the last time we spoke? Hope and Jason are agents of Satan the Devil. Don't you find it strange that they have the same magical powers as the demons, yet claim to be on your side? Humans can't use magic. It goes against the Creator's will."

Henry scratches his chin. "I suppose... it's just- I thought that the Wordsmiths had magical powers like the angels. If they're agents of the demons, why would the demons attack them? Why would we give them to the demons? I don't understand..."

Tch. The young man is confused. *How unfortunate*. When I manipulate emotions, it typically leads to humans thinking irrationally, which I can use to my advantage. However, there's always the chance that they start asking pesky, annoying *questions*.

"Henry..." I slide a little closer to him on the bed. "It's all part of the Creator's plan. Jason and Hope have Neil fooled. They're using their Wordsmithing to manipulate the minds of the weak-willed. You're stronger than them, aren't you? Didn't you tell me you could see through the lies of the demons?"

Henry nods, perhaps a little too quickly. "Of course. Of course! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to trouble you. I'll do what the Creator wishes. He must have chosen me for a reason."

I don't like it when men ask questions. Henry is perhaps getting a little too antsy for his own good.

I lean forward and bring my face toward his. Waves of revulsion threaten to yank me away, but I persevere. Being close to a male — a *human* male, at that — is usually enough to give me conniptions. I

close my eyes so that I needn't look at Henry, then press my forehead against his.

It only takes a few moments. Several pulses of electricity overwrite Henry's higher thought processes, shutting down parts of his prefrontal cortex in the process.

This 'treatment' won't last forever, but it should work for a while, similarly to the last one I did. Doing it too often can lead to memory loss and other unwelcome side effects. I wouldn't want to draw the attention of someone with medical knowledge... especially if that person's name is *Belial*.

I pull away and stifle a sigh of relief. Being close to a human is a lot like sleeping with a hellhound. They're both animals with awful base desires, but at least Hellhounds have soft, pettable fur.

Henry's eyes turn blank for a few moments. He shakes fog from his head and winces. "Ohh... Miss Oshina... I- I have this awful headache all of a sudden."

I roll my eyes and put a cute lilt in my voice. "I'm so sorry, Henry. I didn't mean to hurt your head. I'll leave..."

He quickly forces a smile. "No, no, don't go! Stay a while! Please. I don't want to be alone. Not after what happened earlier."

I echo his smile, though mine is hollow and empty. "Alright. Anything for you, my love."

I hate everything about humans, from their hair to their toes and all the rubbish in-between.

My mind recalls to my body. I awaken with a shiver and rub my arms.

My empty, barren room beckons to me. The sun beams through my window, illuminating a single dresser against the far wall. I sit in my rocking chair, the only other item in my room of importance, and stretch. My back pops, sending a wave of pleasure through my nervous system. Exercise is one of the few things I enjoy in life unrelated to intellectual pursuits.

I stride over to my dresser and pull it open. The top drawer has two dozen identical white uniforms, the middle has two dozen dresses, and the bottom is for undergarments.

Hmm.

I'm in the mood to wear a uniform today.

Sometimes I feel like wearing a dress, but sometimes I don't. I'm not like other women who constantly fret over their appearance. I either wish to maintain a professional appearance, or I wish to utilize my feminine charms. I discovered a long time ago that men don't care about what a woman wears; it's always other women who judge my appearance. With that in mind, maintaining multiple, identical outfits cuts out a lot of wasted time in my daily schedule.

Efficient, resourceful, and contemplative. Those are the words I always use to describe myself. I waste nothing and push all of my resources to their maximum effectiveness.

It only takes me a minute to change my clothes. I always move quickly so as not to waste any time. Before walking away from the desk, I pause and glare at it. A speck of dust catches my eye.

White is the color of purity. It shines brightest in the darkness, but the slightest smudge dirties it beyond repair.

Unacceptable.

"Amy."

My voice is barely a growl, hardly audible even if someone were in the same room as me. Nevertheless, ten seconds later, the door to my room opens, and a human woman steps inside. She bows her head without meeting my gaze.

"There is a smudge on my dresser. Dirt. Scrub this entire room from top to bottom. If I come back and find a speck of lint, expect to find your plate empty for the next three days."

The blonde woman nods quickly and scurries out of the room. She comes back a minute later with an entire toolkit, including rags, chemicals, and wood polish.

Amy never says anything. She can't, as the scars on her throat and her lack of a tongue can attest. I have only a few slaves living at my estate, but all of them are humans. None of them can speak, which is good. I prefer their silence.

I leave Amy to clean every inch of my dresser inside and out. She knows the price of failure. They all do. The demonstone mines are not pleasant this time of year... or ever, for that matter.

I stride out of my room and past a dozen others, all of them empty, doors closed. Amy is the only house-slave, and she doesn't live inside. No, she sleeps in the garden, whether there be rain or snow. I don't know how she's survived for tens of thousands of years, but she has. I suppose the nanobots humans invented during the Energy Wars made her hardier than the average woman.

Perhaps one of these days, I'll kill Amy, and all the other slaves too. I despise humans, but since I can't bear the thought of enslaving a fellow demon, I have no choice but to rely on those I hate the most. How unfortunate that I've ended up trapped in a lose-lose situation.

After a minute of walking, I grow weary of the slow movement and begin transmitting around at the speed of light, moving from here to there to check on various parts of my estate. My inspection concludes uneventfully, and I find no other signs of dirt or grime anywhere. *Thank the devils.*

Mother always called me a perfectionist. She said I set my sights too high, but there was always a twinkle in her third eye. I believe she admired my perseverance, no matter the odds. There is no such thing as *good enough*. One can always aspire to reach a new plateau or achieve a new height. Accepting mediocrity is the first step toward heading nowhere in life. Too many demons have fallen into that mental trap, not least of whom was Diablo.

Heh. Six years after the fact, I can't help but feel pleased that Diablo entered a coma. With luck, by the time he awakens in a few hundred years, I'll have transformed the Labyrinth into a perfectly oiled machine. He'll be unable to offer any resistance and will beat his chest in grief as he accepts me as the permanent Third Emperor.

No, that's not right. I'll eliminate Belial and take her place. I'll become the *Second* Emperor.

...Come to think of it, I've searched for thousands of years, yet I haven't the faintest clue who the First Emperor is. To call him a crafty devil would be an understatement. Diablo swears the First exists, but I have my doubts. Why hasn't the First contacted me in six years? Is he little more than a false conjuration by that lazy oaf to retain power?

No matter. If the First Emperor exists, I will find him. I will make him bend the knee and accept me as the supreme leader of demonkind. If he doesn't, then Belial is the only barrier to my progress.

I can't wait to eliminate her once and for all.

After concluding my inspection of the estate grounds, I leave my residence and transmit hundreds of miles from my mountain plateau to the valleys below in the blink of an eye. I arrive at the Hell Harbor Annex and give it a quick once-over. What used to be a rather uninteresting entrance to our world has now become a miniature fortress encased in stone and steel.

Dozens of Lords and even a few Barons patrol the Annex. A few walk around outside, but the rest stay inside. The moment one of the Lords spots me, he nudges another Lord beside him, and they both stand at attention. "Halt! State your identity and the secret phrase."

I stop before them and cross my arms. "Ose. Third Emperor. I love purple dragons."

"What flower grows on Mount Chilau?"

"Trick question. It's covered in snow."

"How deep does the snowfall average?"

"Nine inches, but it once reached a record-depth of seven feet."

The guard nods. "Welcome, Miss Ose."

I nod back at him. "Keep sharp. Remember, our enemy includes at least one confirmed shapeshifter. I'll rotate the password in three days."

"As you wish, ma'am."

Striding inside the Annex, I spare the briefest of glances at the demonstone-lined room, which is now strong enough to withstand an atomic explosion. After seeing the destruction Beelzebub wreaked several years ago, it's only natural we should prepare for the worst. Unlike the majority of demons alive today, I remember the levels of destruction humans once achieved. I hope we never revisit those dark days.

Hardly have I walked ten steps into the annex before a baroness squirms over to me. The sight of her face fills me with rage, but I contain my emotions.

"Vepar."

The ghoulish-looking demon, with her melted-red skin, bows her head. "Ah, Miss Ose... I bring news regarding the attack on the Hero-"

"You failed. I already know."

She freezes in place. "You... you know?"

"I do. To say I'm disappointed would be the greatest possible understatement I could make. I went to great lengths to deceive the humans, but you botched the job at the last moment."

She shivers visibly. "I... I apologize. The Sphinx appeared. He caught me off-guard, as did his forces. Before I knew it-"

"Stop making excuses. I don't care how powerful the mighty 'Sphinx' is, he's a monster, and you're a demon. A Baron, at that. You know how I treat failures."

Slowly, Vepar raises her head. She sends me a look of pleading. "Please, Emperor Ose, don't do anything rash. Give me another chance. We worked together during the Energy Wars! Surely you remember our promise?"

"I delivered on that promise. You did not. I told you that when I rose through the ranks, I would help you become a Duke alongside me. That was *before* you ruined six years of planning. The humans know of your existence now and will develop counter-measures. You've put them on high-alert."

Vepar's expression turns sullen. "You... you don't mean..."

"We're no longer partners. You served your purpose, only to falter when I needed you most. I'll find a capable replacement with ease."

The blood drains from Vepar's cheeks. "You... you can't abandon me! I helped you at every opportunity! I praised your leadership and spoke highly of you to Diablo on several-"

I cut her off again. "I can, and I will. In fact, your failure sickens me enough that I'm not simply casting you aside. I'm demoting you. You will rejoin the Lords until you've proven your capabilities again."

Vepar opens and closes her mouth several times as waves of shock race through her body. "Th-th-that's... you... demons can't..."

"Can't be demoted? True, the souls you've consumed will stay inside of you, but consider it a symbolic gesture. We will demolish your residence at Hell Harbor, and you'll stay in the Catacombs once more. Perhaps a reminder of how poor your life once was will strengthen your resolve."

"But-"

"Another word and I'll send you to the mines."

That shuts her up. Vepar trembles. She stuffs rage and anguish deep inside of herself and bows curtly. "Of course. I will reflect on your words of wisdom, *Emperor Ose*."

Vepar spits my titles out, and I smile. She can protest all she wants, but among demons, power is everything. I have it, and she does not. She can do nothing to me.

I watch as Vepar storms away, trying desperately to fight back tears. I might feel bad for her, but were I placed in her shoes, I would have succeeded.

That is what differentiates me from the other demons. Animal cunning. The ability to size up my opponents in an instant.

Sometimes, I find myself wishing there were another demon like me, one who understood that power is everything. Most of my people crave the influence and prestige afforded by the rank of Emperor, but few understand what it means to wield such authority.

I am a speck of purity floating in a sea of muck.

I am... alone.

A wave of emotion strikes me in the stomach. I take a moment to lean against a wall. The sudden overwhelming loneliness is not an alien feeling. It is something I have experienced too many times to count.

But... today... seeing Vepar walk away, someone I once considered a friend- no, a minion. Seeing her walk away, it hits me once again. I have no close comrades. All I have is one broken monster of a brother.

I wish, desperately, that I didn't feel this way.

Wiping my forehead, I pull away from the wall and smooth my white uniform down. It would be unbecoming of an Emperor to have an emotional breakdown amidst the lower ranks.

"Awww, Mister Beelzebub! Are you suuuuure I can't come along?"

"Positive. Stay here."

A shrill and nasally voice tears me from my thoughts. It's followed by a deep voice, one that commands attention even in a crowded room such as this. I swivel my gaze around to see Beelzebub, the Duke of Inferno, standing beside his hideous assistant demoness. She is positively one of the grossest creatures among my species. If one were to tell me that her lineage came from goblins, I would agree.

Beelzebub's assistant stomps her foot. "But whyyyy? I wanna come along too! You always make me stay at Hell Harbor!"

"Don't you like it here?"

She nods. "Oh, of course! But I like being with youuu even more~"

Beelzebub rubs his chin. "Perhaps I should get you a pet hellhound. Then you can fawn all over it instead of me."

"Eee!! You're going to get me a puppy?! I always knew you cared!!"

Sensing Beelzebub's distress, I stride over to the two. "If you need Hellhounds... well, my mother was the progenitor of their species. I could give you one in return for a small favor."

The pinstripe-suited demon coughs, and a small stream of fire rushes through his hands before evaporating in the air. "Kah. Anything to shut this she-orc up. You hear that, Rosalia? The Third Emperor has a puppy for you."

Rosalia's smile disappears. "I don't want *your* Hellhound. I want Mister Beelzebub to pick one for me."

Devils. Ungrateful, fat, and ugly. A trifecta of terrible. No wonder Beelzebub can't stand her.

I wave my hand flippantly. "Suit yourself. Beelzebub, what are you doing?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"In the Labyrinth. You're headed there. Why?"

The Duke snuffles, making smoke exhale from his nose. "I hear the humans suffered a grievous blow earlier today. I'm heading to the Core's outskirts to investigate."

Interesting. I hadn't told anyone about the operation yet. I kept it classified in case of leaks. Beelzebub must have built up a decent intelligence network to have learned about my plot already.

"Don't bother. I conducted a covert mission. My goal was to capture the Wordsmith. Unfortunately, the Baron I put in charge failed, allowing the Hero to escape."

Beelzebub tilts his nose up. "That must have put you in a sour mood."

"Somewhat. I've moved past Vepar's failure. I recently put the finishing touches on Operation Stormbringer."

Beelzebub's gaze flicks to Rosalia. "Stormbringer, you say? Rosalia. Leave us."

"What? But whyyy?"

I roll my eyes. "It's top-secret information. Only Dukes and higher are allowed to know."

Rosalia's face sags. "Aww... well, okay, then. I'll go. Bye, Mister Beelzebub! I love-!"

He shoves his hand into her face and pushes her away. "Don't make me vomit."

"Eeee!! You touched my face! We're moving forward in our relationship!!"

Beelzebub's cold, dead eyes meet mine.

We share a moment of solitude together, one which simply says, *we're surrounded by idiots*.

I gesture to a nearby portal and pull him away from his frumpy, lumpy assistant. Once we're out of earshot and waiting for the portal to open, I mutter, "I don't know what you see in her."

Beelzebub shakes his head. "You know the rules. Rosalia was assigned to be my personal maid. Once a demon receives a servant, they're bound for life."

A minute passes. I stare ahead at the portal while waiting for the Warper on the other side to receive the confirmation code.

"Is that a rule? The servant one, I mean."

"I believe so. Why?"

"Who told you it was a rule?"

"Bael."

Several moments pass. A smirk passes over my face. "He lied."

"Hm? What?!" Beelzebub's expression turns to shock. "No! Surely you jest!"

"I would never. Bael must have been poking fun at you. There is no such rule regarding servants. Not that I've heard."

Beelzebub stares at the side of my face blankly for several moments before turning back to the portal. "Lucifer's tits. I can't believe that fat bastard-"

I immediately hold a finger up. "Don't use that phrase in front of me."

"What phrase? Lucifer's-?"

"Yes. That one."

I grit my teeth and exhale.

"Lucifer was my mother."

Several seconds pass. Beelzebub clams up and folds his hands in front of himself.

"My apologies. I meant no offense."

"None taken. I wish I knew who came up with that dreadful saying all those ages ago so I could take a knife and-"

I stop myself mid-sentence. A smile spreads across my face.

"Never mind. Haha... you're not like the other demons, you know?"

Beelzebub meets my gaze. "How so?"

"I don't know. Something about you seems more familiar than I'm used to. I have a difficult time putting my finger on it."

Beelzebub shrugs. The portal finally opens. As we step through and it closes behind us, I turn to him. "Beelzebub, may I ask you a personal question?"

He sighs, breathing fire once again. "Haah, I suppose. I won't answer if it's *too* personal, though."

"What is your goal?"

The Duke raises an eyebrow. "My goal? What do you mean?"

"You're the first demon to ascend to the rank of Duke since the Energy Wars. You must have pushed yourself harder than any others. My question is... why? To what end?"

Beelzebub smirks. "To achieve power. Why else? If I have power, I can remake the Labyrinth. I can change how our species lives."

My breath catches. "B-but once you have that power, what would you do with it?"

Instead of immediately responding, Beelzebub looks away. His eyes swivel around the Third Quadrant landing area, nearby the Basilisk Dens. Dozens of goblins and orcs wander around, paying us no heed.

"Demons are inefficient. We fight over scraps rather than focusing our energy toward the future. The Overlords loom above us without our knowledge. Instead of fighting one another, I wish to make us work together to reach the pinnacle of our civilization. The Labyrinth is little more than an ever-expanding tomb. I wish to colonize the entire galaxy and beyond."

I nod along to his words. A smile spreads across my face.

"I assumed I was the only one who thought that way. Hearing you say such things is music to my ears."

Beelzebub meets my gaze. Several seconds pass.

The Duke glares at me. "Stop staring. You're giving me the same look Rosalia does. It's disgusting."

I blink and look away. My cheeks flare-up. "S-sorry. My apologies."

We start walking together toward some unknown destination. Guilt and distress wash over me.

I apologized. To another demon. In my entire life... I've never done that over something so trivial.

It's at this moment I finally understand... I see it now. Beelzebub is like me. Unsatisfied with the status quo. Willing to claw his way to the top to affect change.

Toward Beelzebub, I feel...

Author Note:

Check out this awesome artwork for Beelzebub!



[And here's a writeup on the image, plus a full-sized version!](#)

Part 087: Birds Of A Feather

[Recommended Listening](#)

The prattling and babbling of the women in my life often seems neverending. If it isn't the she-ogre following me around and fawning after me with a vile look in her eyes, it's the she-devil who stands a little too close to me for my liking as we travel the Labyrinth's halls.

Ose, the newest Emperor, and a royal pain in my neck, matches my pace as I head down one of the near-infinite corridors littered throughout the Labyrinth. Like me, her elevated position is a recent gain, given how Bael promoted us at the same time. However, while I defeated Agares in a terrific upset of the ages, Ose did little to earn her title. I can't help but feel jealousy burning in my chest.

The white-haired demoness glances at me for a moment before looking away. Then she does it again.

Revulsion boils up in my stomach, and I shoot a glare at her. "Stop staring. You're giving me the same look Rosalia does. It's disgusting."

Immediately, she averts her gaze and stares at the floor. "S-sorry. My apologies."

We continue walking in silence. The Basilisk dens appear in our sights, and a distinct sensation of annoyance washes over me.

Ose is a stunningly gorgeous woman, even compared to the beauty of Belial, one of the most fawned-after succubi. I might rank Ose as the most physically attractive specimen the demons have to offer. A high compliment, given how I go out of my way to avoid women every day. No matter how pretty they seem, I despise their vapid thoughts, their constant need to maintain appearances, and all the other traits their gender shares.

Despite her ravishing good looks, I feel nothing toward this *snake* leading my people. She isn't my type. Perhaps it's her hair or the way she carries herself. Bah, who am I kidding? It's her personality. She walks around like a queen and looks down on others beneath her — an admirable trait in a male, but repulsive in the opposite sex. Women belong at the feet of men, licking their boots, among other things.

My ideal mate is a woman who flatters me at every opportunity, perhaps someone who treats me as though I were the highest authority to walk the twelve planes of the physical universe. Sadly, few women have such a personality.

Ose, naturally, acts worse than many other beautiful demonesses. She sees me as little more than a tool — a disposable item to be used and tossed aside. I'm nobody's fool. If she wants me to play a role, so be it. When the time comes, my allegiance will never be to any woman, for I am—

"Beelzebub? Are you alright? You haven't said anything for several minutes."

Ose's voice interrupts my thoughts. I stop myself from sighing. "Yes, I'm fine. Silence is the breeding ground for brilliance. Surely, one as accomplished as you knows that much."

A nod. "Of course. I was merely making conversation."

Silence follows. Ose's high heels click against the ground as the dirt surfaces of the Labyrinth give way to a texture more akin to stone. Glowing rocks appear in the ceiling above, lighting the way.

We're entering the Basilisk caves.

Ose speaks again. "I've heard that you, erm, spend a lot of time with Artorias. Has Barbatos shown any signs of resurfacing?"

At least she's making small talk about things other than makeup and emotions.

"Barbatos is as silent as Diablo. Uriel hasn't spoken to Artorias, either. He's in sole control of his body. Even Uriel's holy energy seems to have receded over the last few years."

"That's wonderful. I've been busy developing the structure for Operation Stormbringer. Artorias will be an essential part of my ultimate plan to defeat humanity. Would you mind telling me a bit about his current state? I haven't had time to speak with him at length."

The Basilisk cave's glowing gems continue to brighten as we walk. Soon, I can see into the distance as easily as if it were daylight outside. The ceiling crystals, reliant on the ambient magical power of the nearest monsters and demons, glow most brightly when nearby denizens cluster together in tightly-knit groups.

The hallway expands outward, and soon we enter a series of large interconnected rooms, each with puddles of water splashed across the floor. A glance to the left and the right reveals massive creatures swimming under the glowing blue lakes, each aquatic monster big enough to swallow ten demons of my stature whole. However, the long, snake-like creatures, while aggressive and territorial, know better than to attack a Duke or Emperor. A hapless orc or grunt on the other hand...

Well, some demons are too stupid to stay away from dangerous areas. It's better they die quickly.

I tilt my head in Ose's direction. "Operation Stormbringer. Will you finish the plans for it soon?"

"Within the month. Mephisto is still locating bodies to revive, but our first attack waves should easily overwhelm the human's defenses."

I pause my walking to stare at the noble creatures swimming in one of the nearby lakes. The crystal-clear water allows me to gaze at their blackened bodies in all their majesty. One of the Basilisks spins around underwater and stops to evaluate me. After a moment, it turns away, seemingly thinking to itself, *perhaps these two are not a meal worth dying over.*

"Easily? You sound confident. Need I remind you of the Wordsmith? He obliterated a star with a single word. Whatever defenses he conjures will be beyond the scope of your science and experiments."

"Possibly. However, I've been keeping an eye on him for a while. Do you know what my magical repertoire includes?"

"No."

"I can project my body astrally. Using this technique, I have surveyed the humans for the past six years."

"That might be useful, I suppose. What did you discover?"

Ose stares at the side of my head for a moment. I feel her eyes burning a hole in my ear, so I tear my gaze away from the Basilisks.

"Beelzebub, can I trust you?"

Her question catches me off-guard. "What? No. I'm the least trustworthy demon you'll ever meet. I'll stab you in the back the first chance I get."

"Perfect. We're quite alike, in that regard."

A question forms in my mind. *I wonder whether Ose or Rosalia is the more aggravating woman?*

"I just told you I wasn't trustworthy. Whatever you want to tell me, you should know I'll use it against you at the first possible-" My throat suddenly catches, and I stifle a cough — fire flares from my nostrils. "Kah!! Kah, kah!"

It takes me a moment to regain my breath. "-the first possible opportunity."

Ose cocks her head. "Are you alright?"

"Couldn't be better."

"Ever since you ignited yourself, I've heard you had issues with your abilities. Are they going to present a recurring problem, or-"

"I said I'm *fine*." I snap at her, putting a tinge of venom in my voice. "Don't question my capabilities. Didn't I wipe out an entire squad of those pesky armored humans a few months ago?"

Ose lowers her eyes. "I only want to be certain your condition is stable. If you say it is, I won't pester you."

"Damn right, you won't." I continue walking forward, and it takes Ose a second to start walking after me. I decide to change the subject. "Tell me more about Vepar's attack. You wanted to capture the Wordsmith. Why did the ambush fail?"

"Vepar claimed it was because the Sphinx showed up. The troublesome lizard-lion-eagle monster put up quite a fight and forced her to retreat."

I snort fire. "Hmpf. Kar, right? I fought him when I first became a Baron. I would have defeated him if Belial hadn't jumped in from out of nowhere. How could he best a seasoned Baron like Vepar?"

Ose raises an eyebrow. "I don't remember hearing about Belial's intervention."

"Must have slipped my mind."

"Mmm. Well, Vepar didn't face him alone, but also a squad of armored troops. I only managed to create one Nanite Destabilizer, and its charges were limited. She drained it on the Wordsmith to bypass his air filters."

The exit to the Basilisk den draws near as we continue walking forward.

I rub my chin. "For such an essential operation, why send a Baron? You should have gone yourself."

Ose's voice lowers. "In hindsight, you are correct. However, Vepar has never failed me before. Doing so now taught me an important lesson."

"And that would be?"

"I need demons I can trust. At the least, I need ones who *perform*."

A smirk crosses my face. "I already told you I wasn't trustworthy."

The Third Emperor closes her eyes and flips her hair gracefully. "Of course, and I appreciate your honesty. What I need to know is whether you'll fulfill the latter requirement."

"I always win. That's why I'm the first demon to become Duke since the conclusion of the Energy Wars."

"Didn't you lose to the Sphinx and the Wordsmith?"

"Tactical retreats."

"Of course. Haha!" Ose chuckles. I force a smile as well, though her gentle ribbing touches on something of a sore spot for me.

"A few mild defeats from when I first ascended. I'm not the demon I once was. I've crushed the humans several times now. They know to avoid Dukes because of my efforts."

Ose nods cordially and touches her heart. "Oh, of course. Don't mind my teasing. Here's my offer, Beelzebub... I want you to take the front position during Operation Stormbringer."

We slow to a stop just inside the narrowing corridors of the Labyrinth as the Basilisk Den fades behind us. I turn to face the Emperor, and the glint in her eye doesn't escape my notice.

"What about Bael? He's the highest-ranked Duke."

A smile spreads across Ose's face. She leans toward me and presses her finger against my suit. A harmless tingle of electricity passes through to my heart, making my right arm twitch. "Bael lacks... *finesse*. He can take the rear. I believe Stormbringer should be your moment to shine."

Usually, I protest when someone touches me, but I bite my tongue this time. "And Mephisto?"

"Auxiliary forces. I need a shock troop to level the frontline defenses of the humans. Who better than the regenerating immortal Duke of Inferno? Whatever attacks the humans hit you with, you'll shrug them off. I'll give you a qualified contingent of our best troops as well."

Slowly, I narrow my eyes. "While prestigious, this mission sounds dangerous as well. I could die."

Ose pulls her finger off my suit and slowly sticks it in her mouth, licking it suggestively. The innuendo doesn't evade me. "Aww. Are you *afraid*?"

"Don't mock me. I only want to know what you'll compensate me with."

She blinks bashfully. "I can be creative with your reward."

"What kind of demon do you take me for?"

Ose's playful expression melts away. "Oh. Well, if you don't swing my way, I'm sure Bael might know an incubi or two who-"

"You're mocking me again."

Ose's smile reappears, brighter than before. "Haha! It's rare for a man to make me laugh. I'll tell you what, Beelzebub. If you reduce humanity's defenses to ashes, and bring me the Wordsmith, alive, I'll give you anything you desire."

Ose slowly rubs her thigh and blushes. I ignore the gesture.

"Make me an Emperor."

Her smile weakens. "Well, that might not be possible. There are protocols we have to follow, after all, such as the Rule of Three. However..."

Ose's eyes fade away for a moment. She gazes not at me, but *through* me, as if a thought has suddenly occurred to her.

"...However, if there were only two Emperors still alive, then ascending you to the final plane might be possible."

I smile. "Ah, you must mean... Belial."

"That's right. She's in your way, as well as mine. Kill Belial or bring her to me battered and broken, along with the Wordsmith. Do that for me... and anything will be possible."

I raise my chin. "That's an awful lot of responsibility, even if the reward is great. Why do you need the Hero?"

Ose's expression sours. "I created the colonies across the galaxy. Jason undermined a hundred thousand years of psychological conditioning and humiliated me when he liberated all of our feeding worlds. Worse, he did it in only a few short months. I can't simply let him die a quiet death."

The Third Emperor's voice deepens. She clenches a fist at her side. "I'm going to turn Jason into my slave. He will Wordsmith for me and watch as I use his power to enslave all of humanity once more... and after I finish, I will torture him for another hundred thousand years. I may eventually allow him to die, but only once I grow bored of making him dance."

It takes a moment for me to respond. My perception of Ose changes sharply, within a fraction of a second.

I didn't realize she had such a sadistic side.

"This isn't business. It's personal. Correct?"

"Possibly." Ose's voice catches. "I... I experienced the worst of humanity's cruelty during my formative years. I have no compassion for a single one of them."

I nod at her, and a feeling of awe overcomes me. For the first time, Ose has shown me, perhaps unintentionally, a side of her others rarely see.

Maybe she isn't the simple airheaded female I first imagined.

"Ahem. Belial, Jason, and the rest of humanity. I will crush them. For you. For me."

Ose breathes out a whisper. "For us."

"Yes."

We gaze into each other's eyes, a more thorough understanding of each other passing through the air between us.

After a few moments, Ose breaks eye contact. "Ah. Sorry. I shouldn't open myself up like that. It's not becoming of an Emperor."

"Correct, but I appreciate your honesty."

I turn and continue walking down the hall. This time, Ose immediately falls into step beside me. I smile at how we walk in unison. My right and left leg move at the same pace and speed as hers.

"You said before that we were more alike than you previously thought. Perhaps there is truth in that statement."

Ose blushes. "Who can know?"

Several minutes pass as we walk in silence. Ose raises her head when a junction appears, splitting in three directions.

"Ah. I need to visit Faith's End. I'll be going my separate way, now."

I raise an eyebrow. "The prisons? Why?"

"The final piece of Operation Stormbringer. I promised you elite shock troops, and I won't disappoint. My brother has been... *experimenting* on a new type of minion."

My lip curls up. "Ah. Gressil. I always forget about your relation to him."

If my disgust bothers Ose, she doesn't show it. "I wish I could forget, too. However, you know the saying. Blood runs thicker than water."

My nose twitches. "Do you mind if I... if I ask you a personal question? About Gressil."

Ose swallows audibly. "Sure... but don't expect an answer."

It takes me a second to formulate the question in my head. The sensation of bile in my gut threatens to erupt from my mouth at the thought of speaking the words.

"Is... is it true what they say? About... the souls in his body? The human souls. And the demon ones, too..."

Several moments pass. Ose stares at me stonily. "That depends on what specific rumors you've heard." She shivers. "Well. Whatever tales you've heard, they were probably accurate. Gressil's abilities are... they're... *unnatural*. Grotesque."

"And what about your mother?"

This time, Ose's entire face contorts. She looks away to hide her expression. "I'm leaving. Good day, Beelzebub."

The Third Emperor clutches her stomach. She hesitates for only a moment before disappearing. She vanishes from existence so quickly that I don't even see her body move. Her fabled *lightspeed dash*. I may have heard of it, but seeing it in person is another thing entirely.

My tongue snakes out to wet my lips — memories of Gressil's mutilated body dance in my mind. Bael gave me the unfortunate duty of speaking to that demon- no, that *monster* last year.

I still remember the terror that flowed through my veins, as well as the powerlessness in my body when he grabbed me. Had he snapped my neck, I doubt I would have regenerated.

A shudder runs down my spine. I quickly spin on my heel and head toward yesterday's attack point.

Push the memories away, Beelzebub. Don't think about... that... that *thing*. The devils know Ose is more courageous than me to head into his lair alone.

Part 088: Cast Aside

[Recommended Listening - Rosalia's Theme](#)

Demons and monsters walk past me, clumped together in twos and threes. Some of them gaze at me with looks of disgust, but most ignore me. I sit in silence and kick my feet back and forth, humming a song to pass the time. "Hmm-hm-hmm, hm-hm hm-hm..."

Five minutes pass. Then ten. Soon, an hour crawls by, and a yawn escapes my lips. Boredom threatens to swallow me whole and put me to sleep, but I hold on. I always do if it means I get to see Mister Beelzebub when he returns. The Annex isn't the liveliest place to sit around and wait, but at least I get to people-watch. It's fun!

Ugh. Jeez. I can't believe Mister Beelzebub made me stay behind while he went off with that floozy, Ose. I saw the way she looked at him. Luckily, he's a smart demon who won't fall for her tricks. Beelzebub loves me more than he'll admit. That's one of the things that makes him better than my previous lovers.

Footsteps draw near. I glance to my right and spot a massive pair of tree-trunk sized legs. My eyes follow them up their owner's body until I eventually meet Mister Bael's gaze.

"Heya, cutie. Whatcha doin' sittin' here all by your lonesome?" The Duke of Pain smiles widely and plops down on the demonstone bench beside me. His bulk rattles my teeth, making me smile.

"I'm waiting for Mister Beelzebub to return!"

"Yeah? How long've you been here?"

"Oh... I don't know... maybe an hour?"

Bael turns away to stare at a pair of succubi walking past. His tongue lolls out, and he wets his lips. A moment later, he turns back to me. "That's some real dedication you've got. Beelzebub's a lucky guy. I don't know what you see in him, though."

I cross my arms. "Hmm, I doubt you came here to talk about Beelzebub. You two don't get along."

"Huh? Sure we do! He's a good kid. Proved himself a few months ago. Really surprised me." Bael trails off and puffs out his lips. "Pfaah... I'm bored. Bored, bored, bored. Ain't no fun sittin' around, doin' nothing. Why don't you and I go back to my place, eh?"

I blush and look away. "Sorry, Mister Bael. I'm only interested in Mister Beelzebub."

The big lovable brute grumbles under his breath. "Hmph, whatever. You'll come around eventually. No woman can stay with a guy like him for long. He probably isn't even interested in bitches. I bet he likes sausage."

"No, Mister Beelzebub prefers deviled eggs if he eats anything at all. He usually skips meals."

Bael chuckles. "Hehe. Your mind is innocent, as always. No dirty thoughts boppin' around in there."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothin'."

Several seconds pass. I continue to kick my feet back and forth aimlessly. I finally break the silence. "Mister Bael... am I ugly?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course not."

"You always hit on me, but everyone else looks away. I don't know if it's all in my head or not."

Mister Bael sighs. "Haah. Look, cutie, I ain't the best lookin' dude around, right? I'm fat. Always sweating. But women can't resist me. Know why?"

"Why?"

He taps the size of his head. "It's cuz I'm smart."

I try not to stare at him suspiciously. *There must be another reason.*

When I don't immediately reply, Mister Bael continues. "I figgered it out a long time ago. Bitches love a guy with balls. I'm strong, high-ranking compared to other demons, and command respect. Women can't resist me, despite my looks not being up to snuff."

I nod slowly. "So... are you saying I need to get stronger?"

"Nope. What works for a guy ain't gonna work for a broad. Look at Ose. Sexy and strong, but men avoid her like the plague. Then again, Belial is the same, but she's got guys lining up to beat down the door."

"Isn't Belial a succubus?"

"Mhm. She gamed the system."

"What system?"

Mister Bael scratches his chin. "Uhh... you know... the *system*..."

"I don't follow."

He hems and haws. "The... uhhhhh..... *system*..."

"Didn't you say you were smart?"

Bael glares at me. "Hey! Shuddup! I have a condition!"

"I'm kidding, haha!"

He nudges me playfully and starts smiling again. "Whatever. Look, the point is, you shouldn't copy others. You gotta figger it out on your own. Somewhere out there, there's a Duke who'd be perfect for you. Someone who'd treat you right, and-"

"Are you talking about yourself?"

The Duke crosses his arms. "M-maybe."

"Mister Bael..."

I look away from him and blush. Mister Bael is very kind, despite his brutish looks. He's an animal when it comes to fighting, but he has a soft side as well.

Bael grunts under his breath. "Oy. Look who's back. Just when we were gettin' to the good stuff."

His sudden shift in voice tone catches me by surprise. I follow his gaze toward one of the portals, where Mister Beelzebub steps out and adjusts his tie.

"Ah! Mister Beelzebub is back! Yay!" Excitement rushes through my body. I'm so glad to see him again!

Mister Bael rolls his eyes. "Yup. There he is."

I quickly jump up and rub my hands together. "Mister Beelzebub! Yoo-hoo! Over here!"

A look of irritation passes over Mister Beelzebub's face, most likely because he hasn't had me around to care for him for over an hour. No doubt, he daydreamed about me the whole time he was gone!

Beelzebub slowly drags himself over to us. Normally he'd eagerly jump into my waiting arms, but since Bael is here, he's acting coy. That's so like him to think about how he'll make me look.

"Ugh. Rosalia. Bael. The last two people I wanted to see."

I cock my head to the right. "Huh? Mister Bael is only one person though."

"He's big enough to be two."

Ah, so Mister Beelzebub was delivering a fat joke. That's so like him to try and make me laugh!

Bael stands up beside me. "I can't believe you made your servant sit here and wait for an hour."

Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. "I told Rosalia to leave. Don't pin her idiocy on me."

It's adorable how bad his memory is! I clearly remember him telling me to wait for his return with bated breath!

"Now that you're back, Mister Beelzebub, you must be starved! Let's go back to the manor so I can cook you some deviled eggs!"

Mister Beelzebub crinkles his nose. "How many times must I tell you? I detest eggs."

"Oh, don't be silly! You clean your plate every time I make them!"

"Yes. I scorch them to ash and blow the remains out the window."

"You do?"

"Of course! Devils, I've said it ten times now!"

I break out into a giggle. "Haha, that's a wonderful way to sanitize dishes! You're so smart!"

Beelzebub grits his teeth. "Hnn!! Damn you, woman! How do you manage to twist every word-"

Beelzebub stops mid-sentence. He pulls back and exhales fire, coughing once or twice in the process. "Kah! Kah! Never mind that. I learned something exciting during my chat with the Third Emperor."

My eyes widen. "You did? Is it about our wedding-"

"No! Seven hells, no!" Beelzebub slams his eyes shut. "It's about your status as my servant."

A feeling of trepidation enters the back of my mind.

"Are... are you proposing to me?"

"I just said I wasn't. Close your mouth and open your ears, damn it. Ose told me that there is no such thing as a permanent servant." Mister Beelzebub opens his eyes and glares at Bael. "You lied to me. You said Rosalia was bound to me for life!"

Bael whistles innocently. "Oh, did I? Must've slipped my mind."

"I knew it. You always screw with me. Rosalia has been my biggest source of aggravation, and it's all your fault."

I cock my head to the left. "Why are you aggravated? Is it because we aren't intimate enough? My bed is always warm for you, Mister Beelzebub."

Beelzebub's face reddens, likely at the thought of all the shameful things he and I would do if only he could bring himself to think of me in such an indecent manner. His mind is as pure as an angel's.

"Rosalia. This has been a long, *long* time coming." Mister Beelzebub's expression turns serious.

My heart skips a beat.

"H-here? In front of all these onlookers?! I... I don't know if I'm ready for our relationship to-"

"Rosalia. You're fired."

Mister Beelzebub cuts me off before I can finish.

Several seconds pass. Bael's jaw drops. "Beelzebub! You smarmy little cunt! You can't do that!"

Several hundred thoughts run through my head.

Fired.

Fired.

What does that word mean? He's the Duke of Inferno. He loves fire. Does that mean... toward me... he feels the most heated passion a man can endure? Does his love for me blaze hotter than the stars above?

A tear drips down my face.

"Mister Beelzebub..."

He smiles sweetly, as he stares at me with tender eyes. "Finally. Now you understand."

"I didn't know you loved me that much."

His smile slips. "...What? I don't love you, imbecile. I'm firing you."

Uwaaah!! He said it again! Mister Beelzebub keeps doubling down on his passion!! My entire body warms a thousand degrees as I feel his passionate gaze stripping my clothes away bit by bit. He wants my everything- my all!

Beelzebub chokes. "Kah. Oh, devils. You're misunderstanding me. You're too dense. I can't believe this. What do you THINK I said?!"

I raise a finger to his lips, and he jerks away. "You don't need to say anymore, Mister Beelzebub. Your love burns hotter than the center of the galaxy. Everyone knows it's true, but it took you all this time to finally admit it."

Bael tilts his head in my direction. "Uh... what? I'm confused."

"You are?! I have to live with her! It's torture! Hell!" Beelzebub grits his teeth and grabs my shoulders, staring directly into my soul. The sensation of our minds intertwines, and the heat from his gaze threatens to send me into a lovestruck coma, whereupon he will awaken me with a kiss! Uwaahhh!

Beelzebub screams at the top of his lungs, "Listen here, you sodding fat cow! We're done! I'm letting you go! I never want to speak to you again! You are no longer my servant! I'll never marry you! I hate you! I hate everything about you!! You disgust!"

WHAM.

Mister Bael's hand moves so quickly that I barely catch a glimpse of it. Mister Beelzebub flies away from me and spins head over heels, smashes through the fortified demonstone wall, and blasts out into the world beyond.

Mister Bael balls his hand up into a fist. "That... that does it! You worthless excuse for a Duke! I'll tear you to pieces!"

Beelzebub's words ring in my ear. I grab Mister Bael's arm. "Wait! What did he mean? Why did you hit Mister Beelzebub?"

Bael whips his head toward me. "Huh? You heard what he said! Beelzebub spelled it out, plain as day! He's sendin' you away so he can have a different servant! Doesn't that piss you off?!"

A hollow pit forms in my stomach. "No... no, Mister Bael, you're wrong. Mister Beelzebub would... he would never do that to me! He loves me too much! You heard his confession!"

Bael stares at me for a moment, then looks away. "Dammit, cutie. You can't keep lyin' to yourself. Beelzebub is a worthless piece of trash, at least when it comes to his taste in women. He doesn't love you. He wants you gone."

I'm confused. I don't understand. Beelzebub loves me! He always said so, all the time! He couldn't bring himself to defile my purity, that's why we never consummated our love. Why would that change now, out of nowhere?! It doesn't make any sense!!

My breath slows to a stop.

No. That's wrong. Today, Mister Beelzebub went off with that snow-haired devil, Ose. She did something to him! She must have corrupted his mind. Yes, that's it! And the reason he's acting so cold out of nowhere... it's all her fault!

Beelzebub stumbles through the hole in the side of the building. His left arm hangs limply, while several broken bones stab through the front of his jacket, allowing blood to pour through.

"Oh my gosh! Mister Beelzebub! Are you alright?"

I run over to him and reach for his good arm to help him along, but Beelzebub growls like a feral animal and swats at me. "Get back! You accursed wretch! I've had it with you! You and Bael both... ugly, disgusting animals!"

Several demons and monsters nearby stand and watch. Most of them take a few steps back, frightened by his outrage.

I know how to calm Beelzebub down when he's angry. "Please, you don't need to yell, Mister Beelzebub. I can sing you a song to help you feel better. You'd like that, wouldn't- ahh!" Beelzebub swings his free hand toward me and sends a ball of fire flying at my face!

Something appears out of nowhere and blocks it. Bael's hand! "Now you attack her? Stuck-up little Duke. I thought you'd matured. You're still an imp at heart."

Mister Beelzebub attacked me? No... he wouldn't do something like that. He'd never hurt me. W-would he?

Bael pushes me back. "Cutie, you should leave. I'm gonna beat some sense into this shitstain."

"No... don't hurt Mister Beelzebub. He's just confused. It's Ose's fault! She messed with his head! She-"

"I'm afraid not," Bael says, interrupting me. "Beelzebub's always been like this. Leave. You shouldn't be with a guy like him."

Beelzebub leans past Bael's body. "Yeah! Leave! You heard him!!"

Tears stream down my face. This time, a familiar sensation accompanies them.

Pain. Anguish.

Mister Beelzebub doesn't love me. It's true. Oh, my devils... it's true. I don't understand. What did I do wrong? What did... I... do wrong...?

Slowly, I take a few steps back. A portal opens nearby, and a demon steps into the Annex from the Labyrinth. I quickly dash toward it before it closes. One of the guards spots me. "Hey! No cutting in line, you ugly-"

His words cut off as I leap through, and the portal seals behind me.

The tears continue to rage, but I fight off the urge to bawl like a baby. I can't weep. Mister Beelzebub always says it's ugly when a woman does that. I'm not ugly... I'm... I'm beautiful!

"Hey! Who're you?" A squeaky voice at my feet makes me jump in fright. I glance down to see two imps standing together in the darkened hallway. "We were supposed to send a chump through, not get an orc back!"

I don't know where I am. Quickly, I sniffle and wipe away my tears, then look around. The Labyrinth stretches off into the distance. Torches line the walls, some burnt-out while others sputter enough to give off faint light, but fear enters the back of my mind. This place creeps me out.

"W-where am I?"

The first imp rolls his eyes. "Faith's End. Duh. The sensation of foreboding and terror didn't clue you in?"

The second imp slaps the first. "Ylvusk, knock it off. No reason t' piss off one of the Agents."

I stare at the second imp. "I... I'm sorry, Agents?"

Ylvusk holds up a hand. "No, no, don't ask. If you let Tvoorik run his mouth, he'll never shut up. He always blabs about his dumb conspiracies."

I nod slowly and wipe away the last few tears, only for memories of Beelzebub to make them come rushing back. I flop to the ground and stare ahead dejectedly, crying even more. "Uwahh... it hurts..."

Tvoorik grumbles. "Cripes. Those damn Agents are improving. Now they're using emotional manipulation to lower our defenses." The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoes off the wall. I don't see what happens, because I'm rubbing my eyes, but Tvoorik yelps. "Ow! What'd ya do that for, jackass?"

"*You're* the jackass! Stop being rude to the orc-lady." Ylvusk growls at his friend. "She's in distress, moron."

Tvoorik goes silent for a few moments, I glance toward them, and he stares at me quizzically. "Hmm. I think she's a demon, not an orc."

"Huh? No way! Look at her face."

"Her skin is red. Have you ever seen a red orc?" Tvoorik goes quiet. "Come to think of it, that might be part of the Emperor's dastardly game. Genetic engineering."

"Jenuh-what? Stop making up words, dumbass."

"I'm not! It's a real thing!"

"Yeah, sure it is."

The two imps bicker with each other, and I watch silently. They talk about me almost as though I'm not sitting beside them. I've never seen anything like it in my life.

I interrupt them after a minute. "S-sorry, I didn't mean to intrude. I just got dumped by the guy I liked... and now I don't know what to do."

Tvoorik glares at me. "I see why. You've got a face only a broodmother would love. Yeesh."

Ylvusk slaps him. "Stop being an asshole!"

Tvoorik rubs his arm. "What? It's the truth! I'm surprised she could get a guy in the first place. It's like I said, man, the overcrowding is all part of the NLO's plot to destabilize us! The women get uglier; there are fewer succubus babes... soon everyone will look like-"

I shake my head. "You're not very nice."

"Of course not. I'm a straight-shooter. I tell the truth even if it imperils my life." Tvoorik glances around shiftily. "Besides, you never know who's listening in. Bloody Oracles, always looking for dissidents. At least if I go missing, it'll prove I was right all along."

"One less annoying mouse in the Labyrinth." Ylvusk leans against the wall and looks at me. "So your guy dumped you, huh? That sucks. Still, coming to the Labyrinth's prison was a mistake. Ain't no place for a lady."

"I didn't mean to come here. I was distraught and ran into the first portal I saw. I'll leave."

Slowly, I stand up and dust myself off. My black dress with its white frills along the edges seems drab and bland compared to how it looked yesterday. Did it change, or did I?

The only thing that changed was Mister Beelzebub. He used to love me until... until t-that floozy lied to him! She messed with his head! I hate Ose!! What does she have that I don't? Nothing! She's a stuck-up snotty bitch! She doesn't care about Mister Beelzebub at all!!

Ylvusk pokes my leg. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah! I don't know where to go, though. Mister Beelzebub won't let me come back to the mansion. It's all Ose's fault!"

"Ose?" Tvoorik pipes up. "The new Emperor?"

"Mhm. She took Mister Beelzebub away and whispered lies in his ear, and now he doesn't love me anymore."

A sudden chill washes down the corridor. Cold air blows across my skin, making me bristle.

Tvoorik and Ylvusk go silent. They turn around and look down the hall.

Ylvusk bites his lip. "Shit. It's the boss. And here we are, standing around twiddling our thumbs!"

Tvoorik looks uneasy. "We should go. Sorry, lady. Hope your boyfriend problems work out, but we gotta bail."

"Uh... uh huh?"

I stare at the demons quizzically. They dash away in the opposite direction of the icy draft. A moment later, the sound of heavy footsteps approaches.

Thud. One, two, three, *thud.* One, two, three, *thud.*

A faint red glow at the end of the hallway sends a shiver down my spine. I want to run, but I can't. My body freezes in place. A massive monster emerges from the darkness, its body an amalgamation of horrors. Glowing eyes spread across its arms, legs, and chest. Four arms with razor-sharp talons at the end scrape the walls. Two heads stare at me, one with a birdlike beak, and the other with three eyes. The one on the right lolls about aimlessly, while the one on the left gazes at me with a piercing stare capable of penetrating concrete.

The monster speaks. Its hard, rough voice scrapes my ears like sandpaper. "Did you speak Ose's name? Here... in *my* prison?"

My eyes widen. *Oh, sweet and salty devils... he's the prison-warden; the demon whispered about only in rumors...*

"G-Gress...il?"

The horrific abomination slowly stomps toward me. It doesn't take long before he's a mere twenty feet away. A single horn on each head reaches up and scrapes the walls and ceiling, creating a grinding noise that makes me grit my teeth. He positively dwarfs me with his size.

Gressil stops five feet from me. I have to strain my neck to look up at him, but my gaze tears back and forth from his empty gaze to the dozens of eyes twitching around on his body.

"Answer me, little demon. Did you speak my sister's name?"

I squeak out a reply. "Y-yes?"

The Demon Emperor is his sister? I had no idea. Oh, god... he's going to kill me for speaking out against her. I know it. I can't escape. Just one look at him and I know he could kill me effortlessly. Even Mister Beelzebub wouldn't stand a chance!

"What did you say about her? Tell me."

My voice shakes. "I-I said she w-was a very sweet, k-kind, c-caring person... Mister Gressil, sir... Eee!" I cower back as the demon leans toward me.

"You praised my sister?"

"Y-yes! I did! I'm a good girl!"

Gressil narrows his eyes. "I despise liars."

"Okay! I'm s-sorry! Don't hurt me! I shouldn't have lied! Hnn..." I close my eyes and turn away, hoping he'll at least finish me off quickly.

"Ose... my *beloved* little sister. My worst enemy. It appears you hold a grudge against her. Tell me why."

My body trembles. *His worst enemy? What is he talking about? I don't understand!*

After a few moments, I swallow bile. My heart threatens to shut down. "S-she told lies to Beelzebub. H-he's the demon I love, and she stole him from me. You're not going to k-kill me, are you?!"

"Far from it. Fascinating." The prison warden rumbles in his throat. "Hmm... I spoke to her not half an hour ago. Ose didn't mention Beelzebub at all. More secrets, as always."

"MORE SECRETS. HAHAAH!" The second head suddenly screams out loud, making me jump out of my skin. "No secrets! Hate them! Hate order!"

I raise my eyes to the three-eyed head. Thin strands of hair roll off it, spilling across Gressil's body. They're caked in dirt, and even with five feet separating us, Gressil's stench washes over me. I fight the urge to gag with all my strength.

"Guh... what do you want from me, Mister Gressil, sir? I didn't mean to come here! I didn't-"

"Quiet." Gressil glares at me, and my mouth slams shut. "I'm thinking."

We stand in silence, the sounds of his labored breathing filling the time.

After a minute, Gressil raises his upper right arm. I flinch, expecting him to attack me, but he merely scratches his head. "You work for Beelzebub?"

"No... he 'fired' me a little while ago. Th-that's why I'm here, now."

"If I let you go... where will you return?"

A spark of hope ignites in my heart. *He wants to let me go?! Oh gosh, that's great news! I can't believe it! Am I saved?!*

"I-I don't know. Mister Beelzebub threw me out. I think m-maybe the Catacombs?"

An unpleasant gurgle erupts from Gressil's throat. "Hu-hu-hu... I don't think so. You work for *me* now. Understand?"

A shadow falls across my body. The massive demon takes a menacing step toward me. "Your life was forfeit when you entered my domain. All who arrive uninvited leave only with my permission."

I nod rapidly. "Y-yes sir! Yes sir! I understand!"

Gressil turns his first head toward the second, three-eyed one. "Wake up. It's present time."

"PRESENT TIME! HAHAAAAHA!! I LOVE PRESENT TIME!!" The second head screams maniacally, and before I can react, it lunges a hand at my face. A single eyeball embedded in the palm is all I see in the split second before it grabs and slams me against the wall.

Dizziness overtakes me. My body increases in weight, as a thousand anvils begin to compress my chest.

I can't speak. I can't scream. I can't even breathe!

A bloodshot eye appears in the darkness. The freakish specter shakes and trembles as it approaches me.

"Is it friend? Is it foe? Is it mine from head to toe?"

I try to shake my head, but nothing happens. I can't move. All I can do is watch as the eye slowly closes in on my immobile body.

"Do what Gressil says, you will. Make no sound, not even a squeak, then be still."

Something drills into my ear. The piercing agony makes me want to cry, as a creature burrows deeply. I feel it wriggle around and slide through my brain, down my throat, and stop somewhere near my stomach. Terror fills my mind, but I can't fight back.

"A gift we give, be glad you live. For us, you toil, conflict, you embroil."

The eye pulls away. A moment later, the sensation of weight flees my body. Gressil's hand leaves my face, and I flop forward, slamming onto my knees in the process.

It takes a moment for me to move. Everything hurts in a way I've never felt before. It feels as though fire-ants are crawling in my blood.

"You have a little potential, demoness, and now you work for me. Go to the Core."

I cough, causing green fluid to leak from my mouth. "Unnf... wh-what? The... the Core? Where humans live?"

"That's right. They accept weak, pathetic demons like yourself. Go there. Await my orders. In time, you will carry out my will."

Something wriggles around inside me, rubbing my chest bone and sending an electric shock up my spine. I squeeze out a few tears and pull myself up. "Nnn... yes... I'll do it. Just don't hurt me anymore,

please..."

Suddenly, Gressil grabs me by my hair and lifts me. His eyes glow brighter than before, and he snarls at me. "I do what I please with my slaves, little wench. Get out of my sight."

A moment later, Gressil flings me through the air. I plummet to the floor and land on my arm. A bone-snapping *crack* erupts in the darkness. "Aaaieee!!"

Gressil turns and walks away. A soft gurgle escapes his lips, as he laughs to himself.

"Hu-hu-hu..."

The darkness swallows him whole.

A minute later, I end up shaking and shivering, all by my lonesome.

I pull my beaten body up, sniffing as fresh tears drip down my face.

Ose... it's all her fault. I had everything until she took it from me. Now I'm the slave of an evil monster, and I'm too weak to do anything about it.

A voice whispers in my mind.

That isn't true... you can change. You have the power, now. You don't need anyone else.

I grab my broken arm and wince as I hold it steady. *Who's that? Who's speaking?*

The voice chuckles.

I'm you... but stronger.

Part 089: Tarus III

Solomon paces back and forth in front of his magical blackboard, a projection I created to assist him in visualizing his teaching concepts. Daisy and I sit on our bed and watch with rapt attention as he taps it. "I want to hear your explanation this time, Jason. Who are the two types of magic users?"

Solomon doesn't allow me to use the Crown's knowledge during our lessons. As he explains it, there may come a time where I need to cast a spell, but I won't have his artifact available. I need to prepare for those edge cases.

"The two types of magic users are Specialists and General Practitioners. Specialists have a core set of abilities, while General Practitioners can pull from a diverse set of powers."

The king nods. He stabs a finger at Daisy. "Young lady, what type of magi is your father?"

Daisy scrunches up her face. "Umm. A jenn-uhh-rull prac-tuh thingy?"

"Right. You'll get the pronunciation down someday. So, Jason, what are the advantages and disadvantages of each style?"

I recite his lessons from memory. "General practitioners, such as me, can use a wide variety of spells and powers, but our abilities aren't as focused as a specialist's would be, and we have to find alternatives to nullify the downsides. Specialists only have a few powers, but they tend to be hyper-focused and thus extremely potent."

"That's the definition, yes. Give me a few examples to illustrate."

Several moments pass as I struggle to come up with an answer. "Uhh, it's like when I tried to use super-speed. The first time I did it, I nearly killed myself."

Solomon turns to draw on the blackboard with his finger. The magical device follows his movements, and within seconds he draws up an image of a stick figure splattering against a wall. "Spot-on. If you want to enhance your speed, you have to realize that your mind won't keep up. A speedster specialist will dramatically outclass you, despite your best efforts. However, mental processing is only one factor involved in accelerating your body's movements."

"Only one? What are the others?"

Solomon clears his throat. "There are many. For example, if you accelerate your body to the speed of sound, the g-forces have a chance to liquefy your innards, especially when you stop. Further, when you travel at such speeds, every particle of dust floating in the air will hit you with the force of an anvil. Those are only a few of the downsides you would need to negate."

Sweat glistens on my neck. "I'm lucky to be alive."

"That you are." Solomon frowns. I follow his gaze to Daisy as she stares out of our ship's window at the approaching moon. "Are you listening, young lady?"

Daisy jerks her head back, a look of guilt on her face. "A-are we there yet? I wanna see the moon houses..."

Solomon chuckles. "Ah, the impatience of youth. We're almost there. It's only a half-hour from Tarus II to the moon."

Sighing, I cross my arms. "We could get there a lot faster if we weren't limited to 98% the speed of light."

"I already told you, Jason..." Solomon says, a note of warning in his voice. "Traveling at such speeds creates a subspace echo. The last thing we want is to draw unwanted attention."

"From the Volgrim?"

"From the Volgrim."

"Mmm."

I flop back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. Solomon taps his board again.

"Let's return to the concept of super-speed. If you speak the word 'Speed' and nothing else, you will probably die the moment you twitch a muscle. You should increase your mental processing power, and then you need to reinforce your body to withstand the g-forces of moving at hypersonic speeds."

"Sounds simple enough."

"It isn't." Solomon snaps, a hint of annoyance in his voice. "Increasing your mental acuity will drain your stamina. Imagine taking the hardest test of your life and how exhausting that would feel. You would suffer that level of mental fatigue in a matter of seconds. If you don't improve your mental fortitude and body's stamina as well, you'll faint before you can unleash hell on your enemies."

Daisy groans. "Uncle Sally, I'm confused..."

Solomon sighs. He leans against the blackboard and rubs his forehead. "This is all a bit much. Let's try some practical applications before we arrive at the colony. Jason, try making yourself invincible."

I blink in surprise. "Invincible? I can *do* that?"

"I don't know. You might as well try."

My heart flip-flops as I remember all the times an ability like that would have saved my ass. **"Invincible."**

After speaking the word, a moment passes. Nothing happens.

Solomon clears his throat. "Try and stab your arm."

"What? Seriously?"

"Most would not describe me as a comedian."

I nod. "Okay. **Knife.**"

A metal blade materializes in my hand. The moment it appears, I realize something is wrong. I can't feel it in my hand. At that moment, a feeling of disorientation takes me. I blink my eyes and swoon as dizziness hits me in waves.

"Oh, god... I don't feel so hot."

Solomon raises an eyebrow. "What's the matter?"

"It's... it's as if my sense of touch is gone. I feel like I've encased my body in bedrock."

Solomon gestures to the knife. "Try and cut yourself. Do it gently."

Nodding, I press the blade against my palm. It takes me a moment before I realize it's already touching, but still, I don't feel a thing. I push harder and harder, but nothing happens. After a moment, the tip of the knife begins to bend as I ram it against my skin.

"That's what I thought. Your body has hardened to the point where you can't hurt yourself. Others probably can't hurt you either. It seems there's a downside, though..."

"Yeah. I lost my sense of touch."

"Mhm." Solomon taps the side of his head. "Think about it. Being invincible means not feeling pain or suffering, so it's only reasonable you'd lose your sense of touch. Touch is part of your somatosensory system, so, without it, you lose your sense of proprioception and haptic feedback as well. You'll easily become dizzy and disoriented."

I reach up to rub my head, but nearly poke out my eye instead. My arm feels like it belongs to someone else and they're trying to attack me. This whole situation reminds me of my paralysis, back when Phoebe cared for me.

"Is there a way around its downsides?"

Solomon shrugs. "Perhaps, but perhaps not. You might be able to return your sense of touch via Wordsmithing, but the point of invincibility is that nothing can hurt you. Returning your touch will remove at least one aspect of the invincibility."

I nod. "**Normalize.**" After a few moments, I shake the dizziness from my head. "Maybe augmenting my body is more trouble than it's worth."

"I would assume so," Solomon says. "However, there may be something your Wordsmithing can do that will have few if any downsides."

"Yeah? What's that?"

Solomon smiles. "Creating devices, of course. Thanks to my Crown, you can create complex technology well beyond anything an ordinary human could dream up, and you can form it in seconds. You might be able to enhance the Exosuits using Wordsmithing."

Above us, Centurion's voice blares from the ship's intercom. "PILOT ZERO ZERO THREE, WE WILL ARRIVE AT TARUS III, THE MOON DESIGNATED 'KELKIN,' IN T-MINUS ONE MINUTE AND COUNTING."

I reach over and pat Daisy's head. "We'll worry about that stuff later, Solomon. Daisy, are you ready to see the colony?"

Immediately, my daughter leaps to her feet and bounces on the bed. "Yes! Yes! Let's go, daddy! I'm bored!"

"Alright, alright. Calm down. Follow me to the cockpit. We'll take Esther in for a landing."

I take Daisy's hand in mine, and Solomon follows behind us as we head to the front of the ship. My daughter's eyes light up when she sees all the buttons blinking and the fancy display readouts. She's a sucker for technology. I bet she'd have liked playing video games in my era.

I sit down in the Captain's chair and plop her in the co-pilot's seat beside me. After buckling her seatbelt and mine, I turn my attention to the sphere looming before us. Unlike Luna, Earth's now-destroyed moon, Kelkin is colored white. The snowy hue is caused by the bombardment of solar radiation on its sandy surface every day. In some places, the sand has even turned to glass, giving the moon a shiny appearance up-close.

Daisy reaches for a button, and I hold my hand out. "What do you think you're doing, little lady?"

She smiles innocently. "Pushing the big red button."

"And what happens if I let you push it?"

She shrugs. "You give me candy?"

"Smart-aleck. If you push it, it'll eject you into space."

Her smile vanishes. "It... it will?"

"No. But it *could*. Don't touch anything without daddy's permission."

"Oh. Okay." She slumps back in her chair, crosses her arms, and pouts.

God, I'm glad she's past the terrible twos. Those were her *worst* years.

I reach over and flick a few switches. "Centurion, once we're within four light-seconds, slow us to 0.05."

"COMMAND ACCEPTED, PILOT ZERO-ZERO-THREE."

I watch silently as the moon draws ever closer. Ten seconds later, the ship decelerates, and Centurion slows us to a gentle 9,300 miles per second. Even at 5% the speed of light, the moon continues to rush toward us at a breakneck pace.

Numbers tick down on the terminal, and I input a few commands to slow us further and further. It doesn't take long until I spot dozens of sprawling structures on the surface of Tarus III. Steel domes and skyscrapers spread across the moon, along with biospheres for growing food and massive fusion generators as well. Large military-grade vehicles roam the surface in the distance, mining for ore while also tunneling downward for our underground bases.

Daisy moves past her pouting and leans forward. Her eyes sparkle with excitement. "Daddy! What's that?" She points at a towering spire with a large, glass dome on the top.

"That's the observation sphere. We use it for air traffic control, among other things. I'll take you there later."

"Ooh!! And what's that big car?"

"That's a lunar personnel transport."

"Huh?"

"It's a big bus."

"Wow!!"

She jumps out of her seat and presses her face against the glass to look around. I smile, thinking about my love of space when I was her age. I remember wanting to be an astronaut when I grew up, only for that dream to change into something more like a firefighter or a police officer.

Eventually, my dreams faded away. I don't know why. I attended a few semesters of college and felt my passion slowly leak from my soul. My life felt hollow and pointless, and before I knew it, I stopped caring.

Well, that was before I entered the cryopod. Things are different now. My troubled youth seems like a distant memory. I'm just glad I'll never relive those dark days.

Centurion pipes up. "TRANSMITTING LANDING REQUEST TO CONTROL TOWER THREE. REQUEST RECEIVED. INITIATING LANDING PROCEDURES."

All at once, the ship shudders in midair as its nose lifts. Esther slows to a crawl, and it takes more than a minute for us to lower to a landing pad below.

Not long after, I stroll out of the ship, with Daisy riding piggyback to get a better view around us. I duck through the doorway so that she doesn't hit her head, and Solomon follows behind.

The snow-colored surface stretches far into the distance, and as we descend the ramp, Daisy gets her first close-up look at the buildings nearby. Unlike the structures I built on Tarus II, the ones here have no windows, since the radiation from our star beats down more intensely than Sol's did on Earth's Moon. The walls and ceiling surrounding our launch platform, which attaches directly to my ship's exit bay, have a transparent force-field surrounding us so we can see the moon's surface.

Daisy leans against my head. "Daddy, where are all the people?"

A door opens up across from us, and one man quickly walks outside. I squeeze Daisy's leg gently. "There's a person."

I can almost hear her eyes roll. "Yeah, *okay*, but I mean all the others..."

The man adjusts his tie as he strolls up to me. "Pleasure to see you again, Mister Hiro."

"Same, Peter. By the way, this is my daughter, Daisy."

The black-haired man grins at her. "So you're the King's daughter, eh? You're a cute little princess!"

Daisy turns her nose up. "Hmph. Princesses don't speak to commoners."

"She's joking," I say, interrupting Peter before he gets the wrong idea. "Say hello, Daisy. Don't be rude."

Her tone flattens. "Hi."

Ugh. *Kids*.

Peter wipes his forehead. "Right. Well, ah, shall we get to business?"

"Yeah, let's."

Peter beckons toward a row of computers inside the Command Center. "The experimental weapons continue to show promise, and our engineers recently completed the Atlas Cannon upgrades. It's online and ready for a defensive strike if the need arises."

Daisy pulls my ear. "Daddy, what's an Att-luss cannon?"

"It's a big satellite that spins around our planet. If demons ever attack, we can protect ourselves with it."

"Are the demons going to hurt us?"

"Not if I can help it."

Peter chuckles. "Heh, the best offense is a good defense."

That's how the rumors go," I murmur. "What about the drone carriers?"

Peter scrunches his face together. "Err, they're still a work in progress. We've had a few setbacks."

"Alright. Solomon and I will have a look."

"Thanks. We appreciate any help you can offer. However, it's the synthetic-farms that are having the biggest issues. Drop by there later if you can."

"Consider it done."

"Thanks, Mister Hiro."

Our conversation concluded, I bounce Daisy on my shoulders as we head to one of the elevators. She continues to look around, pointing at one thing or another, asking what they are and what they do.

"What's that?"

"A computer."

"And that?"

"A robot."

"Oooh, but what's THAT?"

Before we enter the elevator, I stop and follow her gaze. A picture of a large glass dome sticks out from the plain onyx-colored walls in Central Command.

"That's one of the biospheres. If anything ever happens to Hero City, they're our saving grace."

"Ohh..." Daisy trails off. "I don't understand."

"We're going to one now. Wait and see."

I step into the elevator, and Solomon follows behind. I set Daisy down and rub my shoulder to ease its stiffness. My daughter is a lot heavier than she was last year.

As the elevator descends to the lowest floor, I smile. "Daisy, remember how I told you about Washington D.C. last week?"

She holds my hand and stares at the door silently for a few seconds. "Hmm. No...?"

"It's from my homeworld, Earth."

"Oh, oh, right! I remember!"

I've spent many nights telling Daisy stories about Earth and its past to put her to sleep. She especially likes stories about spies and detectives. Something about sneaking around and finding out secrets others wouldn't want her to know piques her curiosity.

"Well, Washington D.C. was the capital of America. Hero City is the capital of humanity's population. The lunar colony is for our protection. We need a backup in case anything bad happens."

Solomon pokes me, his ghostly touch creating a slight sensation of coldness on my arm. "Why are you telling her this?"

"Daisy's a smart kid. The point is that we have to prepare ourselves for anything. Solomon, do you remember what we learned yesterday?"

The ancient king raises an eyebrow. "Regarding...?"

"Hope. He was attacked by demons, along with several other soldiers. The circumstances seem suspicious to me."

Solomon crosses his arms. "How so?"

"You haven't pieced it together? The demons found a way to nullify the T-REX. What's more important is that their goal wasn't to kill a few humans, but to capture Hope. Doesn't that worry you?"

"It does. A Wordsmith in the hands of the demons would spell doom for humanity."

Solomon frowns. A short silence follows before he speaks again.

"Something has been on my mind for a while, Jason. You don't talk with Hope or Neil often, so I haven't had a way to confirm my suspicions."

Daisy watches us silently, ignorant about the meaning of our discussion.

"Yeah? Is something wrong?"

"It could be my imagination. I wonder, though, if the reason the demons haven't attacked in six years is due to more sinister motives."

The elevator dings open, and we step into a hallway, then turn to head toward the bio-dome in the distance.

"You think they're planning an invasion?"

Solomon rolls his eyes. "Of *course* they are. They're demons. However, what bothers me is that I believe Neil and Hope are lying to you."

This time it's me who raises an eyebrow. "That's a strange accusation to make, Solomon. What gives you that idea?"

"I am the Knowledge-Seeker. I possess advanced perception regarding human psychology. There are various 'tells' that people give off when they lie. I don't get to observe Hope often, but you and he were the same person at one point. He has the same tells as you."

My cheeks turn crimson. "Y-you know when I'm lying?"

"I can read your mind, you dullard. It's easy to pick up your tells when I know what's a lie and what isn't."

"You're the same creepy old man as ever."

"Oh, shut up."

We step into another UV-proof glass tunnel, allowing us to gaze at the moon's surface. Several people pass, but only a few recognize me and wave. The others seem absorbed in papers and documents they're holding.

Solomon clears his throat. "Jason, do you remember my awakening, six years ago?"

"Mhm."

"I revived due to the direct attack on your mental defenses. Something I've thought about recently is in regard to the one who attacked you, Ose."

"Ose? You mean the, uhh, the white-haired demoness?"

"That's right. Had you not been wearing my Crown, I believe she would have taken over your mind."

I slow to a stop and turn to stare at Solomon. "Hold on a second. Are you saying... since Hope doesn't have the Crown... she might be controlling him?!"

"No. I would notice something like that. However, didn't Belial mention that Ose was the new Emperor?"

"Uh-huh. I didn't put much thought into it. Do you know anything about her?"

Solomon crosses his arms. A dark gloom settles across his face. "No. I don't. I know Diablo's powers well, and Belial's, and Satan's... but this Ose is an enigma."

Solomon's eyes flick past me to the bleached planet outside. "I did, however, hear rumors, many eons ago, regarding Ose. She's nearly as old as the rest of the Council."

"You mean from before the Energy Wars."

"Correct. Ose keeps her abilities close to her chest. I remember that during the Energy Wars, she took control of Britannia single-handedly. Nobody knows how she did it, but she managed to oust the entire leadership and deceive the humans into signing a false peace treaty."

"Britannia?"

"After the Volgrim appeared, humanity dissolved their nations and united under one unified world order. Britannia was originally known as Great Britain and served as the capital of Earth's defense forces. Losing it dealt a crippling blow to humanity's morale. The Volgrim defeated us not long after."

I nod. "That sounds serious. You say Ose crushed them all by herself. How?"

"As I said, I don't know, Jason. All I know is that, at the time, she was only a Baron. You have to understand that until Ose's takeover, humanity had a decent chance of winning the war. The Demon Dukes and Emperors couldn't risk an open battle against the might of Britannia. We never anticipated a single Baron bypassing our defenses and striking at our exposed heart."

A chill goes down my spine. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Until yesterday, I didn't put two and two together. I think Hope is lying to you, Jason, because I believe he's attacking the demons on his own. He's provoking them."

I scoff. "I was with you up to now. Hope wouldn't do something so dumb. The only thing Hope and Neil are doing is entering the Labyrinth to rescue human slaves. They keep casualties to a minimum."

"That's what they're *saying*, but use your head, Jason. You're a pragmatist. You may believe that as long as both sides have something to lose, we won't risk war, but does Hope share that opinion? Do the demons?"

I glance down at Daisy. She shrugs as if to say, *don't ask me! I'm only a kid!*

Turning back to Solomon, I grimace. "Alright, point taken. What should I do, then? I can't just walk into the Core and call him a liar."

Solomon's palms hang loosely at his side. "I don't know, Jason. You've done a poor job maintaining contact with Hope. Maybe you should eat some crow and apologize, then try and figure out what he's been up to. If he is attacking the demons, he may have a good reason."

"There's no excuse for murder."

"We're in a war," Solomon says, as he waggles his finger. "People die. You have to accept that."

"There's a difference between dying on a battlefield and attacking demons unprovoked. If Hope is doing the latter, there will be hell to pay."

We continue walking again, and the entrance to Biosphere 12 approaches.

Solomon shakes his head. "Even if he is lying, he might have the right idea. I don't agree with your propensity to sympathize with demons, Jason. They're evil. They're enemies of the Creator. If he's attacking them, then, in my opinion, the Angels would be ecstatic. A hundred generations of Heroes were born and raised to slaughter demons. It's you who is avoiding their code."

Under my breath, I grunt, "Yeah, well, the angels are dead. Fat bunch of good their hawkish nature did."

Solomon scowls at me. "I'd wash that heresy out of your mouth if I could. Maybe you ought to ask Gabriel and Raphael what happened if you think they're in the wrong."

"Perhaps I will."

"Good."

"*Good.*"

I roll my eyes. Daisy has gone silent now, perhaps sensing the tension between Solomon and myself. She walks by my side and doesn't utter a word. I feel bad talking about adult things around her, but she lives in a cruel world. Better to get used to things early than for them to catch her unawares later.

Solomon, Daisy and I all enter Biosphere 12. Immediately, one-hundred-degree heat washes over us. Dozens of scientists outfitted in modified T-REX's pace throughout the area, poking at various plants growing in the center and around the edges of the massive glass dome. I Wordsmith quickly, "**Cool**," and the air around Daisy and I hisses as a barrier forms. The last thing I want is for my daughter to get heat-stroke while looking at plants.

Solomon gazes around the room. "I see they've made a few modifications since we last visited."

"It needs to be self-sustaining," I murmur. "You never know if the worst will happen."

Daisy sniffs a silver-colored plant next to the door. "I don't smell anything, daddy."

"This is a facility for creating edible plants as well as harvestable nanites. I'm afraid they don't have an odor, sweetheart."

One of the scientists walks over to me. Unlike the faceless T-REX's military troops use, his helmet has a glass faceplate, revealing his identity. I can barely make out his beard through the tinted barrier.

"Jason. Solomon. Glad to see you again."

Solomon grins exuberantly. "Why, hello there, Saul! How's my favorite nephew doing?"

The poor guy's shoulders sag. "...Great. I'm just great."

I try not to smile at his distress. "Show us what's new, Saul."

Part 090: Devour! Devour!

Saul rubs his arm as we stroll through the superheated biosphere. "Are you sure you don't need a T-REX, commander? What about the little one?"

"I Wordsmithed protection over us. No sweat."

Daisy gives him a thumbs up. "Daddy's magic is the best!" Her cute smile usually makes most people chuckle, but the miserable glint doesn't leave Saul's eyes.

Solomon wraps his ghostly arm around his nephew as though they were best friends. "My boy, tell us how the crops are yielding!"

"Yes, sir..." Saul flippantly gestures toward a multi-level shelf with a dozen flowers encased in glass. "Uhm, the third generation grows much faster than the previous two, and we've taught it how to shape itself into different forms. Leopold thought it would look more decorative if we had some flowers hanging around..."

Solomon nods enthusiastically. "Hm, hm, yes, I see. So, these are nanite flowers?"

"Yes."

Saul doesn't elaborate. He doesn't need to since we already know the details. Growing self-replicating nanites will quadruple humanity's output of exosuits since our existing replicators can't keep up with the demand.

I nudge Saul with my elbow. "How long does the growing process take?"

He shrugs. "Our current capacity is, uh, maybe five million nanites a day. That's enough for one T-REX at most."

"Can you scale production up to meet demand?"

"We're working on that. The problem is that nanites require organic matter to expedite their growth process. The more, the better, and we don't have enough."

"Oh..." I mutter, while tapping my lip. "I see the problem. I guess you can't go chop down a tree outside."

Saul taps his fingers in the air against invisible buttons only he can see. "If you want accelerated nanite growth, then I'll need a system built for regular deliveries from Tarus II. Plants we grow up here are only enough to sustain the lunar personnel."

Solomon rolls his eyes. "Yes, yes, but enough about the nanites! How are you, dearest nephew? Have you been eating well?" The king's ghostly arm seems to weigh like an anvil on his nephew's shoulders. Saul slumps visibly.

"I'm fine, uncle. Let's stick to important matters."

"Your health is at the top of my priority list!"

"Swell."

Solomon snaps his fingers. "Jason, procure that item for me."

It takes me a minute to remember what he's referring to. "**Summon.**"

A small, ornate box materializes in my hand. I open it to reveal a necklace with gold, jewels, and a big, fat ruby hanging at the end.

Solomon grins eagerly. "A beautiful necklace suited perfectly to your tastes!"

Saul stares at it blankly through his tinted visor. "Ah... aren't necklaces meant for... for women?"

"Psh, nonsense. After six years, you continue to turn down gold and jewelry? Your tormentors must have shattered your mind beyond recognition."

Saul bows his head. "I've always been like this."

The king winks at me and makes a cutting motion across his neck. I shrug and put the jewels back in my infinite storage while Solomon guides his nephew away so the two of them can have a private chat.

Daisy and I stay behind. She turns toward the nanite flowers and pokes the glass container. The vibrations cause them to bend and twist. "Wow, daddy. These flowers are pretty."

I crinkle my nose, but she doesn't notice. "I suppose they look... neat."

To me, they look hideous. Silvery tendrils of metal bend and twist depending on how the sunlight strikes them. If one watches long enough, they might notice the flowers slowly increasing in size as time goes on. Excess nanites get pruned and sent through a tube above the box into a collection facility.

Hmph. The entire production of this biosphere only creates enough nanites to fill one exosuit's reserves. Worse, we don't merely have to develop new T-REX's, but also to repair damaged ones. When demons attack and damage the suits, a percentage of nanites break apart and fizzle into dust, leaving the wearer exposed. The last thing I want is for our troops to have weak points for the demons to strike.

The flower inside the glass bends and twists around. At one point, it mimics Daisy's figure and appears to grow two wings, making her squeal with delight and poke the glass even more. "Eee! Look, daddy, it made me an angel!"

I glance at Solomon and Saul as they chat about something privately a few dozen feet away. "That's right, sweetheart. You're my little angel."

Daisy pouts. "You're not even looking."

I turn back to stare at the flower. "Sure, I am. You're still my angel, though."

That seems to please her. Daisy returns to poking the glass now and then while I wait for Solomon and his nephew to stroll back. Saul sighs heavily. "Alright... give me the necklace."

"Haha, atta boy!" Solomon laughs. "I'll beat your memories back into you if I must!"

Saul holds his palm out. I summon the box back and place it in his hand. "Keep it secret. Keep it safe."

He responds with a quizzical stare. "What?"

"Nothing."

Solomon swaggers back to my side. "Don't lose it now, boy. That's a present from your favorite uncle!"

"And me..." I mutter. "I crafted it with Wordsmithing..."

"Pish, Jason. The craftsmanship was all my design. You were merely the tool I used to form it."

"I'm glad you keep me in such high regards," I snap back. Solomon gives me a thumbs-up in return.

Saul taps more invisible buttons in the air, and a compartment opens on his exosuit. He stuffs the necklace inside and exhales when his suit closes. "Let's return to the other matters. Commander, have you checked the experimental weapons division?"

"Not yet. I only got here a little while ago."

"Right... well, Hans mentioned a new 'nanite bomb' he was working on, as well as a portable healing nanite cocktail for downed soldiers. It could cut fatalities in half, or better."

"Hans is on the moon, too? Since when?"

"Three months ago. Haven't you been up here multiple times? You didn't hear?"

I shake my head. "No. I thought he still worked at the Rust Bucket."

"All our best scientists transferred here. You can't blame the man for following the trail of innovation."

"You're not wrong..." I sigh. "Haah... I prefer to know about major personnel changes. Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"You're a busy leader, Jason." Saul bows his head. "You work hard enough as it is, managing Hero City and the colony. Nobody wanted to bother you over something so trivial. Maybe it's time you made another clone to help out?"

I shake my head vigorously. "No. Absolutely not. My first clone worked out poorly enough. Hope won't even talk to me these days. The last thing I need is another one running around and causing trouble."

Solomon rests his arm on my shoulder. "Especially if my suspicions are correct."

"Yeah, well, I hope you're not."

"As am I."

Daisy reaches up to grab my hand. "Is something wrong, daddy?"

I smile. "Nah, It's probably nothing, sweetheart."

She grins widely. "Dope!"

My smile falters. "Uh... what did you say?"

"Hella dope!"

"Who taught you those words?"

Daisy's grin expands further. "You!"

Solomon rubs his face. "She continues to pick up your verbosity."

I groan under my breath.

In the end, words only have power when people give it to them. If I tell Daisy not to say them, she'll use them anyway, since that's what kids do. It's best I treat words as though they were unimportant.

Heh... words not having power... ironic, coming from a Wordsmith.

I pat Daisy's shoulder. "Alright, sweetheart. Ready to go check out the weapon facility with daddy?"

She shakes her head. "I wanna go home."

"Huh? Why?"

"I'm hungry."

"Oh."

Solomon chuckles. "Let's get her something to eat in the cafeteria. Kids quickly tire of adult talk."

"Aww, Solomon..." I smile sweetly at the king. "I thought you didn't care."

The king swivels his head away. "Hmph. I simply don't want to hear her whine."

"Suuure."

An hour later, Daisy pats her stomach, satisfied with the scrumptious meal served in the cafeteria. Even compared to Yamir's cooking, this place isn't bad at all. The French-style garlic bread tingles on my tongue long after I finish it off.

The three of us travel through an elevator deep into the heart of the moon. Down here, there are dozens of levels of protection in case any experiments go wrong. The top-secret facility, Black Star, is a place I keep as hush-hush as possible, so the demons don't learn its purpose. Solomon's Crown allows me to bypass many limits, but even I am not omnipotent. I have energy restrictions regarding what I can create. Until I find a way to skirt those constraints, making humanity produce what it needs is essential.

The floor number doesn't tick down. The elevator only goes from the first floor to the basement, but the wait time for us to descend into the bowels of the planet takes forever. Daisy hops on one foot to pass the time, and within a few minutes, she loses interest in that too.

"Daddy, how much longer?"

I shrug. "**Visualize**. Probably three more minutes."

"How long is three minutes?"

"Not long."

That satisfies her. She hops around some more, but not thirty seconds later, she squeezes my pant leg. "How much longer now?"

"Uh..."

Immediately, her annoyance level triples. "Come ooon! Te-puh-lort us!"

"You mean teleport?"

"Yeah!"

"You just want me to use my magic."

"Mhm!!"

I scratch my chin. "Mommy says I shouldn't. Teleporting might result in us getting stuck in a wall."

"Then unstuck us!"

"We'll, uh... die. Instantly."

"Die?"

I glance at Solomon. "How do I explain the concept of death to a little girl?"

A look of brilliance enters Solomon's eye. "Don't worry. I know what to say."

Immediately, I begin to worry.

The king kneels to Daisy's level. "Young one, have you ever slept so soundly that you couldn't wake up?"

Daisy shrugs. "I dunno."

"Well, death is a lot like eternal sleep. People die when they are killed. There's no pain or sadness involved, but you can't ever wake up and see your mother and father again."

Daisy's eyes widen. "I can't?"

"Nope. Death is bad, so you have to do what you can to avoid it."

Solomon rises to his feet. I feel relieved that his description didn't send waves of panic coursing through my daughter's heart. Even so, she wraps her arms around my leg and squeezes. "I don't wanna die!"

I pat Daisy's head. "Alright. Then let's wait patiently for this elevator."

The next two minutes pass quickly. Soon, the door slides open, and we travel down several winding hallways, past various chambers with several guns and such being tested. One includes the modified railgun, which now shoots rapid-fire. I stop with Daisy to watch through a foot of bulletproof glass as an automated system unloads shells at lightspeed that bore through the moon's surface a mile deep, obliterating a test dummy instantly.

Daisy's jaw drops. "Wow... that's hella dope..."

I'm glad she likes guns, I guess.

We continue onward until finally reaching the primary chamber of the facility. Dozens of glass windows reveal military tests with extensive soundproofing to allow observation. I spot Hans immediately, as he swears at a lower-ranked officer. "No, you bloody imbecile! Zees part goes in *zere*, and zat part goes over *zere*! Must I do all zee work around here?" He nudges a disassembled gun with his foot and grumbles even more. "Who taught you to be an engineer?!"

The younger officer gives him a look of pain. "Ahh... you did, sir. I'm from the liberated colonies. I barely understand this stuff..."

"Well, learn faster! Zee last thing vee need is for our veapons to fail because you blocked zee barrels!"

The wiry German turns to storm away, only to spot my daughter and me standing behind him. He stops mid-stride and stumbles awkwardly. "O-oh! Mister Hiro! I was not expecting you!"

I smile awkwardly. "Yeah. Sorry to interrupt... Saul told me you had something new to report."

Hans sweeps his hands through his combover. His eyes stare at me like a deer in the headlights. Just as quickly as confusion passes over his face, he figures out my meaning. "Ah, yes, zee new bombs! Come, come, you will love zees!"

He beckons, and we follow. Daisy hides behind me as we walk. She doesn't like Hans, since he 'talks and looks funny.' I suppose she has a point, but I hope he isn't offended.

We follow Hans down the path until arriving at a rack filled with metallic black orbs, each with a red button on top. Hans grins hugely and plucks one off the shelf and holds it up like Rafiki with Simba. "Behold! Zee nanite bomb! A weapon of chaos, designed to terrorize zee enemy legions!"

I raise an eyebrow. "That sounds... lethal."

"Indeed, indeed. Zees bomb will chew through organic matter in seconds, evaporating hundreds of demons at once!"

I scratch my head. "That's good, I suppose. I thought I told you to prioritize non-lethal weapons where possible."

"Naturally. However, zees weapon has several modes! Look over here at zee test chamber."

Hans points to my right, inside yet another glass-walled facility. I follow his finger and watch as he pulls out a pad from a bag at his side and taps several buttons. A moment later, the floor opens inside the chamber, and two dummies appear. One has a T-REX wrapped around it, while the other does not.

Hans presses a few more buttons, and a man enters the room from a door in the rear while holding one of the nanite bombs. He activates the orb, which causes it to glow, throws it at the dummies, then quickly exits before the bomb detonates.

A cloud of black 'gas' explodes from the bomb. It moves and twists unnaturally, forming into a giant hand. The hand jerks toward the dummy without a T-REX, and lunges at it, wrapping around like a snake coiling its prey. The nanite swarm hisses and chews at the dummy like a swarm of enraged fire-ants. Within seconds, the false skin erodes and melts away, fizzling into dust on the ground. The swarm intensifies, growing denser after eating the dummy, and begins to circle the room, looking for an escape.

Something about the ferocity of the nanites forms a pit in my stomach. "H-hey, is it done?"

Hans nods eagerly. "Oh, yes! Yes! Did you see? It devoured zee enemy combatant in seconds, leaving nothing behind, not even bone! Think of how many demons vee could kill with zees weapon!"

"Yeah. I am thinking about it. That's the problem."

The swarm lunges around, here and there, before finally slowing to a halt and reforming itself into an orb-like shape. It solidifies once again, and the room entrance opens. I notice uneasily that the orb is now around twenty percent bigger than it was before.

Solomon leans on Hans's shoulder. "Impressive. Humans tried developing something like this during the Energy Wars, but the energy costs were too high."

Hans nods. "Indeed! Developing nanite strands takes gigawatts of energy! Zee most efficient way to grow them is by feeding them organic matter, but even zat takes time. Zee wonderful thing about zees bombs is their versatility! What you saw just now was zee kill mode, but zey also have a mode that only devours spiritual energy, leaving demons unconscious. Vee can capture and interrogate prisoners using zee secondary mode."

Slight relief warms my blood again. "Ah, so the nanites *do* have non-lethal options. That's good... I guess... but Hans, these nanites seem extremely dangerous. I've read enough sci-fi to know you don't simply unleash self-replicating nanobots against biological worlds. I'm sorry, but I think you should discontinue these. The other weapons are more than good enough."

I turn to look at Hans. His face turns ashen. "W-what? Of course, they're dangerous! Dangerous to our enemies! Have no fear, Jason, for zee nanites ignore humans and anyone wearing an exosuit modulator!"

"I'm not talking about danger to humans, Hans. I'm talking about... about..." Flippantly, I wave my hand at the pile of dust inside the test chamber. "The demons! I couldn't stomach killing anyone in such a horrible way. Besides, if we use biological weaponry against the demons, that might make them even crueller! We need to be better than our enemies. The last thing I want is to stoop to their level."

Solomon sighs. "It's war, Jason. They're demons. You need to get past this idea of singing Kumbaya and-"

Cutting Solomon off, I hold my hand up. "No. I won't. It's not about getting along and treating demons like they're our best friends. It's about de-escalating our conflict and perhaps someday finding a middle ground. Violence begets violence; you know that. If we escalate with weapons like these nanite bombs, that will be the perfect excuse for them to annihilate us. We haven't a chance of standing up against the demons if they get serious."

Silence follows. Solomon averts his gaze from mine. Hans lowers his eyes to stare at the nanite bomb in his hand sullenly. "...If that is how zee commander feels..."

"It is."

The disappointment on Hans's face is immeasurable. He sighs and puts the bomb back on the rack. "Alright. Well, if you could do me a favor and tell zee commander, zat would be wonderful. I don't leave zee station much, so I won't be able to let him know. He won't be happy to hear your verdict."

Stunned, I gawk at Hans. "Neil told you to make these?"

"Indeed. You did not know?"

"No! When did he tell you to make these?"

Hans scratches his scraggly chin-hair. "Hmm... a few months ago? Saul's work on nanite shape-forming was a big boost to mein productivity."

A strange feeling of treachery rings at the back of my mind. I told Hope and Neil about the weapons facility around that time, and then Hans came up here afterward? The timing is too convenient.

"Did, uh, did Neil ask you to work here?"

Hans nods. "Yes, it was mein privilege! You know me! I enjoy tinkering and creating new things."

"I suppose you do. Well, you're our best weapons expert. Just, uh... in the future... let me know what projects you're working on."

Hans strokes his chin. "Ees there a problem? Did I do something wrong?"

"No. You're fine. I have to speak to Neil, though."

"Mmm. Neil, Saul, and I are all good friends. Jason, surely you must know his heart is in zee right place. Zee commander only wants what is best for humanity. You understand, right?"

"Yes, but I also know that what's best for humanity could be interpreted and twisted into a selfish desire for conquest and revenge. An eye for an eye makes the world blind."

Solomon rolls his eyes. "You repeat that axiom all the time, but in my experience, killing your enemies before they kill you leads to a longer life."

"Didn't you live during a time of harmony without war?"

Solomon shakes his head. "Where demons exist, there can be no peace."

"If you say so." I sigh and pat Daisy's head. "Alright Hans, before I go, I'd like to see your other invention. Saul mentioned something about a portable healing solution for our troops?"

The fire reignites in Hans' eyes. "Oh, yes! By injecting nanites into zee bloodstream of downed soldiers, we can repair their bodies within moments, then retrieve them before they die! Come, come, I will show you!"

I nod. "Alright. That invention sounds better than bombs."

Ten minutes later, Daisy, Solomon, and I all step into the elevator and head back to the surface. Nobody says anything for over a minute until Daisy tugs at my pant leg. "Hey... daddy?"

I kneel to her level and notice a look of concern on her face. "Yeah? What's up, sweetheart?"

Daisy wrings her hands together for a moment. "Um... the smoke ate the person, right?"

"Yup. Did it scare you?"

"A little... does it hurt to be eaten?"

I chuckle wryly. "Yeah, I suppose it does. Demons eat people, after all. That's why they're our enemies."

"Oh..." Daisy scrunches up her face. "S-so... if the demons eat people, they die? And that's bad, right?"

"Mhm. Very bad."

"Will demons eat mommy?"

The color drains from my face. "What? No! Of course not. I'd never let that happen."

"Will they eat me?"

"Ahaha... no. If demons ever go near you or mommy, they'll regret it. Daddy's really strong, you know."

Solomon speaks up beside me. "Oh? What will you do if the demons attack your family, Jason? I thought you were a pacifist."

I grab Daisy, lift her onto my shoulders, and smile. "I am. But if demons make the wrong move, I don't know what I'm capable of."

Solomon smiles back. "Interesting."

"What?"

He looks away, and his smile fades. "I thought the same thing once. Jason... I mentioned a terrible mistake in my past. It involved demons and my idealistic fantasies. Much like you, I thought I could reason with them. I was wrong."

Solomon goes silent for a moment before bowing his head and closing his eyes. "You're on a path to despair, my friend. I don't advise their destruction due to an unquenchable bloodlust, but because of the same pragmatism you and I share. Once you make a mistake like mine... there is no turning back. It's best to learn from the errors of your ancestors, rather than to repeat them yourself."

Darkness clouds my vision. Daisy leans against the back of my head and rests her chin on my scalp. The weight of my daughter hangs on my shoulders heavier than ever before.

"Maybe you're right, but you might also be wrong. You've given me an idea, though."

Solomon raises his head. "And what's that?"

"I should stop trying to guess the demon's motivations. I'll seek out the leader of the demons and test the waters. Perhaps this 'Ose' woman will listen to my request for a peace treaty."

"Pft." Solomon scoffs. "That's the dumbest thing you've ever said. Why would she agree to such a thing? The demons outnumber us a thousand, possibly even a hundred-thousand to one. A treaty is to our benefit and their detriment."

I smile. "Because, Solomon... we have weapons beyond their imagination. If they choose to attack us, we will fight back. Both sides will lose countless lives. In the worst-case scenario, I can always retreat to the Core with my Wordsmithing if she tries to backstab me."

Solomon holds up his hand. "I have to stop you there, Jason. Listen. You see other humans in a different light compared to how demons see their brethren. You think of your fellow humans as equal to yourself, brimming with potential. Demons respect power and nothing else. Perhaps you should talk to the angels in your rings if you want to know what happens when you... when you... make a deal with the *devil*."

Solomon goes silent again, as do I. The two of us stare into each other's eyes, as he flashes images in my mind. Brief, kaleidoscopic still frames of his life appear and disappear.

Half his family murdered.

Jerusalem scorched.

His explosive rage as he launched a campaign against those who betrayed him.

The rebuilding of his city, a thousand times mightier than before.

Solomon's final admonition to his sons on his deathbed.

Never trust a demon.

Solomon's eyes harden. "If you play with fire, it will burn you. Ask the Archangels what happened. You won't like the answer."

Slowly, I rub the rings on my right hand with my left.

"Fine. You've made your point. I'll ask Raphael."

"All I want, Jason, is for you to learn the difference between wisdom and knowledge."

"I will."

Part 091: The Creation Mythos

Author note: I have decided to rewrite Parts 91 to 97. I didn't like the way they were progressing or the perspectives I was using. For more context, please refer to [this post](#).

If anyone wants, they may read the original parts 91-97. I won't be deleting or overwriting them. You guys can be the judge whether my choice to rewrite is an improvement or not.

Parts: [91](#), [92](#), [93](#), [94](#), [95](#), [96](#), [97](#).

It shouldn't take me long to rewrite them. I spent 22 days writing them the first time, and most of that time was spent figuring out *how to frame them*, rather than *what would happen during the parts*. I think these new versions will be significantly more interesting and that I can post them much quicker.

Please stay tuned!

I ease Daisy onto my ship's bed, tucking her in so she can take a nap. She drowsily mumbles something in her sleep about guns and demons, which I do my best to ignore. After tucking her in, I glance at Solomon. "Thirty minutes until we return to Tarus II."

The king nods. "Mhm. Plenty of time to chat with the Archangels."

"Oh, you weren't joking?"

He shakes his head. "I am not known for my sense of humor."

"You say that a lot."

"Anything worth saying is worth repeating."

"Make that up yourself?"

Solomon leans against the wall. "Stop stalling. For six years, every time I've pushed you to talk to the Archangels, you deflect and avoid me. I don't understand your resistance."

"It's not like that. I'm always busy. I don't have time to talk to long-dead remnants of the past. I already spend too much of my day blabbing at you."

Solomon lightly pounds his fist against his heart. "That hurts. Right here."

"I thought you weren't one for jokes."

Solomon points to a spot on the bed near Daisy's feet. "Shut up, sit down, and focus your mind. You've kept the Archangels waiting long enough."

I roll my eyes and plunk down beside her, then raise an eyebrow. "Hold on; it sounds almost like you've been talking to them."

"Yes, I have. The crown and rings connect through your body's spiritual pathways. Occasionally, we sit together inside your Mind Realm and have a chat. You'd know this if you hadn't chosen to block out the Archangels."

"Well, excuuuse me, kingy. I've had too many damn voices in my head over the last few years. Hoarhiim, Blaarjiim, Ose, the Archangels, you... Christ, my brain is a spook factory."

Solomon chuckles. "Heh, I can understand why that would annoy you. I know you're lying to yourself about your fear of the Archangels, but once you clear the air, everything will make sense."

"Huh? My fear? Why would I be afraid of them?"

Solomon shrugs. "You tell me."

The king speaks in riddles.

I assume a yoga position and fold my hands together. "Alright, whatever. Let's do this."

* * *

A minute passes.

I stare at Solomon blankly. "Hey, it's been a while since I chatted with the Archangels... how do I open up the line?"

Solomon holds his palm over my face. "Close your eyes. I'll guide you through the process."

"You're the boss."

Somewhere between an instant and an eternity passes. When I open my eyes, I find myself sitting on a patch of dirt in front of a roaring bonfire.

To the right side stands Michael, the Archangel of Courage, dressed in knightly splendor, with a sword at his side, heavy boots on his feet, and golden armor adorning his chest. His arms crossed, he stares at me with an intensity that rivals the blazing inferno before him.

To the left stands Gabriel, a fifteen-foot tall Goliath donning white robes and sandals, though he's far smaller compared to when I initially met him. No longer is he Godzilla-sized, but he could still kill me with a single punch. Gabriel's arms hang loosely at his sides, relaxed, as though he has no reason to worry.

Straight across the fire stands Raphael, an old man dressed lavishly in red and gold robes with moccasin shoes, who holds a gnarled staff clutched firmly with his left hand. He leans on it heavily, as though he were bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Finally, Solomon stands beside me. He rests his hand on my shoulder, and it takes me a minute to realize that his touch feels like he's flesh and blood. This place might be an imaginary space, but when I'm inside it, the events here feel as real as those outside.

Michael is the first to speak.

"Six years, Hero. Not once have ye spoken a word to us in all that time."

I scratch the back of my head sheepishly. "Oh, err, yeah. Sorry, guys. Sirs. Your majesties...?"

Raphael waves his hand flippantly. "Bah. Such titles are little more than formalities. Call us whatever thou dost please."

I nod. "Okay. Well, ah... I guess I should tell you all something I've wanted to say since I first found out. Do you know an angel named Uriel?"

Gabriel tilts his head low. "She is our beloved sister, one who died brutally at the hands of a demon. What makes thee wish to bring her up?"

I glance at Raphael and notice the old man tensing up, preparing for the worst news.

"She's... alive."

The eyes of every Archangel expand. Michael's jaw loosens. "Is Uriel safe?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't know the exact details. I learned that a demon named Barbatos imprisoned her inside of his body. I think he's using her energy to increase his power."

A moment passes. Michael's proud attitude weakens. He sags to his knees and wipes his forehead. "I can't believe it. All this time, my beautiful sister has been a prisoner of the demons. How can Barbatos withstand her holy energy? 'Tis poison to a demon's body."

Raphael gazes at his younger brother, an unnerved expression on his face. "Demons already are abominations possessing unnatural powers. Perhaps the reason we lost the war is that they found a way around their weakness to holy energy."

Gabriel shakes his head. "Impossible. Even during our final battle, Zeus and I obliterated millions of demons. There must be a reason they captured our sister. Jason! If the demons control my sister, then she represents another possible ally for thy resistance. If thy military can liberate her from her tormentors-"

I hold my hand up. "I'm sorry, but I have to stop you there. I wanted you all to know of her existence, but I didn't come here to volunteer for a rescue mission. I came to seek your counsel."

Michael relaxes slightly, but in his eyes, I spot a hint of irritation. Now that I've mentioned his sister, he's anxious. Can I blame him? If something happened to Phoebe and someone knew her whereabouts, I might tear their head off if they didn't want to help me.

It's not his fault for becoming emotional, but I have my reasons for moving on.

"Raphael, Gabriel, Michael. I told Solomon an idea I had to speak to the leader of the demons, Ose, and propose a peace treaty. He believes it is a bad idea. I want your opinions."

Immediately, Gabriel averts his eyes. The massive Archangel stares into the distance. "So that is why thou didn't come. Well, if thou dost wish to bargain with the demons, learning their history of backstabbing and betrayal should be thy top priority."

"Yes. I was hoping you could give me the full story. I don't know anything about your people's past, nor the demons'."

Michael steps toward me. He stops only a foot or two away, towering over my seated form on the ground. "Hero, before we speak a word to thee, I wish to know why ye chose to ignore us for six years — no more excuses. I healed thy body and gave thee enough strength to combat thy enemies, yet never did

ye think to offer a word of thanks. Our energy is not infinite. It took a great deal of my remaining life-force to assist thee."

I stare up at the white-haired angel silently for a few moments, then look away.

"I'm sorry. I just... I found it hard to talk to you. Every time I thought about doing so, the guilt would hit me, and I would quickly seek out a distraction. I didn't do it out of malice."

Michael's voice softens. "Guilt? What is thy meaning? Explain."

Before I can answer, Raphael hobbles a few steps toward me and taps his staff on the ground. "Mm, I understand. The lad blames himself for our deaths."

Michael scoffs. "Tch, what madness. He has nothing to do with our passing. That is our fault, and ours alone."

Gabriel rumbles from across the fire. "Is it? Perhaps not. The Hero has reason to doubt himself. Had he lived during the Energy Wars, perhaps humanity would have won. Perhaps we would have defeated the demons and the Volgrim. We may have survived those dark days."

I nod. "The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced. It's my fault the Volgrim won. I should have been there to help my people and yours. With the power of Wordsmithing, it isn't unreasonable to believe the war was winnable. Anything is possible with a limitless power like mine. But I wasn't, and so you died."

The Archangels fall silent for a few moments. Michael walks over to my left and takes a knee. "Perhaps 'tis thy fault, Jason, but there's no sense dwelling on the past. We do enough of that ourselves. The only reason one should look to the past is to learn from it so that they may avoid the same mistakes in the future. Dost thee find my words agreeable?"

I barely manage a smile. "I guess."

Solomon squeezes my right shoulder. "Come now, where's your warrior spirit? It won't do to sulk and wallow in self-doubt. Better to forge a new destiny where humans win than to tell yourself failure is inevitable."

Slowly, I uncurl my legs and pull myself to my feet. Michael rises beside me, and for once, gives me a warm smile.

"I apologize for doubting thy conviction, Jason. I did not realize thy chest throbbed in grief. Now that thou hath moved on, allow us to fill thy thoughts with a vision of our past. I promise, thou shalt find it enlightening."

I raise an eyebrow. "What part of your history will I see?"

"All of it," Gabriel mutters. "Our successes, our failures, everything. At the least, someone must exist who knows the legacy of our people. Should we perish, our legacy must rest within thy soul."

I scratch the back of my head. "Uhh... I mean, my spaceship is going to land in about thirty minutes. I don't know if I have time for a play-by-play. Can't you give me the highlights?"

Michael shakes his head. "Nay. 'Tis not enough to know the events. The reasons and motivations for all the key players matter just as much. Thou must know the unfathomable depths of demonic treachery, and how far they will go to wrench the knife in thy heart."

I swallow and take a step toward the fire. The embers crackle and pop, despite nobody fueling it with more wood.

"Tell me, then. Tell me everything."

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Michael rests his hand on my shoulder and closes his eyes. The world shifts around us, and the Archangels disappear.

"Long ago, the angels were the sole living beings in the universe. The Creator formed us from the ash of dead stars and gave us one order: Live."

An empty void surrounds me. I appear in space, and ten million stars rapidly appear, one by one. After a moment, I realize they aren't stars at all, but angels. Countless winged beings float around me idly; confusion etched into their faces.

Gabriel speaks. "We had no purpose. We had no identity. We had only a goal; to follow the Creator's orders. However, we could not act on his orders. We didn't know what we didn't know. And so... we merely existed."

Raphael appears before me. "One second became a year, then a thousand years, then a million. Eventually, we tired of our boredom and sought to give meaning and purpose to our lives. We began by creating other life, though our youngest sister, Uzziel, was the only Archangel whose powers gave her the ability to do so."

"She failed many times," Michael says, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "And once Uzziel finally succeeded, the result was tragic."

"Dragons were the first entities she formed. They were nearly the last." Gabriel whispers, and all the angels but one vanish before me. Behind the speck of a winged demi-human floating in space, a colossal monster appears. Its wings dwarf the stars around it, and its head those of the planets. Compared to the dragon, the angel is smaller than a grain of sand.

Gabriel continues. "Jörmungandr. The Mother of all dragons. She began her life as an egg hatched in the darkness of the void, and eventually grew unstoppable as she devoured stars whole. Through her, we learned the meaning of both life and death."

"The Creator's sole order, once a source of turmoil and uncertainty, became a primal instinct. We could not stand idly and watch as the dragon slew us one by one." Michael sweeps his hand across my eyes, and the lone angel vanishes, replaced by the millions from before. "So we fought. We bled. We suffered. We formed new creations, one after the other, desperate for an edge against the tyranny of The Dragon. Still, she continued to slaughter us."

The angels from the vision begin unleashing a bombardment of magical power against the dragon, but it merely grins evilly as the Holy Energy ripples against its body. Jörmungandr inhales, then unleashes a wave of darkness, wiping out thousands of angels at once. They scream wordlessly as their bodies fizzle into ash, returning to the dark energy of the cosmos.

Raphael appears before me, staring calmly into my eyes. "Eventually, we succeeded again. Uzziel created a new form of life, one we came to call the Titan. Monstrous beings, born of rage, with abilities similar to ours. However, the Titans had one special quality, which was their resistance to The Dragon's energy. They turned the tide of battle."

"For a while," Michael says, correcting his senior. "But Jörmungandr surprised us. The Dragon learned our secret of creating life and unleashed a new horror upon us."

For the first time since the angels have started, I feel the urge to speak. "She created... the demons?"

Raphael lowers his gaze. "Nay, Jason. They came later. Much later."

Something about his words instills a sense of dread in me. *Why are the Archangels starting with dragons? I wanted to know about the demons! The dragons must be significant somehow to their story.*

Michael's voice cracks. "Jörmungandr gained a power none of us possessed. She gained the ability to form life within herself; to give birth. Where before we faced one dragon, everything changed when a second appeared, and a third... and a fourth."

"The dragons swelled their ranks to tens of thousands." Gabriel's form expands, dwarfing the other Archangels as he triples and sextuples in size. Soon, his size nearly matches that of The Dragon. "We adapted to their trickery. This might surprise thee, Jason, but angels cannot procreate. When an angel dies, we lose a brother or a sister forever. Many of our siblings fell before we understood this fact. And when we realized what Jörmungandr had taken from us, we grew enraged."

Michael's grin gains a sinister edge. "The dragons made one costly error, Hero. Every time a new dragon appeared, the energy of all its brethren split amongst one another. They sacrificed their fighting capabilities for raw numbers, while we did the opposite."

"The nine Archangels combined our powers and formed three supreme beings; the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Ophanim."

Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel all stand in a circle and press their palms together. A moment later, a light brighter than the Big Bang erupts between them, blinding me and sending waves of pain coursing through my eyes. When I finally recover, a three-headed angel with six wings and arms stands before me; each palm closed together in a fist.

The supreme being, far mightier than an Archangel, speaks with three voices at once. **"I, the Seraphim, unleashed the might of all angelkind. The Dragon was unprepared. For the first time since her creation, Jörmungandr felt fear wash through her body. Finally, she understood what it meant to lose those she loved. While I fought The Dragon, the Cherubim and Ophanim slaughtered her children. The Titans pooled their might together,**

and we struck a blow against our first creation. The dragons scattered like ash in the breeze, and we won the war."

I stare in awe as The Seraphim lashes out with two swords, two staves, and two spears, slicing open dragons left and right. The beasts bellow in agony as they breathe pitifully weak flames against the winged destroyer. The Seraphim opens all three of its mouths to blast Holy Energy upon Jörmungandr, though the attacks are a thousand times more powerful than before.

After the dragons flee, Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael demorph from their Seraphim form and reappear before me.

I swallow audibly, still feeling a little awed by their power. "So you defeated the dragons. Why do I get the feeling that isn't the end of the story?"

Raphael bows his head. "We suffered heavy losses. The battle was far from one-sided. Every dragon we killed returned its power to the rest. Even after slaying Jörmungandr, her children soon grew to her former power. Following our war with the dragons, the Titans revolted as well. Due to their betrayal, two of the Archangels, Muriel and Cassiel, passed away. That story is more mundane, in many ways. It was little more than a war of attrition."

Gabriel lays one hand on each of his brother's shoulders. "We eventually made peace with the Titans and sought out a home for ourselves. Sadly, Michael and I know little of those days, as part of the peace agreement included wiping our memories of the past."

I blink in confusion. "Hold on, what? You erased your memories? Then how do you know everything you've told me?"

Michael gestures to Raphael. "Our brother, the eldest Archangel, agreed to hold the memories of our past. Everything we know is due to his stories."

I scratch my forehead. "Okay... but Raphael, why erase your brother's memories if you were going to tell them about the past anyway?"

Raphael's gaze narrows. "I had a reason, Jason. We all did. Please, understand that the agreement was made due to everyone, including the Titans, perceiving me as the fairest and least biased of our people. 'Twas not made idly or out of malice."

I nod slowly. "You're not going to tell me the reason, are you?"

"Nay. 'Tis not information any mortal should know." Raphael's eyes darken. "Sometimes, I wish I did not remember our past, nor the bloody acts we performed. 'Tis a stain upon the memory of my people."

Several moments pass.

Raphael clears his throat again. "Ahem. Michael, let us return to the Hero's question from earlier. He wishes to know the origin of the demons."

Michael sighs. Now that the talk of battle has passed, he seems to have lost interest in what comes next. I never used to picture him as a military commander, but something about how his eyes light up

when he describes spilled blood makes me think he isn't the same Michael as the one described in the Bible.

"The first thing we did was seek out a world to colonize. Having solidified our alliance with the Titans, we decided to create lesser forms of life, rather than equals. No longer would we create beings such as dragons and titans, but those who could not harm us. We only wished to live in peace."

I stare at Michael as he speaks. Despite his words, I feel he's lying. He doesn't seem the sort of person to enjoy tranquility and a carefree existence. He craves conflict.

"If you don't mind my asking, why bother creating life at all? What did you stand to gain? I certainly appreciate your efforts, since I was eventually born, but I don't see the logic after all the losses you suffered."

Raphael nods. "Jason, angels are not immortal. Given how much time had passed, and the toll two wars took on our bodies, we found ourselves near death. We created life, not to satisfy our idle curiosity, but to sustain our very existence."

Gabriel clears his throat. "Imagine for a moment, young Hero, that all beings have a container inside of themselves to store their spiritual energy. Thine is like a small, metal can. It cannot hold much, but it is relatively stable. When thou dost sleep at night, thy mana refills, allowing thee to unleash thy magic at full power the next day. However, an angel's container is more like a cracked glass jar. Our energy leaks from our bodies slowly as time passes. We created subservient beings to give us mana so that we could restore ours."

I cock my head. "Do you mean humans?"

"Yes," Michael says. "However, humans were not Uzziel's first creation. The demons were."

My jaw drops. "You *created* the demons?!"

"Uzziel did," Michael replies. "Their story is one which may surprise thee."

"I'm already surprised," I say. "Tell me the full story. I want to hear everything."

"As thou wish."

Part 092: The Archangel of Creation

Solomon appears before me. His expression turns somber as he gestures toward the top of my head. "My Crown is an incredible tool. You've barely tapped into its latent potential. To expedite teaching you about the angels and demons, I'm going to activate a direct mental link."

"Okay," I reply. "What does that mean? Don't I already have that link? I mean, it's sitting on top of my head. That's pretty direct."

The ancient king frowns. "Not quite. My artifact holds a vast array of knowledge, much of which I took from demons, angels, and humans during my prime. I can also pull from the memories of the Archangels here, allowing you to visualize the past as if you were living it yourself."

Before I can reply, Raphael interrupts, a note of alarm in his voice. "Solomon! How dost thee intend to use our memories?"

Solomon pauses. "Ah, sorry, I won't touch yours, Raphael. Michael and Gabriel's recollections will be quite sufficient."

A drop of sweat drips down Raphael's forehead. He quickly dabs at it. "Ah, of course. Good. Good. Carry on."

Once again, a strange suspicion roils in my stomach. Raphael is unusually secretive about the past, specifically regarding what happened before his people wiped their memories. What terrible events must have unfolded for him to be so cautious?

Guardedly returning my attention to Solomon, I nod. "Alright. How will your little vision system work?"

Solomon waves his hand. In the air before him, a holographic display appears with images of hundreds of white-skinned, red-skinned, and dark-skinned beings of many shapes and sizes.

"Anyone who has worn my Crown in life, or anyone I touched while I was still alive, donated their knowledge to me wittingly or unwittingly. In the case of the demons, I even obtained the memories of any souls they had ingested. Quite handy. As I said, my Crown holds the collective knowledge and memories of seven-hundred thousand living and deceased humans, angels, and demons — even a few Volgrim."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh? I'd like to learn about the Volgrim first."

"No, you don't," Solomon replies, annoyance in his voice. "In due time. Let's bring you up to speed on the others first. I'll begin with the Day of Betrayal."

"That sounds ominous. What happened?"

"You'll see," The ancient king replies. He shoots a glance at Raphael, then back to his holographic display. "I hope this isn't too disorienting for anyone."

He taps a button on the screen. My vision goes black.

Somewhere between one and five seconds later, I blink my eyes open. A sea of colors floods my mind, taking me several moments to adjust.

Green. Red. Yellow. A garden. A forest. Hedges, vines, and trees spread out into the distance before me.

People walking around. Wings. They have wings. Ah, they're angels.

After a moment, I try to move, but my body won't respond. I can't move my hands, or my head, or even adjust my gaze. However, as if a puppeteer is controlling my body, my arm raises to pluck at an instrument, creating a soft sound.

A harp sits before me. I've never played one before, but I recognize it immediately. Several dozen angels sit in a half-circle and gaze at me as I strum the instrument, some on stone benches, others on the ground. One of the men hangs upside-down from a tree branch! Somehow, despite never performing before, I pluck the harp like a seasoned professional, with beauty and grace. The smiles on the faces around me appear light-hearted, as if I could make a dozen mistakes, but nobody would care. My performance is intended to be light-hearted and fun, not a professional show.

My mouth opens. "La la la~ lalala~"

The voice that escapes my lips isn't mine. It's female. Lovely, too, with a lovely lilt and cadence I could listen to all day.

As the woman continues strumming, I glance at her hand and notice her soft, supple skin is noticeably darker than many of the angels nearby. It seems she's younger than the others, perhaps in her twenties.

After several minutes, she finishes her song. The onlookers clap politely. One of the girls sends an enthusiastic grin my way. "That was delightful, Uzziel! How art thou so talented?"

"Lots of practice!" Uzziel replies. The sensation of my mouth moving is uncanny, but I find myself growing used to it as the minutes pass. "Shall I play another?"

The angel hanging from the tree crosses his arms. "Hmm. Thy eyes appear to blink heavily, sister. Do not push thyself unnecessarily."

A yawn escapes my lips. I blink slowly. "Ah, perhaps thou art right, Elphin. Three evenings back-to-back surely aren't good for my health. I'll stop, for now."

The others nod appreciatively. "There is no need to exhaust thyself. Enjoy a good rest, Uzziel."

Standing up, I slip past the harp and stretch the kinks out of my back. The other angels disperse, leaving me alone with Elphin. The angel hops from his tree and lands deftly. I can barely tell him apart from any other male picked at random, save for a thornless rose tucked behind his ear. Elphin's white hair blends with the majority of other angels, but a few of the women have dyed hair in different colors. Uzziel brushes hers to the side, allowing me to catch a glimpse of it. It's a light sea-green color, spilling into curls past her shoulders.

Elphin falls into place beside me as we turn and walk past a large, stone fountain. "Overworking thy body is undesirable, milady. As the Creator orders, we mustn't waste what we can save for another day."

"'Tis no problem," I reply. "A little fatigue is a small price to pay for making my family smile."

"Of course," Elphin says, keeping his voice neutral. "I still think a few days of rest are in order. If you would-"

Elphin pauses mid-sentence and raises his eyes to the sky, as do I. Hundreds of feet above, a single figure soars toward us, decelerating as he draws near. What interests me more is that this place, wherever I am, appears to be illuminated by an all-encompassing source of light. No sun sits suspended in the sky above. Instead, the light comes from all directions at once.

To myself, I ask, *where does the light come from?*

Solomon's voice replies. *You haven't realized yet, but this is the Garden of Eden, one of the most beautiful places in Heaven.*

Oh, I mutter. *Heaven. That explains a lot.*

The winged figure swoops toward us and stalls out at the last second, tilting his wings to freeze thirty feet above. He lands gently in the field, allowing me to get a good look at him.

A golden mask covers the top half of the newcomer's face. It rises several inches above his hair and a few inches to the right and left of his head, tapering off into feather-like protrusions, as if it could leap from his face and fly away whenever it wished — the man's bare, muscular chest ripples with strength. Tattoos of various animals, including a bear, wolf, and lion, dot his chest and arms. The bottom half of a toga is all that covers his waist.

The man approaches me. Before he utters a word, I notice the irritation on his face. His lips curl into a frown. "Uzziel, I require a moment of thy time."

I pause. "Certainly, Samael. What is the matter?"

"It's the imps. The little wretches-" He pauses to look elsewhere and compose himself. "Thy... thy *children* destroyed one of my experiments."

"Oh, no! That's terrible!" Uzziel's voice lilts in alarm. "Surely, 'twas an accident?"

Samael tosses his right hand flippantly in the air. "Tch. I haven't a clue. I told the little bast- the *imps* to leave me alone. They always pester and annoy me. That Satan fellow causes problems every damned-"

"Okay, okay," Uzziel says, interrupting Samael. I step toward him and rest a hand on his shoulder. "I apologize, brother. I'll discipline him at once."

Samael meets my gaze for several seconds, then averts his eyes. "Gah. Thy fascination with the red rats perplexes me. They fail the simplest tasks. They trip us underfoot. I wish they would all fall in a pit of-"

"That's enough, brother," Uzziel says. Her tone darkens noticeably. "I don't want to hear another word. The Heated Pond calls for thee. Take a break and relax. I'll handle my children."

Samael licks his lips. He glances at Elphin and sighs. "Very well. I'll leave the matter in thy capable hands."

"Indeed," I say, leaning forward to peck him on the cheek.

Samael runs his fingers through his hair and stomps toward the garden, leaving Elphin and me alone.

Elphin grunts. "Thy brother's words might be unpleasant, but I don't disagree with him. The imps are little more than nuisances."

"They sustain us," I reply. "What fate do they deserve? Shall I smite them dead? The imps are my children. I shall continue to treat them as such."

"Of course. I would never ask thee to commit an act as heinous as genocide. In any case, I'll take my leave now. Camael requested my assistance with testing a new artifact."

I nod, but it feels diplomatic. "Farewell, Elphin."

The male turns and flies off into the distance, leaving me all by myself. I don't know who anyone is, but something about the way Uzziel spoke to Elphin tells me she isn't as close to him as she is Samael. Perhaps he isn't a close relative? Do angels have spouses? In-laws?

Solomon replies in my mind. *Uzziel is an Archangel, as is Samael, Camael, Uriel, Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel. Additionally, Cassiel and Muriel used to live among their ranks, but they passed away during the wars against the Dragons and Titans.*

Oh, I reply. *That sucks.*

Indeed. Elphin, however, was a Cherub. Along with the Seraphs and Opaphs, they were considered the defenders of Heaven, ranked above other non-combatants, but below Archangels. Elphin was a renowned warrior during the Dragon War.

He sounds powerful.

In a manner of speaking.

Uzziel continues walking ahead. Birds chirp above, bees buzz past, and as I pass through the gardens, I snatch an apple off the ground and bite into it, relishing the sweet juiciness as it runs down my chin. Solomon's Crown might present this past as only a vision, but my mouth waters from the rich, delectable taste of the fruit. The thoughts of pizza and lasagna and all the other human food I've ever eaten melt away as I swallow the first chunk of it. I want more.

Uzziel bites into it as she walks, savoring every morsel. When she finishes, she stares longingly at the core for a moment before dropping it to the ground.

The fruits and vegetables in Heaven were much purer than anything on Earth, Solomon says. Uzziel infused them with large amounts of spiritual energy. Having tasted one of Heaven's apples during my lifetime, all other fruits became like dust in my mouth. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing I would never taste anything so good for the rest of my life. Eventually, the sensation passed. I forced myself to forget.

I can see why, I reply. This is merely a vision of Heaven's fruit. I can only imagine how the real deal would have tasted.

Angels didn't require sustenance, but they would sometimes eat during formal occasions if necessary. Sadly, only mana-infused fruit held any taste for them. It was a double-edged blade, in my

opinion.

An ancient Greek temple arises in the distance. I recognize the stonework immediately, even though I've never been to Greece. Pillars of chiseled rock support an archway hundreds of feet above, towering over the angels milling about on its doorstep. Latin letters etched into it reveal the name of the building. Thanks to the Crown, I'm able to read them.

The Temple of Elderium.

Dozens of other buildings, also Greek-style, litter the city around it. Angels walk and fly from place to place, while some even relax atop various roofs, chatting with one another to pass the time.

Soon, I notice something else. Amidst the angels, tiny little creatures skitter about, ducking and dodging the legs of the giants above. Their red skin and bulbous eyes mark them immediately as imps.

One imp carries several scrolls in his arms. He expertly dodges the angels around him as he runs toward the giant temple. "Scuse me! Me bad! Sorry!"

Just before the little guy makes it to the stairs, one angel lands directly in front of him at the base of the temple, causing the imp to leap backward in surprise, trip, and spill the scrolls all over the ground.

"No! No! Aw, geez!" The demon scrambles to grab his papers while the angel who landed before him scowls.

"Watch it, fool! I nearly tripped over thy fat head!"

"S-sorry! No mean to! Big accident!"

"Apologies are certainly in order. Ugly rat." The man flips his hair back and strides into the temple.

I walk over to the imp and drop to my knees. "Art thou alright, little one? The skies avail thee! Keep an eye above. Elderium is always a busy place."

The imp glances up at me as he grabs the last scroll. "Oh! Mudder Uzziel! Me work hard! Make happy!"

"Aye," I say, smiling. I lean forward to smooch the little guy on his forehead, then remember a moment later it's Uzziel doing the kissing, and not me. Yuck. Easily the worst part of the vision so far.

The imp scampers inside, leaving me alone. I stand up and sigh, then scan the plaza to look for something.

I spot it. Or rather, Uzziel does. I haven't the faintest clue what she sees, but the Archangel takes off in the opposite direction from the temple toward a statue of a lion clawing toward the sky. As she approaches it, I spot another imp holding onto one of the lion's legs with one hand, while balling his other into a fist and pumping it in the air. He leans away from the statue and suspends himself a few feet above the ground.

"Too much work! Never get sleep! Imps have rights! Big chickens think own us!"

Several angels nearby stare at Satan, whispering to themselves conspiratorially, as if they're trying to figure out what to do with him. At the base of the statue, several of Satan's fellow imps stare up at him, awe in their eyes.

"You said it! Big boss right! Need more food, better beds!"

I stop several feet away, off to their side, and cross my arms. None of the imps notice me until I speak. "Satan! What is the meaning of this? Work should be at the top of thy itinerary, not idle chatter."

Satan's triumphant fist-pumping comes to a screeching halt. His eyes bolt open as he turns his head to face me. "Ah! Mudder! It's mudder Uzziel!"

"Mother..." I say under my breath, correcting his poor linguistic ability. "Get down from there. Thou art causing a disturbance."

A few angels walk by, glance at me, then the imps, and look away, satisfied I seem to be taking care of things. The others from before disperse now that I've arrived. It appears Uzziel is someone respected by her peers. Her title of Archangel isn't for nothing.

Satan lowers his head guiltily and slides down the side of the statue, then stands meekly, waiting for my judgment. "S-sorry, mudder..."

"Sorry doesn't cut it. Not this time." Uzziel snaps each word, biting them off angrily. "Verily, thou didn't destroy one of Samael's experiments! What hath thee to say for thyself?"

"It was ask-i-dent," Satan replies. "Didn't mean break it..."

"When last we spoke, I delivered thee an ultimatum. I wasn't joking. Now I must punish thee, even though it breaks my heart to do so."

The other imps lower their heads contritely. "Satan good boy. No hurt him, please, mudder."

I sigh and tilt my head back to inhale deeply. "Haah... what shall I do? Samael and Michael want thy head on a stake. A beating won't accomplish anything, but since thou dost continue to stir up trouble in Heaven, ye leave me no choice."

Several seconds pass. I lower my head to nod at them. "Alright. Thy punishment shall be... banishment."

Satan raises his eyes. "B-band-ish-mint?"

"That's right. It means ye can no longer live in Heaven, nor can thy comrades. I'll have to banish everyone standing here to Earth."

Satan glances at the imps nearby. "What she mean?"

"Dunno," Another imp replies. "Word too big."

I point my fingers at each imp, one by one, and mutter under my breath, "Agares, Valac, Lucy, Diablo... looks like there are about fifteen of them. How unfortunate."

Uzziel recognizes them. I don't. I keep forgetting she's the one in control. Sometimes I feel as though my mind is on the brink of merging with hers.

Frankly, I don't understand why she wants to banish the demons. What was their crime? Asking for better living conditions? Breaking some random gadget? Being a little annoying?

Something seems fucked-up here. Maybe it's because I come from the 21st century, but I think the angels are treating the imps terribly. The little guys do their best, but the angels have nothing but irrational hatred for them.

Uzziel beckons to the dozen or so imps. "Follow me, please. I'll guide thee to Heaven's Gate."

The imps nod and follow after her. Satan cocks his head. "Big gate? That place go to Earth. We no allowed there."

"Correct," I reply. "'Tis true under normal circumstances. However, I cannot stand the thought of ending thy lives. Thou art my beloved children, after all."

The imp's eyes go wide with fear. Still, they follow after Uzziel. Since she knows all of their identities, fleeing won't do them any favors. They'll never escape her wrath.

How many imps are in Heaven? I wonder to myself.

Far too many, comes the reply. This time, it's Michael who responds. *I would estimate there were around thirty-five thousand of the little red bastards running around.*

I don't understand your constant hostility. What did the imps ever do to you? It looks to me like they were only slaves at this point.

Don't mind Michael, Raphael chimes in. *He never liked the imps from the beginning. I tried to keep my opinion of them in check, but I never came close to Uzziel's enthusiasm. She was the only Archangel who truly cared about their fates. On several occasions, the imps would frenzy about and tear apart priceless scrolls or documents. Some of those held information I considered more precious than my life.*

Oh? Why did they do that, then? You make the imps sound like they were little assholes, always on the prowl to cause mischief and mayhem.

That's because they were! Michael snarls. *All they wanted was to-*

Michael. Calm thyself, Gabriel says. *Those were the ancient days. Dwelling on the past will only bring thee grief.*

Several moments pass. Uzziel continues to walk away from the city district toward 'Heaven's Gate,' oblivious to my conversation with her brothers.

Ancient. So ye say, Michael says, much more quietly. *We've lived for millions, perhaps even billions of years. What is a hundred thousand years compared to the blood of my kin spilling across my chest, or a sister dying in my arms? The so-called Ancient Times ache in my chest today as much as they did then.*

All three Archangels go silent. Solomon clears his throat and changes topics. *Let's skip ahead, Jason.*

Time fast-forwards. Ten miles zip past in an instant, and soon the Temple of Elderium is long behind Uzziel. I can barely make out a great tree far to the East, but Uzziel turns to the West, toward a massive granite obelisk, one with two cherubs parked before it and a glowing gateway at the bottom.

I can't see through the glowing portal. Wherever it leads is a mystery. Uzziel gestures toward it, motioning for the imps to step through.

One of the cherub guards holds up his hand. "Ah, milady Uzziel. By Gabriel's orders, I must stop thee. What is thy business with these imps?"

"I'm banishing them," I reply. "These little ones have caused more mischief than anyone would like. I'm banishing them to Earth where they won't trouble us anymore."

The armored angel tilts his head toward his friend. "Ah..."

His friend shrugs. "Sister Uzziel is an Archangel. 'Tis her prerogative."

The first one turns back to me. "Thou knoweth we must inform Gabriel, correct?"

"No need to bother," I reply. "I'll do so myself. Feel free, though, if ye wish."

"A-alright, milady. Do as thou please. But, ah... by taking these imps outside, dost thou understand that, ah, the treaty...?"

"The Titans. Yes. I understand."

"Excellent. Far be it for us to obstruct thee."

Both cherubs step aside, unbarring the path. I smile sweetly at them and allow the imps to exit, then follow after a moment later.

Passing through Heaven's Gate sends the same waves of disorientation through me as the portals in the Labyrinth Core. A sharp rushing of air impacts my ears, but I adjust within seconds.

A large, hollow chamber greets me. Wherever we are, it's dark and cave-like. The imps glance around, shifting from one foot to the other. They're unsettled. So am I.

We continue walking together, and Gabriel speaks inside my mind.

Dost thee remember this place, Michael?

I wish I could forget.

Gabriel's voice tightens. *Thou dost lay the blame on thyself, but I was at fault too. I should have helped Uriel.*

We all should, Raphael says. *I couldn't tell the changeling apart from Michael. 'Twas a dastardly deed.*

I listen to their conversation, and a sickening sense of dread overcomes me.

Hold on. Uriel. Changeling. Are you referring to... to when Samantha killed her?

Seconds pass. The sound of Uzziel's bare feet slapping against the damp ground is the only sound. Even the imps are unusually quiet.

Raphael coughs. *Kuh. Samantha. Surely, thou referreth to Belial.*

Yes. Her. What happened?

That witch. That she-devil, Michael whispers, rage in his voice. *I hate her. I hate everything about her. Belial assumed my form at the beginning of the War in Heaven. She told Uriel to cease her defense of Heaven's outer gates. When Uriel refused... Belial killed her.*

Silence follows.

I stare ahead blankly, paying little attention to anything Uzziel sees.

Son of a bitch. I don't believe it. I mean... I *do*, but it's simply... unbelievable.

Hope spoke to Neil six years ago. I overheard the conversation. Hope warned Neil that Samantha killed Uriel. I didn't understand the full context back then, but... but now...

I don't know what to do. Samantha is Phoebe's close friend. If she did kill an Archangel, what does that mean?

Was Hope right?

Do we have a double-agent in our midst?

You're more reserved than usual, Solomon says. Having second thoughts? About Samantha, I mean.

A few. You knew what she did, didn't you? When Hope told me about Samantha and Uriel... and when I apologized to Samantha, you were there both times. Why didn't you say anything?

I didn't feel the need.

That's a terrible answer.

Solomon pauses to think before replying. *Well, Jason, don't you believe people can change?*

Maybe. But there's a difference between shifts in personality and... and... murdering someone!

Michael interjects. *I don't believe anyone can change. We are who we are. If the Creator wished for me to be a fair-skinned boyish figure, I'd have little say in the matter. Instead, he created me to be the ultimate warrior angel. As for Belial, he made her into a lying, murderous snake.*

But if the Creator has a plan, then wouldn't that mean he planned for Belial to kill Uriel?

He works in mysterious ways.

I cough. *Krmph. If you ask me, the Creator sounds like an asshole.*

Blasphemy! Michael barks. *I won't hear another word.*

Suit yourself.

I try to swallow the rock in my throat. I want to push it down into my stomach, but Uzziel's body prevents me from doing that. When these visions conclude, I'll have to confront Samantha for the second time.

Maybe murderers can change.

I pray they can.

As if reading my thoughts, Solomon speaks. *These visions will reveal everything you need to know, Jason. The War in Heaven was the most pivotal moment in Earth's history. It shaped everything to come. Listen carefully, open your mind, and soon you may understand a millionth of the things I do.*

Yeah, sure. Don't pat yourself on the back too hard.

After a minute, Uzziel and the imps wind their way through another underground cave. A wall of light slams against our faces as she finds the cave exit. The midday sun shines overhead, scorching the land with hundred-degree heat.

Reflexively, Uzziel wipes my forehead. Her forehead. Fuck, I have a hard time keeping things straight.

"Okay~! We're here. Welcome to thy new home."

Satan slowly inches out of the cave opening. A small plateau leads to a sheer drop of several hundred feet, and after that, the mountain veers into a steep incline until it reaches the base a mile below.

"Um... mudder Uzziel?"

"Yeees~?"

"We no can fly..."

I almost hear the gears turning in Uzziel's mind.

"Oh. Right. Well, we wanted the entrance to Heaven to be as remote as possible. This is Mount Sinai's steepest face."

Satan wrings his stubby fingers together, glances at the other imps, then back to me. "Errmm... me no want go. Where get food? Where get sleep?"

"Thou shalt have to find a way to survive," I reply softly. "I'm sorry, love. It hurts me to say, but thou didn't bring this upon thyself. I tried to help thee many times, but disobedience was all ye gave me in return. Fear not. There are mice and bugs and fruit to eat on Earth as well. As long as thy wits stay sharp, thou shalt survive for many a moon. I will try to visit now and then, but I have other children to care for."

Turning to the entrance, I motion with my hands. Energy flows through my body in a way I've never experienced before. Warmth and joy send ecstasy coursing through my veins. The mountainside flattens out, turning into a steep, unclimbable slope. However, the texture smooths out like polished bedrock, creating a slide all the way to the base of the mountain.

For a moment, I half-expect Uzziel to ride it, but she doesn't. Instead, she nudges Satan with her foot. "Go on. Slide to the bottom. I mustn't be outside of Heaven for long. It violates the ancient treaty."

Satan inches toward the ledge, but backs away at the last second and grabs my leg. "Ahh! No want go! Very scary! Big fall! Hurt!"

"Don't worry. I added soft grass to the end of the ride. It will be fun!"

Satan shakes his head. Tears well up in his eyes. "Scared! Scared, mudder!!"

The other imps nod, but one approaches the edge. "Pft. Satan big scaredy. Me go first. Easy."

Without saying another word, the little guy hops off and begins hurtling toward the bottom. His scream of terror turns to excitement, but within a few seconds, his voice fades into the distance.

"See? Bael isn't scared! Now, go! Thou art the leader. Leaders never cry."

"Yeah," another imp says. "G-git movin' boss. No be little crybaby."

"Shaddup, Agares!" Satan growls at the other. "Me no scared o-of anything..."

Uzziel rolls her eyes. "So thou dost claim."

It takes some coaxing, but Satan eventually stands at the precipice, inhaling several times as he builds up the courage to move.

"Hurry up!" A squeaky female voice yells. "Gah! Sick of waiting! Stupid man!"

She lunges forward and kicks Satan in the back, knocking him over the ledge. His scream of terror, unlike Bael's, never turns to excitement.

I groan. "Lucy. That was rude."

"No care. Men always slow. Me go next."

The ugly little imp girl, whose only indication of femininity is her nasally voice, hops off and begins sliding. She doesn't let out a sound as she rushes toward the bottom.

The others follow after, each giving a fifteen-second buffer so that they don't land on their friends.

One final imp remains. He glances up at me. "Mudder... we see you again?"

"Of course, Agares. I'll visit someday. In fact-"

Before I can finish speaking, footsteps from inside the cave catch my attention. I turn and spot a massive, fifteen-foot Archangel stomping toward me. I recognize him immediately as Gabriel. The Goliath of a winged being scrapes the ceiling with his forehead, but he ignores that fact, and his eyes lock on me.

"Uzziel! What art thou doing?!"

"Um..."

Uzziel's voice cracks. An instant later, she shoves her foot out and kicks Agares over the side. The helpless imp screams as he hurtles toward the bottom.

"...Nothing?"

Gabriel stares at me blankly. "D-did'st thou just kill... that little...?"

"What? No!" I quickly point over the cliff. "I banished the troublemakers! Now they won't cause trouble any longer."

Gabriel scowls, lumbers toward me, and peers over the cliff. The sound of Agares' screams fade as he plunges toward the grassy plains below.

"Damnation, Uzziel. Earth is Titan territory. Thou must consult me before treading upon their domain."

I shove my tongue against my cheek and cross my arms. "Had I done so, thou would have sentenced my children to death."

"Obviously! Gah! I shouldn't even be this far from Heaven, nor should thee. I have half a mind to fly down there-"

Gabriel's nostrils flare. He closes his eyes and turns back toward the inside of the cave. "I love thee, little sister, but I hate how ye test my patience. If the Titans find out..."

"We'll say the imps ran away."

"They won't believe that lie for a moment."

I exhale. "Well, feel free to recover the little ones if it bothers thee that much."

"Thou knoweth I can't do that. I shouldn't be this far from Heaven as things are now."

"Mhm."

Gabriel clicks his tongue. "Tsk. Come along, then. I swear by the Creator's name, if thou should pull a stunt like that ever again..."

"Don't worry, brother, I won't. I won't!"

I fall into step beside Gabriel and smile sweetly, beaming sunshine up at him. "Art thou going to spank me?"

"Please, Uzziel. Contain thy vulgarity."

"Haha! Thou art blushing!"

"No. I'm not."

Uzziel continues poking fun at him all the way back to Heaven's Gate. I, on the other hand, feel weirded out by her strange overtones.

Gabriel, was your sister always so... so... flirty?

The Archangel's voice rumbles in my mind. *'Twas in her nature. Uzziel was the Archangel of Creation. Some called her Earthmother or Gaia. As a goddess of fertility, she always poked and prodded at others. She was a freer spirit than the rest of us.*

A blessing and a curse, Raphael adds. Truthfully, young Hero, all angels were the same age. To say Uzziel was our younger sister would be to utter a lie. The Creator formed us from the dust of the cosmos all at once. Uzziel always was one to trust others blindly, even to her detriment. Her naivete won her many friends... but also allowed her enemies to exploit her.

After a few seconds, the vision fades away.

I reappear before the campfire alongside Solomon, with the Archangels in the same positions as before.

"Uzziel seemed like... like a genuinely wonderful person."

My words make the Archangel of Courage bow his head and close his eyes. "She was our precious, blessed sister. I would have given anything to protect her."

Gabriel walks around the fire and rests his hand on Michael's back. "Fret not, little brother. Thou didn't give everything up for her sake."

"And it wasn't enough."

Silently, I watch the two comfort each other. Until now, Michael has repeatedly performed actions that depict him in a negative, violent light. He seems unwilling to listen to reason or to look at things from the other side.

Something happened to him. I don't know what... but it changed him. It hardened his will. I can only imagine it was a loss unlike any other, something not even I could recover from.

Muriel... Cassiel. Michael lost two fellow Archangels, his sisters, during the war against the dragons. Could that have been what changed him? Perhaps something else?

Solomon claps his hands, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Okay! Well, this is a touching moment, but I'm afraid we still have much to cover. Shall I move onto the next vision?"

Michael wipes at his eyes. "Yes. Go ahead. Don't mind me."

I nod. "Send me in, uh, captain."

Solomon scrunches up his face. "I should warn you... this next vision is... disturbing."

"Just show me. I don't want to waste time."

"Alright. You asked for it."

Author note:

This is Uzziel!





This is Uzziel in a slightly different artstyle!



This is Uzziel, but an outdated character design.



Second version!



This is Samael.



Part 093: The King Under The Mountain

Solomon's Crown works its magic, allowing a new vision to appear. Once my eyes adjust, I quickly discover I'm no longer in Uzziel's body. Instead, my head hovers less than a foot off the ground. I walk along, taking tiny little steps, and every so often, a red-skinned arm with five chubby fingers reaches out to grab things in front of me.

I'm in an imp's body. But which one?

"Oy, Satan!" A nasally voice addresses me, helpfully answering my question. I turn to face the speaker, who turns out to be several inches taller than me. I haven't a clue who he or she is. All of the little red buggers look identical to me.

"Find grub?" Satan asks. My mouth moves along with his, just as it did when I was inside Uzziel's body.

"Mhm! Big and juicy! Agares lift rock and they crawl everywhere."

My stomach growls. "Good find. Me hungry."

I toddle after the other imp, whose name I still don't know. My stumpy little legs are so small that hopping over pebbles and stones makes me feel like an Olympic gymnast. Christ, seeing things from an imp's perspective makes me appreciate standing seven feet tall.

The air is noticeably chillier than when I was last inside Uzziel's body. Clouds obscure the sun above, and every shadow sends a shiver down my back. If I had to guess, I'd say several months or years have passed since the last vision.

A thinning forest with many dead trees looms ahead. Each one seems ten times taller than they should be, likely due to my short stature. Satan glances at the treetops above, showing several crows perched on various branches. All of them eye me with cold, calculating eyes. They're scavengers, and they're waiting for my death.

Dry grass cracks and pops under our feet. I turn to look at the other imp. "Bael. You not cold?"

"Nah. Me fine. You guys bunch of wimps."

Satan rubs his arms and shivers, forcing me to mimic him. A tingling of worry seems to buzz in the back of his mind, as if time is running out, and he doesn't know what to do.

Eventually, after climbing over tree roots and sliding under logs, Bael and I stop in a small clearing where the rest of the imps clap their hands giddily.

"Ah, Satan. You hungry?" One of the imps clutches several wriggling bugs in one of his hands. "Me find big blue beetles. Whole bunch of them!"

"Mmm. Them look tasty," I say, salivating at the little- no! Augh! Gross! Don't tell me Satan's going to eat- AHHH no, no, NO!!

Satan lunges his hand out and grabs the six-legged critter with his fat fingers and drools. "You find best bugs, Agares."

"Yeah, me do. Not many around."

As Satan brings the bug closer to his mouth, violent spasms of fear wash through my mind. *No, god, please! Don't eat it! Oh, for fuck's sake!*

CHOMP.

Half of the wriggling insect explodes in my mouth. My teeth mangle and chew it into progressively tinier pieces as its guts spill through my teeth. Every time a new chunk of the bug hits my tongue, I desperately try to spit it out, but I can't! I can't leave the vision!

Solomon!! You did this deliberately! You wanted me to suffer!!

When Satan finally swallows, the gory hunks of the bug roll down my throat, sticking to my esophagus as they fall. Satan smacks his lips, *my* lips, and just as I feel relief that it's over... he shoves the rest of the bug inside.

CHOMP.

I want to die!! Please, God, kill me now! I don't deserve this!!

* * *

By the time the fifth insect goes down, I feel numb. Perhaps it's Stockholm syndrome, but I'm almost growing to enjoy the taste. No, that can't be right. It's awful. *Come on, Me. Take your mind off the bitter flavor. Think of Phoebe. Think of Daisy.*

While I try to cope with the horrible things Satan has stuffed in my mouth, he smacks my lips pleasantly. "Very tasty. Want more."

Agares shakes his head. "That all me found. Too cold. Bugs hiding very sneaky."

The imps chitter and chatter amongst themselves for a few minutes, but then I cock my head. "Hmm? Where Lucy? Where Deebs?"

Satan glances around, and I count the imps. Two of them are, indeed, missing.

"They go explore. Lucy say she saw cave," Agares replies. "Maybe cave warm. Diablo say he want protect Lucy."

"Cave? Hmm..." Satan trails off and taps his lip. "Me want see. Where they go?"

Agares points toward a nearby mountain. "That way."

"Okay. We go take look."

All the imps nod and follow after me. Agares and I trot toward the mountain, saying nothing to each other as we walk. The muttering of various imps behind us turns into a dull hum as they whisper about this and that. I ignore them.

After several minutes, Agares' eyes dart to the side. "Oooh!" He trots to the left and leans down beside a stump to look at something.

"What see?" I ask.

Agares grins and plucks a tiny animal off the tree bark. It wiggles in his hand but doesn't try to flee. "Look! Lissard!"

"Look tasty. You gonna eat it?"

"No! Lissards are friend!" Agares shield it protectively. "They eat bugs. Just like us!"

I shake my head. "Yeah. Sure. You weird."

Agares pets the little creature, then places it back on the log and putters over to me. "We almost there. Big mountain just past trees."

After a few more minutes of walking, we step out of the tree cover and enter the shadow of a grassy cliff. Unlike Mount Sinai, this one appears much smaller, perhaps only a few hundred feet tall. Calling it a 'mountain' might be giving it too much credit, but it's also a little too big to be a hill...

Whatever.

Amidst the greenery coating the mega-hill, two red spots halfway up pop out like black dots on a white piece of paper. Lucy and Diablo slowly head toward the top, but the tall grass makes it hard for them to move. Their climbing is slow and labored as they wade through obstacles in their path.

"Yo! Diablo!" Bael steps ahead of the group and yells, but his shrill voice barely carries up the hill. "Hey! Ugly! Stupid!"

Bael howls several insults, but the climbers don't hear him. He gives up and tosses his hands in the air. "Buttheads. Hate when peeps ignore me. Sheesh."

"We follow them," I say, gesturing toward our fellow imps. "Nothing better do."

Agares nods. "Okay. Sound good- ah! Valac! What you doing?!"

I turn around to spot one of the imps holding a dead rabbit by the ears. Unlike the others, this imp's appearance is somewhat deformed. His jaw juts forward noticeably, giving him one hell of an underbite. He doesn't answer, but instead opts to slowly claw out the rabbit's innards, throwing them on the ground bit by bit.

"Valac. You not waste food. That bad," I say. "Stop it."

The creepy imp raises his eyes to meet mine. "It no scream."

"Huh? The bunny?"

"Yes."

I open my mouth to say something else but think better of it. "Never mind. Let's go..."

Soon, all the imps begin climbing the hill. A quick glance backward reveals Valac trailing the rest. He's much slower since he continues to hold the rabbit.

What the hell is his deal?

I don't get an answer. As the imps ascend, one of the two we're following glances down and spots us. He (or she) waves, then grabs the other and points at us.

It doesn't take long for them to climb down and meet us.

"Why you follow us?" Diablo asks. I only know it's him because his voice is slightly deeper than Lucy's, though it's still pretty squeaky.

"Me heard you find cave. Me want see."

Diablo shakes his head. "No. Very dark. Too scary. Me help Lucy look for berries now. Forget cave."

I cross my arms. "Me leader. Me decide if scary or not."

Diablo tries to nod coolly, but a hint of fear bubbles in his eyes. "O-okay. You big boss."

I follow after Bael and Lucy, noting with interest that she takes the lead. Sometimes she points out landmarks or scratches she left in the ground, but when I follow her gaze, I don't see anything until we draw closer. Her eyesight is spectacular.

Eventually, all the imps arrive at a small hole in the side of the mountain. Standing perhaps five-feet-tall, the most surprising thing about the opening is the heat warming my skin. As if the depths of the Earth are yawning, a mild warmth radiates out, allowing me to stop shivering.

Still, that familiar buzzing alarm pokes at the back of my mind.

Don't enter, I think to myself. *Diablo's right. This cave is dangerous.*

"Diablo right," Satan says, as if he can hear my words. "Too scary. Warm, though. We stay here tonight."

Someone shoves me aside. Bael strides several feet into the cave and puffs out his chest. "Pft. You guys big scared! Warm means comfy! Me go into cave alone!"

Several imps fidget. Something about Bael's haughty tone makes Satan narrow his eyes. "Me no scared."

"Yeah-huh!"

"Nuh-uh." I stomp over to Bael and glare at him. "You no leader. Me leader."

"Leader too scared go inside," Bael says, snickering to himself. "Hehe, you little kitty cat."

Unsurprisingly, Satan takes the bait. I turn around and beckon to the other imps. "Me not kitty. Come on. We go deeper."

Despite all the warning signs, the other imps nod. Everyone enters the cave, staying near to the wall as we walk. Within a minute, darkness swallows us. The sounds of breathing, bare feet shuffling against the floor, and hands scraping the walls are all I hear as we travel.

The temperature rises. Thanks to the lack of a breeze, soon I start sweating bricks. I mop my face down, realizing that we might be heading toward an active volcano or an underground lava geyser.

However, the thought this heat comes from the Earth itself is far too comforting to be the truth. I begin to wonder if I'm hearing things. The distant sound of breathing makes me twitch as I walk. Where are we going? Shouldn't we turn back?

"Excited?" Bael whispers from behind me, quiet enough that only I can hear him.

"No," I reply, keeping my voice low. "We need turn back."

"Me gots good feeling, boss."

"Me got real *bad* feeling," I mutter, my voice hoarse.

Suddenly, as I step forward, the floor disappears.

"Wha-?!"

I let out a yelp of fright as I fall into an abyss. Before I can scream, I hit a wall and roll downward.

THUD! CRACK!

I bounce off something unseen and smash into the ground. My body comes to an abrupt halt as waves of agony course through me.

It takes several moments before I can think.

Everything hurts — my body aches. I think... I might have... broken something...

"Nnn..."

Satan lets out a pitiful whimper. The bumpy, spiky ground presses against my face and stomach, taunting me.

After a few moments, I freeze. My blood turns to ice.

I'm not alone.

I raise my head slowly. In front of me, something absolutely shitfucking *massive* shifts around. It barely makes a sound, but even in pitch-black darkness, I can see the slightest hint of motion.

Whatever the... the *thing* is, it's gigantic. A hundred feet tall. Perhaps more.

"Hmm?"

A single grunt rumbles in the darkness. The beast speaks, its tone so deep that words can't describe it. My bones rattle from the weight of its voice. I slowly curl into a ball to make myself as tiny as possible.

Don't see me... please... oh god... what the hell is this monster?!

"Is someone there?"

The voice speaks again. It knows.

The air shifts. Two specks of orange appear, perhaps twenty feet away. They slowly move toward me, sending waves of terror through my body.

Eyes.

Two eyes, each one as big as my head, with slits for pupils, narrow in on my tiny, pathetic form. Light emanates from them, illuminating my naked, defenseless body.

I tremble, unable to speak.

Whatever the creature is, it knows I'm here.

"Do you think yourself invisible? You shine as bright as a star to my penetrating gaze."

"I... I..."

Satan tries to reply. Instead, he stutters and stammers.

From the entrance above, a tiny voice squeaks out. "Hey! Boss! You okay?!"

The gargantuan monster flicks its gaze upward. **"Others? Invaders, come to fight? Perhaps I should retaliate."**

"N-no..." I whisper, flinching as it stares at me again. "N-no fight... no hurt, please..."

"Your scent is unknown to me," The monster says. **"What do you call yourself, little red blob?"**

"I-i-imp! Me called imp... not taste good! Very nasty!"

The monster snorts and recoils slightly. **"That name, I have not heard it. I know of rat and bat and cat, of deer and bear and boar... but imp is one I've never heard before. Stand up, 'imp,' so that I may study you more closely."**

I nod, unable to deny his request. I grunt in pain and stagger to my feet, leaving my broken right arm to hang limp. I can only clutch my shoulder to try and stifle the pain.

"Ugly little wretch. Weak and scared. You're no threat. Why have you come?"

I shake my head slowly, unsure of what to say. "Cold outside. F-felt warm in cave. Did not m-mean wake up... very sorry!"

"You stumbled in by accident? Tch. I thought you were agents of the angels, but you're little more than skinny rats. Leave me. I wish to rest."

The monster starts to turn its head away.

"Angels? Big ugly chickens? You no like?"

The monster stops before fully turning away. It snorts as if to chuckle. A puff of fire bursts from its nostrils, illuminating its face and allowing me a glimpse of its body. Now I see that it is a massive dragon, pure black across its entire body, except for its glowing orange eyes. Its scales, black as the night, seem to swallow the light from the fire instantly, returning darkness to the room.

The size of the dragon's head makes me swallow a lump of fear. It could devour me whole without a second thought. Worse, however, is the sense that I've seen it before. The dragon appears familiar, but I cannot place the memory...

"Angels are the enemies of all living creatures," The dragon says. **"You. Me. Everything. They slew my people one by one. They would kill me as well, were they to discover my existence."**

The dragon slowly turns to look behind me toward the opening above. Several rocks crumble downward, bounce off the walls, and hit the ground below. A grinding sound follows as an imp slides down the slope. They hit the ground a few feet behind me, and squeak out, "Oy, boss! Boss! Are you-"

The speaker, Bael, freezes mid-sentence. I can't see him, but the dragon's gaze fixates behind me.

Bael whimpers. "Buh-buh... boss?"

"Me here," I whisper. The dragon hasn't tried to eat me yet. It doesn't appear aggressive, though I can't know if that's what Satan is thinking. It's a terrifying monster, to be sure, but if it wanted us dead, we wouldn't still be standing.

"Another imp. How many more will arrive? Call to them. Tell them to come."

The dragon's orders are absolute. I nod slowly, force myself to turn my back to the creature, and yell toward the others, "M-me okay! Everyone come!"

As if the floodgates of Hell have opened, several sounds of sliding follow in quick succession. Unlike my accidental stumbling into the abyss, the other imps manage to glide to the bottom without hurting themselves.

Every single one of them freezes in terror when they arrive, as the dragon scans the group with its reptilian eyes.

"One... two... three... hmm. Why are fifteen imps traveling together?"

"Big chickens kick us around. Mudder say we leave."

Satan seems to have adjusted to the fact the dragon isn't going to eat him. He takes this in stride, but still flinches when it lurches toward him.

"You lived among the angels? I knew I smelled their scent."

"Chickens not our friends," Satan replies. "Chickens beat us. Make us work. Kick around and hurt."

"I understand," The dragon replies. **"The angels enjoy playing the role of gods. They summon creatures from the void to serve them, then toss us aside when they tire of us. They did so for my people, and now for yours."**

A moment passes. The dragon snorts again, sending plumes of fire over our heads. **"Bah. The old wars are a distant memory. Perhaps I could kill the angels, but I haven't the will to try. Sleep is comforting. I dream of my mother, and my brothers, and my sisters too. I dream of those lost and those who will never see the light of day."**

Satisfied with himself, the dragon sighs. **"Haah... I decided long ago to burrow under this mountain and live my life in solitude. The bedrock, infused with the mana of the Earth, conceals my presence well. After millions of years, the angels have yet to find me."**

Satan cocks his head. "You hide? Scared of chickens? Like me?"

"Scared... frightened... perhaps... perhaps not..."

The dragon pulls back and rears up on its legs, stretching itself to the ceiling above. Several explosions go off as its joints pop into place — the behemoth grunts with satisfaction.

"I am Leviathan, the last of the dragons. For every brother and sister that died, my strength increased as their mana spread among the survivors. With all of them gone, I am at the peak of my power. However... I consider myself a practical thinker. Battling the

angels is a futile endeavor. Not only would I need to combat them, but also their allies, the Titans. I might win. I might not. Other than satisfying a sense of justice, what purpose would killing them serve?"

Satan glances at the other imps. All of them stare with rapt attention at the dragon, afraid to take their eyes off it. Satan returns his gaze to Leviathan.

"Words too big. Not understand."

Leviathan stares at the ceiling. Seconds pass — a minute.

Slumping to the ground, he lowers his body and returns his attention to the imps. **"The angels are afraid of losing their power. Whenever they form a sentient being, it turns against them. That's why they made pathetic servants like you. Weak, unable to fight back. Easy to push around."**

The dragon curls back his lips, exposing his teeth in a sinister grin. Even in the darkness of the cave, the pure white stands out, illuminated by the faint light coming from his eyes.

"Hehe... I have a great idea. A little... *poetic justice*, if you will. Wouldn't it be funny if, for the third time, one of their creations turned against them? What a twist of irony that would be."

Satan blinks and cocks his head. "What mean?"

"I've decided to take you under my wing, little 'imp.' You can't fight the angels as you are now, but, in time, that will change. I'll make it change. You will battle them in my absence and make the angels suffer. Those who took my family from me... you will take theirs from them. Come. Step forward. I have a gift for each of you."

I nod. My body moves on its own, unwilling to disobey the dragon's orders. One step becomes two, then three. Without intending to, I take twenty steps forward. The dragon's glowing orange orbs are closer now than ever before. From the darkness, a slight movement catches my eye. Leviathan pulls his head back and thrusts a massive claw forward, one that stands ten times taller than me. His four-taloned appendage is barely visible in the dark, but its frightening size makes me wet myself.

The dragon could kill me in an instant. Instead, he wants to give me a gift. What could it be?

I find out as the claw lightly nudges my forehead.

Cosmic power floods into my mind, body, and soul. Waves of mana course through my veins, bursting every blood vessel in my body, rupturing my heart, and reforming them a moment later. I try to scream, but can't. One moment I'm standing, and in the next, I end up on the ground.

Bones snap — muscles pop. I writhe and wriggle, unable to control my spasming form. The dragon's energy burns like a wildfire, searing my skin off and growing it back. The cycle repeats over and over for what feels like an eternity. In reality, the process barely takes a minute.

The pain is mind-shattering agony, yet also exquisite ecstasy. Once it fades away, violent rapture embroils my thoughts. The most wonderful food, best sex, and memorable moments of my life do little to

compare to Leviathan's power.

I know, from the most primal corners of my mind, that the power he's shared with me is but a sliver of his whole — a fraction of a fraction.

I've only tasted Leviathan's power... but I want more.

Slowly, I stagger to my feet. A rush of sensory information floods my mind. My hearing, more acute, detects the slightest whimpers of fear from the imps behind me. The dragon's drumming heart is like an anvil crashing into the Earth.

My sight, smell, and hearing increase tenfold. Suddenly, the darkness melts away. I see far more clearly, as though several small candles illuminate the room. The dragon, once a specter in the gloom, now becomes visible. I behold his majesty in its entirety. While crouched low to take up as little space as possible, Leviathan's body is hundreds of feet from his head to his tail. His wings, though folded against his back, must stretch a hundred feet to the right and the left.

I've never seen something so incredible in all my life. Leviathan, more than any being I have ever imagined, is a dark god, capable of slaughtering all those who slight him.

He chose me. He favors me.

I'm... lucky.

Turning around, I face the imps behind me. Suddenly, it hits me: I've grown. I'm at least four feet tall now.

The imps squint to stare at me, but their vision is far worse than mine. It's likely they can only make out my hazy red figure in the darkness.

"B-big boss? That you?" Agares asks.

"Yep. It's me," I reply. My voice is suddenly much deeper, dramatically so. The change startles me, but I adjust to it. "Step forward. Leviathan is going to power us up."

The dragon chuckles. **"Hm. Hm. Your cognitive abilities have increased. Likewise, you have gained magical powers. You are too weak to handle any more of my power, but you have enough to cause some mischief. Doubtless, your abilities are already far beyond your comprehension. It will take time for you to adjust."**

Agares inches toward the dragon. Leviathan reaches his claw out and touches the imp's head. Just as I did, Agares stumbles onto his back, wheezing and gasping. His body slowly increases in size, his skin melts off and grows back, and within a minute, he lies on the ground, breathing hard.

When he rises to stand beside me, I look his naked body up and down. Like mine, it courses with raw energy. His eyes flick around the room to examine the dragon, and he turns to me.

"Satan. What... what's happened to me? To you?"

I smile. "We've been given a second lot on life, chum. We share a common enemy with the dragon. I'll explain after he boosts the others."

Both of us stand and watch. Bael comes next. Diablo. Lucy. Belial. Valac.

After all fifteen of us finish, we examine one another. Power flows from our veins, but unlike before, we have distinct appearances and stand apart visually. Bael towers a foot above the rest. Hair covers Diablo's face. Belial transforms into a sexy goddess.

My eyes scan all of them, past the four-breasted figure of Lucy, toward the final remaining demon, Valac. Unlike the rest of us, he continues to writhe on the ground. His wounds only partially heal, leaving patches of bone visible. Two arms sprout under the others, giving him four in total, in addition to his legs.

Valac's skin hisses. Pieces begin to flake off. I glance at the dragon. "Hey! What's wrong with Valac? He's falling apart!"

Leviathan shakes his head. **"Someone was bound to reject my gift. Count yourselves lucky that only one of you will perish. In exchange, the rest will experience power they couldn't imagine."**

I walk over and kneel next to Valac. Before I can try and touch him, he lunges out and grabs my ankle with a skeletal hand, startling me.

"Nehehe.... endless pain and the fear of death, enrich my body and give me breath. Send to darkness, put to sleep, burn the bodies, their souls I *reap*."

I jump backward in fright. Valac chuckles quietly and pulls himself into a sitting position as even more of his skin begins to melt away. Soon, only bits of guts and entrails stick to his bones underneath, held to him by the thinnest pieces of muscled sinew.

Valac rises. He stands nearly as tall as Bael, but unlike the massive demon behind me, Valac appears thin and gangly, due to being a walking skeleton. His teeth chatter, leaving me to wonder how he can speak without a voice box.

"V-Valac? Are you alright?"

The skeleton cocks his head. "I am fine. Sublime. Don't worry about me. We have angels to kill, hehe..."

Leviathan narrows his eyes. **"Interesting. This one has adapted. All of you have. By now, you should be able to sense the mana within yourselves. Reach inside. Summon your aspects."**

Everyone glances at each other for a moment and nods. We all begin weaving signs simultaneously. Lucy, the four-breasted demoness, gasps and recoils as a third eye emerges on her forehead. Belial changes shape, morphing into Diablo. Valac hisses as a massive bone-scythe appears in his grasp, along with a glowing blue lantern in the other.

As for me, when I form the signs, a magical scroll appears in midair. It hovers for a moment, then falls, but I catch it before it hits the ground.

I unravel the scroll to read it, but nothing appears. It's blank.

Despite this, I smile. "Ah, so that's how it is."

I don't know why I'm smiling. I haven't a clue what the scroll does- ah, right... I forgot. I'm Jason. Not Satan. I keep mixing up my mind with his. These visions are blurring the line between reality and fantasy

for me. I'm starting to lose the ability to tell one from the other.

Satan raises his fist. "Alright, you bunch of idiots. Listen up. I've got a plan."

"A plan?" Belial asks. She and Lucy appear disinterested in their nakedness, despite standing amongst a group full of men. Perhaps they don't yet understand the concept of shame.

"That's right, hot stuff. This dragon wants us to fight the angels. Stupid. We can't beat 'em like we are now. What we can do, though, is make some noise. Cause some trouble. We gotta get the rest of our people outta Heaven. You feel me?"

Agares nods. "Sounds good, boss. Whatever you say, I'm in."

"Great. Here's the plan..."

Satan kneels and begins drawing pictures in the dirt. The demons lean over to watch — all of them except for Valac. He stands and gazes at us... staring with hollow eyes... never moving...

Like a harbinger of death.

Author Note: Have some more character art! Previous appearances of characters can be found in the older parts.

This is Lucifer.



This is also Lucifer, and Diablo too!



This is Valac.



Part 094: The Grim Reaper

"What are your thoughts regarding the last vision?" Solomon asks.

Having reappeared at the bonfire, I once again stand before Solomon and the Archangels. Raphael nudges the logs, sending plumes of smoke into the air.

"It was interesting. The demons got their power from a dragon, huh?"

Michael bows his head. "We hadn't any knowledge of this."

"What? You didn't?"

He shakes his head. "Nay. Solomon's vision is the first I've heard of Leviathan. Everything makes sense now."

"Indeed," Gabriel says quietly. "The sudden spikes in demonic power. Their ability to work together. Their increase in intelligence. Dragon magic was extremely potent. Had we known of Leviathan's existence, especially early on, we would have taken the imp threat far more seriously."

"Let us not superimpose our knowledge from the future upon our past selves," Raphael says. "'Twas fortunate that we did not learn of Leviathan's existence and decide to challenge him. Defeating Jörmungandr and pacifying the Titans almost wiped out our people. Even after millions of years of slowly regaining mana from the imps, we were in no condition to battle Leviathan, who was assuredly even mightier than his fallen mother. Had we battled, the angels would have lost."

Michael scratches his chin. "Assuredly, thou art most likely correct, brother. The knowledge of Leviathan's existence changes everything we knew about our final battle against Jörmungandr. She fought us at only half her power. It makes me wonder if she didn't deliberately conceal Leviathan's existence from us for all those eons."

"Sounds like she played the long con," I reply. "And she won."

"Nay," Raphael says. "'Twas not Leviathan, but the demons who defeated us. While the dragon certainly increased their strength and fighting power, t'would be a disservice to deny Satan credit for his brilliant fighting tactics. No matter how powerful a military might be, it will crumble if led by an incompetent fool. Satan was no such demon."

Solomon crosses his arms. "I fought Satan once. Not out of choice, mind you. During my life, I was a poor physical fighter. I relied on my intelligence and knowledge to defeat adversaries. The battle was brutal. I eventually outwitted Satan, but his casual demeanor and quick-thinking caught me off-guard on many an occasion. Few people have ever come close to being my equal during a battle of the minds, and he held a distinct advantage in the physical department. I won by the slimmest of margins."

"Did you defeat him for good?" I ask.

"Hah! No. I merely managed to drive the Devil back for a time. He decided Jerusalem wouldn't be an easy target to ransack. In fact, battling me was the straw that broke the camel's back. All-out attacks on

humanity became much rarer as the centuries passed. Satan learned that going toe-to-toe with a Hero would incur more losses than he thought were worth sustaining."

After a moment, Solomon clears his throat. "Enough idle chatter. Let's return to the ancient histories. I'm going to jump ahead a few days. Satan wasted little time in planning his first strike against the angels, but you'll probably be interested in what came before that."

Shrugging off the previous conversation, I nod. "Yeah. Let's dive back in. Time's a-wasting."

"Not as much as you'd expect," Solomon replies with a smirk. I don't get to ask what he means. He motions with his hands, and the bonfire melts away.

"We gotta decide who's the strongest around here," Bael says. Several demons nearby nod. I do not.

Satan speaks, but this time I'm not in his body. I'm in someone else's.

"We haven't time to waste on nonsense, Bael. We need to rescue our unascended brothers and sisters from Heaven. Once we succeed, then we'll worry about the other tomfoolery."

My current host watches the other demons silently. The others nearby are dressed in simple clothing. The tanned hides of several animals hang from tree branches nearby, including one that resembles a saber-toothed tiger. Where before the demons could barely catch bugs, now they hunt animals at the top of the food chain.

A lot has changed for them in only a few days.

I reach down to smooth out a white tiger skin draped over my legs. Despite snow drifting down from the skies above, I barely notice the frigid temperature. As I stretch and pat the fur to increase its flexibility, I can't help but notice my arms appear much hairier than the other demons. My muscles, while substantial, don't compare to Bael's. He's a powerhouse capable of crushing any of the others with a single slap.

"I ain't talkin' crap, Satan," Bael replies. He walks over to Satan and places his fists on his hips, grinning as he towers over our leader. "And I ain't followin' some pipsqueak to my death. If you wanna save our family, you gotta prove you can do it. I'll break the Archangels myself, but what can you do?! Nothing! You're a wimp!"

Satan crosses his arms and stands defiantly, but a hint of concern bubbles in his eyes. "I ain't no wimp, punk. I'm a realist. Every minute we waste here is another minute the other imps get kicked around and beaten."

The future leader of our people turns at me. "Hey! Deebs! Back me up on this, willya?"

I shrug. "Mmm. Bael does have a point, chief. The imps have lasted a few million years already; they'll be fine for a while without us."

Satan licks his lips. He appears annoyed I didn't take his side. "Yo! Lucy! What do you think?"

Immediately, I swivel to look at one of the nearby demonesses. The four-breasted lady wears several animal pelts, all of them belonging to black jaguars. They layer over her body several times, covering much of her skin, but still, Diablo's heart pumps a little faster when he stares at her.

"It's *Lucifer*, not *Lucy*, you limp-dicked..." The woman bites off her words to scowl at him. While Diablo's body lusts after her, my eyes fixate on Lucifer's mouth. Her raptor-like teeth *clink* as they knock together, giving her a slight lisp. "I don't care who is the strongest or weakest. I intend to pay back Samael for all the pain he inflicted on me. Anything else is superfluous."

Satan sighs. "Fine, fine." He turns to Bael. "Alright, big guy. How do you wanna do this, eh? If it's something dumb like arm-wrestling, we already know you'll win. We have to test intelligence, strength, and leadership skills at the same time. Got any ideas?"

Bael scratches his head. "Uhhh..."

"C'mon. Surely you can think of something."

Slowly, Bael glances at me. I shake my head. "You're on your own."

"Ah! I got it!" Bael smiles excitedly. "We can do arm-wrestling!"

Satan facepalms. "I... I just said... no arm-wrestling. What are you, stupid?"

"Yeah... a little," Bael mutters.

"Alright. I'll think of something, then."

Satan leans against a tree and taps his lip. A minute passes while he contemplates a challenge for the demons to undergo.

Agares walks over, several little lizards clutching onto his leathery clothes. "Satan, I have a solution. How about a contest of skill? Dispatch everyone to kill as many creatures as possible. Bigger ones mean more points, while smaller ones count for fewer."

Satan shifts around, itching his back on the tree. "Yeah... maybe. I'd want us to team up so we could verify each other's points."

Immediately, I lunge my hand out. "I vote to join Lucy's team!"

The demoness scowls. "It's *Lucifer*, imbecile. I'd sooner die than pair with you."

Satan chuckles. "Heh. We'll decide the teams with lots. That should keep things fair. Since there's fifteen of us, pairing up won't work. We'll do groups of three."

Lucifer crosses her arms. "If I end up on the same team as Diablo, so help my sanity..."

I jump up and slide over to her, a huge grin on my face. "Hey, baby, don't be like that! You and I are like peas in a pod! What isn't there to like about me?"

The triple-eyed demoness turns away. "Don't take it personally. I haven't the faintest interest in you or any other man."

"Oh? Are women more your type?"

"No. I'm not 'into' anyone. Go away."

My smile slips. "Oh. Okay. Well, if you feel that strongly about it..."

I turn and wander toward Satan, scratching my head sheepishly. When he catches sight of me, he winks. "Don't worry, Deebs," he whispers. "I got your back, pal."

"You do?"

"Mhm. Check this out."

Satan coughs loudly, then walks toward a pile of kindling we stacked when we were still imps. With our powered-up bodies, warming ourselves isn't necessary anymore, nor is eating food. Satan snatches up fifteen differently sized sticks and winks at me. "Alright, everyone! Gather around! We're all going to pull twigs. People with similarly-sized ones get teamed together. Got it?"

Several demons grumble, but everyone still nods, Lucifer included. I spot Belial hovering next to Satan, a look of curiosity in her eyes.

Satan holds out the twigs, and everyone takes turns plucking them out one by one. After we finish, only Valac is left to pick from the last two. The specter of death says nothing as he snatches one of the remaining contenders from Satan's grasp.

Bael holds the twig in front of his face and squints to stare at it. His expression appears remarkably stupid. "Uhh... so how's this gonna work?"

Satan clears his throat. "Ahm, well, you see, I already measured them all, so it's a matter of identifying each one. Diablo, you're working with Bael. Agares, you and Orias are together..."

It takes a minute for Satan to line everyone up. By the time he finishes, the teams come out as follows:

Satan, Belial, and Valac on Team One.

Me, Bael, and Lucifer on Team Two.

Agares, Orias, and Vepar on Team Three.

The other two teams don't seem to matter much. They consist of a few grumblers, but nobody of note.

Belial screws her face up in deep thought. "Now, hold on a second. My twig is smaller than Lucifer's. Shouldn't I be on Bael and Diablo's team, and she be here? Orias's doesn't seem right either."

Satan waves his hand nonchalantly. "Nah, doll. Don't you worry your cute little tush. I checked beforehand. Trust me, the devil's in the details, baby."

"Doll? Baby?" She crosses her arms. "Getting a little familiar there, aren't you?"

Satan ignores her. "I wrote the rules for this game ahead of time. It's simple. Predator animals are worth ten points. Fast ones, like deer or hares, are worth four. Birds are two. Anything else, like bugs, are worth zero. We don't wanna wipe out the whole forest, ya know?"

Everyone nods and stares in surprise as Satan motions with his hands, and a glowing papyrus scroll appears in midair. Hundreds of words appear on the paper as it uncoils, and he lowers it onto a flat stump nearby for us to read.

"Alright, here are the rules. You guys give 'em a read, and when you're ready..." He motions with his hand, and a feather appears in midair. "...prick your finger with this, and sign the paper in blood."

Agares raises an eyebrow. "Hm? We can't read or write. Why would we sign this silly scroll anyway? It looks like something you stole from the angelic library."

Satan holds up his palms. "No, no, not at all, Agares. It's a unique piece of papyrus I made for our competition. If you sign it, you accept the rules and promise not to cheat."

Bael stares at the scroll dumbly. "Uh, how we gonna do that?"

Satan sighs. He grabs the feather, pokes his finger to wet the tip with his blood, and quickly draws a simple portrait of himself on the bottom, little more than a grumpy face with horns on its head.

"There. Just like that."

Lucifer sweeps a strand of hair back behind her ear. "Tch. You put me on the same team as Diablo after I expressly requested for you *not* to do so, but expect me to accept the rules?"

"That's how the stones fell," Satan replies with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "Couldn't be helped. Bael, you go first."

He hands the feather to Bael. The giant demon gazes at it for a moment, pricks his finger, and scribbles a terrible-looking stick-demon onto the page. The papyrus glows for a second after he finishes, making him raise an eyebrow. "D-does that count?"

Satan smiles. A gleam appears in his eye. "Oh, yes. It certainly does. Agares, you next."

Agares draws a lizard for his signature. Orias, a star. Me, a fist. Lucifer, an eye.

Belial snickers to herself. "Kehehe. Drawing random body parts, are we? I expected breasts from you, Lucy."

"Shut up," Lucifer replies. "Something so vapid would be more in line with *your* personality."

"Yeah? Maybe it is. I like to have fun. You know what that is, don't you? *Fun*, I mean."

"Sign the damned paper. You're slowing us down," Lucifer says.

Belial quickly scrawls a pair of breasts on the page. "Hmph. Beautiful."

"No dignity. That's what I hate about you."

Listening to their conversation, I haven't the faintest clue why Lucifer and Belial hate each other. Sure, the imps have lived for millions of years by this point, but they seemed to get along fine before the dragon changed them. Maybe something else is going on under the surface.

After more demons sign, the final one, as always, is Valac. The hooded skeleton leers toward Satan. He holds a bony hand out. "How should I sign when my body isn't flesh or blood? Perhaps I should throw myself down and roll in the mud?"

"Um." Satan stares at Valac for a moment, then glances at the scroll. "Well, mud won't do. Eh. You don't need to sign. Forget it."

Everyone nearby, myself included, scoff at Satan. "What? Why not Valac? I thought the point-"

Satan motions for us to calm down. "The contract is a symbolical gesture. Don't think too hard about it. Valac can't sign, so he won't. Anyway, let's get to work. Time's ticking. I want to hurry up and go to Heaven."

"That makes one," I mutter.

Still, fighting alongside Lucifer excites Diablo. I'm not particularly enthusiastic. Lucifer isn't cuddly, cute, or sweet. I don't know what the big guy sees in her.

The five groups split apart. As I walk away from Satan, I notice a grin on his face. It seems sinister, as if everyone has fallen into a trap.

What could he be planning?

As the five teams split up, Satan yells, "We'll meet up in four hours. Get cracking!"

"Bael. Help me out," I whisper to the giant, walking beside me. Lucifer wanders up ahead, unable to hear my voice. "I need a high score to impress Lucy. Help me take down a cave bear."

"Are you stupid?" Bael whispers back. "No way. We can't beat one o' them. They're fuckin' huge."

"The two of us could take one. If I slow it down, you could rip off its head."

Bael scoffs. "No way. Them bears are like, really big. They'd eat us for breakfast."

I roll my eyes. "Fine. Don't. I never took you for the scared type."

Bael's red skin darkens. "What?! I ain't scared of nothin'! You take that back!"

"Children, *please*," Lucifer mutters. "If you're going to be on my team, I expect you to act maturely. I'm not losing to Satan or any of the others."

The demoness stops up ahead and sits on a stump. "You two are quite chatty. Tell me you have a brilliant plan to score hundreds of points."

I glance at Bael, then clear my throat. "Ahem! Uh, yes. I do. We're going to find and kill a cave bear."

All three of Lucifer's eyes blink at the same time. "A cave bear."

"Mhm."

"I thought you were at least a little intelligent, Diablo."

"Huh? Do you think it's a bad idea?"

The demoness fans out her fingers to examine her nails. "Cave bears are worth ten points, like any other predator. We'd be better off hunting feral cats or small wolves. I can't see why you'd want to do something as imbecilic as wasting time killing one gigantic animal."

Heat flares up in my cheeks. "Oh. I, uh, thought you'd be impressed... if I, uh, took down... a cave bear," I mumble.

Lucifer stares at me for a moment. "You're not wrong. I would find it impressive."

"Really?"

"Yes. However, that doesn't mean anything would change between us. Suit yourself. If you wish to kill some giant predator, I won't stop you. Just make sure you report my points accurately to Satan."

Bael scratches his chin. "Err. Your points? You ain't got any."

"We still have three and a half hours to go. I already figured out how to maximize my gains. Care to hazard a guess?"

My expression tightens. "You're not going to do it by killing cave bears. Maybe something smaller?"

"Much smaller, yes. Birds, to be specific."

Bael nudges me. "Is this broad dense? Birds are only worth two points! Why would she-"

"I'm right here," Lucifer says, ice in her voice. "They're only worth a fifth the points of the predators, that's true. However, if one were to kill them en-masse..."

Lucifer's eyes stay fixated on mine. However, the third eye in her forehead tilts to look behind me, at the canopy of a tree.

Her third eye narrows. She concentrates for a moment, and a laser shoots out with pinpoint precision.

"SQUAWK!"

A bird screams in pain. I turn around in time to see it fall from a branch and slam into the ground, snapping its neck. The other birds in the tree scatter in panic, seeing one of their friends die in such a horrible manner.

"Perfect," Lucifer says.

I turn to look at her again. Her third eye shifts color from red to purple. The squawking of birds above suddenly goes silent.

Two seconds later, the sounds of several muffled *thuds* makes me flinch in surprise. I turn around again to behold dozens of birds free-falling out of the sky. Each of them either smacks against trees and their branches or slams against the ground at full speed, killing them instantly.

Dozens of birds perish one after the other. They die so quickly I lose count of their numbers.

After a moment, the sounds of chirping and squawking go silent. Lucifer yawns. "Ahhn, hmm, I suppose that was sixty or so? A hundred and twenty points for me."

"What? How..." Words fail me. I haven't a clue how she killed them.

Bael scratches his head. "Damn. She must have something like Mega Bitch Vision. Those birds died from a nasty glare."

"You're close," Lucifer replies. "I hypnotized them with my third eye. They temporarily forgot how to fly. The result was death by free-falling."

"That's incredible. It feels like you're gaming the system, though," I say. "I think Satan wanted us to-"

"I don't care what the little bastard *wanted*," Lucifer says, cutting me off. "Satan doesn't own me. This trial is a contest for leadership, one determined by points. He probably thought he had some power that would allow him to win, but I'll end with thousands of points. He hasn't a prayer."

Lucifer smiles, putting all of her shark-teeth on display. She chuckles to herself. "Heh, heh... I'll rule our people. Satan thinks he's a brilliant man, but he's a fool. He'll have no choice but to admit defeat. And when he does-"

Suddenly, before Lucifer can finish, the roar of a massive animal shakes the forest. Hundreds more birds take off and scatter in every direction.

"GROOOOOAAAR!!!"

Bael and I spin to face the sound. It appears to come from the direction of Leviathan's mountain.

"Bloody- was that a cave bear?!" Bael asks. His jaw drops. "It sounds massive!"

Lucifer scowls. "Seems one of the other teams had the same idea as you two. Nincompoops. Fighting one of those behemoths is asking for trouble.

A drop of sweat trickles down my neck. "We should check on our friends and make sure they're okay."

"The roar came from the direction of Satan's team," Lucifer says, a smug smile on her face. "I'm watching the spectacle unfold right now. My Divine Vision pierces the tree cover easily. I think he put himself into a situation he couldn't handle. We might have a dead demon on our hands, shortly."

"My palms clam up. The sweat on my neck condenses dramatically.

"C'mon, Bael. We gotta help the boss."

Bael snorts. "Pft. He angered the bear. He should be able to handle himself."

"Yeah, maybe, but maybe not. Let's take a peek. We can't beat Lucy anyway."

"It's Lucifer!" The demoness yells from behind me. "And you're damn right. Nobody can defeat me."

I turn and give her a thumbs up. "That's what I love about you, baby. You're such a positive thinker!"

"Shut up."

My mind shifts, leaving Diablo's body and appearing inside Satan's. I know it's him because the first demon I see is Belial, standing in her leather bra and skirt.

Belial slowly licks her lips. "How are we going to win, Satan? You always have a plan."

I chuckle. "Heh. Easy, toots. Don't you worry about me. I've got this gig in the bag. You, on the other hand, gotta prove yourself. You and Valac both. I'm tryin' to figure out who's gonna be my number one and two, ya dig?"

"No..." Belial says, shaking her head. "I don't understand. How are you going to get points?"

I yawn and flop down on the ground, resting my head against a log. "I'm not. It's no biggie. You and Valac though- hey, where did he go?"

Leaning back on my hands, I pause before relaxing to look around for the skeletal demon. After a moment, I spot him standing next to a tree, staring at it silently with all four arms hanging limp at his sides.

"Ey, Valac! What are you doin'? You're supposed to be killin' stuff!"

My words fall on deaf ears. If Valac hears me, he doesn't reply. His hooded body is impossible to make out underneath all the animal skins covering him, so I can't tell if he has the slightest reaction to my words.

I lean up, irritation on my face. "Bloody dipshit. He's supposed to be working, but he's just goofing off!"

Belial rests her hands on her hips. "Isn't that what *you're* doing?"

"Sure, but I'm the boss. I can lay around if I want."

"It must be nice to be in charge."

I wink at her. "Never know. You could rule demonkind someday."

Belial sighs. "Hmph. That sort of life doesn't interest me."

Unlike the Samantha I know in the future, the Belial of the ancient past isn't very sexy or flirty. A lot of her sexuality and pheromones appear underdeveloped as well, giving the impression she has yet to become a succubus. Her appearance is plain and drab, with less of an emphasis on her curves and body compared to Lucifer.

Still, Satan eyeballs her, moving from her head to her toes with his piercing gaze. Belial takes a step back. "Stop leering."

"Why? If you're gonna stand around instead of killing stuff, you might as well do some sexy poses for me. Gimme a nice view, babe."

Belial presses her tongue against her inner cheek. "What a pervert."

"I'm a guy. I do guy things," I reply. "Damn. This whole idea ain't gonna work if everyone stands around doin' nothing."

"Guide by example," Belial says, gesturing to the forest. "If you want to make an army, you have to lead the charge."

A few moments pass. I sigh. "Alright, sure, whatever."

I hop to my feet and clap my hands. "Hey! Valac! Let's go! We've got to start racking up a few points!"

Valac continues to stare at the tree. Eventually, he turns to face me, his face darkened by the hood.

"Points are useless, and your game is trite. You won't become a king via pretense of birthright. I don't mean to confuse, and I don't care if I lose, this game will only be a waste of my time."

Slowly, I walk toward Valac. "Yeah? A waste of time, eh? You didn't even rhyme with that last bit, dumbass. C'mon. I need to see how good you are in combat. It won't do to have some mumbling bag of bones in my army if you can't land a punch."

"Kss..." Valac hisses quietly to himself, then raises his head to stare at me. His hollow eye sockets glow blue as tiny pinpricks of light replace his eyeballs. "Don't play games with me, Satan. I saw your contract. I read the words, the words..."

When Valac stops rhyming, it sends a chill down my spine. "You did? You're a fast reader."

Belial approaches from my left. "What do you mean, Valac? What's this about a contract?"

The quad-armed demon raises one of his left palms and forms several magic signs. A metallic scythe with several eerie inscriptions appears in the grasp of both his right hands.

"You'll know soon enough, my dear. Satan will become the one you fear. A liar from the start, deceiver at heart, that wretch is too smart... for my liking."

I cross my arms. "You're a mouthy little cunt."

As I meet Valac's eyes, the ground begins to tremble. For a moment, I almost think he's the cause, but I find out otherwise not long after.

A tree rips from the Earth and slams against the ground, making Belial and I twitch in surprise. We turn around to see teams three, four, and five running toward us, panic on their faces and Agares in his lizard-form leading the charge.

"S-Satan! It's terrible! Orias accidentally-"

"GROOOOOAAARR!!"

A massive creature howls angrily, not far in the distance. Through the snow falling, I stare with wide eyes as a tree flies through the air and slams against the ground. A monstrous bear, nearly fifty-feet-tall, stomps across the landscape, chasing after a demon trailing behind Agares. The young male turns to try and unleash magic on the beast, but he fails. The brown bear swipes its paw out and slaps him to the side, pounding him across the snow. He tumbles and twists several times before coming to a sudden stop; his body bent in several unnatural directions.

"Son of a-" I gawk for only a couple of seconds before turning to Belial. "It's a female cave bear! They're supposed to be hibernating! What the fuck did you morons do?!"

Agares scurries across the ground, ducking to avoid globs of snow that sail over his head. He pounces at a tree beside me like a wild animal, shivering as his cold-blooded body begins to slow.

"S-Satan, we have to stop th-that rampaging-"

I know," I say, cutting in. "Damn. It killed Milfir in one hit. Belial, can you distract it? I'll go with Valac and try to deal a killing blow."

The colossal cave-bear roars again and swipes at a demon pressing against a tree. Purely out of instinct, the demon ducks, and the bear rips out half of the trunk, allowing the tree to teeter forward and fall atop the great beast. It shrugs off the one-ton log with ease.

Valac hisses. "Your little game brought this bear; now she's come to rip and tear, throw your body in the air, send you fleeing in despair. Why should I help, when I can laugh as you fall on your derriere?"

I scowl at Valac. "Tch. Fine! I'll deal with him myself. Agares! Follow me!"

I stomp through the snow, charging the massive animal, but my knees rapidly begin to shake. The beast is enormous. I barely stand as tall as the first joint on its leg. How am I supposed to defeat it?!

"Satan!" From the forest, Diablo's voice reaches me. I turn and smile, though the elation in my chest is short-lived. "Deebs! We need your help! This monster is on a rampage!"

"GROOOOAAARR!!"

The bear hears my voice and rushes toward me. I dive to the side, but far too slowly, as a five-clawed paw rushes toward me.

Something yanks me to my left, pulling me out of the bear's range. The wind from the creature's claw blows me away, but I land safely in Belial's arms, as she stretches back to her standing position.

"You and Diablo figure something out! I'm going to distract it!"

I nod, staring dumbfounded at her face. She suddenly seems far more beautiful than before.

"Y-yeah, sure thing. Thanks for-"

Belial doesn't stick around to listen. She pounces at the animal, stretching her legs to stand up to its height. One of her fists rushes toward its face and knocks the big brute backward a step or two, bruising its ego more than its cheek.

The bear shakes its head in surprise and evaluates Belial for all of three seconds before deciding to focus on her.

"GROOOOARRR!!"

Diablo dashes toward me with Bael in hot pursuit. "Boss! Are you okay?"

"I'm fucking dandy. We need to kill this thing. Where's Lucy?"

"She's... busy," Diablo replies.

"Busy. Sure. Change of plans. Bael, you're the biggest, meanest, toughest bloke we have. Grab some boulders and start throwing. Aim for its head."

Bael appears annoyed by my suggestion, but given the colossal beast trying its damndest to kill Belial, he takes my orders in stride. "Throw rocks. Sure. Easy."

He turns and runs toward the nearest boulder, leaving Diablo, Agares, and me behind. Orias and Vepar join us, while the remaining demons do their best to avoid the cave bear's attacks as best as they can.

Orias gasps for breath. "S-sorry, Lord Satan. There was a cave, I wasn't paying attention, and when I spotted a shiny rock stuck in the wall, I accidentally woke the bear-"

"Don't give me a play-by-play," I say, interrupting him. "We have to take this beast down. Vepar, can you poison it?"

The demoness hisses. Vepar's drooping face hints at a terrible disease, but I don't have the time to guess what it is.

"I could try, but my poison isn't very effective against large animals."

"If we can blind this bear or give it a head cold, that'll be enough for me. Orias, I need you to whip up some darkness around Bael. He's our heavy hitter. If the bear sees him, we won't have a way to kill it."

The shrouded demon nods. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a handful of black gemstones. "Alright. I'll do what I can."

I turn to Agares. His shivering is nearly uncontrollable now. "Dammit, dumbass. Get out of that lizard form. You're useless in the snow."

His teeth chatter violently. "Y-yeah. Gimme a second."

While he demorphs, I turn to Diablo. "What are your powers?"

Diablo shrugs. "I can put animals to sleep if I touch them. I can make them see mirages, too. If I have other powers, I haven't discovered them yet."

I stare at him dumbfoundedly. "Can you put the bear to sleep?"

"Not a chance. It's way too big."

"So, you're useless?!"

"Like you, yup."

I pat Diablo on the arm. "Alright, stay out of the way. If everyone works together, we can take this bastard down."

"GROOOOAAAARR!!"

The bear unleashes another mighty howl right as Vepar sends a cloud of poison rushing at its face. Sadly, the gas doesn't affect it. The bear ignores her and continues trying to tear Belial to pieces as she hops and bobs, pounding it with surprising force. Her strength is incredible, but nowhere near enough to knock it out.

Boulders as big as my body fly toward the bear's head. It bats them aside, then changes its tactics out of the blue and kills two of the lesser demons who get too close with a single swipe. Their screams of panic cut off instantly as they meet their end.

Satan clenches my fist. "Damn," he mutters under his breath. "If only I had even one ability, I could help. I'm worthless."

Diablo grabs my shoulder. "Don't say that! You're leading everyone. If we work together, we can kill this beast."

"My friends are dying!" I yell, turning to face him. "And I can't help them fight!"

"If you can't fight, lead," Agares says, having finished his morphing. "Diablo and I are useless, too. You're fighting to save us. Make us proud."

I nod. "Alright. I'll do what I can, chums. Stay out of the way, and don't let this big, furry bastard spot you."

Turning my attention to the bear, I quickly wade through the snow, taking in the scene as best as I can. Belial's arms, once fists, have become two deadly blades. Instead of punching the bear, she stabs and lances it all over, bouncing out of its reach whenever it draws near, and ducking under its legs to inflict

damage on its softer underbelly. Sadly, her attacks seem little more than pinpricks against its bulk. Spots of blood dot the beast's hide all over, but none seem deep enough to cause significant damage.

Bael continues grabbing boulders and flinging them at the bear, but they glance off its thick, wooly fur, causing light injuries at best.

From my perspective, as a human from the future, it's almost comical seeing the demons of the ancient era get their asses handed to them by this wild animal. However, Satan's beating heart pounds in my chest, as well as his. A tear drips down his face as the bear jumps backward and crushes a demon standing behind it. The poor fellow never saw his death coming.

I'm failing them, Satan's body screams. If only I had more power. If only...

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Valac rushes past me. He reaches the bear with alarming speed, ducks its swinging claws, and rears back his bone-scythe.

Swish.

Valac slashes the bear's stomach.

All the fight in the animal vanishes. Its momentum comes to a crashing halt, and the light vanishes from its eyes.

The beast stumbles forward and collapses on the ground. Everyone, including me, stares in shock at Valac. The cloaked demon grins evilly, exposing his jawbone underneath his hood. He motions with his hand, causing his scythe to vanish and his lantern to appear. An unearthly moaning sound erupts from the beast, as a ghostly form appears from its body and sucks into Valac's lamp.

"Mmm. A delicious soul for the Grim Reaper. It will make a fine addition to my collection."

"W-what..." Bael gawks at Valac. "He... he killed... the bear... in one hit."

"Unbelievable."

"Did you see that?"

Several demons whisper to each other as they gaze at Valac.

Valac trudges toward me, deliberately taking his time. When he arrives, he whispers. "You can be the 'leader,' Satan, but now everyone will know who *you* answer to... hehehe..."

He slowly wanders behind me off into the distance, ignoring Agares and Diablo. As he leaves, a hollow pit forms in my stomach.

Belial approaches me, a look of concern on her face. "Satan? What did he say?"

I wet my lips. "S-something about repaying a favor."

"Oh."

I wipe sweat from my forehead and slow my beating heart.

Valac saved my life, and the others as well. But... he also embarrassed me.

I ball my hand into a fist.

Damn you, Valac. You got me.

Later, I gather the remaining demons.

"Where's Lucy?"

Diablo stares at me. "She stayed behind. I think she was going to-"

"I'm right here."

A woman speaks up, turning my attention away from Diablo. Lucifer strides into the group. "Did you have fun with that cave bear?"

"We lost eight people. More than half of our fighting force."

"Wonderful. Now we won't have any dead weight slowing us down," Lucifer replies blandly. "Are you going to tally my points?"

I glower at her. "The points don't matter anymore. We all got a feel for our powers... ahh, fuck it. Where are your kills?"

The demoness grins, revealing her teeth. "Everyone, follow me."

We do.

A few minutes later, all of the demons arrive at an enormous pile of bird corpses. I stare at it for several seconds, trying to guess how many are there. The miniature mountain of feathers and flesh proves too intimidating for words to describe it.

Lucifer gazes at me smugly. "Fourteen thousand, six hundred, and ninety-one."

"What? You killed *that* many birds?"

"Indeed. As such, I'll be taking the role of leader. Those were the rules, weren't they? Unless you did better than me, *Satan*."

I shake my head while still gaping at the pile of bird corpses. "No. I didn't. You won the competition without a doubt."

Despite the snobbish look on Lucifer's face, I'm the one who smiles.

"Ahh, about the competition. I forgot to mention there were a few *extra* rules added."

"What do you mean?" Lucifer gazes at me suspiciously. "You didn't mention any extra rules."

My smile widens. The thought of putting this conceited bitch in her place makes me giddy with joy. "But I did, girl! It's all right here in my Blood Contract."

Waving my hands, I produce my magical scroll once again. The words on it, written in a strange, demonic language, glow ominously along with everyone's signatures.

Lucifer stares at the contract, but she doesn't seem to understand the words. "Explain. What rules are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing too important! Well, by signing the contract, you agreed to obey my orders for the rest of our lives, and that you would never make any attempt on my life. Simple stuff like that."

All the demons nearby gasp. Belial's lip quivers. "Satan! Y-you tricked us! You-"

"I did what was necessary," I say, cutting Belial off. "Once I don't have to worry about any betrayals, we can progress toward saving the rest of our kin."

Agares is next to speak. "Unthinkable. I can't believe you'd do this, Satan. We trusted you. It wasn't enough to prevent a betrayal, but you also made it so we had to follow your every order?!"

Bael punches his palm. "Pah! You think I care?! That stupid paper don't mean nothin'! I'll knock your head off right now!"

Bael, a powerful Demon Baron, charges at me, but I don't flinch. The moment he rears back to swing, his body freezes, as if a thousand ghosts had suddenly appeared to hold him in place.

"Huh? I-I can't move! What the fuck is this?!"

"It's Satan's ability," Diablo murmurs. "You sly hound. You acted like you were powerless ever since meeting the dragon, but that scroll had a purpose. Amazing."

Smiling, I bow dramatically. "Yes, yes, praise me more, chums. You can all be pissed if you like, but nobody can nullify my contracts, not even me. You're stuck like this for the rest of your lives."

Belial takes a step back and covers her chest. "S-so, you can make us do anything you want? *Anything?*"

"That's not important!" Lucifer yells. "Valac didn't sign! That means he got off scot-free while we didn't! Outrageous! I have an urge to splatter you all over this forest, you damned-"

I ignore her and look around, but Valac is nowhere to be seen. "Let's all move past the trickery. You can't undo it, and in time you'll come to find I had my reasons. More importantly, now that everyone has witnessed the potential of my contracts, you understand the threat it poses. I want to weaponize it against the angels."

Lucifer shuts up. Despite her anger, my words pique her curiosity.

"Will it allow us to strike a blow against Samael?"

I grin. "Hehe. Well, it's funny you mention him."

Part 095: The Archangel Gambit

Once again, my vision returns to the campfire before Solomon and the Archangels. Michael appears more agitated than usual, which isn't surprising, given how he's almost always on edge.

"This Valac guy seems powerful," I say with a reserved tone. "If he was the Grim Reaper, then he must have been a terrifying opponent."

"Hmph. I wouldn't go so far as to praise the Reaper," Michael replies. "But t'would not be a lie to say his abilities were... formidable. Valac's soul manipulation stood at a precipice far beyond others of his ilk. Not only did he mold the souls of humans, but bloodskins and monsters as well."

I scratch my chin. "Mmm. Speaking of monsters, where do they come from? I've always wondered about that. I saw goblins and orcs in videogames and books and other such forms of entertainment, but I never saw them in the real world."

Solomon smirks. "The world you knew, in the 21st century, held many tenuous links to its ancient past. The forces manipulating humanity from the shadows went to great lengths to conceal our storied history and to pretend the existence of the demons was little more than old mythology from ancient civilizations."

"Do you mean that humans were working with the demons to conceal the existence of demons?"

"Sometimes, yes. After battling mighty heroes like myself, Alexander the Great, King Arthur, and Joan of Arc, demons began to avoid human society. The might of a hero was, for thousands of years, the only threat to demonkind, but eventually, humanity's total military might began to dwarf even the heroes. By the time of automatic weapons, demons made sure to hide underground and never show their faces."

"Some might call such actions cowardly," Raphael says. "I thought them wise. There were several instances when the demons came close to wiping out all of humanity and the angels. Thankfully, thy people were resilient. Humans shared one quality with the demons they didn't account for, which was resilience. Like cockroaches, if a few scatterings of humans survived anywhere and the demons didn't sniff them out, that pocket of resistance would grow back and learn to counter the tactics the demons used, forcing them to change. 'Twas a delicate balance maintained for several thousand years."

"Unintentionally," Gabriel adds. "If the demons had a chance to defeat humanity, they would have used it."

I reach back and itch my head, though it surprises me I can feel the sensations in a dream world. Solomon's Crown is something else. "Demons could kill humanity now, but they haven't. It's in their best interest to turn us into soul-energy cattle, but why didn't they realize that back in the ancient times?"

"Ah, it's funny you ask," Solomon says. "The short answer is that the overwhelming majority of demons *couldn't* steal souls from dead humans. That changed later. We'll get to it eventually. In the meantime, perhaps we should move to the next vision?"

I nod. "Yeah. Sounds good. Take the helm, captain."

Solomon rolls his eyes. "Aye, aye."

This time, when I materialize, I end up once again in Satan's body. I know because of his height, and when I open my eyes, the first person I see is Agares.

The two of us take the lead as we guide the remaining demons through a familiar winding cave. Our eyes, now able to see in the dark, allow us to navigate without Uzziel's angelic glow showing the way.

It doesn't take long for us to arrive at Heaven's Gate. The opaque portal, unguarded from the outside, hums pleasantly as waves of blue energy oscillate inside the gateway. The rivers of mana spin around, beckoning for us to enter.

"This is it, boss," Agares says. "I hope your plan works."

"Me too, chum," I reply. Even though sound can't pass through the portal, we keep our voices low, fearful someone will hear us. "Someone's gotta take the two guards down real quiet-like. I dunno when the shifts rotate, so we'll need to-"

Suddenly, a hand grabs my shoulder. I turn to look at the person interrupting me, only to see Bael's huge head inches from mine.

"We gotta go in there and kick some ass! Hit 'em hard! Let's beat the crap outta any angel in our way!"

I sigh. "Bael, you're going to stay behind. I don't want to cause a racket, and that's all you'll do."

"W-what?" Bael pulls away. His face contorts into an expression of shock, as if I've deeply wounded him. "I don't... get to... smash some heads?"

"No. You don't. Once we're inside, you and Deebs will stay behind at the gate and signal us if the angels discover our presence. We're using stealth, not dumbassery, understand?"

Bael puffs out his lower lip. "I-I'm plenty stealthy."

"Yeah, sure. You're full of shit. Stick to the plan."

I gesture toward the gate. "Alright, Deebs. I hope you know what you're doing."

The hairy demon jerks his thumb out. "Hah! Always!"

Diablo zips toward the gate, pauses for a moment to take a deep breath, then jumps through.

Several seconds pass. All of the demons watch with pounding hearts as we wait for the results.

"D-did he make it?" Bael asks.

"I don't know, moron. Wait and see. If he didn't... we'll know soon."

Hardly have the words left my mouth when suddenly two unconscious angels come flying through the portal. They hit the ground with a dull *thud*, and Diablo hops back to our side, landing atop the nearest one's back.

"I was fortunate! They didn't resist my sleep magic at all!"

All six of us walk over to Bael. I nudge the closest one with my foot. "Nice. Bael, snap his neck."

Agares glances at me in confusion. "What? We can't kill them, Satan! They're defenseless."

"Zactly. It means they won't put up a fight. We've been killing animals left and right. What difference does it make?"

Diablo hops to the floor and steps away, allowing Bael to draw near. Before the big guy can do his work, Valac shoves me aside.

"That one's soul is mine; his death will be sublime. Don't cry or whine; there will be a next time."

Bael jumps aside as Valac summons his scythe. The Reaper swings around and stabs the blade down. It passes through the angel's body and hits the ground with a *tink*. A moment later, the angel's skin pales. His glowing aura dims, and the life expires from his eyes. Valac raises his lantern. A ghostly wisp escapes the angel's body, enters the lantern, and spins inside for a moment before coming to a rest.

Everyone stares in shock as Valac raises his scythe over the second cherub. "What was that?" Agares asks.

Valac drives his scythe through the second cherub's chest. As the light fades from the angel's eyes, Valac turns away. "The power of an angel, the power of the Creator. I reap their souls so my power will become greater."

"What's a soul?"

Valac doesn't reply, but I do. "It's the innermost part of an angel or one of us. When it dies or vanishes, so do they, leaving an empty husk behind."

Agares stares stonily at the two dead angels, then wipes his forehead. "Tsk. Killing someone when they're helpless feels wrong. I can't condone it."

"I don't like it either," Bael grunts. "It ain't fun if they don't fight back."

"Enough bickering," I say, interrupting their conversation. "We don't have long. Let's go."

Reluctantly, Agares falls into place beside me as we hop into the portal. The other five demons follow after, and once we arrive on the other side, I glance around warily.

"I don't see anyone. Bael, Deebs, you two stay near the portal. If any angels come, try and knock 'em out. If you can't... make sure we know."

"I understand," Diablo replies. He makes an *ok* sign with his hand. "I'm on the job."

I gesture toward Belial. "You and Agares, come with me. We've gotta find Samael and Uzziel. They're the key to my plans. The rest of you, fan-out, keep low, and try to blend in. Stay away from angels if you can. Tell the imps to spread the word about our flight."

Lucifer, Orias, and Vepar nod. "Understood."

Valac lowers his head. "Do as you please, but I have a goal. Don't interrupt me, or for you, a bell will toll."

The Grim Reaper glides through the nearby tall grass, becoming a shadow amongst the greenery. The rest of us stare at him silently as he leaves, unsure what to do.

"He'd better not fuck everything up," I mutter. "Let's move."

I head toward the Gardens, keeping out of sight whenever possible. Agares and Belial slink along behind me, though it doesn't take long for my nerves to tremble.

"Too many angels around," I mutter. "We stick out like a sore thumb, especially in these clothes. Imps don't wear animal hides."

Agares' tongue flicks out of his mouth. "Tsk. Let's shed them, then."

"I'd rather not," Belial says, acting oddly prudish. "I'm not comfortable in the nude."

"Shake your tush," I say, turning to grin at her. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Besides. A little nudity ain't nothin' compared to what'll happen if the angels discover us."

Anxiety boils inside Belial's eyes. She bites her lip, unsure what to do, but after a moment, she begins pulling her tigerskin clothing off. "Fine. Stop staring."

I roll my eyes. "Ain't nothin' to see. You're flat as a board."

"Excuse me?"

"Someone's sensitive."

I quickly start pulling my pants and shirt off, and when I finish with my shirt, I stare at Belial in surprise. "Uh, what? You look..."

Belial, her body now shrunken down to an imp form, smirks at me. "Illusion magic. Now you have nothing to ogle."

"You can change your appearance?"

"It's temporary. I suspect perceptive angels will see right through my disguise."

I quickly rub my chin. "Can you use that on us?"

"Maybe? I'll try."

Belial weaves a few magic signs, then walks over and presses her palm against my chest. As soon as she draws close, her body morphs back into her demon form, but after stepping away, it shrinks again.

She repeats her magic with Agares, and after the two of them separate, Agares' body shrinks. "Did it work?" He asks.

"Yeah. I think it did for me, too."

Belial breathes a sigh of relief. "My magic will wear off soon if I don't keep renewing it, so we need to move fast. Don't walk too close to angels. They'll see through our facades."

"Trust me. I'll keep my distance."

* * *

The three of us start walking toward a large group of angels near the center of the Gardens. It doesn't take long before we spot Uzziel with a crowd of onlookers watching as she plays her harp.

"There's the dame," I whisper to the other two. "We gotta pull her out of that crowd. Isolate her. Get her all alone."

Agares frowns. "Be careful, Satan. She might look like a young woman, but Uzziel is still an Archangel. She's extremely dangerous."

"You don't have to tell me twice. Keep your eyes peeled for Samael. He's the key to my plan."

Cautiously, we skulk around the edges of the gathering. One or two angels glance at us for a moment, but they turn back to Uzziel's performance after a second or two. We don't matter to them.

After finishing, Uzziel bows her head, and the others clap politely. "Beautiful as always!"

"Thank you, I do what I can," Uzziel says sweetly. Her radiant smile warms the hearts of everyone nearby.

"Satan," Belial whispers. "Return to that secluded spot behind the tree. I have an idea."

I frown. "What are you planning?"

"I'm going to draw Uzziel away from this crowd. Don't worry. I think I'll succeed. If I don't try, she'll probably continue playing her harp for hours."

"True. Mother loves plucking at the damn thing."

Agares raises an eyebrow. "Shouldn't we stop calling her 'mother' now?"

"Of course not, dumbass. Our goal today is to use Uzziel for our gain, not to hurt her. If she turns feisty, we'll use force. Otherwise, we won't."

"Whatever you say."

Agares and I leave Belial to the task at hand. We slip off and return to the tree where we stashed our clothes and lie in wait.

A minute passes. Two. Three.

I bite my lip. "Damn. What's taking so long?"

Agares appears unfazed. "Belial is cautious, Satan. Give her time to work her magic. If she pulls too hard, Uzziel might cause a scene. That would be disastrous."

"We don't have time, remember? The angels could check on Heaven's Gate at any moment. Cripes. Wish she'd pick up the pace. Can't ever rely on a broad for anything."

After another minute, Agares peeps out from behind the tree. "Oh! Look alive, Satan. Here they come."

I nudge Agares. "Try and stay out of sight, but morph into a lizard again. We'll need to subdue Uzziel, then lure Samael over next. You're the best guy for the job."

Agares nods. "As you command."

He quickly morphs his body, grows scales, claws, and a tail, then he scurries up the tree, climbing it just as Uzziel and Belial walk around to my side.

Uzziel's voice lilts when she sees me. "Oh, is this the one? I thought ye said he was injured."

Belial's eyes flick to me, then dart around, trying to find Agares. I quickly clutch my chest and lean back, pretending to be hurt. "Ah, mudder Uzziel, it bad. Tummy hurt."

Concern sprouts on Uzziel's face. "Oh? Are you alright, little one? Did you overeat?"

She takes a few steps toward me, ignorant of the reptile clinging to the branches above. As she kneels down, Uzziel's expression turns into a frown. "Hey... thy face is familiar. Come to think of it, so is the female's..."

The Archangel doesn't get a moment to piece the puzzle together. Belial and Agares pounce at her. Belial morphs and stretches her body, quickly wrapping around Uzziel's arms and legs to stop any spellcasting, while Agares lands on the woman's back, digs his claws in, and latches onto her firmly.

The Archangel flops onto her stomach, unable to fight back. Agares covers her mouth with his claws and presses a talon against her throat. "Don't make a sound, Mother. We won't hesitate to kill you."

Uzziel's eyes dart around in terror. She stops struggling to stare at me helplessly as I loom over her.

"We don't want to hurt you, Mother. As long as you keep quiet and play the part of our hostage, things will turn out alright. Agares, are you holding her tight?"

The reptilian demon nods. His crocodilian head makes it difficult to ascertain his emotions, but coiling around Uzziel's body seems to disturb him somewhat. I don't think he likes it.

"Alright. Belial, find Samael. Bring him here next."

The demoness unwraps from Uzziel slowly, allowing Agares to coil his tail around her arms, pinning them behind her back. "Uzziel told me where he was on the way here. I'll return soon."

Belial darts away, leaving Agares and me alone with Uzziel. The Archangel mumbles through Agares' claws covering her mouth. "Mghm?"

"I told you to keep quiet, Mother. Don't speak, and this will all be over soon."

Her body sags in Agares' grip.

This time, fifteen minutes pass. Agares begins to dart his eyes around. "Tch. We should have brought Deeb's. He could have put her to sleep."

"I need her to be awake. It'll convince Samael better if she struggles a little."

Agares glances away. "You're messed up, Satan."

"No more than some demons, and less than others."

Eventually, when I glance behind the tree again, I spot Samael walking behind Belial. He scowls at her as if he can't believe she would waste his time over some trivial task.

The moment Samael rounds the tree, his eyes laser onto Uzziel, facedown on the grass, with a freaky lizard-creature wrapped around her.

"Sister?! What in the name of-?!"

"Don't move," I say, holding a finger to my neck. "Or your sister dies."

Samael blinks twice. He starts to motion with his hands, but freezes when Agares stabs his talon deeper into her throat, causing her to whimper and cry. A few drops of blood drip into the grass, staining it red.

The Archangel of Change pauses, uncertain what he should do. "Tch! What is this?! How dare ye lay a hand on Uzziel!"

"Keep calm, and your sister will live to see another day," I say, ice dripping from my voice. Belial slides over beside me to get out of Samael's reach.

The male Archangel regards me for a few moments before lowering his arms to his sides. "Little imp bastard. Speak quickly, for soon, I will remove thy head from thy shoulders."

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, kid. I'm in control here." I wave my finger at Samael. "There's something I want, and only you can give it to me. If you don't, your sister dies."

Uzziel wiggles in Agares grasp and tries to yell something, but Agares coils around her a little tighter, like a python squeezing the life from its prey. His scaled claws continue to press against her lips, preventing her from screaming for help.

"Tell me what thou dost desire," Samael says. He suppresses his anger further, turning his expression deathly calm. His expression sends tingles of fear creeping down Satan's back, but the Devil forces himself to remain calm.

"That's better. I want you to help me release all the imps from Heaven. You should do everything in your power to ensure no harm comes to any of them."

Samael narrows his eyes. His expression is sometimes difficult to make out through the golden mask covering his upper face, but his look of suspicion is unmistakable. "An exodus? Thou intendeth for them to leave Heaven?"

"That's right, chum. Pretty simple, eh?"

Samael appears unconvinced. "Surely thou art a jester. Why should thou wish to leave Heaven when Earth is a miserable-"

"I have my reasons, stupid chicken. Don't question me. In addition to granting the imps safe passage, I want'cha to sign this scroll..."

My hands become a flurry of motion. Mana leaves my body and coalesces into a Blood Contract, which hovers before me in midair for a moment, then lands in my grasp.

"What is that?" Samael asks.

"Call it a souvenir," I say slyly. "It's a record of my first incredible deed beating an angel. By signing this, you acknowledge I beat you. That's all."

"I don't understand."

"It's a personal thing. Call it one of my eccentricities, if you want. Either way, if you don't sign it..." I nod toward Agares, and the reptilian squeezes Uzziel even harder, making her whimper and cry.

Samael grinds his teeth together. "Worthless... fine. Give me the damned scroll. I'll have the last laugh when we place thy wretched head upon a pike."

I nod, keeping my expression neutral. "Perhaps. We shall see."

I walk toward the Archangel, and he violently snatches the scroll from my grasp. "How do I 'sign' this. What does that even mean?"

"The feather. Prick your finger with it and write your name or a symbol on the page at the bottom. Use your blood."

The Archangel curls his lip in disgust. "Gah! My blood?! Thou art a morbid little wretch. What purpose would blood-"

"Sign it!" I bark, making him jump in surprise. "Or else!"

Samael closes his eyes, then sighs. "I can't wait to... to rip the life from thy skinny little..."

The Archangel doesn't finish his sentence. Instead, he releases his grip on the scroll. For some reason, it unfurls in midair, as if held by an invisible observer. With both hands freed, Samael takes the feather, stabs his finger, and begins to write on the page.

When the Archangel finishes, a strange sensation enters my body. Adrenaline, mixed with pure ecstasy, dance like the embers of a fire in my eyes.

My pupils dilate. I lick my lips. "Oh, yes. *Perfect.*"

With a flourish of my hand, the blood contract vanishes. I grin.

"Agares. Release Uzziel."

The lizard turns to gawk at me. "What?! Are you crazy? If I-"

"Do it."

Samael tenses up. He digs his feet into the ground, as if preparing to lunge at me once we free his sister.

I grin.

What a fool.

Satan's thoughts enter my mind, as clear as day.

Suddenly, a feeling of disorientation washes over me. I've never experienced anyone's thoughts but mine during Solomon's visions.

He played right into my hand. Heh heh heh...

Satan's grin widens. Samael curls up his lip and snarls. "What dost thou find so funny, little wretch?"

Uzziel wrenches out of Agares' grasp and flings him aside, then dashes to her brother. "S-Samael!"

Samael grabs his sister and pulls her behind him protectively. He lunges toward me, his fist ready to pound me into a pile of blood and gore.

I hold up my palm.

"Stop."

Samael freezes, his fist suspended mere inches from my face.

"Ngh. W-what... my... body..."

By now, my grin is downright maniacal. I begin to giggle like a madman under my breath.

"Hehe... stupid, ugly chicken. You signed your soul away to me. I own you. Stand at attention."

My command hits Samael harder than a sack of bricks. The Archangel yanks back to a standing position. Both of his arms hang rigidly at the sides of his body.

"I... I can't... move..."

Samael twitches, trying to unfree himself from the invisible shackles wrapping all around his soul.

Unfortunately, he cannot.

I whistle a merry tune and stroll over to the Archangel. "First rule, maggot. You will never hurt or injure me or any demon, ever again."

"Samael?" Uzziel's eyes widen. "What's wrong?"

I ignore her. "Second rule. You will follow my orders or those any demon gives you unless they conflict with the first rule."

Uzziel quickly grabs her brother's shoulders. "Samael! Snap out of it! This child does not command thee!"

Samael's breath begins to shorten. "This... this is... powerful magic. Verily, thou didn't place a spell on my body... ah! That scroll!"

I nod sagely. "How unfortunate for you to realize after you've already signed it. Ah, it can't be helped. Now, my first order for you will be a simple one, though I fear you won't like it."

Samael's eyes widen. "No... no! Uzziel! Flee! Warn the others! This imp is planning something terrible! He's-!"

"Restrain your sister," I say, cutting him off. "Prevent her from using magic, and cover her mouth so she can't scream."

Samael's body obeys my command instantly, though his movements are awkward and stilted. He pivots robotically and spins toward her. Instead of lunging toward Uzziel and grabbing hold of her, something strange happens.

Uzziel's arms yank away from her sides. Something invisible appears to grab and pull them apart. Her eyes widen once again as she tries to break free, but something with a grip far exceeding Agares' holds her in place. She tries to kick her legs out, but the invisible force grabs and pins those as well, then levitates her a few inches off the ground, suspending her helplessly in the air.

I narrow my eyes. "What's going on? How are you doing that, Samael? Answer me!"

Samael doesn't turn to look at me. "V-Vectors. My eight vectors. They're like long, invisible arms that allow me to- augh! It isn't thy business! I need not tell thee anything!"

"That's for me to decide," I mutter coolly. "Vectors, huh? Interesting. I didn't know you had a power like that. What other abilities do you have?"

The veins in Samael's neck bulge as he tries desperately not to answer. "Tr-transformation. I can shift my body into that of various animals. No! This information is not meant for thy wretched ears! How dare thee compel my speech!"

Uzziel wriggles, trying to escape. For the second time in several minutes, she is unable to break free of her assailant's grasp. This time, however, it's someone dear to her who holds her in place.

I nod to Agares and Belial. "Alright. We're done here. Let's help the other imps escape. We need-"

Suddenly, from the skies above, a male voice cries out. "By the Creator! Samael! What art thou doing to Uzziel?!"

My eyes dart to the speaker. A robed angel with a rose tucked behind his ear flaps his wings, gawking at us from above.

Samael yells, "Elphin! Run! Warn the others! This imp is using terrible magic to-"

"Stop speaking!" I bark at Samael, silencing him. "Rule three! Speak only when I tell you to!"

Elphin stares wide-eyed from above, unsure of what to do. However, to his credit, he quickly understands something is amiss. "Worry not, brother! I'll fetch the others!"

"No! Stop him!" I yell at Agares and Belial. "Don't let him sound the alarm!"

The two demons leap into action. Agares uses his powerful reptilian arms to grab Belial by the waist. She yelps in surprise, but quickly understands his intent as he rears back and flings her toward the angel fleeing in the skies above.

Belial races toward Elphin like an arrow toward a bullseye. He doesn't see her coming, and she slams against his back, wrapping herself around the Cherub like play-doh around an action figure.

Elphin yelps in surprise and loses control, plummeting toward the ground. He slams into the grass a few hundred feet away, just out of sight. Several dozen screams of surprise and alarm erupt in the clearing, turning my veins to ice.

"Damn. Damn! Now everyone knows something's up!"

Agares barks from behind me. "We have to escape, Satan! It won't be long before the other Archangels come. Whether you control Samael or not, we can't battle Michael, Gabriel, and Camael at the same time. We have to leave!"

I pause, as Satan's thoughts enter my mind.

There are tens of thousands of imps in Heaven. We can't have saved more than a few hundred yet. We need more time.

I gesture toward Samael. "Come with me. Bring Uzziel! We're heading back to Heaven's Gate."

Belial bolts out of the Garden and rushes toward us; panic etched into her face. "The angels are coming!"

"I know! Let's make like wolves and get the bark outta here!"

Recommended Listening

All three of us, plus the two Archangels, begin running toward Heaven's Gate. A glance over my shoulder sends a wave of panic coursing through me, as hundreds of Cherubs fly overhead, tailing not far behind us.

"Get a move on! Go, go, go!!"

As we near Heaven's Gate, a shocking sight greets us. Valac stands silently among a field of angelic bodies. Armored Cherubs along with robed Seraphs lie here and there, at least a hundred of them scattered across the land. Imps dash past the corpses, ignoring them as they flee toward Heaven's Gate. Everyone knows the Cherubs are coming. Panic spreads like wildfire once they spot us and our winged pursuers.

Diablo gasps. "The Archangel Samael! And Uzziel! Boss, you-"

"Not now, dumbass! Summon everyone! We've gotta escape right now!"

We slow to a grinding halt and spin to face the blotted-out sky. Within seconds, Cherubs begin racing toward us. They slam into the ground, one after the other, landing expertly on their feet. Each impact sends a rumble through Heaven's soil, jarring my teeth.

"Diablo! Use your magic on Uzziel! Samael, hold her down!"

Several cherubs yank out their swords and jump at me. I gasp and fall on my ass, watching helplessly as the weapons race toward my heart.

A blur of motion passes before my eyes.

The angels hit a wall of solid flesh as Bael protects me and blocks their attacks. He grabs their swords and flips them to the sides, then pounces at each one and smashes their faces in with punches and kicks, snapping a neck or two in the process.

A quick glance behind me reveals Samael fighting his body as he tries not to hand Uzziel over to Diablo. Diablo forms a few magic signs, grabs her by the back of the neck, and Uzziel's eyes close reluctantly. The Archangel falls asleep, and Diablo lowers her to the ground.

"Bind her," I command. "Samael, you're on frontline duty. Kill any Cherubs or Archangels who get too close. Protect us, and especially me, with your life!"

Samael snarls, but thanks to my command earlier, he cannot speak. The Archangel leaps to the front and assumes a defensive stance as he guards Heaven's Gate. He tries to keep Uzziel within his vision, but I point at the Cherub army. "Eyes up front, dickhead! Your sister isn't your concern anymore!"

His head twitches as he tries to resist. He fails.

Samael glowers and snarls at the cherubs, causing several to rethink their life's decisions. Many of them glance at each other, unsure of whether to attack.

Why is Samael working alongside the imps? Their eyes ask. Should we attack? Should we wait for Michael and the others?

They don't have to wait for long. As if on cue, four other angels arrive on the horizon. Two men and two women land amongst their brethren. I recognize the towering figure of Gabriel first, then Raphael beside him, but I haven't a clue who the women are.

"Samael? What is the meaning of this treachery?" Gabriel shouts. "Why dost thee stand against thy family? Why hath thee allowed the imps to bind Uzziel? Speak!"

Raphael leans forward and narrows his eyes. "Look closely, brother. Some of the imps stand taller than the rest. The bodies around us... Samael did not kill them."

Defiantly, I strut toward the Archangels. "Greetings. I doubt you'll recognize me, but I know you lot well. Gabriel, Raphael, Camael, Uriel. I'm surprised Michael didn't come along."

One of the Archangels, a female in splendid white and gold armor, far bulkier than seems necessary, glowers at me. Her face, wizened with age, reminds me somewhat of Raphael's, though it has a harder edge to it than his. She appears to be a little younger than him and is probably the second eldest of the group.

"Filthy imps. I foresaw thy treachery centuries ago. I cast it aside as a terrible dream, but now I see 'twas another prophecy given to me by the Creator. Release our sister, or suffer our wrath."

"A prophecy, eh? Camael, the Archangel of Divination. It must be handy, seeing into the future. If only you had acted on your visions, you might have been able to stop me."

The final Archangel is a gorgeous woman in a silken red dress. Her hair, white like that of her brothers and sisters, hangs loosely over half her face, covering her right eye. Her thin frame and dainty physique give her an air of naivete, as if she's little more than a twig that will snap in half if too much pressure is applied.

I may not know who she is at first glance, but the only one I haven't met is Uriel, Archangel of Protection. It must be her.

Uriel's eyes ignite in red-hot rage. She takes a step toward me, and all my impressions of fragility vanish as two fireballs ignite in both of her palms. "Disgusting red rat! Let not another word escape thy putrid lips! BURN!"

She flings the fireballs. Samael slides toward me, and his Vectors lash out, deflecting them harmlessly to the sides, where they explode against the grass.

I reach out and smack Samael's ass. "Hah! Nice one, chum! Those rules are coming in handy!"

"What? Samael... why art thou protecting these imps?!" Uriel stares at him in shock. "What's come over thee?"

I snap my fingers and point at Uriel with an *'oh yeah, baby'* expression. "Heh, Samael works for me now, you fat cow. He's seen the light."

I quickly glance around to take stock of my surroundings. Imps cower and hide next to the bodies of fallen angels everywhere. Our exposed position affords us little protection. The situation has turned dire. Satan's bravado appears violently misplaced, given the circumstances.

Agares slithers up beside me and whispers in my ear. "Boss. Diablo finished tying up Uzziel. The other demons have returned. A few hundred imps already fled through the portal... but that's all we could save. We didn't have enough time to find more."

In the sky above, hundreds of cherubs join the others. They circle overhead, watching, waiting for the order to attack.

Movement out of the corner of my eye makes me flinch. I turn to see Lucifer, Vepar, and Orias calmly walking toward the portal as if they haven't a care in the world.

"What is thy plan, little imp?" Raphael asks. He smiles at us warmly, like an old man about to break a paddle over his grandson's ass. "Thou didn't slay many of my brothers and sisters. Their corpses have yet to cool. Dost thee imagine a quick retreat is within thy grasp? At best, thou might make it a mile before thy worst nightmare befalls thee. If we fail to stop thee here, then Michael shall hunt thee to the ends of the Earth and tear ye limb from limb."

Raphael tries to talk me down, but Satan smiles back.

Stupid old man. I knew the angels would find out. I was hoping it would take longer, but nothing's changed.

"I want all of your angels to back off, grandpa. If they don't, we'll kill Uzziel."

I gesture toward the unconscious woman behind me. Diablo props her up with one arm and holds a crude stone knife to her neck with the other. Bael stands beside him, grinning, as if daring the angels to make a move.

"A hostage," Uriel murmurs. She balls her hands into fists. "How *cowardly*. Is this the reason for my brother's change of heart? Didn't thee cow him into submission by threatening his precious sister?"

I flick my gaze toward Lucifer. The demoness quietly motions for several imps to flee through the portal, continuing the plan even as hundreds of cherubs wait for us to slip up. They want nothing more than to gut us like pigs.

"No," I say, turning my attention back to Uriel. "Samael chose to join us freely. He supports our cause. Tell them, son."

Samael's eyes twitch. His mouth opens, and he speaks, but his voice is stressed as he tries to fight my command. "YES. I LOVE THE IMPS. I WANT TO FIGHT ALONGSIDE THE LITTLE RED BASTARDS."

"A convincing performance," Raphael says. "But I suspect foul play. Whatever thou dost seek, obtaining it via these acts of deception is sure to fail-"

WHOOMPH.

A massive explosion to my left makes everyone jerk in fright. A crater explodes in Heaven as Michael pounds into the dirt. Scarcely has he landed before the Archangel pounces toward us, a golden sword

aimed at me.

"BASTARDS!"

My heart turns to ice. The most powerful Archangel in Heaven has arrived, and he's *pissed*.

"Samael! S-stop him!"

I yell an order at the Archangel of Change while recoiling in terror. Panic floods my mind.

Michael clears the five-hundred-foot gap in barely a second. His sword moves insanely fast as he cuts apart several imps in his path, dicing them into hundreds of pieces before they can react. Samael pounces at his brother and whips out his Vectors to stop Michael. The two Archangels fly into combat as Michael instantly realizes Samael is his enemy. Unlike the other angels, Michael doesn't hold back.

From behind me, two imps yelp in surprise simultaneously. I turn around just in time to see Diablo and Bael fall into a sinkhole forming underneath them. They scream in terror, drop Uzziel, and try to grab at the sides of the chasm, but the ground swallows them up, and seals shut a split-second later.

"Hahahaha!! Foolish rats!" Uriel cackles delightedly. She motions with her hands and uses the power of Earth manipulation to spit Uzziel's bound, unconscious body out of the ground and into Raphael's arms. Diablo and Bael follow a moment later, and Camael snatches them out of midair.

"Gotcha!"

Camael flings my companions behind her to the cherubs. "Capture them! Hold them down! I want those two alive!"

I gasp. "Deebs! Bael!"

Agares howls. "Satan! We need to flee! Make a run for it!"

"I think not!" Gabriel yells. He stomps toward us, and a hundred cherubs dive toward us from the skies. "Kill the imps! Don't let even one escape!"

Everything moves so quickly I can barely follow the action with my eyes. The Archangel of Power blasts a wave of Holy Energy at me, intent on my destruction. Agares's tail coils around my waist, and he leaps toward Heaven's Gate, along with all the other imps in the area.

Lucifer aims her third eye at Gabriel. His attack ceases. He stumbles and trips, then falls flat on his face as he loses his footing. The cherubs from above howl in pain as Valac pounces into the sky and cuts through them with his scythe, making their corpses slam into the ground only seconds after dying.

While it rains cherubs around us, all the nearby imps push through the portal. Just before Agares and I enter it, I catch a glimpse of Diablo as he screams in pain. One of the cherubs stabs him with a magical blade and pours Holy Energy into his veins.

Then, Heaven vanishes. I pop through the portal along with Agares, Vepar, Orias, Belial, Lucifer, and all the others as well.

Agares dashes through the hallways, carrying me with his tail.

"Deebs! Bael! We have to save them!" I yell.

The reptile sets his jaw. "We can't, Boss! We can't..."

For some reason, the angels don't pursue us through Heaven's Gate. This time, though, I don't think it has anything to do with Titans.

Part 096: Attack On Chimera

"Holy shit. That was intense."

Before I mean to say anything, a curse leaves my mouth. I open my eyes and find myself before the bonfire once again, as the Archangels and Solomon gaze at me.

Michael sticks his chin out. His face contorts into disgust.

"Not a pleasant vision, was it? Twas a day I'll never forget. Satan, the leader of the demons, turned our brother against us. He forced Samael's hand, turning him into a living weapon."

"Samael didn't deserve such misery," Raphael says, his voice low. "Sadly, that day was only the beginning of his torment."

I raise my hand. "Question. Samael used a power he called the Eight Vectors. When I battled Satan six years ago, he also had it. Given this vision showed Samael signing one of Satan's Blood Contracts..."

"Thy presumption is correct," Michael replies. "Satan eventually took Samael's powers for himself. Not only Samael's abilities, but those of other demons, heroes, and angels. Satan may have been the weakest of his people at first, but as time passed, he eclipsed his peers. In many ways, thy rise mirrors his."

I raise an eyebrow. "It does? I do?"

Solomon nods. "I've taken my time training you, Jason. We've been lucky to have a lengthy reprieve from conflict with the demons. Wordsmithing holds more power than anything the demons and heroes could ever imagine, but it will require mental willpower, vast mana stores, and excessive creativity to master."

"The Knowledge Seeker speaks truth," Raphael says. "One of the reasons we're sharing our knowledge of the past is because we believe thou can't repair the damage the demons have wrought upon the galaxy. Returning the lives of our brothers and sisters is impossible, but thou may yet restore a sense of balance to the galaxy, preventing the demons from tearing apart everything in their path."

"I don't think the demons intend to cause permanent damage," I say. "They lived stably for a hundred thousand years. I'm unconvinced they're genocidal monsters. To be honest, the way you treated them in the past seemed downright awful. It's no surprise they turned against you."

Michael's expression sours. "Dost thee believe the demons were right to attack us? That we deserved the horrors they unleashed? We made many mistakes, but never anything worthy of the violence they rained from the skies. Now that we know about Leviathan, 'tis reasonable to conclude he corrupted the minds of the demons and turned them down the path of evil."

"Leviathan certainly had a hand in the demonic insurrection," I concede, "but you kicked and bullied the imps. You treated them like slaves for thousands of years. Millions, perhaps? I'm not surprised they went rogue. I would too."

"Blasphemy," Raphael says. "The angels conceived the imps to serve us. Thou art implying the imps had the *right* to revolt, but given they owed their existence to us, we held control over their lives from the moment of their creation."

"I don't care why the angels created the imps. What matters is how they treated them. Kicking, beating, and insulting them was inhumane. I can't see the imps as the bad guys, considering the circumstances."

A moment of silence passes. My words hang in the air as the three Archangels stare at me.

Michael waves his hand flippantly. "Give it time. Thy tune will change when thou dost witness what came next."

Solomon clears his throat. "Ahem. Let's return to the past. This time, we'll see the aftereffects of Satan's Blood Contract and what it could do to a person's mind. It wasn't pretty."

I say nothing. Solomon motions with his hands, and the world fades to black.

I can't see the angels as the good guys, no matter how they try to spin the past.

"Uzziel! Sister! Art thou injured?!"

Uriel's panicked voice jolts me awake. I open my eyes to see the waifish Archangel hovering above me. She rests her hand on my forehead.

"Where am I? What happened?"

In the distance, a dull *whoomph* blasts outward, shaking the ground. I lift my body to see what caused the noise and gasp as a chunk of rock whizzes past and misses me by mere inches, slamming into the ground beside my face.

Samael, the Archangel of Change, no longer resembles himself. Instead, he has transformed into a chimera, one with a cave bear's body, a lion's head, and a wolf's tail to boot. My first thought is that it resembles Kar's Sphinx form. However, the thirty-foot-tall monster dwarfs Kar's transformation by a factor of three, so the comparison doesn't seem apt.

"Samael! Why has he transformed?"

Uriel helps me to my feet. My numb legs tremble as I dust myself off. "Worry not, Uzziel. The foul demons attempted to capture thee from right under our noses, but I put a stop to their plans. They fled, but left Samael behind. He's been battling our brothers and Camael for thirty minutes now!"

The humongous monstrosity, Samael, unleashes a howl that blasts away the clouds above.
"GROOOOOAAARR!!"

Despite his transformation, Samael doesn't appear to have gone berserk. Instead, his eight vectors intelligently punch and thrash the other Archangels as they try to hem him in and cut his movements off. Gabriel, once the tallest angel in Heaven, now only stands at half Samael's height. He continuously fires powerful blasts of holy energy at his brother, but they deal little to no damage. Samael concentrates his attention on Camael and Michael, ignoring Raphael and Gabriel for the most part.

Michael darts around, tossing rocks into the air and batting them with his sword at Samael's reinforced animal hide repeatedly. His incredible strength and speed allow him to transform the stones into cannonballs, blasting Samael over and over.

Camael, meanwhile, wields a tremendous greathammer, taller than her body with a head that must weigh a ton. Her speed, while significantly slower than Michael's, is made up for by her strength. She leaps at the cave bear and slams her hammer into his stomach, knocking Samael fifty feet to the side. He crashes into the ground and leaps to his feet instantly, appearing unharmed by her attack.

Meanwhile, Raphael weaves several magic signs that appear to do nothing. I can't tell if he's helping or trying to distract the Archangel of Change with spooky finger movements. I hope it isn't the latter.

"Art thou capable of standing?" Uriel asks. "I have to help stop Samael. His transformation puts him well beyond a level of power our brothers can handle. At least, not if we hope to subdue him!"

Dizziness hits me for a moment, but I shake it off. "I'm fine. I'll help, too. Michael and Camael must be exhausted."

"Thou hath no idea," Uriel replies, worry in her voice. "We've expended valuable mana trying to stop Samael. I don't know what that little red rat did to him, but he won't listen to reason!"

I chew my lower lip. "Satan summoned a strange, glowing scroll and forced Samael to sign it. I don't know what it did, but Samael lost control at that moment. There's evil magic at work, sister. Let us work together to subdue him. Don't blame Samael for his actions!"

"I banish such thoughts," Uriel replies, ice in her voice. "Conserve thy energy, Uzziel. Thy body lay unconscious for a frighteningly long time. Leave this battle to me!"

"I'll be fine. We both have to save our family!"

Uriel nods, but a grim expression spreads across her face. "I won't lose a brother or sister. Not today."

Together, the two of us stand up straight and face our opponent. Samael, well over a football field away, lunges his invisible limbs out. Camael dives to the side as the ground explodes behind her. The impacts of his vectors leave bowling-ball-sized craters in their wake. Michael starts to bat another rock at superspeed toward Samael, but a Vector catches him off guard and pounds Michael backward, stunning the Archangel. Michael rolls and spins as he tumbles a hundred feet away. When he comes to a stop, it takes several seconds for him to pull himself up. He's fatigued beyond belief.

"Dammit, Samael," Gabriel says, his voice listless. "The Creator would weep if he witnessed thee in this state."

Samael doesn't reply. He only maintains his relentless onslaught and swipes at the ground, sending a hail of rocks at Gabriel. The Archangel of Power quickly raises his arms to shield his face, but in that instant, he reveals his chest as a blind spot. Samael charges at Gabriel and hits him five times at once, slamming his brother deep into the dirt. Gabriel cries out in pain, but a volley of blows silences him.

My heart sinks. Only Camael, Raphael, Uriel, and I are left standing. Camael motions with her hands, and a tiny metal orb, barely the size of a marble, materializes before her face. It hovers for a moment, then

falls into her outstretched palm. When she touches it, it expands and encases her gauntlet in iron, then transforms into a glowing shield.

Samael turns to look at her. The moment he makes eye contact, the shield unleashes a ray of blinding light. The chimera screams in pain and recoils, clawing at his eyes in agony. Camael pounces toward him, greathammer raised, and drives it into his head, smashing him into the ground. All of Heaven quakes from the impact, nearly jarring me off my feet.

"Now!" Uriel yells. "Assist Camael!"

I have no idea how Uzziel's powers work, but she does. I weave several signs, and after a few seconds, thick roots burst from the ground and wrap around Samael, pinning the Chimera in place. At the same time, Uriel summons four servants. The first two resemble angels, while the others consist of an orb and a cube levitating in the air.

The cube rapidly oscillates, and invisible forces press against Samael, holding him tightly. For some reason, instead of taking the opportunity to attack him while he's defenseless, Camael flashes her gaze toward Uriel, nods, and leaps backward, flapping her wings to put as much distance between herself and the chimera as possible.

I find out why only a few seconds later. Uriel's third servant, the orb, begins vibrating and spinning like the cube. A volley of rock and flame bursts out of its top and races toward the helpless chimera like a prehistoric artillery strike. Samael's *aaiiyee* of agony when they strike unnerves me, reminding me of someone kicking a wounded dog.

Smoke billows out from the impact point. I stare, wide-eyed. "By the Creator! Is... is he..."

Uriel tenses up. "He's still alive. And angry."

A sound like firecrackers explodes in the smoke. Samael clammers to his feet, tears apart my roots with his Vectors, and rushes toward us. "**GROOOOAARR!!**"

My heart stops. Seeing a thirty-foot-tall monster charging me scares me shitless. Luckily, Uzziel retains her senses. She motions with her hands and a hundred-foot-tall tree sprouts between Samael and me. Its branches explode outward, transforming into a spiderweb of green and brown, creating a wooden barrier between the two of us.

I almost breathe a sigh of relief. At least, until Samael *jumps*.

My tree presents no obstacle for him. The bear-lion-wolf hybrid animal leaps into the sky, clears the obstacle, and dives toward Uzziel.

Death.

The word flashes through my mind as the unstoppable killing machine speeds toward my body. I stand, helpless, and wait for my end to come.

Then, unexpectedly, Samael's rapid descent comes to a screeching halt. Like a bug hitting a windshield, the chimera awkwardly slams against a faintly visible barrier above. His body contorts, twists, and flips as a look of confusion passes over his face.

Uriel grabs my shoulder. "Sister, do not hesitate! My barrier caught Samael off-guard! Grab him before he recovers!"

Nodding, I weave more magic signs. This time, vines erupt from the ground, entangle Samael's limbs, and yank him down the side of the magical barrier. When he hits the ground, more of them sprout.

Uzziel dashes over to him and hops into the air. She motions again, causing a bed of purple and green flowers to form around Samael. We land atop his hairy hide. A faint shimmer in the air reveals several vectors rushing toward me, but Uzziel presses her palm against his chest.

Vines erupt from my grasp and join the others on Samael's body. His vectors grab me and try to fling me away, nearly tearing my arm off, but still, I hold steady, wincing from the pain.

Wham! Bam!

Over and over, invisible fists bash me around, hitting me in the face, stomach, back, and every other part of my body. Samael can't pull me off, but goddamn if he isn't trying! I'm going to die!!

Uzziel coughs out something, but I can't make out what she says. A moment later, every flower around Samael explodes.

A cloud of gas rushes into the air. My eyes begin to droop. Sleep takes me.

Oddly, as my eyes grow heavy, Samael's attacks cease. The chimera monster coughs and wheezes. I fall against his fur and gasp as the breath gets knocked out of me.

But soon... after not many seconds, I begin to drift off to sleep.

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A dark void appears. I reach out to touch it, only for someone standing beside me to do the same — a man.

Samael stands five feet away. I turn to look at him, blushing at his full-frontal nudity. His golden mask isn't present, nor anything else to protect his dignity.

"Thank Heaven that thou finally stopped me," Samael says, quietly.

"I only did what I could, brother," Uzziel says, her voice soft.

Samael's eyes glisten. A tear runs down his cheek. "I... I apologize, sister. I couldn't... couldn't protect thee. The demon, Satan... he used thee as a hostage, and I failed to see through his ruse. I serve him now, unwillingly. I cannot refuse his orders."

"Thy soul is mighty. If thou should put effort toward resisting him—"

"No." Samael cuts me off. "Satan's magic isn't like ours. I feel it festering in my blood. My mind. My soul. A monstrous claw clutches my heart. For every second that passes, it squeezes tighter and tighter. I cannot wrench free."

I stare longingly at Samael. "A curse, then? Surely, there must be a way to free thee from his clutches."

"Perhaps. Perhaps... not..."

Samael turns away. More tears begin to flow. "Everything hurts. I stand at death's door, little sister. Satan's last order was to fight, and so I had no choice but to obey. I fought transformed for far longer than I should have. I haven't any mana left to spare."

"What?! No!" I step toward Samael and grab his hand, then press it against my heart. "I'm here! Take my mana, quickly! I won't allow thy spirit to fade! Thou must live on! Thy family-"

Samael reaches over and places a finger on my lips. He shakes his head. "I can't go on like this. I failed thee, Uzziel. I hurt my brothers and sisters. Whether by accident or incompetence, I brought death and sorrow to Heaven. The imps are still out there. If I survive, they will surely turn me against thee again. I... I cannot allow that to happen."

My eyes begin to blur. Tears flow freely. "D-don't say such things. Nobody blames thee for thy actions. We know 'twas Satan's doing."

Samael pulls his hand off my chest. He takes a step back, putting distance between us. "'Tis my right to choose, Uzziel. 'Tis thine to try to stop me."

He looks away. "I won't trade thy life for mine. Live on, Uzziel. Forget not what the demons did to us. Punish them for their sins."

The Archangel's body wavers for a moment, like smoke spinning in the breeze. He lowers his gaze to his hand. It begins to evaporate into dust, carried away by a silent wind.

"Samael! No! NO!!" I dash toward him and try to grab hold, but my arms pass through his body, scattering his remnants into the breeze.

"Farewell... sister..."

Samael's voice fades away. Uzziel sweeps her arms around, trying desperately to reform him through sheer willpower alone.

She fails.

"SAMAEL!! BROTHER!! UWAAAHH!!"

The heartbroken woman falls to her knees and wraps her arms around herself, sobbing and choking with every breath.

"Creator, please... don't take him... don't take him from us..."

A current of electricity courses through my body, jolting me awake. I sit upright and find myself in a shallow crater. Grass and flowers line the edges. Samael's body lies motionless beside me.

Uzziel turns to stare at him. This time, no tears form. The emptiness in her chest brings an ashen taste to my mouth.

"Brother..."

A single word is all she manages.

Footsteps draw near. Uriel rushes into view at the crater's edge. "Uzziel! Uzziel! Art thou alright? Is Samael-"

She freezes mid-sentence. Her eyes pivot to her brother's motionless form. His angelic body, normally a softly glowing shade of yellow, lies cold and grey, lifeless in the dirt.

"No... it... it can't be..."

Uriel eases into the crater. She slumps to her knees beside me, and the two of us embrace.

Her cold, calculating nature melts away for a few minutes. Uriel tries desperately to suppress her anguish, but eventually, she succumbs to grief and weeps in my arms.

"Samael... I can't... I don't want to believe..."

Raphael and Camael appear at the top of the crater, Michael suspended between them. The beaten and battered Archangel of Courage hangs limp, barely lucid. Even so, all three of them spot Samael's corpse. His dull, colorless body echoes those of the hundreds of cherubs scattered nearby.

Camael closes her eyes. She mutters something under her breath, possibly a prayer for Samael. When Camael opens her eyes, she and Raphael lower Michael onto his back at the top of the crater, then they descend into our pit.

Raphael stands over Samael and strokes his beard. "Today is a dark day for our people," He mutters. "Another brother, gone. Unforgivable."

Camael crosses her arms. "Long have I seen visions of a murky future. My ominous premonitions were once little more than a vague warning in the back of my mind, but now they have coalesced into something more tangible. There is a threat out there... and it lives among us."

Raphael closes his eyes. "We must purge the imps. Immediately. Those in Heaven, as well as those outside it."

My eyes bolt open. "Th-thou art... thou art going to... to kill-?"

Uriel pulls away from me. She snuffles and wipes her eyes. "Uzziel, p-please. Thy compassion goes too far. The imps... the imps killed Samael. We must wipe them out at once. At once!"

"'Tis as Uriel states," Camael says. "The imps are now our sworn enemies. We shan't go another day without avenging the loss of our brother."

Camael kneels beside Samael. Her expression, usually stern and callous, softens for a moment. She reaches out and touches his bear-like shoulder, then pulls away. Rage boils in her eyes.

"Killing one of us would be terrible enough... but the imps made us fight our brother. They forced us to kill him ourselves. How cruel. They haven't a shred of empathy in their entire bodies. After we kill those in Heaven, we must set out and scour Earth for their lair."

A voice booms from outside the pit. "We cannot, sister. No matter how much thou dost wish to do so."

Gabriel appears at the edge of the crater. His face, black and blue, is misshapen and deformed. Several patches of skin are missing entirely. His chest is covered in scars and bruises.

The Archangel of Power flops onto his back at the crater's edge and wheezes. "Haah... the Titans hold jurisdiction over Earth. We must seek their permission before we can enter."

"Their permission can lick the shiny side of my boot," Uriel growls. She wipes away the last remnants of tears from her eyes and staggers to her feet. "We have a blood debt to settle. If those Titans dare get in our way-"

"We will do nothing," Raphael says. "Calm thyself, Uriel. We barely held our own against Samael. We haven't any strength to spare against the Titans. Above all else, we must appear strong. If the Titans sense any weakness from us... I fear the actions they might take."

Raphael's words cast a pale gloom over those present.

Quietly, I ask, "If we kill the imps, how shall we regain our mana? I barely have the spiritual stores to sustain myself. Creating new life to give us mana will prove impossible."

Camael licks her lips. "Unfortunate. We'll have to think of something. In the meantime, I shall return soon."

She turns away, jumps into the air, and flies into the distance.

Raphael clicks his tongue. "If we are to search for the missing imps, then 'tis quite fortunate we captured two of them during the battle. We must interrogate them and learn where they live."

From the ridge above, Michael's voice croaks out. "Ha... haha... hahaha... I-leave it... to me. I shall... cut them open. No secrets shall... escape my grasp. They will pay for what they... what they did to Samael."

I clamber to my feet and shakily fly up to Michael. Despite the wounds covering his body, he slowly regenerates the worst-hit spots here and there.

"Michael, don't torture them. Please."

Michael stares at me stonily. "Stay away when... when I speak to them... Uzziel. Their screams will haunt thy worst nightmares."

Until now, Uzziel has done everything in her power to protect the imps. However, Michael's threat hangs in the air for only a moment before she turns away.

"A-alright. Do what ye must. Find the rest of their kind."

Michael slowly raises a hand and caresses my arm. "I shall, little... little sister."

He smiles at me.

I don't smile back.

Uzziel's thoughts form in my mind.

It's all my fault. I loosed the imps from Heaven. Samael died because he was protecting me. It's all... my fault.

The poor girl.

Part 097: Vengeance, Postponed

The vision lingers in my mind, becoming a memory that feels almost as if I lived it myself. It wasn't only Uzziel and the Archangels who lost Samael, but me as well. Irrational as it seems, and despite how little I knew him, Samael seemed like a stand-up guy, one willing to do anything to protect his sister's life. He didn't deserve to die in such a terrible manner.

After a few seconds, I materialize before the bonfire and immediately turn to Raphael.

"You didn't cry."

Raphael blinks slowly. "Apologies, Jason, but I don't follow."

"Samael died, but you barely acknowledged his death. I know people suffer in different ways, but you hardly mentioned it."

"Jason," Solomon whispers, a note of warning in his voice. "Don't be disrespectful."

"'Tis fine, Knowledge Seeker," Raphael replies. "As for the young one's inquiry, I did not break down in tears because, long ago, I lost millions of family members all at once. Even now, a hundred thousand years later, my grief is so overwhelming that it never leaves."

Gabriel takes a step forward and rests his hand on Raphael's back. "Raphael is my elder brother, but on a scale of immortality, years count for little. We might as well be the same age. The difference is that Raphael remembers all those who died before we gave up our memories, while Michael and I do not. I am certain the burden he carries places tremendous stress on him."

Raphael bows his head. "Mmm. 'Twas essential that at least one person remembered the ancient histories. The pain I bear is nothing compared to the thought of forgetting my beautiful sisters, Muriel and Cassiel, let alone millions of other angels."

At the mention of Muriel and Cassiel, Michael grimaces, plops down on his log to my right, pulls out his sword, and stabs it in the ground. He begins to wring and squeeze the hilt as though it were someone's neck.

"If only I could remember the ancient histories. Sometimes I see pale flashes of faces. Distant afterimages. A faint smile, a memory of happiness and bliss. They're always a galaxy away, yet so close that I wish I could reach out and touch them."

Raphael flicks his eyes to Michael. "Of all the angels, 'twas essential thou should forget the past. I'm sorry, brother, but I did what I could to--"

Michael suddenly leaps to his feet. "Gah! Why, Raphael?! Why can't I remember?! Our people are extinct! We're confined to these torturous rings, unable to fly freely or cut down the ones who did this to us! Surely, thou can't finally lay bare the reasons we lost our memories! It isn't as if the Titans are waiting for us to break the treaty anymore! They're dead too!"

Raphael stares evenly at Michael. His ancient eyes slowly seal shut. He bows his head, rests an elbow on his knee, and places his face in his palm.

"I'm sorry, brother. The treaty was... it was..."

"Thou need not explain," Gabriel says. "Michael. Calm thyself."

"I won't," Michael growls. "I wish to hear about our past! I wish to know what secrets were so significant that Raphael wouldn't speak a word to his brothers about them! Where does thy loyalty lie, Raphael? With thy kin, or with the Titans?!"

Slowly, Raphael raises his head.

"Treaty? There was no such thing."

Michael blinks. He pulls back slightly. "What? Thou speaketh nonsense."

"Nay, I speak the truth," Raphael whispers. "What good would a treaty do if only one person knew the reasons behind its existence? No. The reason the angels and Titans gave up our memories was... it was... to prevent..."

Raphael's voice cracks. "No. I won't say. Michael. Please don't press me for answers. Thou dost think answers will ease thy pain. Thou dost hope they will give thy spirit closure. They will not. I pay the price for every moment of my continued existence, knowing what I do. I do not wish for thee to suffer more than is absolutely necessary."

Raphael's words chill the air around the campfire. Michael meets Raphael's gaze. Their eyes speak to each other for a few moments before he opens his mouth. "Would... wouldst thou tell Gabriel of our past? Ever? Under any circumstance?"

"I might," Raphael replies. His voice is little more than a murmur in the wind. "But t'would only be as a last resort."

"A last resort," Michael says, echoing Raphael. "Yet, never wouldst thou speak of the past to me."

"Nay. Never."

Michael's lip trembles. He slowly turns to stare into the bonfire. After a moment, his chest begins to shake. He squeezes the hilt of his sword, and a tear drips down his face.

"I... I did something. It... it must... must have been terrible."

Raphael stares at his brother. Michael tries to contain his emotions, but slowly, his stalwart facade begins to crack around the edges.

"Do not blame thyself, Michael. The Ancient Times... the Dragon Wars... the Titan Wars... many tragedies of unfathomable scale unfolded there. Thy actions were hardly-"

"Stop," Michael says. He raises his armored hand to wipe at his eyes. "I know the truth, now. It... it only makes sense — the way thou regarded me with suspicion. The way thou never spoke of the Ancient Wars when I was present. Muriel. Cassiel. Did... did I... toward them..."

Raphael's eyes widen. "Enough, Michael. Thy curiosity will only lead to ruin."

"I knew it!" Michael leaps to his feet. "'Twas my fault, wasn't it?! I killed Cassiel! I killed Muriel! Why?! Why would I do such a thing?! Answer me! Tell me!"

"MICHAEL!"

Raphael leaps to his feet, mirroring Michael. Out of nowhere, the old man's dismal appearance changes. A dark cloud of miasma springs up around him.

"I AM THY ELDEST BROTHER! CEASE THIS LINE OF QUESTIONING AT ONCE!"

Raphael's body stays the same size, but somehow his presence seems to quadruple in size, dwarfing even Gabriel. The Archangel of Power takes a step back in fright, trips over his log, and lands on his ass.

Michael's anguish turns to terror as his elder brother lurches toward him. Instinctively, Michael grabs for his sword, but he clumsily bats it aside, then rethinks challenging Raphael and cowers under his brother's overwhelming pressure.

"B-brother Raphael! Stop! I yield!"

Raphael's teeth gnash together. He reaches a hand toward Michael as if to strangle the life out of him.

Suddenly, Solomon leaves my side. He jumps in front of Raphael and puffs out his chest. "Raphael! Stop! Stop! You're going too far!"

Expressions of malevolence, hatred, disgust, and rage pass over Raphael's face, all within a single second. However, his eyes glaze over when he recognizes Solomon. The Archangel of Wisdom recoils in surprise. His aura shrinks once again, and the terrifying specter of Death itself morphs back into that of a tired, weak old man.

"O-oh. Solo...mon." Raphael shakily leans on his staff and sits back down. A look of horror spreads across his face. He grabs at his robes and dabs his face dry. "I... I didn't mean to... to lose my..."

* * *

I don't know how to feel or what to think.

Raphael, the kindly old man, is hiding more than I expected. Thanks to Michael's line of questioning, I can take a few stabs in the dark at what happened during or before the Ancient Wars.

Michael was involved, somehow, in killing Muriel and Cassiel. Why? Even if that were the case, Raphael doesn't seem to blame him for it, yet he exploded in rage at Michael for bringing it up.

Does that mean Raphael blames his brother for their deaths? Perhaps there's another reason. The truth could hold sinister consequences for the future.

Everything I learn about the angels, more and more, turns me toward the belief that they are not and were never agents of righteousness or virtue. They're selfish, vain, and petty, like numerous people I've met during my life. Hell, the Archangels are worse in many ways because they're immortal demigods with explosive magical powers. Their potential to cause damage far exceeds that of the average human.

Michael lays on the ground shivering in a ball for half a minute, trembling and sweating. He covers his face with his hands and mumbles incoherently, though I can't make out his words. Gabriel, on the other

hand, recovers relatively quickly. He cautiously pulls himself to a sitting position on his log and smooths his robes over and over. Like a nervous tic, the Archangel of Power rubs his robes repeatedly while flicking his eyes between Raphael and Michael.

Solomon pulls me aside and walks us a short distance away from the fire.

"Jason. Try not to make any hasty conclusions about what just happened. The Archangels are not in their best states after living inside the three rings, alone, for a hundred thousand years. Such isolation would cause anyone to... ah... lose a few marbles."

I bite my lip. "Didn't Bahamut wear all three rings constantly? I thought they could communicate if that were the case."

"No. The Archangels only can do so now because of my crown. I linked their spiritual energies with mine using my artifact. Look, all I ask is that you don't think ill of them because of one minor scuffle."

"*Minor?*" I nudge my head toward Raphael. "The old man went berserk! He was going to kill Michael!"

Solomon doesn't reply for a few seconds. When he finally responds, he chooses his words carefully.

"I... I don't think... Raphael would hurt Michael. I think he... ah... intended to wipe Michael's mind."

My heart nearly stops.

"Raphael would do that? To Michael?"

Solomon looks me dead in the eye. His expression is graver than anything I've seen in my entire life. "Raphael would do a great many things, Jason. You know the saying. *The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.*"

My heart trembles. "What are you implying?"

"I didn't live through the Ancient past, Jason. However..."

Solomon glances behind us a hundred feet away at Raphael's bowed form. He silently stares into the bonfire, consumed by his thoughts.

A look of fear passes over Solomon's face. He doesn't want Raphael to hear him.

Solomon lowers his voice. "Jason. My crown is the receptacle for hundreds of thousands of memories, from beings long-dead. As I said when you first entered this thought space, its visualizations of the past are built upon the memories of those whose memories I copied."

I nod slowly. "Okay. So what does that mean?"

Solomon lowers his voice. "Anyone who wears my crown, even for a fleeting moment, gives their memories to me. Anyone I touched during my lifetime gave not only their knowledge to me, but the knowledge of any souls they had consumed or manipulated as well. As I told you at the beginning, Jason... I have access to the memories of all three Archangels now."

* * *

My jaw slackens.

"You... you know..."

"About the Ancient Wars, yes. I know Raphael's secrets, including *the big one*."

Solomon's eyes darken.

"Say nothing to the old man. Don't ask me to tell you what he knows. I won't utter a word. All I will say is that Raphael is right to conceal the past. The secrets he holds should never come to light. I regret probing his mind."

"If you know his secret, why not me as well?"

I challenge Solomon. The king shakes his head in response. "It isn't like that. I learned his past unwillingly as a result of my powers. The danger lies not in you or I knowing his secret, but in someone else obtaining that knowledge. Especially Gabriel, Michael... or the demons. The fewer who know it, the fewer who can turn the past to their advantage."

Solomon squeezes my shoulder. He forces a smile so painfully disingenuous that it makes my eye twitch.

"Cheer up, Jason. I'm going to give you another vision."

I smack my lips while trying to rub the taste of sand off my tongue. "I don't think I want to see anything else."

"You do," Solomon replies encouragingly. "Don't forget why you came here. You need to know about the past if you wish to change the future. Have no fear. I will guide you to the best of my ability."

Solomon and I turn back to the Archangels. Michael has already pulled himself up to sit on his log the same as his brothers, but his look of total dejection reminds me of an abused dog. He slumps forward with his shoulders sagging and stares at the ground emptily. Raphael gazes into the fire, a look of heartache etched into every corner of his face. Gabriel, however, merely looks confused. As a third-party, he doesn't appear to have the emotional involvement Raphael and Michael do about the Ancient Wars, though I can see gears turning in his head as he tries to untangle their conflict.

"Let us return to the Wordsmith's visions," Solomon says, jarring everyone awake. All three Archangels simultaneously turn to look at him, remembering where they are.

"Oh, right. Yes, yes, of course," Raphael mutters. "The visions. Where were we?"

Michael lowers his head again. "As if it matters."

Gabriel and Raphael ignore Michael's brooding. The Archangel of Power coughs into his fist. "Ah, ahem, right... well, I suppose the next major event would be... err..."

"We'll return to Satan's perspective," Solomon says. "The point of these visions is to give Jason a view into the ancient history, and I'd like to keep things balanced."

Raphael shakily lights more tobacco and inhales the odor in his pipe. "Yes, balance, of course. Go on, then."

I glance at Michael. The look on his face reminds me of someone trying to figure out how they ended up on trial for the death penalty, as if he's trying to unravel what would make Raphael hate him so much.

Does Raphael hate Michael, I wonder? Perhaps it's less about hatred, and more about how much Raphael loved his sisters, Cassiel and Muriel, more than life itself. Since Raphael loves Michael as much as he did them, his mind and heart war with one another, trying to decide whether to love Michael as a brother or hate him as their murderer.

Or, maybe it's none of those things. I don't know enough about their history to cast judgment.

Solomon weaves magic signs with his hands. "Careful. This next vision is going to be a bit... *disorienting*."

"I hate it when you say crap like that," I mutter.

The world goes dark, and once again, I leave the bonfire, but this time, I'm worried about what its state will be when I return.

Part 098: Hades

The moment the vision begins, I realize something is horribly wrong. The darkness of a cave yawns out before me. Agares stands by my side as we head into the depths of the Earth, but before I have time to gather my location, something smashes into my head with the force of a freight train.

"Gaaaugh! Nnn... huwaaah!"

I stumble forward and lose control of my body. The ground rushes at my face, and I hit it with a sickening thud. My nose cracks, blinding me with pain.

Agares voice calls out from somewhere, but my tears blind me. "Satan? Whoa! What happened? Hey, Belial, something happened to the boss!"

Footsteps approach. I gasp for breath while clutching my chest with one hand and my face with the other. My broken nose forces my eyes shut with all the agony it can muster. Electricity courses through my body, tearing apart my blood cells and rewiring my neurons to deliver unending torture unlike anything I've ever experienced. I've had every bone in my body broken twice, both times were my fault, and the pain Satan feels now is somehow ten times worse than either of them.

Someone grabs my shoulders. "Satan? What's the matter?!" Belial's voice rings out in alarm.

Satan can't form a coherent reply. "Hnng, buhuhu, gaah! Hur-hurts!"

After a moment, the pain lessens dramatically. I take a sharp breath as the sensation of magic enters my body. My lungs burn. I feel like my ribs have somehow impaled through both of them.

I wince and open my eyes to see Belial in her tigerskin robes, her brow furrowed in concentration. A drop of sweat drips down her forehead as she channels magic into my body.

"Gah! Your mana passages are a bloody mess," Belial says. Agares stands beside her, watching intently to see if I'll recover.

Something happened to Satan, and it hurts terribly, but the confusion running through his thoughts mirrors mine. He doesn't know what's shredding his body any more than I do.

I cautiously flip onto my back and stare at the ceiling while gasping for breath. Belial and Agares hover over me, and eventually, the pain fades to a dull throbbing in the back of my throat.

"Boss! You okay?"

"Y-yeah. I... I dunno what happened, Scales. Felt like someone threw me into a boiling geyser for a minute or two."

Belial scrunches up her face. "Well, your magic pathways were jumbled up. I pulled out a bunch of weird, shifty stuff from your body. You should be okay now."

"My fuckin' nose-"

Satan starts to say something, but stops mid-sentence. Above him, a long, spindly arm drifts into view. The appendage shifts colors slowly, from green to red to blue to pink, it cycles through all the colors of the

rainbow over and over. It reaches toward the ceiling ten feet above, and as it draws near, the hand fans out to reveal five fingers, each ending in a ghastly-looking talon.

"Your nose...?" Belial leans in to examine me. "Mmm. It's broken. I think I can patch it up."

Satan ignores Belial and focuses all his attention on the floating arm. After a moment, another emerges from behind his back. Then another, and another...

Eight arms twist and bend in midair, writhing weirdly as they sometimes lock hands with each other, and other times reach out to touch the walls.

Belial finishes weaving a magic sign, and the pain in my nose vanishes as it pops back into place. Blinking, I flick my gaze toward her. "Hey, toots... do... do you see the arms?"

Belial raises an eyebrow. "The arms? Your arms? Obviously. Do you have a concussion?"

Agares nods. "We see both of them, boss."

"No, dumbasses. Not *these* arms-" Satan tries to move his arms to wave at them, but instead, two of the rainbow-colored octopus-style limbs lower and wave in Agares and Belial's faces. As they do, I notice the limbs are partially transparent, like they belong to a ghost.

Belial stares through the limbs, not noticing them at all. "What do you mean, 'not *these* arms,' Satan? Are you okay?"

I continue trying to move my flesh-limbs, but nothing happens. Instead, the ghost-limbs dance around. Concentrating, I furrow my brow to gaze at Belial. The hand closest to the demoness reaches toward her to caress her face. Belial flinches and swats her cheek, but her hand passes through mine.

Yes. That's right. My limb. Mine.

I know what they are. Vectors. Samael's vectors. I fought Satan once before, and he tore me apart with them. Satan of the ancient past doesn't fully understand them yet, but I do.

"Whoa..." Satan whispers. "I can't believe it."

Belial swats her cheek again, then stands up and takes a step back, flicking her gaze around the room to look for her unknown assailant. "What the Devil keeps touching me?"

Satan tries to stand up, but instead of pushing off the ground with his flesh and blood limbs, his new aetherial ones do the job. This results in us levitating into a standing position.

Agares' eyes widen. "Uh, uh... boss? You're floating. You're floating!"

It takes a moment, but eventually, I regain the ability to move my regular arms. I reach up and rub my nose. "Yeah. How about that?"

Satan's thoughts bubble in my mind. *That ugly chicken must've iced over. Guess his friends took him out, eh? Are these the Vectors he mentioned? Pretty cool. It seems I'm the only one who can see 'em.*

Satan adjusts his coat and cracks his neck. "Thanks for the fix-up, doll. I'm feelin' pretty damn good right about now. Let's have a chat with our new friends."

Belial blinks. "Huh? Oh. The imps, right."

The three of us turn and continue into the cave. Satan's thoughts begin to go wild.

I guess that Blood Contract did the trick. Anything I write in the notes will happen, so when I said the Archangel's soul would become mine, it must've given me his powers, too. That's handier than I expected. I'll have to play around with his abilities later.

Hm. Now that I think about it, Blood Contracts are pretty convenient. Sure, I've gotta convince someone to sign, but once they do, I own their ass forever. The other demons can't put a hand on me. Even Valac don't seem all that tough now that I have Samael's powers.

Satan narrows his eyes. *Wish I'd known what I know now when I first got the power. I'd have bound the souls of Agares, Belial, and all the others to me. Shit. They probably won't sign a second contract. Oh, well. At least they can't attack me. That's good enough for now. As for the rookies... hmm...*

The tunnel warms steadily as we descend into the planet. Eventually, we arrive at Leviathan's lair. Already, several hundred imps mill around, waiting for my arrival. The sheer-drop from the cliff edge is gone. At some point, somebody must have smoothed it out, because now a stony ramp descends the side of the bluff to the ground forty feet below.

I walk down it, with Belial and Agares trailing me. A few torches line the wall so that the imps don't blindly wander about, but the dragon is still damn hard to see. His black body seems to suck the light from the room and absorb it. Even if I squint, I can barely see his prone form as anything other than a part of the void.

When I arrive at the bottom, I stop to look around the room. "Hm? Why are there so many imps?"

Belial replies. "I beg your pardon?"

"I thought Leviathan was going to power them up. Why are they all still unmutated?"

Agares shrugs. "No idea. Let's ask."

Nodding, I head across the room. Leviathan's head lies on the ground. He snores quietly, though it's hard to see how he can sleep with some of the imps screeching loudly to one another.

"Hey! Dragon! Wake up!"

Satan yells, surprising me with his boldness. He shows no fear as he awakens the primeval monster that could kill him effortlessly.

Several seconds pass. Satan starts to open his mouth, but Leviathan rumbles deep in his stomach. **"I heard you the first time."**

Swallowing, Satan's voice shakes slightly. "O-oh. Well, ah, I was kinda w-wondering... if, uh... you could..."

His confidence vanishes instantly as Leviathan's eyes open. The winged behemoth slowly raises his head and yawns, unleashing a torrent of flame upon the ceiling. The canopy turns red hot. It only lasts for an instant, but the temperature in the room jumps fifteen degrees.

Leviathan blinks slowly. **"Why have you awoken me?"**

A lump forms in my throat. "The, the, uh... the imps! They're still... you know... *imps*."

The dragon blinks. **"And?"**

"Well, we killed a bunch of angels.... I thought you could, uh, you know... power the other imps up? Like you did the rest of us?"

Several seconds pass. The dragon flares his nostrils. **"Who said I would do such a thing? Do you think yourself heir to my power? Does it belong to you?"**

"Huh? No! No, haha, of course not!" Satan rubs his head sheepishly. "Ahh, forget it! I don't know what I was thinkin'."

Leviathan gazes at me. Ten seconds pass. Sweat drips down the back of my neck.

"What are those?"

The dragon's eyes follow the movements of my vectors as they dance about.

"These? You can see them?"

Leviathan blinks slowly. **"Mmm. Unless my eyes deceive me, Samael had a set of limbs similar to yours."**

I nod. "Samael died. I killed him."

"Oh? Most impressive."

Leviathan's tongue snakes out of his mouth and through his teeth, wetting his monstrous lips.

"I underestimated you, Satan. No matter how you did it, killing an Archangel is no mean feat. Millions of dragons far beyond a level of power you could comprehend have tried and failed. Only two Archangels have ever fallen, and neither perished to the claws of my brothers and sisters."

Leviathan leans his head to the side and scratches the top of it against a wall. A horrible grinding sound radiates outward as scale meets stone, causing every demon in the room to press their palms against their ears.

After the dragon spends a few moments satisfying his urge, he speaks again. **"If you can kill one Archangel, perhaps you could do the same for others. To be honest, I thought of your kind as a joke at first. I imagined it would be amusing to send you to die at the hands of the Archangels. I'm reconsidering my opinions."**

My jaw slackens. "D-does that mean... you'll power us up after all? If you do, we can kick some angel ass!"

"No. I won't," Leviathan replies. **"It would be too tiresome to transfer my power hundreds of times. There are too many of you. Instead, I'll teach one of your kind my ways. They can evolve the rest. I look forward to seeing what you'll accomplish."**

I cross my arms. "All I know is that the angels captured two of my friends. We need to rescue them as soon as possible. Teach me, and I'll power up my comrades lickety-split."

Leviathan chortles in his throat, a nasty sound like metal ripping in half. **"Kukuku... not you, Satan. You've too much on your plate, and your mana capacity is quite low. Leading the rest of your species won't give you enough time to manipulate their spiritual energy. No, instead, I'll pick a subordinate. I'll choose..."**

The dragon's fiery eyes sweep across the room. His vision illuminates everywhere he looks, revealing looks of terror on the faces of all the imps who aren't yet used to him. Even the other demons who met him once before appear a little frightened.

However, two demons show no fear. Two of them don't cower or flinch when the dragon's gaze meets theirs. Valac and Lucifer.

"Mmm. A Manipulator of the Damned, and a female with an all-seeing eye. Interesting."

Satan follows Leviathan's gaze. Immediately, his expression sours. Satan turns to the dragon and keeps his voice low. "Come on, why you gotta do me like this? Can't you pick someone else?"

Leviathan cocks his head. **"My powers of aura manipulation are no trifle. They will kill a weakling instantly, and they require an ironclad will to use properly. Only one of those two will do."**

A minute passes. Satan grumbles to himself as the dragon's gaze beats down on him.

Stupid dragon. Cripes. I guess I have to choose Lucifer. Valac doesn't have to follow my orders at all. He's a loose cannon. If anyone's gonna have the powers of the dragon, they'd better be under my thumb.

"You're saying I can't have the power, right?"

"Correct."

"Fine. Give it to Lucifer. She's the second-best pick."

I glance at Lucifer. "Hey! Lucy! Get your funbags over here! Mister Dragon has a present for ya."

The demoness rolls her third eye. *"I heard.* Fine. Do what you will, oh mighty dragon."

Lucifer walks over to Leviathan, ignoring my presence entirely. Leviathan shifts his body, moves his front claw toward the demoness, and touches her chest.

After a moment, Lucifer takes a step back. "Oh? Is that all? I expected more of a-"

Lucifer stops mid-sentence. All the strength in her body vanishes, and she slumps to the ground, unconscious.

The dragon chortles again, making that horrible sound in his throat. **"Kukuku... this female will require hibernation for a few days. Begone, all of you. Leave me in peace so that I may rest. When she awakens, Lucifer will be the one who handles the future of demonkind. Use her new powers well, Satan."**

Leviathan pulls back and yawns, releasing another wave of fire at the ceiling. The temperature in the room raises to well over a hundred degrees, sucking the moisture from everyone's bodies. Several imps pass out from heat exhaustion, and even I begin sweating uncontrollably.

"Y-yeah, can do, big guy. Have a nice nap."

A while later, all of the imps pace around in the snow, shivering as they stay close to several firepits scattered around a makeshift camp. The cold of winter already reaches below zero, but the winds aren't yet chilly enough to extinguish the flames.

The demons have already evolved to ignore the cold, but the imps aren't as hardy. One imp nudges another. "Me freezing tits off! Heaven never this cold!"

"Stop your bitching!" Satan snaps at him. "If you want to return to Heaven, go ahead. They'll slit your throat without a second thought."

The imp swallows hard, rethinks his life's decisions, and wanders away to another fire pit.

"You seem more hostile than usual," Agares remarks. Much like the unmutated imps, he stays close to the fire since his reptilian blood makes him sensitive to the cold. "Is something on your mind?"

I swear under my breath. "No, things are just fucking dandy- OF COURSE I'm angry! Tens of thousands of imps are still in Heaven. They'll all be dead soon, assuming I've judged the Angels correctly. On top of that, our enemy captured Deebs and Bael, and now the dragon gave Lucifer some special power. Everything sucks, chum."

"I think you're acting a little overdramatic," Agares replies. "We survived. Lots of demons died, but we have a dragon on our side. Instead of worrying constantly, you should focus on creating a home for us. We need to get out of the cold and the heat and make a nest where the angels won't find us."

"We need to save Deebs and Bael," I mutter. "That other crap can wait."

"Patience. Use your head. We can't return to Heaven until all the imps are at the same level as you and me. Seven of us barely held the Angels back, and that was only because of the stunt you pulled with Samael. You said he was dead, right?"

I squirm slightly. "Err, yeah. Probably."

"How do you know?"

"I have my ways. I made Samael sign that magical contract thingy. When he died, I knew."

Agares rubs his lip. "Mmm. Interesting. If I died, then you would know as well?"

"Probably."

"Well, at least that's one positive thing to come from your power."

I cross my arms. "Yeah? Only one? I saved us from the angels, remember?"

Agares's casual smile fades away. "You tricked us into signing our souls over to you. No matter the reason, such deception is going to cause a lot of resentment. I don't know if we can trust you or not, but you didn't give us a choice. At this point, I can only hope you'll do the right thing when an opportunity arises."

"I'm selfish. I'll admit that much," I reply. "But I've got the best interests of our people at heart. Don't you dare doubt me now."

Agares bristles at my words. "As I said, I don't have a choice in the matter. Diablo and Bael are trapped in Heaven. If you plan to save them, you'd better figure something out soon."

"I'm still thinking," I mutter in response. "Gimme time. I always come up with something."

"Right. Always the genius," Agares mutters.

Several minutes pass. I turn and wander away, leaving Agares beside the fire. As I walk, Satan's thoughts form again.

Everyone doubts me. The dragon. Valac. Lucifer. Even Agares. I'm starting to think they might be right.

Satan rubs his chin as he trudges through the snow.

I saved a few hundred imps. Big fuckin' deal. Whoop de doo. I got two of my promising warriors caught in the process. I did kill an Archangel indirectly, but that don't make up for Deebs and Bael. I gotta do better, man. I gotta work my tush off and send those ugly chickens packing.

Satan stops a short distance away from another campfire. At this one, only imps mill around. None of the seven mutated demons are in the vicinity.

Come to think of it, once Lucifer wakes up, she's gonna be a pain in my ass. She'll boost these rookies up, but they might not follow my orders. Instead of only Valac, I'll have hundreds of rebellious bastards plotting to take my spot. I need to take action now, while they're still dumb as rocks.

Satan motions with his hand. A Blood Contract appears in the air, and words magically appear as Satan gazes at it. The language is a guttural, demonic-looking batch of letters, each with pointed edges. The uppercase G resembles a curled claw, while the W's remind me of demonic horns.

Thanks to Solomon's Crown, and the fact I'm in a vision of the past, I quickly scan the words.

Bla bla bla, sign your soul over to me until one of us dies, bla bla bla, give me all your powers and abilities on death, bla bla bla...

I skim the contents of the magical scroll. It appears to be slightly different from the ones Satan had Agares, Belial, and the others sign before. The new contract includes a clause about taking people's abilities on death. Perhaps he used the same one on Samael?

Satan stands up straight, adjusts his coat, and tosses the scroll in the air. Two of his vectors zip forward and grab it before it can land in the snow, and he swaggers toward the fire pit where the imps are chatting.

"Mornin' chums. How are you young bucks doin' today?"

Several imps spin to look at me as I stop at the edge of the melted snow. One of them leans forward. "You big boss? Big boss Satan?"

"Mhm, that's me, lil' guy. And boy, do I have a job for you! Though, I dunno if you're cut out for it."

Satan pauses for a moment. He pretends to hem and haw while evaluating the imps.

Unsurprisingly, his reverse psychology works. Every imp at the campfire turns to look at him. He captures their attention immediately.

The nearest imp raises his hand. "Ooh, ooh! Me! Pick me!"

A second imp scowls at the first. "No way! Belmor stupid! Me smarter!"

Within seconds, all of the imps begin howling and arguing with each other over who gets to work for Satan. The Devil's thoughts ring clear in his head. *Heh. It's like taking souls from babies.*

"Alright, all of you, shaddup. If you wanna be eligible to be my right-hand soldiers, you dummies hafta sign this here scroll first, okay?"

Satan's invisible arms lower the Blood Contract down, and a third arm holds out the feather for signing.

The first imp scratches his head. "What mean by 'sign?' How do?"

Satan kneels to the imp's level. "It ain't tough. Just poke your finger, then use your blood to draw a smiley face. Easy peasy."

* * *

Several minutes later, all of the imps nod giddily at Satan as he rolls up the magical scroll, now covered in chicken-scratch signatures. "Okay, boss! We ready work! What do now?"

Satan's smile falters. *Oh, right. I told them I was going to have them do some work. I suppose it can't hurt to give 'em something to do.*

"I want you guys to dig underground."

The imps cock their heads. "Dig?"

"Yeah. Just dig a deep hole. Big enough for us all to fit. We've gotta get outta the cold, ya know? Don't overwork yourselves though. Stay close to the fire."

"Ok! Ok! We dig hole! No problem!"

All of the imps give a thumbs up simultaneously, but something about their enthusiasm seems off. After a moment, I realize why. It's because the Blood Contract is taking effect. The imps already wanted to follow Satan's orders, but now they have no choice.

Hm. Maybe I'm overthinking things. After all, even if Satan made them sign a contract to follow his commands, he doesn't necessarily have to use its effects. He could command them lightly or forcefully. Then again, I don't know how his Blood Contracts work, so all I can do is take stabs in the dark.

* * *

Half an hour passes. Satan continues going from fire to fire, making all of the imps sign his scroll one by one, then he orders them to dig underground.

Eventually, Satan stops. "That's all of them," He murmurs to himself.

A tingling in the back of his skull makes me flinch.

Satan reaches up to massage his forehead. He leans against a tree and slumps into the snow. "Bloody crap. All of a sudden, outta nowhere... nng..."

The tingling turns into something more akin to a drill as a piece of metal seems to bore into my skull. I rub my head and wince as it shivers and shakes, worming its way into my thoughts."

"...ard."

A voice speaks in my mind.

"Huh? Who said that?" Satan glances around, but no other demons are nearby.

"...Bastard."

The voice, masculine, speaks again. Venom drips from every syllable.

Satan questions the voice again. "Who are you? Who's talkin'?"

The voice clears up. "Dost thee not recognize my voice, little rat? Surely thy puny brain can understand the consequences of thy crimes. Verily, thou didn't make me sign thy accursed contract, and now I have perished."

Satan's eyes widen. "Samael?"

"Who else? 'Tis I, the one whose life thou upended. Thy corruption resulted in my death. Now I must exist within the confines of thy pathetic, feeble mind, a prisoner drifting on an ocean of blackness."

Satan slowly rubs his face. "Wow. I didn't realize you would still be alive inside of me. Is that gonna happen for all the souls I take? It'll get a bit crowded in my head."

"My spirit is strong; my resolution firm," Samael mutters. "I revived myself due to my formidable willpower. Now I shall punish thee for all eternity. I will crush thy dreams and embolden thy nightmares. Thy people will abandon thee as ye transform into a raving lunatic, incapable of forming words. Ye-"

"Shut up," Satan says. "I don't want to hear another word unless I ask a question. Got it?"

Samael's voice disappears. After a moment, he replies. "Y-yes. I understand. I... shall not... speak... unless spoken to..."

Satan grins. "That's what I thought. Drop the tough guy act, dipshit. I still own your ass. You might be in my head, but now you're even more of a prisoner. You have to follow my every command, don'tcha?"

Samael's voice shakes. "Y-yes. I must... obey... thy orders..."

Satan reaches down, balls up some snow in his hand, and tosses it back and forth between his palms. "Wow. It's my lucky day, after all. I wonder what took you so long, buddy? It's been a few hours since you died. Ah, whatever, you're here now. That's all that matters. Mind if I ask you some questions?"

Samael grunts. "I... do not... wish to answer..."

"Too bad. That's the thing about souls. *You shouldn't give 'em away so easily.* Tell me what the angels are going to do to the imps in Heaven."

Satan pivots into his first question. Samael replies, but with slightly more confidence. "They will all be put to death. As... as all of thy kind deserve."

"Yeah. I expected as much. What about Deebs and Bael?"

Samael takes a moment to reply. "I know not of whom thou speak."

"Two of my demon brothers. Your asshole sister captured them just before I left. What're your feathered kin going to do? Kill 'em?"

Samael's voice turns icy. "Hehe. Thy comrades know where thou dost hide and skulk about in the darkness. Michael will torture them to uncover thy location. Once the bastards squeal, the Angels and Titans will come together to rain fire upon thy treacherous heads. All of thy family shall perish."

"You think so, eh?"

Satan's grin widens.

"You've got a hell of a mouth, but I like your honesty. Do you know what I need from you? Information. I can't go up against the Archangels without knowing their powers. What say you and me have a long sit-down? I'm *dying* to hear everything you know."

Samael's tone turns frosty. "What? Nay! I shan't tell thee anything. I... I won't... betray..."

Satan balls up his fists and punches himself in the head. "Shut up! I'm in control here. You're gonna talk, you fat, ugly chicken. Let's start with someone dear to your heart. How about your little sister, Uzziel? I'd love to know what tricks she has up her sleeve."

"No! No!! I... I won't... I..."

Samael trails off.

After a moment, his voice becomes monotone.

"Of course. I shall do as my master commands."

Satan clasps his hands together. "Wonderful. Wonderful! After you finish, I have a giant, scaley friend who would be *delighted* to hear from you. We'll call it a... family reunion."

Part 099: Heaven's Forge

This time, when the vision concludes and I return to the bonfire, I'm the first to speak.

"Samael ended up inside of Satan, after all?"

The three Archangels sit silently for several seconds, each of them gazing into the fire dismally. A range of emotions passes over their faces, from sorrow to regret.

Raphael clears his throat. "Aye. We never knew. 'Tis yet another revelation to us. Solomon's visions continue to surprise."

Michael rests his face in his hands. "Our brother Samael and sister Uriel, both trapped inside the minds of evil monsters. If only I had known. I would have stopped at nothing to release them from their torment."

"Do not blame thyself," Gabriel replies. Of the three Archangels, he sits the straightest. Compared to his brothers, he's the one who has mostly come to terms with his past. "How many times did we kill Satan, only for him to return? He was an unstoppable force of evil. His power grew exponentially over time. 'Tis a miracle he ever fell."

I turn to Solomon. "Speaking of which, how did Satan die?"

The ancient king leans against me and rubs his chin. "Hmm. Satan perished after the destruction of Earth, I presume. I locked myself inside the halls of the Labyrinth around that time. The information I possess comes from when I copied memories during my life, or the heads of people who wore my crown after my death. Unfortunately, my knowledge is not infinite, but contained to those I've interacted with."

I frown. "That doesn't seem right. Whenever I use the crown, I gain the ability to visualize abstract concepts, materialize advanced technology, and any number of other incredible feats. I thought the crown possessed infinite knowledge?"

"Nope. I'm afraid not," Solomon replies. "During the 20th and 21st centuries, many intellectuals were granted the gift of wearing my crown by whosoever was Pope at the time. Several famous inventors and other brilliant minds did so for varying periods to augment their understanding of the universe, but in doing so, they lent their genius to my libraries. Naturally, I grew more and more capable of understanding abstract and complex theories regarding the cosmos."

Solomon winks at me. "Give and take, you see?"

I nod. "Mmm. Well, I know that Amelia was involved with Satan's death. She somehow captured his soul and took possession of him."

"Hah!" Michael guffaws suddenly, making me flinch. "How ironic! The Devil spent his entire life stealing souls from anyone he could wrap his greedy paws around, only to end up trapped under someone else's thumb! I could hardly write a more fitting end for him if I tried."

Solomon glances at me. His eyes glow white for a moment, then revert to normal. "Amelia. I've seen her in your memories and examined her battle against you in detail, but my Crown possesses surprisingly little knowledge of her life before meeting you. For a human to gain enough power to defeat the First Emperor, yet not exist in my database before six years ago..."

Michael stops chuckling. "Oh? Was this 'Amelia' a Hero? Perhaps she emerged after the Energy Wars and battled Satan, then defeated him in a great show of heroic might."

I immediately shake my head. "Not a chance. Amelia despised heroes. She battled Joan of Arc and lost. Hell, she attacked me when she found out I was a hero. Also... regarding her powers..."

Pausing, I remember the images of her attacking humans, devouring souls, and the terror on the faces of demons as she tore them apart.

Solomon holds up his hand. "I see your thoughts, Jason. Let us not relive those memories."

I bow my head. "Sorry."

Michael glances at Solomon suspiciously. "What memories?"

"The Black Queen was no ally of, humankind, angelkind, nor demonkind. I considered her an enemy of all life. Killing Satan was less about helping anyone here, than it was about eliminating a foe against whom she bore a deep grudge. I would hardly praise her for her actions any more than I would Satan's."

I grow silent as memories of Amelia bubble up in my mind. She was my friend. I knew little about her, other than that she led a troubled life. I shouldn't blame myself for her death, but in the end, I do wonder if I couldn't have redeemed her somehow.

No... her salvation wasn't up to me. Amelia was the arbiter of her destiny, and she chose the path of evil. Even if Blaarjiim influenced her, and even if she had a million excuses, it was her choice in the end, just as the Hero's path was mine.

Saving lives isn't easy. It's often more treacherous than ending them. It takes a lifetime to create something, but an instant to destroy it.

That's why I have to be vigilant. I can't take the easy road, no matter how tempting it might be.

Solomon looks at me. "Jason? Something on your mind?"

"Kinda. I was thinking about Amelia. Now I'm wondering about my life and what led me to where I am now."

Raphael lifts his gaze from the fire. "Oh? Judging by the sparkle in thy eyes, the future must be thy foremost concern."

"No, the past. I still don't understand why the Heroic Aura chose me. I'm not special; I'm nobody. Solomon was heir to a throne. Alexander the Great was, too. What makes me different?"

Raphael frowns. He gazes at me for a moment before placing his pipe in his mouth.

"The Heroic Aura. Aye, 'twas not other than my sister, Camael, who created it. The exact way it worked was not something we envisioned, merely that it had to perform a few key functions to meet our needs."

Raphael continues. "We placed our power inside a human, one whose body was already puppeteered by a Titan's. By altering him in slight, but significant ways, we managed to create a being with the unified power of Angelkind, Titankind, and Humankind. We knew not the exact manner in which his abilities would function, only that upon his death, they would transfer to another human, somewhere in the universe."

Solomon nods. "That was what I assumed. The Heroic aura has always acted in a semi-sentient manner. It seeks those it believes worthy of its power, then changes its abilities based on their personality and potential."

Raphael scratches his beard. "Aye. Not even the Archangel of Divination foresaw its ability to change its form. Life has a way of surprising even the most world-weary traveler."

As the Archangel of Wisdom and Solomon debate the finer points of the Heroic Aura, my memories return once again to my youth.

I remember my life back then, when I was a young boy living in the foster care system, both of his parents deceased, jumping from house to house — no living relatives. No stability. It's a miracle I came out as good as I did.

What did my biological mother look like? My father? No matter how much digging I did, I never found out anything about them.

I raise my hand. "Hey, Solomon. How many Heroes were orphans? I read a lot of fiction growing up about kids without parents called to save the world and other mushy stuff like that. Maybe there's a connection? Something about fiction mirroring reality?"

Solomon pauses to consult his crown. "Not many. A few were, but most heroes were born of nobility and had large, extended families, myself included. Are you asking because of your life's course?"

"Yeah. I never knew my parents. I'm just wondering what made me worth pursuing. The Heroic Aura must have chosen me for a reason."

Raphael chuckles. "Heh. Young men usually desire a purpose for their lives. Have thou considered the possibility that perhaps thou were of little importance? Perhaps the Aura sought out an ordinary person. After all, in the ancient eras, there were only a few nobles living amongst the common rabble. By the time thy birth occurred, the world had thousands of politicians and businessmen with influence and power on par with kings."

Solomon lifts his head to gaze into the starry night sky. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Jason brings up a good point. At the time of his birth, there were billions of humans on Earth. I wonder, too, why the Heroic Aura would choose him."

Michael waves his hand flippantly. "Bah! It matters not. The boy became a hero, and that's all there is to it. Solomon, please continue the visions. I grow weary of this idle prattle."

Solomon sighs. "Michael, I hope someday you learn the value of patience. Such hastiness is unbecoming of an angel."

"The king is right," Gabriel adds. "One need not be in a rush to travel nowhere. Slow down. Smell the roses."

Michael goes silent for a moment, before saying, "If only I *could*."

Solomon whistles quietly. "Pseww... okay. Well, Jason, I think we'd better return to the distant past. Michael needs a nap."

The Archangel of Courage glares at Solomon. "Quiet, lout."

Solomon rolls his eyes, then turns to me. "Prepare yourself, Jason."

Once again, I reappear inside Uzziel's body. Somehow, it's become almost comforting seeing things from her point of view. The demons often stink like skunks, but Heaven smells lovely, and being inside an angel's body, especially someone as sweet and gentle as Uzziel, is a much more pleasant experience than that of the demons.

I walk down a dirt-street inside Heaven's biggest city. The only one? Are there multiple? Come to think of it; I don't know how big Heaven is. It could be the size of a planet or a small country. I'll ask Solomon later.

Uzziel hums to herself pleasantly, though there's a tinge of melancholy in her tone. She pauses before a large water-fountain and lowers her gaze to a splotch of blood along its base. A tiny red hand lies severed next to the stone cropping. Uzziel's stomach clenches, and she quickly motions to form magic signs. A wave of mana leaves her body, and the ground opens up to swallow the hand. After that, a few vines sprout and cover up the blood.

She continues onward, forcing herself to continue humming stoically. The pain in Uzziel's heart wrenches mine as well.

Compared to the last time Uzziel stood among her fellow angels, the overall attitude of the place is completely different. Most murmur to each other quietly, while others simply hang their heads. Looks of defeat pass across the faces of everyone present. It appears a few days have passed. I see no imps wandering around, so I have to conclude that the angels killed them.

Uzziel continues walking through the crowds, smiling and nodding at those she passes. She puts a little bit of sing-song into her voice as she stops before a half-dozen men and women. "Cheer up, brothers and sisters! We needn't weep for those fallen! They shall live in our memories forever!"

The gaggle of angels turns to look at me. My infectious smile forces them to return the gesture. "Y-yes. Of course. It, ah, won't do for us to mope around all day."

Continuing onward, I marvel at how Uzziel forces herself to smile. She puts her best effort into making others laugh, even as her chest constricts every time her memories return to dwell on Samael's face. His death wounded Uzziel deeply, but she still beams happiness everywhere and tries to boost everyone else's spirits.

I admire her self-sacrificing spirit.

* * *

Time passes. Ten minutes. Twenty.

Uzziel arrives at the edge of the city. A fifty-foot tall stone building towers over me. The domed structure reminds me of an igloo, with a doorway barely ten feet high. Gabriel might have difficulty entering it, but the other angels wouldn't. The oval-shaped opening extends out of the building a few feet. As I walk toward it, a wave of incredible heat washes over me. It must be a hundred and fifty degrees inside. I start to sweat, but Uzziel doesn't seem to notice.

The Archangel enters the building. Immediately, the temperature increases even higher. Two hundred degrees. Three hundred degrees. Uzziel wipes her forehead as sweat begins to drip. I can't understand how she's standing, let alone walking. I've cooked food in ovens cooler than this place. Angels are hardy beyond belief.

As I enter, the sound of steel clanging against steel rings out in the din. *WHAM. WHAM. WHAM.*

Camael, the Archangel of Divination, raises a massive hammer above her head and slams it down against a sword. A wave of heat radiates outward as the tool meets the red-hot blade. Behind Camael, Uriel and Raphael stand. Unlike me, Uriel appears perfectly at home in the heat from the forge. Raphael seems somewhat fatigued, but he stands without complaint as Camael smiths the weapon wordlessly.

"Brother. Sisters." I nod at them and come to a stop. My gaze sweeps the room. Dozens of swords, axes, shields, pieces of armor, and hundreds of other trinkets hang from the ceiling. Others stay affixed to the walls via spikes and similar implements.

Camael halts her hammer for a moment to glance at me. "Uzziel! What brings thee to my humble smithy?"

"'Tis not often thou dost bestow a new artifact upon someone," I reply. "I am interested in seeing Uriel's new weapon."

Camael stares at me for a moment before smiling. "Is that so?"

She returns to hammering the sword. I take a step closer, but keep a distance of about ten feet from her forge. "Did I miss the ceremony?"

Uriel shakes her head. "Nay. Camael needed to finish working on that blade before continuing."

"Is that Uriel's artifact?" I ask.

Camael shakes her head. "Nay. This sword is one I've forged and reforged hundreds of times. I intend for it to someday be my mightiest weapon. Unfortunately, my mana supply is not what it used to be."

Uriel stands on her tiptoes to peer over Camael's shoulder at the weapon. "Not to insult thy craft, sister, but it doesn't seem different from any of the others in here."

Camael smirks. "Have faith, Uriel. Someday, whosoever wields this weapon will become an unstoppable agent of the Creator. After that fiend killed our brother... I realized I needed to complete it. These imps... the *demons*... they represent a threat to our people. We underestimated them once, and as a result, we lost more than we bargained for."

Uzziel's eldest sister tightens her grip on the red-hot sword.

"I... I had another vision. Last night."

Raphael, silent until now, perks up. "Oh? Thy hesitant tone worries me."

"It should," Camael whispers. "My clairvoyance is rarely lucid. The future is messy, chaotic, a mass of twisting lines and allegiances. Often, I wake up more exhausted than when I lay my head down to rest."

Hesitantly, I speak up. "Thy vision must have been clearer than usual."

Camael sighs. She lifts up the sword and plunges it into a vat of water beside her, extinguishing its heat. After waiting a moment for the blackened blade to cool, she sets the weapon on her anvil, along with her hammer, then turns to face the three of us.

"What I saw sickened me. The demons will become our greatest threat. Their powers will continue to increase, far beyond anything we can imagine. All of us may perish under their unstoppable onslaught."

Uriel's eyes narrow. "Impossible. They caught us off-guard, but the bastards were hardly a match for our power. How could they hope to overrun the might of Heaven? We subdued the dragons and the Titans. A few tiny demon bastards are hardly-"

"Uriel." Raphael reaches his hand over to rest it on her shoulder. "Allow Camael to finish. Her visions have never failed us. Besides, they always have a caveat."

Camael nods. "Thou dost speak truth, brother. Never is the future set in stone. My visions often offer us a divergent path. However, this time, the stakes couldn't be higher. On the one hand, we will face total extinction, but on the other, we will find a utopia free of pain or sorrow. We must hunt the demons down and slay them all if we hope to avert the inevitable."

After a moment, Camael lowers her eyes. "But... the vision I received last night... the reason it haunts me still... I saw something else. I felt it. *My death.*"

The color drains from Raphael's face, Uriel's, and mine too. Our brother opens and closes his mouth, before stammering out, "A-art thou certain?"

Camael hesitates. "I... I saw a horrible creature. Red skin, like the imps, but with a horrific gleam in his eye. He reached toward me. I tried to fight back, but couldn't. My body became heavy. Darkness overtook me. When the void parted, hundreds of screaming voices echoed inside my mind. Their pain mixed with mine. I awoke with a start, sweat drenching my skin. For a moment, I forgot 'twas only a dream. It felt so real that I... I unquestioningly believed my demise had occurred."

"How terrible," I whisper. Quickly, I walk over and reach up to hug Camael, wrapping my arms around her armor. Camael reciprocates, forcing a smile.

"'Twas only... only a vision," she says. "I shall recover."

"'Tis still awful! My heart rends in two for thee!"

Camael gently pats my head, caressing it lovingly. "I thank thee, Uzziel. Even if my end should someday arrive, I will always count myself grateful for-"

"No more of that!" Uriel snaps. "I'll hear no talk of thy supposed demise. Not this soon after Samael's death, not *ever*. Cast aside thy anxieties and focus on the present."

A minute passes. Camael pushes me away and nods. "Right. Very well. I would like nothing more than to forget. A-ah, Uriel, thy reason for coming here..."

Camael switches topics, moving to end the discussion. She turns to the wall of artifacts, then gestures toward several different implements. "Thy fighting ability against the demons was less impressive than I liked seeing. I have decided to triple thy combat prowess by creating a pair of weapons for thee."

Uriel follows Camael's hand to a pair of spears hanging from the wall. "Not a sword and shield?"

"Nay. Thy Light Walls provide exemplary defense — what thou dost lack is a mighty offense to land killing blows. A sword and shield are for fighters like Michael, who rely on speed and mobility to close the gaps between each enemy, while also providing defensive capabilities where they lack. Thou requireth no such thing."

Camael reaches up and plucks the spears off the walls, then tosses them to Uriel. "Gungnir. Gae Bolg. Two of the mightiest spears I have ever forged. Each is light as a feather, but nigh unbreakable no matter how much force one applies."

Uriel catches both spears, one in each hand. She fumbles them slightly and frowns. "Shouldn't I wield only one spear at a time? Using two seems rather... clunky."

Camael smiles. "As I said, thy defense is unparalleled. Typically, someone who uses one spear will focus on parrying and attacking with smooth, sweeping motions. However, wielding two of them allows for incredible reach and attack potential, allowing thee to spear multiple enemies at once."

Uriel's eyes brighten. "Ah! I can slay twice as many demons as before, eh? Thy intent is admirable, my beloved sister. I thank thee for this wonderful gift!"

Raphael keeps his enthusiasm muted, possibly due to the heat in the room. "A most generous gift indeed, Camael. I wonder if thy generosity will ever extend to thy older brother, hm?"

"Haha! Thou hath little need of such implements, Raphael. Thy mystic arts are more than a match for any physical weaponry." Camael winks at Raphael. "But of course, thou already knoweth this."

"I do, I do," Raphael replies. "Still, the prestige of holding one of my sister's artifacts would lighten my heart."

Camael pauses to rub her chin. "Hmm. Well, Samael's death has given me ideas. Protecting our lives is essential. I'll give thy request some thought."

"Do not stress thyself," Uriel says with a grin. "Once I master these spears, I'll become unstoppable. I feel thy mana flowing inside each of them. The demons won't stand a chance, nor will the Titans."

My eldest sister's smile vanishes. "Let us not speak ill of our allies, no matter how tentative the peace might be. Ah, that reminds me, 'tis about time."

Camael sweeps her hair back and heads toward the door. The three of us follow behind her and step into the wonderfully cool air outside, which feels chillier than an arctic breeze compared to the heat from

her forge.

Raphael wheezes, thankful to be out of the heat. "Huff. I should join Michael and Gabriel. Soon, we will head off to address the Titans. I am uncertain how Cronus will react to our request."

"If he denies us the right to scour Earth for the red bastards, then he will become our enemy," Uriel says. "I won't rest until I put Satan's head on a pike. I'll butcher the demon women and torture the men."

"Thy bloodlust is admirable," Camael replies. "But I fear it will stifle negotiations. We will leave this matter to our brothers and Uzziel."

I raise an eyebrow. "Thou dost intend for me to go?"

Raphael smiles. "Of course! Thy beauty may help ease Cronus's irritation. He doesn't like being awoken, so perhaps if he observes thy beautiful smile, he may negotiate in good spirits."

Uriel plants the butts of both spears in the ground and leans forward on them. "Hmph. Why can't I come? I'm reasonable!"

"Thou art a hothead, and worse than Michael," Raphael replies. "Worry not. Uzziel makes for an excellent ambassador. She will prove instrumental in changing Cronus's mind. I feel it in my bones."

Uriel relents. "Very well. I have better things to do than chatter with big, overgrown goliaths. I'll practice with my new spears. That sounds like fun."

Camael smacks Uriel's back, making her sister flinch. "Hah! Why don't I join thee! A bit of sparring will do wonders for our mental wellness!"

"It's settled, then," Raphael says. "Let us go now, Uzziel. We shouldn't keep Michael and Gabriel waiting."

I wave goodbye to my sisters. "Farewell, Uriel. Camael. I'll return soon!"

They wave back, and I begin walking the path beside Raphael.

After a minute, Camael's forge falls behind us into the distance. I turn to Raphael and feel my stomach knot together.

"S-say, Raphael... about... about Michael... has he been... with the prisoners..."

Raphael doesn't meet my gaze. "Do not ask questions to which thou knoweth the answers, Uzziel. Michael continues to press the captives for the location of their brethren. Sooner or later, they will tell him what he wants to know."

The old man swallows audibly. "I hope, for their sake, they don't delay. There has been enough pain in Heaven as of late."

I bow my head contritely.

"Aye. I hate the cycle of violence."

Part 100: Attack On Titan

Leaving Uzziel's body behind, I travel across Heaven to an unknown location. As my eyes open, I notice my new host has a considerable height difference compared to Uzziel: I'm at least a foot taller than before. A dark room swallows the faint glow emanating from my body, while a single torch hangs on the stone wall, illuminating a horrifying scene.

A five-foot-tall demon hangs from the wall, suspended by two shackles clamped onto his wrists. Another demon, much shorter, lies strapped to a stone altar, all his limbs chained and spread out to each of the four corners.

Bael and Diablo stare at me, defiance in their eyes. Dozens of lacerations and burn marks cover their bodies. Only a few patches of mottled skin remain untouched, but both of the demons breathe weakly, unable to catch a proper breath.

The big one, Bael lifts his head. "P-pathetic. Pickin' on the boss, just 'cause he's weak. You know you can't break me."

"Thou shalt reveal where the other rats are hiding, or thy torture will never end," I say, smiling. Judging by my voice, I must be in Michael's body. It's the first time I've possessed him for a vision. I'm surprised by the strength in his arms and how confident he acts as he paces back and forth. There isn't a hint of desperation in his voice. "I can keep this up all day and night. Thou shalt never receive a moment's rest — not until thy secrets come spewing from thy putrid lips."

Diablo trembles. He tries to lift an arm, but it barely budes. "Haah... haah... we... we'll never... never tell you anything."

Anger boils in Michael's stomach. I slowly take a few steps around the altar and stop half a foot from Diablo's head. His eyes lock onto mine as I bend slightly at the waist. "I sense thy weakness, and I hear thy voice shake. Art thou afraid, little bloodskin? Thy mind tells thee to keep quiet, but thy heart knows speaking will prevent thee from suffering a great deal of pain."

Bael tugs at his chain, pulling himself up the wall an inch before sagging again. "Ugly chicken. You're too stupid to know when to quit. It must piss you off that we've held out for three days, eh? We ain't weaklings. You can't push us around like when we were imps."

My gaze narrows. I tilt my head to glare at the suspended one. "Quiet. Thy ridicule grows tiresome. Taunting me will prove fruitless. Holy Magic has little effect on thee, so I will abuse thy companion instead. It won't be much longer before he breaks."

Bael curls up his lip. "Don't say nothin', boss. Satan'll come for us. We just gotta hold out."

A throaty chuckle escapes my lips. "Kuhuhu... Satan? The treacherous little rat who tricked my brother? I think not. He fled like a coward and left thee to die. The look of panic on his face as he retreated was quite amusing."

Diablo grits his teeth. "Tch. Y-you didn't chase after him. Sounds like you were the coward to me!"

My eye twitches. I stab a finger at Diablo, press it against his chest, and funnel waves of Holy Energy into his body.

"AAAIIEEE!!" Diablo howls in agony. His fingers and toes clench as he struggles mightily to evade my touch. After ten long seconds of listening to Diablo's horrible screams, I retract my finger. A black mark sits on his chest, where I touched. Diablo's body sags as tears pour from his eyes. His chains stop rattling, and his strength fades.

"Be wary of the insolent words thou might speak. I'm not known for my restraint."

"Someone's touchy," Bael mutters.

I glare at the demon hanging on the wall. "I am not afraid of little red mice. However, the angels cannot leave Heaven, since Earth is the domain of the Titans. The exception is for when we issue a specific inquiry with Cronus, their leader. Thy accomplices are temporarily safe, but not for long. After my brothers speak to Cronus, he will permit us to tear down the forests and bore deep into the Earth in search of our enemies. They have days, perhaps weeks left to live."

Bael smirks at me. "So you *are* afraid, eh? Whassa matter? Will the big bad Titans lay the smackdown if you step outta line?"

Silently, I draw my sword from its sheath. Bael's eyes dart down and follow its movements as I take two steps toward him. A moment later, I press the tip against his stomach and slowly push it into his body. Bael grits his teeth and winces, but he forces himself to show as little pain as possible.

Glowing at the fat bastard, I narrow my eyes. "Were the choice mine, I would kill any Titan in my way. The thought of war worries my family, but not I. I like neither their kind nor thine. We killed tens of thousands of thy kin over the last few days. Even now, my only lament is that we've stained Heaven's soil with their blood."

After a few moments, I yank my sword out of Bael's stomach. A stream of blood gushes from his fresh wound, but it seals after a few moments. Bael exhales audibly, releasing a breath he had been holding.

"Thou art quite durable," I mutter.

Bael nods. "M-my blood clots real easy."

"Color me unimpressed."

I wander back to Diablo. It's been less than a minute, but already he's breathing normally again, having recovered from my torturous holy energy.

"You... you feathery fuck. I'm not... not saying a word. I won't sell Satan out, or anyone else."

"What gives thee such fortitude, I wonder? Considering the manner in which thy people abandoned thee, what is it that makes ye go to any length to protect them? Why show loyalty toward those who abandoned thee?"

Diablo stares at me silently for a moment. "They're kin. They're *my* kin. We have the same skin. We bleed the same blood. We all suffered under your boot. I'd sooner die than betray them."

"Ahaha. Then die, thou shalt," I promise. A sinister grin passes over my face. "But rest assured, I *will* break thy spirit, little demon. Thy silence won't last forever. Soon, thou shalt-"

I pause mid-sentence. The sound of boots outside the chamber draws my attention. I glance toward the entrance, where a heavy stone door stands, resolute, unyielding. It lacks a handle on the inside, so even if the demons tried to escape, they'd have a difficult time. Only a slight crack at the bottom allows a trickle of light to stream through, and judging by the shifting shadows; someone must be standing outside.

"One moment," I say, raising a finger. I trudge toward the doorway and motion with my hands, casting a spell to unbar the entrance. The door swings open, assaulting my eyes with Heaven's Light. Michael's vision instantly adjusts to the change in light thanks to his angelic heritage.

Three Archangels stand outside. Immediately, Michael lowers his gaze to his sister. "Uzziel? Why art thou here?"

"Hm? Did I not tell thee?" Raphael asks. "We must seek an audience with the Titans today. Thou art coming, as is Uzziel."

Raphael's voice has a note of finality to it. Michael questions him anyway. "Must I go? I am still trying to- to... ah..."

He pauses, noticing the look of distress on Uzziel's face. She cranes her neck to try and see into the dark dungeon, but he steps out and closes the door behind himself.

"Uzziel shall be our show of compassion, while the two of us will represent Heaven's might," Gabriel says, crossing his arms. "Raphael will appeal to Cronus's common sense, assuming the Titan King has any left."

Michael pauses to examine the emotions on Uzziel's face. His thoughts bubble in my mind.

My sister lost a brother only a few days before, yet still, she worries about the fate of the bastards who slaughtered Samael. I shouldn't trouble her more than necessary.

Michael's demeanor softens. "Very well. A little fresh air can't hurt."

I walk over to Uzziel and pull her in for a quick hug. "Come, little sister. It has been many ages since we last saw Earth's state. Its beauty will surely pale compared to the lush gardens of Heaven, but thou hath always found comfort in its wild, untouched nature."

Uzziel continues staring at the door for a moment before turning to me. She forces a smile. Despite how disingenuous her grin is, the radiance catches me off-guard. She's stunningly beautiful, with an alluring figure that draws my eyes around its curves. I suddenly feel awkward while admiring her, given I'm in her brother's body.

"Yes. Of course. I hope thou art feeling well, Michael."

I smile back, mine just as disingenuous as hers. "I've never been better."

Raphael sighs. "A lie if ever I've heard one."

Time passes. My mind returns to Uzziel's body as the four Archangels begin flying across the ancient Earth, heading toward an unknown destination.

The rushing of wind against my face and the dizzying speed at which the angels fly exhilarates me. Even if Solomon's Crown only gives the illusion of bodily sensations, I find the fake world around me as realistic as the one I've lived in for my entire life. Hundreds of trees speed by beneath us. A desert follows — an ocean as well.

The four of us reach a coastline, follow it for a while, then proceed toward a mountain in the distance. It rises hundreds of feet higher than Mount Sinai, where the angels live.

Once we draw within a mile of the mountain, all of us decelerate and dive toward an opening in the forest below, flying perfectly in parallel to one another. We pull up at the last second and come to a graceful landing, pausing to swat a few bugs off our robes.

The clearing we land in is filled with the sounds of various birds chirping and cawing above, as if to signal our arrival. They hang out in the branches, peering at us from the shadows. Angels are a rare sight on Earth, it seems.

An unpleasant, musky odor rises from various leaves and plants under our feet. It mixes with the moisture from recent rainfall, giving off the scent of a wet dog. Gabriel pauses to sniff the air. "Has Earth always possessed such a rank odor?"

I shake my head. "Nay. I am unfamiliar with these species of trees. Without my guiding hand, Earth has had millions of years to develop outside of my control."

Raphael gestures forward. "Come. Watch thy step. Mount Olympus is near."

Nodding, the rest of us follow our eldest brother. While the men wear boots or sandals, Uzziel goes barefoot. Every step she takes, Uzziel reaches out to touch the trees, or dig her toes into the mud, experiencing nature as viscerally as she can.

Her thoughts whisper in my mind. *I wish I could visit Earth more often. 'Tis unfortunate that I've never seen the descendants of the creatures I conceived.*

After a few minutes, the edge of the forest appears. We continue toward it, but a rustling in the trees above catches my attention. I glance up in time to spot an odd-looking chimpanzee leap from one tree to another, clearing a gap above our heads. The male Archangels pay it no heed.

I wave hello and flash a sunny smile. The chimp pauses to ogle me for a moment before continuing on its merry way.

Michael pauses to glance at me. "Uzziel? Did ye see something?"

I lower my hand. "Oh, nothing much. There was a funny little creature hanging on a branch. I've never seen one like it before."

Michael turns and continues onward, showing little to no interest in the chimp.

"Mmm. I see."

* * *

We emerge from the tree cover onto a flat, grassy plain. The field extends for a mile in every direction, but we continue toward the base of the mountain we spotted earlier. It doesn't take long before we encounter two massive stone carvings, each a hundred feet tall. Each is in the image of a naked man with his palm outstretched, as if to say, *none may enter*.

The statues stand guard before a gigantic cave opening at the base of the mountain. The hole dwarfs the statues, rising several hundred feet, with more than enough room for a battleship to comfortably fit inside. Raphael pauses before it. The rest of us watch silently as the old man mumbles to himself and begins weaving dozens of magic signs. After a full minute passes, he wipes his forehead, clears his throat, and opens his mouth.

"KING CRONUS! MIGHTIEST OF THE TITANS! THE ARCHANGELS HAVE COME, SEEKING AN AUDIENCE!"

Raphael's voice explodes like a ton of dynamite. Uzziel's entire body quivers from its kinetic energy, reminding me of when I caught the demons offguard with my Wordsmithing. I can only marvel at how long it took him to prepare a spell similar to mine, whereas I only had to utter a few words.

Times like these remind me of the untapped potential my Wordsmithing possesses.

Several minutes pass. Nobody says a word.

Suddenly, the birds in the forest go silent. An eerie stillness washes over the region. Clouds blot out the sun above, and the summer's breeze dies off.

From deep under the Earth, the rumbling of *massive* footsteps reaches our ears, each one like a boulder slamming into concrete, shuddering and shaking the planet. It doesn't take long before a humanoid figure appears in the darkness of the cave. The naked giant steps forward and yawns loudly.

"Nnn! Gah. Bloody angels! How dare you disturb my slumber!"

Cronus stands over two-hundred feet tall. His big toe rises nearly to Gabriel's height. Seeing him reminds me of the first time I met Gabriel in a vision when he was a similar height. Scraggly brown hair and a fifteen-foot-long beard combine with a fat nose and potbelly, giving Cronus the appearance of a lazy hillbilly.

"King of the Titans. We respectfully come before thee today to seek an audience," Raphael says, bowing politely. It boggles my mind that this ugly, obese giant is the king of anything not named 'Dunkin Donuts.' "My brothers and sisters, as well as myself, have suffered a great loss not three days prior."

Cronus rubs his eyes. "Hrm. Great loss. Mmm. Right. Go on."

Michael squeezes his sword's hilt. The king's casual demeanor seems to irritate him. His thoughts etch onto his face, asking, *why must we show respect to this ugly, disgusting oaf?*

Raphael, however, ignores Cronus's disheveled condition. "Samael, the Archangel of Change, fell a few days ago to an ambush. The imps, our formerly loyal servants, rose up in rebellion and murdered him."

Michael's face twitches. "Aye! And they were far stronger than should have been possible! Quite the coincidence, wouldn't-"

"Quiet," Gabriel whispers, silencing Michael. "Allow Raphael to work his silver tongue."

Cronus blinks several times, finally clearing the sleep from his eyes. "The imps? Weren't those the ugly little red things? The rats?"

Raphael nods. "Aye. Their leader, Satan, fled Heaven a month prior, along with a few others. They later returned, but their bodies had changed. They grew far more powerful, in a surprisingly short period."

Cronus sighs. "Oh, bother. This story of yours is going to take a while, isn't it?"

Deciding not to wait for Raphael's reply, the King falls backward and slams his ass onto the ground, shaking the Earth. None of the Archangels lose their footing, though Michael grows even more annoyed by Cronus's laziness.

The Titan shifts into a cross-legged position to get comfortable. He leans his elbow in his knee and rests his chin in his palm. "Hrm. Your servants rebelled and somehow managed to assassinate Samael. Is that what you're saying?"

"Correct. The imps gained potent magical abilities, seemingly from nowhere. Given their arrival on Earth, I hope I am not too forthcoming when I surmise that a nefarious plot may have been involved."

Cronus narrows his gaze. The Titan leans forward to loom over us. Even sitting down, the living mountain towers seventy-feet tall. "Are you accusing me of skullduggery, Raphael? Of plotting to kill your people?"

"Nay, nay. I would never insult thee in such an offensive manner," Raphael replies. The old man reaches into the folds of his red and gold robes to procure a small pipe. He quickly lights some tobacco in it and takes a few puffs. "However, thou art not the only Titan on Earth."

Several moments pass. Cronus rumbles disapprovingly in his throat and straightens his posture. "Other Titans. Yes. Of course. So, you accuse not me, but one of my brothers or sisters of empowering your servants to turn against you. While insulting, I begrudgingly admit that I rarely speak to the others. It has been many centuries since I last stood under Sol's light."

Michael balls up his hand into a fist. "Perhaps thou mayest suspect someone? Atlas? Prometheus? Rhea?"

At the mention of the last name, Cronus's mood sours. "Watch your tongue, Michael. Disrespect my wife again, and I won't hesitate to reignite the ancient conflicts."

"Yes," Raphael says, nodding at Michael. "Please, keep quiet."

I reach over and touch Michael's arm, pulling close to him. "Cronus is our ally, Michael. Ascribing ill-intent toward his family is unbecoming of us."

Cronus's gaze flicks from Michael to me. "Ah! Uzziel! How are you, Mother? Long has it been since we last spoke."

I pull away from Michael and take a few steps toward the naked giant. "I am fine, I suppose. However, losing Samael has wounded me deeply. Surely, thou dost understand, given how many of thy family members have fallen over the eons."

"That I do," Cronus says, nodding. He reaches a massive finger toward me and gently rubs my head. "I might be an old codger, but I know the pain of death the same as any of you. I suppose I could ask around. Perhaps I can sniff out whoever is turning thy servants evil."

Raphael rubs his palms together. "Cronus, we would like thy permission to search for our escaped servants. These imps have wronged us, and as such, we must hunt them down before they become a greater threat."

Cronus chuckles. "Tsk, I'm afraid I can't do that, Raphael."

"What?!" Michael steps forward. Fire burns in his eyes. "The little bastards killed Samael! They attacked us mercilessly! How dare thou refuse!"

Gabriel pivots on his heel and slaps the back of Michael's head. "Quiet!"

Cronus rubs his nose. His eyes flicker with a faint hint of rage, revealing the suppressed emotions stuffed into his belly. "Michael. I have held my tongue since your arrival. However, it is clear that you hold some grudge against me for whatever reason. I cannot say with absolute certainty that a Titan did not empower your servants, leading to Samael's death. Perhaps someone did. Perhaps someone did not. I do not know. What I *do* know is that your continued insults are beginning to *boil my blood*."

The Titan bites the last few words off. He snarls viciously, showing slightly too many teeth for my liking. "I do *not* permit you to scour the Earth. I will do so myself. Be glad I am willing to go to such lengths for Raphael and Mother Uzziel, for had *you* been the one to ask, I wouldn't extend the same courtesy."

The fire dies down in Michael's eyes. "I-I apologize. I... I did not mean to disrespect thee."

"And yet you did," Cronus says.

The Titan climbs to his feet, returning to his two hundred foot standing height. "Raphael. Uzziel. Gabriel. Michael. I bid farewell to all of you. I will find out if there is a traitor breaking the old treaty. However, I do not give my approval for you to stay on Earth. Return home at once."

Raphael flicks his eyes to Michael. A look of disappointment passes over his face, but it disappears quickly. The old man returns his attention to Cronus. "Ah, of course. We thank thee for any services ye can spare. Thy assistance will not go unrewarded, I assure thee."

The Titan turns to leave, but pauses. "Before I go, I must ask... if the imps have turned against you, how will you regain your energy stores? Didn't you depend on them for mana?"

Gabriel bows his head. "Aye. We did. We've purged all of their ilk from Heaven."

Cronus glances at me. "Mother Uzziel, do you plan to rebuild your stores?"

I nod hesitantly. "Y-yes... somewhat. I need to create a new servant creature, but the imp attack drained our reserves. We can barely..."

"Uzziel!" Michael gawks at me. "Have ye forgotten? Why art thou mentioning our mana supply?!"

My eyes widen. "O-oh no..."

The Titan rumbles in his throat. "Huhu... your situation sounds dire. Afraid I'll attack if I know how weak you are? Worry not. I might crush Michael for speaking ill of my wife, but my love for war has faded over the years. I'm too old and tired to bother with bloodshed and conflict."

Cronus eyes me for a moment before heading into his cave. As he leaves, the Titan says, "However, I would not say the same of my sons. Poseidon is a jealous bastard. Pray he never learns of thy present predicament."

The four of us watch silently as the King returns to his mountain home. His footsteps rumble the Earth for several minutes. Soon, only the silence of nature greets us.

Once again, birds begin to chirp in the distance. Clouds part in the sky, and the creatures of the Earth release the breaths they had been holding. A ray of sunshine beams down on us, warming the chilliness on our skin.

Gabriel sighs. "Michael... thy temper is troublesome."

"I am sorry," Michael says, bowing his head contritely. "I hate word-games. Polite speech, pleasantries, the quips people utter when they have something to hide. I fear that Cronus knows something. He may not have played a part in the imp's evolution directly, but I believe he knows who did."

"Nonsense," Raphael says, waving his hand flippantly. "Pish-tosh. I felt no such impression from him. Cronus was merely irritated by thy constant insults. Now I regret bringing thee."

I wrap my arm around Michael's and smile sweetly at him. "Oh, come now, Raphael! Do not blame Michael. He is stressed the same as all of us. We can hardly blame him for losing his cool. And besides! Cronus is going to investigate his family for us!"

"So the Mad Titan says," Gabriel replies. "Let us pray Cronus keeps his word. We must return to Heaven, and we won't be able to search for the imps. Whatever the demons do next, I worry we will suffer their actions."

Michael pauses for a second before replying. "I don't. Tricks and deception will only get the rats so far. If they return, they will meet the sharp side of my blade. Then, they will know true fear."

The Archangel of Courage keeps his voice low. The frostiness of his words makes me shudder. An evil glint appears in his eye, as though he's plotting his next move, but hasn't yet figured out what it will be.

* * *

A few minutes later, we wander back toward the forest. I glance up at the trees and spot several prehistoric chimpanzees swinging around from branch to branch. The other Archangels do as well.

"Those creatures are quite remarkable," Gabriel says. "Look at how they balance themselves while climbing the trees. I wonder why they don't fall."

"They're perfectly balanced," Raphael replies. "As all things should be. More importantly, I can't help but notice how they compare to us."

Michael scoffs. "I see no resemblance. Black hair, wingless, with ugly hands and feet. Art thou going blind, eldest brother?"

I walk away from the group and head toward the closest tree. As I do, one of the chimps stops swinging around and stares at me. I recognize him as the one from when we first arrived.

I raise my hand and wave at him. "Come and say hello, little one."

He regards me suspiciously for a minute or so. The chimp starts to turn away, but changes his mind as his curiosity gets the better of him. Eventually, he crawls down the tree and lands on the forest floor, but keeps his distance.

"I'm friendly!"

Behind me, Gabriel chuckles. "Haha, it never fails to amuse me how much our sister loves nature."

After several minutes, I coax the chimp over, then reach out and pat his head. "Aww, you're a cutie!"

Uzziel's thoughts appear in my mind. *This animal is shaped similarly to the imps. Raphael is right about how it resembles us, as well. How interesting. Perhaps, if I cannot spare the energy to make new servants, I might be able to try something else.*

I motion with my hands, and a trickle of energy leaves my body. It travels toward the chimp and enters his brain. The little guy's eyes bolt open, and he darts away in a panic, fleeing as fast as he can.

Uzziel watches silently as he jumps into a tree and swings away, but a smile forms on her face. *He will be the first. If my experiment works, I may solve our mana problems and prevent more needless bloodshed.*

"Uzziel?" Gabriel lifts his voice questioningly. "Art thou alright? I've never seen anything flee from thee in all my days."

I spin on my heel and lean forward cutely. "Oh, tis' unimportant, brother. No matter at all. I got a little too touchy, and he became frightened. Let us return to Heaven, now."

"Aye," Raphael says. "With our request refused, t'would be unbecoming to dawdle longer than we must."

I walk back over to the others, and all four of us lift off into the sky.

As I fly away, my thoughts dwell on the chimpanzee and why Uzziel might have used her magic on him.

I wonder what she's planning...

Part 101: Don't Fear The Reaper

The bonfire appears once more. I materialize before the Archangels and Solomon with a hundred thoughts bubbling in my mind.

Immediately, Raphael notices the distress on my face. "What is the problem, young Hero?"

I stare at him for a moment, then turn my attention to Michael. "You tortured the demons. Brutally."

Michael, still sitting on the log, rolls his eyes. "Aye. Dost thee feel a sliver of compassion for them after seeing the deaths they caused? Bloodskins began the war when they turned Samael into our enemy. Valac killed dozens of angels before they had a chance to defend themselves. I posit that a little torture was more than justified."

Solomon raises his eyebrow. "You make it sound as though your barbarism didn't last long."

"The time spent matters little. Had the rat bastards opened their mouths and told me what I wished to know, I would have freed them from the world of the living much sooner."

"You would have killed them," I reply, correcting him. "Wow. Aren't you generous?"

Gabriel clears his throat. "Ahem. Jason, allow me to play *devil's advocate*. My people lived in relative peace for several eons in Heaven. The imps never made any effort to voice their concerns. Instead, they turned against us, murdered one of our beloved brothers along with hundreds of cherubim, and then turned tail when we mustered a force to stop them. Our rage ran hot. 'Tis easy for thee to judge Michael for his actions from what you know of the past now, but back then, nobody could blame him. Many of us wished we could torture the survivors ourselves. Millions of my brethren felt relief at drawing and quartering the remaining imps in Heaven. I would not call thee incorrect if ye stated we should have pondered the consequences more carefully... but hindsight is 20/20, as humans say."

I regard Gabriel's words for a full minute, thinking silently to myself.

"Maybe. I guess I can't apply today's morality to yesterday's society, but it's tempting. How about we call it a draw and move on?"

Michael averts his eyes. "Hmph."

I turn my attention to Raphael. "Cronus seemed like a decent guy. Even when Uzziel let your mana situation slip, he didn't attack."

The old man nods. "Mmm. Cronus was a war-weary survivor of the Primordial Era. To a mortal, a million years seems an incomprehensible, vast amount of time. However, to deities like myself, time passes significantly faster. The last hundred-thousand years were a blur. If thou didn't stand in his position, the ancient wars might be like months or even days in thy eyes. 'Twas a recent memory for all of us."

Solomon rubs his chin. "I'm only a hundred thousand years old, so I don't compare to you lot in the age department. I was technically dead for most of that time, so I'm still used to a human timescale.

Anyway, I imagine the speed at which time passed is what caused your next blunder."

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning to Solomon. "What happened?"

Gabriel rises to his feet. The fifteen-foot tall Archangel pops his back as he stretches. "Nnn! Ahh. Well, Jason, fifty years passed in the blink of an eye. The demons-

Solomon interrupts Gabriel. "A hundred."

"I beg thy pardon?" Gabriel glances at Solomon in irritation. "A hundred what?"

"Years. Not fifty. A hundred years passed. Closer to a hundred and twenty, in fact."

"The exact number matters not," Gabriel says, waving Solomon's correction off. "Several dozen years passed, and the demons raided Heaven to free their comrades, seemingly out of nowhere. Their numbers had swelled to ten thousand, by that point."

"That many?" I cross my arms. "I thought only a few hundred demons escaped Heaven alive. That's a huge jump to go from hundreds to thousands."

Solomon purses his lips. "I assume you recall the vision where Leviathan gave Lucifer a special ability?"

"Sure. What about it?"

"Lucifer became instrumental in shaping the future of demonkind," Solomon says. "Before we jump a hundred and twenty years forward, I think we should detour to see the ramifications of her new powers."

I nod. "No reason to skip significant events. Take it away. You're my guide to the past."

Solomon motions to form magic signs. "So long as you think we have time, I'll show you anything you wish to see."

Before Solomon activates another vision, I grab his arm. "Wait. Hold on. I've seen tons of visions already. What time is it outside of the crown?"

"Not to worry. Since you entered my crown, only seven minutes have passed in the physical dimension."

I blink. "That's all?"

"Yes. That's all."

Nodding, I lean back as relief washes over me. "Wow, it feels like I've been in your crown for weeks."

"The passage of time is in the eye of the beholder," Raphael says with a wink. In a way, thou art receiving a taste of how it moves for us as well."

"Mmm."

I nod at Solomon.

"Alright. Make it so."

The moment I arrive in the ancient past, I end up gazing upon a horrifying, awful, disgusting sight. The overwhelming urge to retch engulfs my body. Waves of nausea pass through my stomach, travel to my throat, and burn my nose. Somehow, Satan manages to suppress his nausea before expelling anything.

"Bloody- what the devil is that?!" Satan coughs out words he and I are both thinking. A massive 14-foot-tall monstrosity lays inert in a cave system, nearly filling the entire area ahead of us. The wall of red flesh writhes and wriggles, while moaning to itself in pain.

Beside me, a woman speaks. "Beautiful, isn't she? Her former name was Mildred. I call her '*Imp Shitter*' now."

I turn to look at the speaker. Lucifer stands beside me, grinning from ear to ear. Her razor-sharp teeth give her the appearance of a predator, as if she's sizing me up for her next meal. Her third eye twitches back and forth, looking from me to the disgusting lump of red flesh.

"Mildred? What the devil did you do to her?!" I ball up my fist and exhale angrily. "She's disgusting!"

Lucifer chuckles into her palm. "Hehe, it was a shame, but she was the ideal test subject for Leviathan's powers."

"You're terrible! I can't believe you! This shit is unforgivable!"

Satan's rage boils like a fire. I can feel his hatred churning as he prepares to lunge at Lucifer and tear her head off.

"What are you saying? Mildred is the first of many. She will save demonkind. I thought you'd be happy."

Satan pauses. "F-first of many? Explain yourself, fat-tits. You've got ten seconds before I splatter you over the walls and tell the dragon to make Valac our new envoy."

Lucifer holds up her palms in a mock display of fear. "Oh no, heavens, please. Surely you wouldn't attack a helpless woman. Come now, Satan. Mildred is no ordinary demoness anymore. I've adjusted her body's internal structure to be like that of an ant queen. I think she's *cute*."

I scoff. "Cute? Cute?! She's a fat, blubbery swamp monster! Why is she so nasty-looking? And what's up with..."

I pause to lean around and stare at Mildred's rear. Her body isn't only tall and fat, but long, too. It extends backward for nearly thirty feet, filling the tunnel with her rear extremities.

"...with THAT? It's hideous!"

Lucifer rolls her eyes. "Mildred is a new type of demon, one I designed to produce imps. She can whelp several dozen at a time. As I said, I based her body on that of an ant-queen. She's asexual and able to produce offspring without the loving touch of a male. She will quickly birth many imps for us to swell our ranks."

It takes a minute, but Satan manages to settle down. He swallows hard as he gazes at the corpulent body of what used to be an ordinary demoness. The uneasiness in his stomach doesn't go away, but he

seems to accept it. "Fine. She shits out imps. Still, why's she gotta look so disgusting? Mildred had a pretty nice body, before."

Lucifer feigns ignorance. "Oh, that's how Leviathan's power works. If you want an army to rival the Archangels, you'll have to make a few sacrifices."

"Yeah? Don't play stupid. You knew I fancied Mildred. You picked her to piss me off, didn't you? Stupid bitch. From now on, pick the ugly women first."

Mildred's glazed eyes open for a moment. "S... Sa... Sat... an... hur... ts..."

Lucifer ignores Mildred's weeping. Instead, she rubs her chin. "Hmm. What should I call this creature? An imp-queen? No. Too regal for a spawn-spitting sow. Perhaps I could call her a 'bloody mother.' No, that reminds me of the insults the angels foist upon us. I'll have to give the matter some thought."

I turn away and shake my head. "Call her what you will. In the future, tell me what disgusting experiments you'll be doing. That's an order."

Lucifer flinches. "Tch. Bossing me around won't win you any favors, even if your contract forces me to obey. You had better start giving me the respect I deserve."

"After butchering a perfectly good dame, the only thing you deserve is a visit to Leviathan's stomach," I quip.

Turning to walk away, I call out, "Remember! I want advance knowledge of whatever you're up to! No more surprises, Lucy!"

Her voice hisses at my back. "It's Lucifer! Not Lucy!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

* * *

The tunnel stretches ahead of me. I'm underground somewhere, though I haven't a clue where. Everywhere I look, the corridor branches off in different directions, often to small rooms where various male or female demons sit around, chat with each other, and play games involving sticks or rocks.

A sense of boredom fills the underground base. Given how big it is, a decent chunk of time must have passed since I last possessed Satan's body for a vision. A month? Two? Perhaps more?

Satan trudges through the hallways, ignoring the goings-on of the demons around him. Eventually, he arrives at a path that quickly slopes upward. Within a minute, he emerges through a layer of underbrush hiding the demon lair and out onto a snowy Earth. The winter is noticeably frostier than before. It's cold enough outside that I almost want to shiver, but Satan's enhanced body withstands the winter chill. It's barely an annoyance to him.

Satan shuffles through the snow, kicking it out of the way.

"Change my babes into freaks, why don't'cha. Fuckin' Lucifer. Stupid bitch. I ain't one to hit a broad, but I oughta teach that three-eyed freak a lesson."

Satan grumbles to himself as he exits the forest cover shielding the underground demon lair. Once he steps onto an open plain, something catches his attention. Out across the valley, close to a hundred demon grunts line up in pairs, brawling with each other. At the front of their group, Agares stands wrapped in several animal skins. He shivers and clenches his teeth as the winds of winter whip around him.

"D-d-do t-t-two more r-reps! S-Silko! Put y-your back into it! Goron, y-you need t-to dodge!"

I walk over to Agares' side. "You okay? You look like you're having trouble standing."

Agares whips his head toward me. The poor young guy is shivering like a madman. "S-Satan! Oh, devils! It's s-so b-b-buh-bloody cold out here! My whole b-b-body's startin' to ache!"

I nod. "Go inside, then. Cripes. I thought Valac was supposed to be training the troops today. He knows you're useless in the cold."

Agares shakes his head violently. "I a-ain't seen him around. That g-guy's a real n-n-nomad. He does whatever h-h-he wants. Gah! I gotta go, boss. C-can't take this cold any longer."

I nod. "Warm up, friend. There's no sense in having you turn into an ice-cube."

Agares shuffles away without another word, leaving me with the troops. Most of them seem to be suffering too, but nowhere near the same extent as him. Having Phoebe teach me what she knows about demonology has been useful over the last six years. In addition to Bahamut's libraries, Phoebe also learned about demons from the Knights of the Round Table. The majority of demons are quite resistant to hot and cold weather, especially compared to humans. Solomon has explained that it's due to a bunch of biochemical processes that heat their blood during the winter and expel heat during the summer.

I'm no biologist. All I know is that's how it works. Since Agares' body is something like a lizard's, he must be cold-blooded. Interesting.

Satan slowly rubs his hands together, more to relieve tension than to warm himself up. Something's eating at him, but it isn't apparent what.

Well, until his thoughts begin to swirl.

Lucifer's changing my women into beasts. Valac's slackin' off again. Agares can't work in the cold. Devil's sake. I've gotta do all the work around here. If I don't get Deebs and Bael back, I won't have any decent helpers. What's a guy gotta do to find a few yes-men?

Not far away, one of the trainees suddenly stumbles in the snow. He gasps and clutches his chest, then falls to his knees. His training partner, Vepar, cocks her head. "Hm? Tirrus? What's the matter? I barely hit you."

Tirrus wheezes hard as his eyes zig and zag everywhere, which I recognize as the classic signs of a panic attack. "Aw, man, geez! Too... too much! Too much work! Too hard! Ahh! I can't take it anymore! I wanna... I wanna go back to Heaven! I hate it here! It's m-miserable! All we do is work and work! Nnn!!"

He squeezes his legs and tries to control himself, but his emotions grow ever more erratic. I start walking toward him. "Hey! Whaddya yappin' about? I thought I went over this already!"

The young grunt glances up at me, terror in his eyes. "M-mister Satan! Come on, man! You gotta let me go back. I can't take it here anymore! We never have any fun or get to take days off! We don't-"

"Quit your bitching," I mutter. "You think you're the only one who has it bad? Vepar here works just as hard as you do. So do I. We all live underground just in case the angels come flying overhead, but nobody's having fun."

Tirrus's breathing slows noticeably. "I... I d-didn't mean to suggest... that, uh..."

I glance around the clearing. Several of the trainees have stopped sparring to whisper conspiratorially to each other. It seems many of them are thinking the same thoughts at Tirrus. A lot of discontent is brewing under the surface.

I reach down, grab Tirrus's arm, and pull him up. "Calm your tits. Everyone's a little on edge. It's okay to let out your anger and frustrations once in a while. Just don't go doin' anything stupid like trying to find Heaven again, ya feel me? If you go there, the angels will kill you. I'd rather not have any dead demons on my watch. As long as we stick together, we'll grow more powerful. Soon, we can return and kick their asses."

The young demon's breathing evens out. "Y-yeah! Totally!"

Several trainees nearby pump their fists in the air. "Right on!"

I breathe a silent sigh of relief as I pat Tirrus on the back. "Now get back to training. No slacking. I'm going to have a big feast tonight, and everyone can lounge around after their combat practice is over."

With the whoops of approval at my back, I turn around and pace toward a tree, then lean back against it. *Cripes. I'm babysitting a buncha morons*, Satan thinks to himself. *Whine, bitch, moan. That's all they ever do. I'm just glad they're all dumb as rocks.*

Satan's sour mindset contrasts with his assertive outward appearance and how he smiles and waves at people. I can practically hear the thoughts of those nearby as they marvel at his 'amazing' leadership capabilities.

However, seeing things from his perspective makes me realize he's bitter, confused, and unsure of what he should do next.

If only these guys knew how good they had it, Satan thinks. *They could be dead, or worse. Samael told me that Michael is probably torturing Bael and Deebs. I've gotta save 'em. No way I'm leavin' two of my best warriors to rot in Heaven.*

"Satan!" A woman's voice to my left startles me. I jerk my head toward the disturbance to spot Belial gasping for breath. "It's terrible! Come quickly! Valac has gone berserk!"

"What? Berserk?! What do you mean-"

"He's killing demons left and right! Come on, come on!!"

Panic covers every inch of Belial's face. I nod and quickly follow after her. "What direction?"

"North, near Leviathan's cave. I don't know what happened!" Belial and I hop over boulders and run through bushes in our path, even as the snow reaches almost two-feet in height, making us wade through

it like a swimming pool. "I think one of the grunts insulted him, and a few others started laughing. I wanted to stay and fight, but-"

"But, nothing," I say, cutting her off. My eight vectors burst from my back. I reach over, grab her waist with my left arm, and jump into the air. Belial yelps in surprise as we seemingly levitate into the air. My eight invisible limbs press into the snow below, transforming me into some form of a massive spider.

Belial's eyes turn to saucers as she spots the five-clawed imprints rapidly appearing in the snow below. "What in the name of-?!"

"Don't worry about it, toots. I've got a new trick up my sleeve. Bah! What is Valac thinkin'?!"

Using my vectors, we zoom forward ten times faster than before. Sometimes a vector will lunge toward a tree branch and yank us forward, giving a big burst of speed. Belial's cries of terror turn to glee as we continue, then vanish once she remembers where we're heading.

"You can't fight Valac! He's too powerful! Don't you remember what happened when we fought the cave bear? What about when we were in Heaven, and he killed all those cherubs? You'll die!"

I grit my teeth. "Shut up, dumbass. I ain't gonna lose to the likes of him! Not this time. I've had enough of him muckin' up my plans."

Satan's thoughts transform into seething anger. *Yeah, that's right. All that piece of work does is question me. He never contributes anything, because he thinks he's soooo tough. Big ol' Valac, always mockin' me every chance he gets. Well, I'll tell you what, it ends today. I draw the line at killing other demons. No way that continues anymore. Not if I have a say in it.*

Within two minutes, the base of the mountain appears. I drop Belial into a snowbank and continue forward, ignoring her yelp of surprise as she hits the ground. The sounds of several demons yelling and screaming grow louder every second. Soon, I encounter the first body, that of a young male grunt. Another male follows, and a female, and several others.

By the time I've passed thirty bodies, I levitate above the wall of trees and pounce toward the barely visible opening to Leviathan's cave. Not half a football field away, ten demons battle Valac as the scythe-wielding madman cackles gleefully.

"Look at you run! Look at you fight! Try and stop me, but you lack the might! Whether you flee or face your plight, you'll find I'm a blight in the night! Neehehe!"

Thirty more demon bodies lie motionless in the snow. Given how long it probably took Belial to find me, Valac must have been killing his comrades for over half an hour.

One of the demons, Orias, stays in the back while his friends try to keep Valac at bay. I only recognize him due to his black-bear fur coat and the length of his horns, a sign that he's possibly at the level of a Lord or higher.

Orias motions with his hands while sweat pours off his brow. He tries to form magical symbols, but right as he's about to complete his incantation, Valac pauses momentarily to hold his lantern aloft. A ghostly spirit rushes out and explodes next to Orias, knocking him on his ass and disrupting his spell.

"Damn you, Valac! You'll pay!" Orias howls. "I'll kill you ten times for every friend of mine you've slain!"

Valac chuckles. "You, kill me? I laugh at the thought! You're all weak and pathetic; the whole lot! Bend over and prepare, for your death is at hand! Once I'm through with you-"

Before Valac can finish, Satan slingshots himself forward with his vectors and swoops at Valac's backside. "Shut up, moron!"

Satan's body plows into Valac with thunderous force, smashing the undead demon into the snow. All eight vectors cocoon around me, cushioning my body from the impact.

Valac is not so lucky. He crashes, spins, and bends unnaturally, coming to a stop a short distance away. I recover quickly and pull myself to my feet, then turn to Orias and his ten grunts. "Sorry I'm late. You guys okay?"

Orias nods, but his eyes betray how terrified he is. He clutches a dozen diamonds while sweating profusely. "W-we can't stop him, Satan! Valac is too powerful! I've been trying to ignite these gems, but he won't let me finish!"

I hold up my palm. "You guys are in the way. Get to safety. I'll handle this."

Orias's eyes widen. "Impossible! You won't win! He'll kill you!"

The snow shifts where Valac landed. The undead demon slowly pulls himself back together, making me shove Orias away with my palm. "I'll be fine! Get outta here. See if any of the others are still alive. You'll only slow me down."

Orias hesitates. Before he can object, I snarl at him. "GO!"

That does the trick. Seeing my anger puts the fear of the devil in him. Orias nods and grabs the others. They hustle away, and I turn my attention to Valac as he rises to his feet.

The Grim Reaper's glowing red eyes fixate on me from beneath his hood. "Well, well well, look who's here, it's Satan, the *pretender*. You think you're my match? You're not even a contender. You fled from the angels and left your friends to die, but when I finish you off, you'll break down and cry."

Satan glares at Valac. "Your rhymes won't save you this time, bub. You ain't even good at 'em. I ain't the demon I was when winter began, I've grown more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

Valac drops all pretense of rhyming as he lowers his voice. "As have I."

I shoot a glance at the demons lying around me. Their empty gazes stare up into the sky as a light snow rains down from the heavens above. Then, I turn to Valac. "If the only reason you killed your family was to grow stronger, then you disgust me. No matter how many souls you take, you'll never fill out the empty hole in your chest. You ain't nothin'."

Valac stretches to his full height, standing a few inches taller than me. "Talk is cheap."

The Grim Reaper jumps at me, clearing the twenty-foot gap between us with frightening speed. His scythe lunges for my chest. The instant before it hits, one of my vectors bats it to the side. Valac stumbles and gasps, opening himself up for a counter-attack. I seize the opportunity to smash my fist into his face,

bruising my knuckles on the fleshless bone of his skull. Valac stumbles backward but manages to right himself.

His right arms grip the scythe, while the upper left holds his lantern. The fourth quickly forms several magic signs, and a ghostly soul flies at my chest. My vectors try to deflect it, but it passes through them and explodes against my ribs with the force of a grenade, sending me careening backward end over end.

Once again, my Vectors surround me, forming an invisible shield to absorb the kinetic energy threatening my life. I roll out of the death spiral and right myself in midair, landing neatly on my feet. Suddenly, blood rushes from my chest as several broken ribs protrude outward.

The pain, agonizing, doubles Satan over. To his credit, the devil manages to hold his concentration, even as blood begins to seep through the fresh wounds. "F-fuckin... cunt..."

Valac motions with his free hand, and another soul rushes toward me. My eyes widen in panic as I realize I can't deflect it. Satan's vectors kick into overdrive, yanking him away at the last second before the soul can impact.

Something unexpected happens. Valac disappears and teleports to the soul's position. "Surprise!"

His scythe rushes at my back, right in my blind spot.

Satan gasps. *Shit! He can teleport by throwing his souls!*

His teeth gnash together. This time, an invisible palm rushes forward and forms a solid barrier, blocking Valac's scythe before it can hit my back.

Valac's jaw drops. "What? Impossible! How did you-?!"

He starts to leap backward, putting distance between us, but another vector grabs his scythe and rips it from his grasp, then flings it toward the top of the mountain. I spin around to face Valac and immediately launch an assault before he can recover. Two vectors grab his arms, holding him in place, while three others begin violently pummeling him. The invisible limbs beat, batter, and bash the undead freak over and over. Valac tries to block the invisible fists, but he's powerless to stop them.

I pause for a split second, lift Valac above my head, and slam him into the ground.

The instant before Valac hits, his body disappears. My vectors smash into the snow, blowing out a small crater and sending sleet in every direction.

Valac materializes a short distance away, panting for breath. His bones lie snapped and broken in several directions. The so-called Grim Reaper writhes on the ground, unable to control his spastic movement. "Imposs... impossible! Y-you... you can't have... g-grown... this strong... so quickly!"

I wince as my ribs poke further out of my chest. My vision blurs slightly. A strange redness enters my eyes. "Nng. You underestimated me... dipshit. Even if you didn't, you can't... can't block my attacks. I have the perfect offense *and* the perfect defense."

Valac motions with his hand. A soul exits his lantern and enters his body. Immediately, his bones begin to mend. The bony bastard pulls himself together and rises to his feet. Despite his repaired frame, he appears noticeably more exhausted than before.

"Tch. What's the matter, Satan? You're looking worse for wear. Avert your eyes, for there's no need to stare. Once I considered myself a risk-taker, but today I refuse to meet my maker."

I groan. "Bloody devils. Again with... with your damn rhyming!"

My vectors coil beneath me. I pounce at Valac, only for him to vanish again, as he teleports toward the top of the mountain.

I hit the dirt and swivel to face him. Valac stands for a moment and eyeballs me. "I'm tired of you, and I hate how you rule. I'm surrounded by weaklings who all slobber and drool. I see now that this is no place for one such as I, so devilspeed, farewell, and goodbye."

Valac motions once again. His scythe materializes in his grasp, and he teleports away, leaving me by myself.

Satan's anger slowly ebbs. After a few moments, the demon leader sags down and flops on his back.

"Y-yeah... you'd better... fuckin'... run..."

One minute passes. Two. Three.

The life slowly fades from my body. Suddenly, Belial appears above me. The panic in her eyes is palpable. "Oh, devils! That's a lot of blood! Satan! Are you okay?"

My vision begins to blur. "F-feelin'... real sleepy..."

"No, don't walk toward the darkness! I'll heal you! Prepare yourself."

Two seconds later, blinding pain lances through my chest as my ribs pop into place. I jolt awake and gasp for breath. "Gahh! Augh! Shit!"

After the phantom pain fades, I gaze into Belial's eyes. It takes several minutes before I can speak again.

"Th-thanks... girl..."

Belial cranes her neck to gaze at the bodies lying in the snow.

"No. Thank *you* for teaching Valac a lesson. I only wish you'd killed the bastard."

I nod.

"Yeah. Me too."

Part 102: A Shocking Revelation

"Discontent among the demons, huh?"

I reappear at the bonfire and ask a question immediately as the Archangels come into focus.

Solomon nods. "Things weren't peaches and cream at first. The demons had many growing pains as they tried to adapt to life on Earth. It might not be immediately obvious, but aside from losing out on the wonderful food in Heaven, the demons also left behind a realm of constantly perfect temperature, wide-open spaces, and lots of established games and fun."

I roll my eyes. "Sure, but they also escaped beatings and constant insults. Gaslighting is a terrible thing, Solomon. Just because their slavery was relatively comfortable doesn't mean they had to keep quiet and suffer."

Michael growls in his throat. "Kuh. What Hero dares to take the side of bloodskins? Has thy brain become addled, Jason? Why art thou overlooking the cherubs they killed, as well as their fellow imps? The demons are a violent, barbaric species, one which seeks only pain and death."

I cross my arms. "That's rich, coming from you."

Raphael holds up his hand. "Now, now. Jason, thy naive upbringing might lead thee to think the demons redeemable, but all we wish is for thee to learn from our mistakes. If thou giveth the demons an inch, they will take a mile. Thy intent was to learn about their past, and that is what thou shalt do. Try not to jump to conclusions."

Gabriel nods. "Jason, please understand that we do not wish to foist our history upon thee. Our emotional baggage weighs on us every moment of every day. Perhaps, given how we failed so catastrophically, it might be best if thou shouldst disregard our conventional wisdom and approach the demons in a whole new light."

Before I can reply, Gabriel extends a finger. "However... terrible though our mistakes may have been, if thou ignoreth the lessons we've learned, thou shalt fail in the same way as us. Thy goal of negotiating with the demons is admirable, but demons do not bargain with those they consider their inferiors, and any agreement with beings in a superior position will fall apart due to their backstabbing and skullduggery."

I digest Gabriel's words carefully. "So, you're saying that because the demons consider me weak, if I try to bargain with them, they'll outright refuse?"

"Most likely," Raphael replies. "Or worse still, they may plunge the knife into thy back after accepting thy offer. Never underestimate the depths to which a demon will sink."

"I'll keep that in mind."

* * *

Solomon raises his eyes to the starry night sky. "Let's continue with the visions. In the last vision, you saw that Valac departed his comrades after slaying many of them. Until that point, Valac's ability to reap

the souls of other beings and give them to his brethren was his primary usefulness to demon society. Valac was, in effect, the originator of demonic power."

I nod. "Makes sense. Where did Valac get the souls from, though? I didn't see any humans running around."

"Animals. For example, that cave bear, deer, wolves, and so on. The skins the demons used to cover themselves were taken from the creatures Valac slew. Animal souls are impotent compared to human, demon, and angel souls, but they allowed the first imps to mature into grunts."

"Okay, so if Valac left, how were the demons going to power themselves up?"

Solomon crosses his arms. "Lucifer came up with an idea. Have you heard of Burner demons and Brutes?"

"Yeah, Phoebe mentioned them. You're talking about fire-type grunts and the big guys who can crush humans with their bare hands."

"Correct. With Valac gone, Lucifer began experimenting on demons. Satan protested several times, but in the end, he couldn't offer a good counter-argument as to why Lucifer needed to stop. She created the Burners, the Scythers, the Rumlbers, and all the other demons. The demon mutation process is quite interesting. I could explain it sometime if you're interested."

I wave his suggestion off. "No need. I already mostly know how it works. Broodmothers have several chaotic genes that they can whelp into new imps, which results in unique and variant demons when said imps gain enough souls to mutate. Phoebe explained the process to me a few times."

Solomon nods. "She's right. It was a deliberate choice by Lucifer. She changed the genomes of the early demons so they would produce all different types of offspring."

Michael raises his voice. "Art thou finished discussing the reproductive functions of bloodskins? Can't we move on to the next vision? Every word thou speaketh churns my stomach."

I glance at the Archangel of Courage. As always, his sour expression is more than capable of curdling milk.

"Sure, Michael, we can move on. Solomon?"

The ancient king grumbles to himself for a moment. *Moody Michael won't let me discuss demon biology for one whole minute. Sheesh.*

Solomon motions with his hands. "I explained to you what happened to the demons when Valac left, but it's what happened to Valac next that shaped Earth's future to come. His next actions held deep ramifications for all sentient life. Valac was a Unique demon, one of a rare few to spring up across the ages. Unlike those created by Lucifer, he held the potent ability to manipulate the energy of living beings for himself. Few demons since him have ever held such power in their palms. Aside from Valac, I count Satan, Mephisto, Beelzebub, and Lucifer in my assessment. There were others, but Heroes and Angels hunted them down as quickly as we could."

I frown. "Beelzebub? Why him?"

"Don't you remember what Phoebe told you? Beelzebub holds the coveted power of Soulfire. It can rip the souls of those it touches right from their bodies, sucking them inside of its wielder instantly."

Suddenly, Raphael jumps to his feet. "What? A demon possesses the unholy flame? Impossible!"

Solomon winces. The expression on his face seems to say, *I shouldn't have said that where Raphael could hear.*

He turns to the old man. "A-aye. He does."

Raphael's jaw trembles. "Such... such ungodly power. None should wield it. He's a threat to everyone, including himself!"

I don't understand what the big deal is, but the way Raphael's eyes flick to Michael for a split-second, then back to me, makes my stomach quiver.

Solomon stares the old man down. "I know. There's little we can do about it now."

"Don't give me that nonsense, Solomon!" Raphael's eyes smolder with anger. He takes a step toward Solomon, leaving his staff behind. "There isn't a moment to waste! We mustn't sit around telling stories while a wielder of the Divine Flame draws breath! We-"

Solomon hardens his gaze. "Raphael. Sit. Beelzebub is already several thousand years old. We can pursue him after we complete the visions."

The elderly Archangel clenches his jaw to stop his shaking. Raphael relents after a moment and returns to his log, but he doesn't appear happy.

I turn to Solomon. "What's the big deal about this Unholy Flame?"

"It's a type of magic the Creator should never have given us," Raphael replies, answering before Solomon. "The ability to rip souls from those living to power up oneself. 'Tis a disgusting, vile spell. Those who discover it quickly turn against friend and foe alike as their lust for power grows."

Solomon goes quiet for a moment. He watches Raphael intently as the old man lowers his eyes to his feet.

"Raphael described it succinctly. Soulfire is one of a few forbidden talents that stir fear in even the eldest deities. Valac's scythe was his method for tearing soul from flesh. Satan's Blood Contracts were another."

I run my chin. "You mentioned Mephisto and Lucifer. What about them?"

"Mephisto's story is fascinating, but I'll probably talk about him later. He was born long after the Ancient Era concluded, and even after the War in Heaven. Lucifer only gained her ability because of Leviathan. Hers is less about taking souls for herself, and instead involves melding genomes and DNA. She hadn't a clue how the scientific elements of her power worked, so I suppose calling her a 'soul melder' would be inaccurate."

Solomon shakes his head. "This topic is not a light one. We can discuss the finer aspects of soul manipulation at a later date. For now, I recommend we begin the next vision."

Raphael's haunted expression and Solomon's sudden desire to move on make me nod along. "Sure. Next vision. Right. Time's a-wasting, as they say."

Solomon forms several magical signs, and my world fades to black.

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As soon as the vision begins, I realize something is terribly wrong. My sensation of touch vanishes. I float in a void, staring at what I assume is a forest on Earth, but one without any color. The greens and browns of nature appear more like varying shades of grey. The snow is still white, but everything else is... *wrong*.

From my position perched atop a hill, I struggle to draw breath. My chest doesn't move, nor can I inhale. Rather than simply stopping, my biological processes appear to have vanished altogether.

After a moment of staring, I begin to notice something. The black and white landscape before me does indeed have dots of color. A flock of birds soars overhead. To me, they resemble blue flecks of flame, gliding on the breeze. A snow hare darts into the clearing, hopping through the snow gaily, his inner fire burning warmer than those above.

While I gaze at the colored flames inside of the animals, an ominous series of whispers begin to tug at my ear. A chorus of voices, squawks, and chirps speak to me as if they're a galaxy away.

"No need to speak, no need to shout. No matter if you cry, you can't get out. Safe in my lantern, that's where you'll stay. Bow before me, pick a devil, and pray."

Valac's unmistakable raspy voice speaks out. He whispers to nobody in particular while holding his lantern next to his face. When I saw the world through Satan's eyes, I never got much of a look at it, but now that I can see from Valac's point of view, a dazzling array of colors greets me. Where before the lantern shifted between various hues of blue and green; instead, a brilliant rainbow of colors twirls and twists as hundreds of souls, animal and demon alike, spin around inside, unable to control their movements. The voices of tens, hundreds, perhaps thousands of creatures cry out pitifully, begging for release from their prison.

I want to release them. At least, I would, under normal circumstances. However, inside Valac's body, my emotions seem to dull, turning my consciousness as grey and barren as the world around me.

Who cares if they want freedom? Those trapped inside Valac's lantern ended up there due to their weakness. They deserve their lot in life.

Ah, no, that can't be me thinking those thoughts. It's Valac. His cold appraisal of his lantern's souls mirrors that of a pawn shop dealer examining a watch or some other trinket. He only cares about the energy the souls will give him, not about the individuals from which they originated.

I understand, immediately, the warning Raphael uttered. Those who collect souls treat life as a commodity, something to improve their standing or physical attributes.

Reprehensible. Disgusting.

And yet... a sickening thought occurs to me.

My Wordsmithing is not omnipotent. I've spent years trying to figure out how to increase my internal capacity for energy.

What if I tried ripping out the souls of my enemies using Wordsmithing? Has the answer lain before me all this time?

No! Perish the thought! I... I can't dwell on such ideas. Focus, Jason! The vision. What is Solomon trying to show you?

I mentally smack myself and return my attention to... *whatever Valac is doing*. He continues to sit on the top of the snowy hill and gaze into the distance, but I haven't a clue what's captured his attention.

Valac lowers his lantern. "Ten trillion souls await, some mightier than the rest. Compared to other demons, I deserve the best. To defeat Satan, the weaker souls I must eschew. Birds, bats, and bears? No, they won't do."

Four souls leap from Valac's lantern. Each one flies in a different direction, sailing far off into the sunset. Their movements, guided by the Reaper's magic, travel to the north, west, east, and south, ignoring all terrain in their path.

Valac's vision goes blurry. A disorienting sensation of scale engulfs my mind, as his consciousness begins to expand.

The world around me moves from the third dimension to the fourth. As time passes, a bubble of perception envelops the Reaper's body. Underground caves appear in my mind's eye, along with bird nests, frozen rivers, and other elements of the world.

Expanded Presence.

Valac's soul grows until it hits a tipping point. A beacon of flame, hot like the bonfire the Archangels face, burns fifteen miles away. Soon, another appears, and another. Four individual souls glow brighter than all the animals, bugs, and other creatures of the world combined.

Valac tilts his head toward them.

"Oh? What are these? Flames which beg for a taste. Powerful beings they are, to them, I must lay waste. These souls, they remind me of the angels. Reaping them will be anything but disdainful."

One of Valac's souls homes in on the roaring red flames. He teleports a few hundred feet away and skulks behind a tree.

Titans. Four of them. While they aren't as tall as Cronus, I recognize them immediately. The gargantuan behemoths sit in a circle and tear apart several deer before stuffing the raw, uncooked carcasses in their mouths. Each one must stand close to a hundred and fifty feet tall, and based on the massive mammaries on two of them; I'd wager there are two males and females.

None of the Titans are attractive. Quite the contrary, each is a walking combination of fat and muscle, able to crush trees in their palms without breaking a sweat. Their hairy backs and drooping jowls make

me shudder as they wring the blood from each deer's carcass all over their bodies before throwing the meat and bone inside.

One of the females wipes her lips. "Meldor, you won't believe what I heard."

The male beside her stuffs another deer in his mouth. He barely acknowledges her words. "What?"

"My ravens gave me a report. They spotted angels on Earth during the last lunar cycle."

"Were they ignoring the treaty?"

"Don't know. It's not my business."

The two glance at each other for a moment before polishing off the rest of their five-star gourmet meal and rubbing their bellies.

"Why even mention it, then?"

"I'm just making conversation."

"Psh. Babbling nonsense, I'd say."

"Oh, shut up."

The other male Titan rolls his eyes. "Would you two stop? I hate when you bicker."

"She started it. She's always bringing up pointless things. Nobody cares about the bloody angels."

The second female pushes her last two deer away. "I care! The angels don't belong in our land. They should stay in Heaven, like good little pigeons."

The first male, Meldor, raises an eyebrow. "You gonna finish those?"

"I might save them for later."

"Later? They'll rot. Come on, give them to me."

The second female frowns. "No! I don't want to! They're mine! You've had enough."

Meldor grumbles to himself. "Dumb woman. Only an idiot lets perfectly good food go to waste."

* * *

After hearing Cronus speak to the Archangels, it's a little surprising how simplistic the other members of his species sound. The King of the Titans wasn't as eloquent as Raphael or Gabriel, but he seemed relatively intelligent. These four, whoever they are, must be related to him. Why are they so... *thick*?

I ignore my inner questions and focus on the vision. Valac leaps up and grabs onto one of the tree's branches. A loud *snap* shatters the quiet of the forest, making me cringe.

None of the Titans pay it the slightest heed. Their total disregard for safety must be due to their position atop the food chain. Given their 150-foot-tall size, what could possibly harm them?

Valac perches on the branch. He motions with his free hand, and a single soul rushes out of the lantern. It zooms into the circle of Titans.

Meldor notices it immediately. "Hm?"

The soul explodes. A burst of blinding light erupts in the center. Each Titan lurches back and roars in pain. "Gahhh! By the forefathers!"

Valac rushes toward the first female and impales her head with a sickening *crunch*. The sneak attack instantly rips her soul out, making her body topple backward, dead. Immediately, Valac leaps to the nearest male. He, too, leaves the realm of the living, unable to fend off the unseen assassin.

Valac pauses for a split second as waves of celestial energy flood into his body. He struggles to move for a moment, then regains his footing and pounces at the other female. She continues howling in pain, oblivious to her surroundings, and nearly smacks Valac by accident. He avoids her frenzied flailing and impales her heart, ripping the soul from her body.

The final Titan, Meldor, blinks his eyes. He immediately realizes his companions are down for the count and spots Valac jumping toward him.

Valac raises his scythe to stab the remaining Titan, but Meldor's palm slaps him aside in midair. With each finger standing as tall as a BMW, the force of Meldor's attack smashes me fifteen feet underground, burying me in a mountain of dirt.

"By Cronus's scrote! What kind of creature are you?!"

Valac doesn't respond. His broken body quickly begins to regenerate as the energy of three Titans mends his broken bones.

However, something else happens. A feeling like lava boils in his veins. A pounding sensation at the top of his skull, like a hammer trying to reach his brain, makes my head spin. Valac's horns grow a full inch.

Despite never having seen the phenomena in person, I know what's happening, thanks to Phoebe's lessons. Valac is mutating into a higher demon form. Where before he might have been a Lord or a Baron... now he is another rank higher.

The Earth shakes as Meldor plunges his fingers into the dirt and rips me out, along with a massive wad of soil. "You! Little maggot! What have you done? Why isn't Iris moving?!"

My body begins to compress as the Titan squeezes his palm into a fist, crushing me into marrow.

Not much longer and I, or rather, Valac, will die.

Despite the sensation of my bones snapping under Meldor's strength, no waves of agony hit me. Valac has no sense of touch or pain.

Valac stares into the dirt as it presses against his eyeballs. "Now I understand. I have a *purpose*. If I die right here, t'would be a disservice. This dullard cannot defeat me; he cannot contend. Little does he know, but his story is at its end."

Valac flicks his finger. Ten souls leap from his lantern and tear through the dirt. A moment later, the compression ceases as Meldor howls in pain. I plummet toward the ground as the Titan drops me, but Valac bursts out of his dirt coffin and lands like a cat.

The Grim Reaper flicks his gaze toward the giant. Meldor clutches his face and moans. He takes a step back, trips over the body of the first female Titan, and falls onto his back, still wheezing and crying.

Valac eyes the glowing fire inside of the Titan. "A pitiful effort, no style or grace. You were as weak as the look on your face. I take no pleasure in killing those who are frail, but even so, you'll make a fine soul for my scythe to impale."

The Reaper hops onto Meldor's chest. Meldor swings recklessly, trying desperately to hit his miniature attacker, but Valac's speed is too much for the blind giant to overcome. Valac plunges his scythe into Meldor's heart, and after a few seconds, the Titan goes limp.

With all four Titans dead, the wildlife nearby becomes a whisper. On a branch above, a pack of crows watches silently. Valac ignores them and walks away, leaving behind the bodies of his victims for the wolves and vultures.

* * *

Minutes pass. Valac walks without commentary toward a large, frozen lake. The beautiful, pristine water shines under the overcast sunlight, sparkling like a diamond even to Valac's colorblind gaze.

My thoughts spin around like crazy in my mind.

I understand now the danger the demons represent. The Titans seemed fearsome enough that the angels didn't want to cross them, yet Valac killed four Titans within thirty seconds. Whether the Grim Reaper is an aberration of nature or one of many dangerous members of his species, he represents the most explosive elements of demon society. While the other demons struggle to reach low-level Lord status, Valac might already be at the level of Duke... or higher.

Valac continues toward the body of water. It doesn't take long before he arrives at the ice and begins crossing it, heading toward the center.

A strange feeling begins to boil in my gut.

Something's off.

What is Valac doing? After slaying four Titans, why come here?

Valac slows to a stop. He gazes down at the ice. "This spot should do."

I wait. Nothing happens. Hearing the Reaper drop his rhyming scheme, as always, unnerves me. The Grim Reaper gazes at his reflection. His burning red eyes appear to melt two pinpricks in the ice the longer he stares.

What the hell is Valac doing? He's wiggling me out.

The Reaper raises his free hand and caresses his face.

"Enjoying the show?"

* * *

Worry boils in my stomach like never before.

Why is Valac chatting with his reflection? Is he talking to one of the souls in his lantern?

* * *

Valac's hollow gaze reflects off the water, aiming directly at me.

"I'm talking to you, Jason."

A chill freezes me in place.

You... you can hear me?

"Of course. Solomon isn't as brilliant as you think. The old man made a mistake. It will cost him."

My inner voice shakes.

S-Solomon... Solomon, pull me out of this vision. You're freaking me out!

Valac chuckles. "Heh heh heh... Solomon can't come to the phone right now. He's trying, desperately, to wrestle control from me. He may succeed, but by then, it will be too late. I have a message for you, Jason. Something he won't dare say."

The Grim Reaper strokes his skull softly, gently, as if to calm me down. It has the opposite effect. A horrible feeling of dread washes over my body as bone grinds against bone.

What... what could you possibly say to me? How are you here?

Valac raises his eyes to stare across the lake. He ignores my questions. "The angels lied. Solomon did, too. None of them want you to know the truth. You're a puppet. 'Heroes' are nothing more than a sham. They were created by the angels to force their so-called 'righteous order' upon the world."

A lump forms in my throat. I want to swallow, but since I'm inside Valac's body, I can't. I'm trapped. I have no control.

I feel... *small. Insignificant.*

You're lying, I say, my thoughts almost a whisper.

Valac lowers his arm. "The word 'Hero,' to most humans, represents purity and goodness. There is no such thing as an 'evil' hero, or so the logic goes. But... what if I told you that was a lie?"

I take a few moments to gather my thoughts.

My next question would be why you care enough to tell me. I have no reason to believe you over my friends.

Valac slowly begins striding across the ice. He waves his hand, and the vision of an icy winter morphs into a warm summer. The ice melts, but Valac strides atop the water as though he were Jesus Christ.

"Reality is similar to Solomon's false visions. You can twist and bend it to suit your worldview as you please. When you have enough power, you can label those who oppose you as 'evil,' and yourself 'righteous.' The Angels forced demons to give them our mana... but what they truly wanted was control of our souls. That is why they hated *me* the most."

An irritating tingling sensation pokes at the back of my mind. I ignore it.

I already know that much. The angels needed imp energy to survive. Their bodies leaked mana, and without it, they would die. Selfish, yes, but I can't fault them for self-preservation.

Valac shakes his head. "Tsk, tsk. Think about my words. You spoke with Raphael before entering my vision. As soon as Solomon mentioned Beelzebub's manipulation of souls, didn't you find the old chicken's behavior... *strange*? Perhaps you might be forgiven for thinking he was... *hiding something*."

Spit it out. What are you getting at? I don't like you controlling my mind, demon.

"I'm not controlling you, Jason. The angels are. Solomon is. I'm letting you in on a secret. What you choose to do with it is up to you."

Fine. I'm all ears.

My frosty tone doesn't bother Valac in the slightest. He arrives at the edge of the lake and strides out onto the grass. Immediately, the greenery begins to wilt and die. The flowers shrivel up and turn brittle, falling into ash as he stomps them down.

"When the angels learned of my powers, they realized I was their greatest threat. The Titans were slow to react. I easily overpowered many of them. The angels, however, sought to employ me for their gain."

Now I know you're lying. The angels would never do that. They hated demons with a passion.

Valac's calmness vanishes. "You're wrong. Wrong! You don't know anything about them, Jason! You only know the lies they've spoon-fed you! The angels wanted my power for themselves!"

The Grim Reaper pauses in the field and thrashes about as his voice rises.

"They used the demons! They used the Titans and the humans too! How can you not see, boy?! The angels perished because everyone united against them! We all worked together to eradicate the winged freaks from the universe! If you help them, you'll only bring their filth back to the realm of the living!"

I flinch, as Valac continues his verbal barrage. *Nothing you say makes any sense. The angels might be at fault, but it is and always was the demons who devoured humans alive! You're the ones who use human souls for your gain! Nothing the angels did could compare to the atrocities 100,000 years of demonic rule has unleashed upon the universe.*

Valac seethes. "You don't have to believe me, child, but you'll soon understand! The War in Heaven changed everything. It created a new paradigm. The angels-"

Suddenly, Valac pauses. He reaches up to rub his head. The tingling sensation in the back of my mind increases dramatically. It shifts into a sensation akin to a mole clawing at my brain, trying to dig through. Painful and hot, as if someone is slowly dripping molten lava onto my skull.

Gah! Painful! What are you doing to me?! Get out of my head, Valac!

Valac hisses. "It's not me, you fool! It's Solomon! He's terrified of what I'll say! He doesn't want you to know about the angels! He's-"

A crackling sound explodes in my ear. "**Krrggh- jfs... hnllpry... J... JASON!**"

Solomon's voice booms like a cannon, drowning out Valac.

"Awaken! Come to me! There's an intruder in your mind!"

Valac grabs at his skull with all four arms. "Kss! No! Damn you, Solomon! Get... get out! You won't stop me! I'll tell him everything!"

"Foul demon! Begone!"

The warmth of Solomon's radiance warms my body. Where before I could scarcely feel anything thanks to Valac's sensory void, Solomon's mana beckons to me sweetly, recalling me to the world of the living.

Anger begins to burn in my chest. *You tried to whisper lies in my ear, Valac, but I won't listen. Bargaining with demons is one thing. Believing them is another.*

I stretch my inner aura out. Solomon's hand bursts through a veil of darkness, ripping me out of the emptiness inside Valac's mind.

Valac's shrieks of rage follow after me, fading into the distance.

"The Archangels are lying, Jason! Lying! LYING!! Don't believe a word they say!!"

Part 103: Lies, Damned Lies, and Destiny

"Jason! Jason, are you alright?!"

I wake up on my back. Solomon hovers over me, along with all three Archangels. They scan my face, looking for signs of distress.

Ugh. The top of my head throbs like a motherfucker. What happened?"

The Archangels pull back, giving me space. Solomon rises to his feet. "You're lucky to be alive. The moment I initiated the vision, when you went under, a predatory being appeared inside your body's mana. I lost all contact with you for twelve seconds. It started overtaking your mental functions, and I had to initiate a mana burn to irradiate it. My apologies if your head hurts. I may have gone too far in trying to scorch the intruder out."

I carefully pull myself to my feet, wincing the whole time. "Twelve seconds? You're kidding. That vision was at least thirty minutes long."

"Time perception, Jason. The deeper you are in a dream, the slower time moves in reality. Anyway, you're lucky I was able to pull you back. If you had stayed there for five more seconds..."

Solomon trails off, leaving the implication to hang in the air.

"What would have happened?" I ask.

"I'm not sure. It would have likely reduced your lifespan by several decades. Beyond that, I can't say. I've never encountered anything like it in all my years, nor has anyone in my memory library."

A moment passes. I sweep my hair back and glance at the angels.

Valac's words echo in my mind.

I turn back to Solomon. "So, ah... while I was inside the vision... the vision of Valac, I mean..."

I pause, unsure of how to explain.

"...Valac came to life. He started speaking to me."

Solomon's expression turns screwy. "He came to life? It may have been a hallucination caused by brain damage."

"I don't, ah, think so. Valac knew things he shouldn't. The whole ordeal was pretty unnerving."

Solomon stares at me for a moment, flicks his gaze to Raphael, then back to me. "Hmm. Well, truthfully, the thing in your mind reminded me of a soul. It wasn't complete. It felt more like the chipped edge of someone's soul than a complete picture, but..."

Slowly, Solomon raises his hand to his neatly trimmed beard. His expression hardens as he strokes the black hairs on his chin over and over.

"...That would be impossible. Valac died in the Ancient Era. You must have seen something else."

"Or *someone* else," Raphael mutters.

"I don't know. The Valac I saw seemed identical to the one in the visions you showed me. I don't think he was a figment of my imagination. You're dismissing the thought awfully fast."

Solomon shakes his head. "I'm not. Anything is possible. Satan came back to life after a hundred thousand years in purgatory. Valac, though... I doubt it was him."

Solomon pauses for a moment, then waves his hand flippantly.

"There are many demons with a variety of terrifying abilities, Jason. Ose, for example, can control people's bodies and take over their minds. I wouldn't assume Valac has returned just yet, especially when the soul I saw could have belonged to anyone."

Michael clears his throat. "Ahem. More importantly, how could someone have placed an errant soul inside of the Hero? I think that's the question we should be asking. There shouldn't be many demons alive who can do such a thing."

I nod. "Good question. I mean, maybe it wasn't Valac. When he started talking to me, he didn't do the whole rhyming thing. He *did* do it earlier in the vision, though..."

"So it could have been anyone," Solomon says. A wave of relief passes over his face. "Nothing would terrify me more than the return of the Grim Reaper. Satan, as terrifying as he was, couldn't rip through an enemy's defenses and tear their soul out. Such unthinkable power belongs only to the damned."

"And the accursed," Raphael adds. "I would wager that Ose's brain-meddling had something to do with Jason's soul-violator. Pay the vision no mind, Jason. The ramblings of demons have about the same worth as mine."

All three Archangels breathe a sigh of relief and wander over to their logs. While they do, I stare at their backs. Many thoughts swirl in my mind.

Solomon squints at me. "Is something bothering you?"

"Well... it's what 'Valac' said about, err, the angels. I dunno. Maybe I'm overthinking what I saw."

Solomon closes his eyes. A moment passes as he concentrates. A tingling at the back of my mind indicates his probing of my memories.

"Mmm." Solomon opens his eyes. He pulls me aside and lowers his voice so the Archangels can't hear. "I think I understand. Valac's comments about the angels and the heroes... you wonder if he was right."

I nod. "Yeah. I mean, he's a demon, so I can't give him too much credence... correct?"

"It's always good to ask questions, Jason. A healthy dose of skepticism never hurt anyone. If you want my opinion, I agree with you that the angels mistreated the imps. I agree that, in a way, the angels 'started' the conflict with the imps. However, there is a matter of justifiable force, wouldn't you agree?"

I cock an eyebrow. "Justifiable force? Explain."

"The angels shoved the imps around. They treated the imps like their inferiors. However, when Satan and his cronies gained incredible power from Leviathan, they didn't negotiate for reparations. Instead, the newly-arisen demons turned to the path of violence. They slew a hundred Cherubs, and Satan's actions directly led to the death of Samael. Wouldn't you agree that was far worse than what the angels did?"

Ten seconds pass. Twenty. Thirty.

I lower my gaze and carefully consider Solomon's words.

Angels created the dragons. Then, they forced a war with their creations. The same thing happened again with the Titans. It wasn't clear who initiated each conflict, but one thing always stayed true. The angels created a new species to be their inferiors, and eventually ended up at war with them.

All things considered, Solomon is right. The imps responded to the angels with violence, escalating the conflict. Even so, they were a young species, angry at those who mistreated them. The imps were like juveniles, irrational and uncertain of how to right the wrongs committed against them. Most of the blame lies on Satan's shoulders too, given how he manipulated the rest.

I don't know. The whole issue is too complex for me to analyze. I don't see either side as being in the right, no matter how they try to twist the past to their advantage.

Solomon nods. "Good, good. I hear the doubt in your mind. As one who seeks knowledge, I understand that tough questions have tough answers. Once you factor in the bloodthirsty nature of the demons, you'll come to see that the angels were not the aggressors Valac painted them to be."

I wet my lips. "What about the idea that Heroes are puppets? What did Valac mean by that?"

"The universe is complex, Jason. When we reach the War in Heaven, everything will make sense to you. I promise."

"Even what Valac said about Heroes?"

The ancient king sighs. "Heroes are the balancers of nature. We exist to ensure the safety of all life. In our absence, chaos follows. You need only look at the universe's current situation to understand that fact. The demons and Volgrim rule the universe, now. They wiped out the angels and enslaved our species. With that in mind, you can understand how important Heroes are to maintaining the balance of power."

Not wanting to argue anymore, I nod wearily. "Sure. That makes sense."

Solomon pats my back. "Good, good. If you have other questions, we can continue this discussion later."

Both of us turn to face the Archangels. Michael frowns at me. "Thy vision seems to have disturbed thee. Dost thee requireth a break before we continue?"

"No. I'm... I'm fine. The demon was persuasive, but it's easy to twist the truth around as needed. I'll stop thinking about Valac's words eventually."

Raphael nods. An uneasy look appears in his eyes, though I can't be sure if it's only my imagination. "We must return to the visions, then. Soon, we'll arrive at the War in Heaven."

I cross my arms. "I've heard it referenced many times. What's so important about that war, specifically?"

Gabriel rubs his palms together in a circular motion. "There were only three instances of full-scale war between angels and demons. The first was when the demons launched their initial assault to recover their

brothers in Heaven. The second was the War in Heaven, a cataclysmic event that destroyed the balance of power."

"And the third?"

Raphael answers. "The final battle was one which wiped out the remainder of my people at the end of the Energy Wars. While the humans engaged in battle with the Volgrim, the demons launched an attack against us. We fought valiantly, but Satan stood strong at the apex of his power. We perished."

Solomon closes his eyes. "Not much more to say than that, I'm afraid."

A cloud of sorrow hangs over the Archangels. Each one stares into the fire as their thoughts swirl around like a hurricane, dwelling on those they've lost and those they'll never see again.

I can't begin to imagine the weight of their losses.

Solomon ignores the crippling depression bubbling within each Archangel. "Well, Jason, based on your memories, that vision you saw was the correct series of events. Valac slew four Titans in under a minute, and thanks to the power of their souls, he began to thirst for more. The bit at the end was the only embellishment, so as long as you ignore that, you're nearly caught up on the important history."

"What else happened?"

"Very little worth mentioning. Over the next hundred and twenty years, Lucifer bred dozens of broodmothers, which spawned thousands of imps. The initial experiments created several demon variants, and a few rose through the ranks to become quite powerful. Agares and Vepar, for instance, increased their abilities thanks to Lucifer's magic."

"You mean Leviathan's, right?"

"Of course. Beyond Lucifer's work and Valac's psychopathic murder-spree, the demons kept to the shadows and focused on improving their underground cave network."

Solomon begins to form magic signs with his hands, but pauses.

"Hmm. Before I send you off, I should double-check for any... *irregularities*. We don't want a repeat of last time."

"Yeah, let's be a little more cautious for this jump."

Recommended Listening

CLANG.

CLANG.

CLANG.

The sound of metal smashing against metal echoes inside Camael's forge. For the first time in Solomon's visions, I appear in her mind and gaze upon her handiwork as she slams a hammer against a red-hot sword.

Camael pounds and flips the sword, folding and heating it over and over. Despite the time and effort, not a drop of sweat appears on her brow. The several-hundred-degree temperature in the room barely affects her as she focuses entirely on her task at hand.

The ultimate weapon.

Camael's thoughts bubble in her mind, allowing me to hear what she's thinking.

My visions grow darker, night after night: torture and pain, sadness, and agony. Short have the days become. Long has it been since I enjoyed a soothing dream. I must finish Excalibur. The fate of Earth depends on it.

CLANG.

CLANG.

CLANG.

Camael's gaze hardens as she plunges the sword into a vat of water.

This sword has a long way to go. The mana it possesses must be enough to obliterate any threat I face, no matter the cost. I pray that my family never learns how dire my dreams have become. They would fall into darkness, just as I have.

Camael lifts Excalibur and gazes at the charcoal-black weapon, scrunching up her face in disgust.

Two paths formerly lay before us, but now only one remains. In recent decades, not once have I dreamt of a peaceful future. I see bodies piled into the sky. Brothers and sisters crying out my name. Terror stretched across the faces of those I love. Is this the fate of my people? Is this the future awaiting us?

Camael snarls viciously and stabs the sword into her forge, reheating it once again.

I cannot bear to tell them. I wish to see Uriel smile and laugh, Uzziel to dance and play, and for all the others to enjoy what time they have left.

Nobody in my family would understand. The demons are our creation. They will rain upon us like fire from the sky. We will stand proud when they come, only to fall back, begging and screaming for mercy.

The demons will show no sympathy to us, nor will we deserve it.

Camael stares stoically into the forge, even as a tear drips down her face. She crushes the voices in her mind and wipes her eye, hardening her resolve again.

If we cannot win, then we will fight with all our might. We will unleash all the power we can muster and put on a display for our descendants. Future beings will write songs about us and tell tales of how the angels stood resolute in the face of an unstoppable enemy. The demons might take our lives, but they will never take our dignity.

After a minute, Camael yanks the sword out and begins pounding it with her hammer.

CLANG.

CLANG.

CLANG.

* * *

Outside, the sound of heavy footsteps catches Camael's attention. She pauses to gaze at the door.

He's arrived.

Her inner voice, sure as ever, announces the appearance of an unknown man. Two seconds later, someone yanks her door open. A thin male angel with sunken eyes waves his hand. "Sister Camael! I bring important news!"

Camael barely looks at him. "Brother Shepherd. You must be referring to the visitors."

"Yes! Two of them, and they- huh? Huh? They've only just arrived at Heaven's entrance. How didn't thee learn of their arrival...?"

"I saw them in my dream last night. Well, since our guests have arrived, I'll head to Elderium."

Shepherd nods. "Aye, Raphael requests thy presence at once. Shall I fly ahead and inform him of thy coming?"

"No need. I'm finished, anyway. This damned sword takes forever to fold..."

Shepherd's eyes follow mine to the weapon held firmly in my left hand. "Ah... Is that thy newest creation, the Shattering Blade? I've heard rumors of late regarding how thou dost keep overworking thyself and passing out in the forge... surely thy body needn't stress over making a simple weapon..."

Camael's gaze hardens. "Worry not about the splinter in my eye, but the stake in thine. I know full well what I am doing. Begone. I will travel to the Temple of Elderium as soon as I can."

The young angel pales. "O-of course, eldest sister. I meant thee no disrespect. I'll take my leave."

The door slams shut, and Shepherd vanishes, leaving Camael alone with her thoughts.

The Archangel stares silently at Excalibur for twenty seconds before plunging it into the water and hanging it on the wall.

"If only the others could understand..."

* * *

Minutes later, Camael soars through the sky toward the Temple of Elderium. She swoops down and lands smoothly on the front steps, dusts her armor off, and heads inside.

Elderium, usually bustling with activity, is dead silent. Hundreds of angels gather inside and stare breathlessly at two wingless newcomers, each of whom stands ten feet tall. Gabriel, of course, towers four feet above them, but compared to the rest of the angels, the humanoids appear quite massive.

Camael walks past her brothers and sisters lining the hall. The crowd of onlookers gently spill open before her as she walks, allowing their eldest sister to head toward the two guests without shoving through the crowd.

"-your pardon, Raphael, but my father is in a rush. Zeus has much work to do, uniting the Titans against this demonic threat. We don't have time to barter and bargain about how you'll assist us. We'll allow you entry into Earth to come and go as you please. That should be enough."

Camael strides up to a large table with a dozen chairs surrounding all of its sides. All of the other Archangels sit quietly around the two visitors, and as Camael takes her seat beside Michael, across from the newcomers, I get a good look at them.

The one who spoke a moment ago is a giant, muscular man, with a clean-shaven face, a circlet of gold around his forehead, and dark black shoulder-length hair. His muscled body gives me the impression he could shatter concrete and bend steel with the slightest effort from his pinky fingers. His clothing is a mixture of ornate gold and white robes, with a silver belt securing everything to his waist.

To his left sits a beautiful woman, with long, poofy black hair, a cute purple dress, and a golden bracelet with several emeralds embedded inside. She smiles at me as I take a seat.

"Camael, Archangel of Divination. It is our pleasure to finally meet you."

Gabriel, seated to the left of the female visitor, coughs into his fist. "Ah, sister, our guests are Hercules, son of Zeus, grandson of Cronus. The lovely flower beside him is his wife, Megara."

Camael nods. "I am aware. I dreamed of thy arrival several nights ago. I am also aware of the situation on Earth."

Raphael, seated to the right of Hercules, smiles politely. "Is that so? That saves us the trouble of explaining."

Michael snaps his fingers to get everyone's attention. "Ahem. Back to the topic at hand. Hercules, if thy father expects us to offer our assistance simply for the right to walk Earth, he is sorely mistaken. Our mana is lower than ever. We're worried enough about the demons attacking us any day now. Uzziel hasn't had any luck creating new servants to breathe mana into our veins. Thy problems were caused by thy unwillingness to cooperate a century ago."

Hercules sighs. "That's where you're wrong, Michael. While Cronus slept soundly, a lone demon tore across Earth and slaughtered over three thousand Titans. My cousin, Loki, died on his wedding day as that single foul creature slew him, his husband, and their entire entourage. I, too, might have died, had I not been too busy to attend. For a single creature to slay a hundred Titans in a single day, its power must dwarf that of the Archangels. We must work together if we are to stop this menace."

Hercules crosses his arms. "Do not concern yourselves with Cronus's lethargic, slothful movements. After my father found out about Cronus's incompetence as a leader, he slew the Titan King in a fit of rage."

Camael blinks in surprise. "Cronus is dead?"

Hercules' expression darkens. "Aye. Never have the Titans had another leader. I, too, felt disturbed when I discovered my father murdered my grandfather. However, given Cronus's inability to protect his fellow Titans and warn us of the demonic threat, many accepted Cronus's death with only a slight bitterness in their mouths. Of what use is a king who cares nothing for his subjects?"

A moment passes. Camael glances around the table at the faces of everyone present. Uriel and Uzziel sit quietly at the end of the table, listening intently. Michael bows his head, likely cursing himself for not defeating Cronus in glorious combat. Gabriel and Raphael shoot looks at each other, trading information through their eyes. They both nod, as if to confirm something between themselves.

Gabriel raps his fingers on the stone table. "Hercules. Megara. If I may counter thy offer, I have a request. I would be willing to offer my people's assistance in eliminating the demons, but thou must first do my people a small favor."

Hercules frowns. "And what would that be?"

"We need mana. The angels are at death's door. If we go any longer without replenishing our reserves, we'll die from atrophy. Even now, we're already spreading ourselves too thinly."

Megara purses her lips. Hercules seems to want to say 'no,' at least until his wife nudges him. "That seems reasonable. If Zeus intends to let bygones be bygones, then I don't see why we can't support our new allies. Our mana restores under sunlight, anyway."

The ten-foot Titan male glances at his wife, annoyance etched on his face. However, when she glares back at him in a *do this, or else* way, he relents.

"Fine. I'll see what I can do. However, you must understand, we need all the strength we can muster. Nobody has ever seen Valac and lived to tell the tale. We only know his name because of the blood-etched letters he leaves behind after every massacre. It churns my stomach."

"We've seen him," Gabriel says. "He slew a hundred Cherubs in a matter of minutes. I'm not certain what his energy output is, but if he can reap souls..."

"Then he is our number one target," Raphael says, finishing Gabriel's sentence. "Give us mana, Hercules. We will not lead thee astray in our quest to restore balance to the Earth."

The young Titan smiles, but his expression is lethargic and forced. "R-right. Any assistance you can offer would be appreciated. Well, as fun as this meeting has been, I must return at once. My people-"

Hercules stops mid-sentence as Megara grabs his arm. "My love! Surely you will give them energy now? I will too, as a show of good faith."

Hercules grunts. A look of unease passes over his face as he glances at the several hundred angels crowding around the table.

"Worry not," I say. "Thou art our guests. We would never harm thee when thou cometh in peace. The ancient wars are old history. We would gladly wash away the past without a second thought."

Hercules nods, but he appears less than enthusiastic about giving his energy to the angels. "Of... of course. It's just- my grandfather told me many stories about the ancient times."

"Oh? Did he?" Raphael asks. "Surprising, given Cronus had no memory of the Primordial Era. I wouldn't put much stock in his words. I alone am the sole person possessing memories of the Titan and Dragon Wars."

Hercules frowns. "Hm. Well, Cronus *was* awfully drunk when he spoke about the ancient times..."

Uriel breaks her silence with a chuckle. "Heh, it sounds like thy grandfather saw a few ghosts in his old age."

"Hah. You're not wrong..."

Hercules trails off. A few seconds pass. He coughs, then motions with his hands, and lightly touches Raphael's arm.

"There. I've given you about half of my energy. Megara?"

The Titaness nods, motions with her hands, and gently grasps Gabriel's shoulder. The massive Archangel blushes at her touch, revealing a hint of the indecent thoughts in his mind.

"Oh, my. Your arms are nearly as big as my husband's," Megara says, winking at him.

Gabriel quickly looks away. "Ah, they *do* call me the Archangel of Power."

Hercules rolls his eyes. "Stop flirting with our hosts, Meg. You're embarrassing me."

"Your jealousy is showing again," Megara replies with a smirk.

A few minutes later, Uzziel and Uriel leave with the Titans to show them to Heaven's Gate. The rest of the Archangels stay behind at the table to discuss a few remaining matters.

"I don't trust those Titans," Michael says, surprising nobody. "They're too hesitant to give us energy. They can regenerate their mana within a day, yet they didn't think to offer it to us immediately? Surely I'm not the only one who sees through their lies."

"Michael..." Camael mutters. "I acknowledge thy concern, but the Titans are in a dire position. This news might surprise thee, but fewer than thirty thousand of them remain. Their numbers have dwindled significantly since the ancient wars. They're in no position to backstab us."

"Thirty thousand?" Gabriel raises an eyebrow. "Unthinkable. Their numbers once dwarfed ours. What changed?"

"Infighting. Blood battles. Violent sport. The Titans spend most of their time sleeping or fighting one another for territory. I think Valac's appearance has sent a lightning bolt of fear through them. Before, they knew Cronus would step in if their bloodthirsty ways threatened their survival. Now, with him gone and Zeus in command, this skinless demon is their worst nightmare."

Camael goes quiet for a moment.

When she speaks again, her voice wavers. "I... I have seen a vision recently..."

Gabriel nods. A look of trepidation appears in his eyes. "And?"

The Archangel of Divination taps her lip and gazes into Gabriel's eyes for several long moments.

"According to my foresight, if we do not help the Titans, they will perish. Our deaths will follow. Saving them is the only course of action that will ensure our survival."

Gabriel exhales. "Ah. 'Tis fortunate that thy visions are here to guide us, sister."

Michael sighs. "If Camael's visions say we must help the Titans, then so we will. Far be it for me to stand against the architect of destiny."

The Archangel of Courage rises to his feet. "Brothers. Sisters. I take my leave."

Michael flaps his wings and departs. The other angels in the temple begin plodding away too, now that the formalities are over.

Raphael strokes his beard. "Beloved sister, is something the matter? Thy expression could wilt the fairest rose. Long has it been since I saw thee languishing in such pain."

Camael stiffens. Her body tenses up as she notices Raphael's wizened eyes evaluating her countenance.

"I haven't slept well as of late. Please excuse me, Raphael. I must return to my forge."

"Very well. Peace be upon thee, little sister."

Raphael tilts his head ever so slightly. Camael rises and heads toward the door, leaving her brothers behind.

Her thoughts are a torrent of anguish.

I lied to everyone. To my brothers. My sisters. They believe me when I say that helping the Titans will save us... but no such future awaits. We can only delay the inevitable. How am I to tell them? I cannot. They mustn't know. Hope is the only thing we have left. Without it, we will fall into despair.

Camael's metal greaves scrape against her armor as she saunters toward Elderium's entrance. With a mighty flap of her wings, she soars into the sky to return to her forge.

Excalibur. I must complete it. It alone has the might to extinguish the demonic menace forever.

Somehow, despite the sincerity of her inner voice, I doubt her words.

Excalibur won't save them. The Archangel of Divination alone bears the burden of knowing what will happen to her people... and she cannot stop it.

Fate is inevitable.

Part 104: The Ice Queen

"Satan! Come quickly. We're under attack!"

I materialize inside Satan's mind as he turns to face a young Demon Lord. Despite the fellow's low rank, his appearance is surprisingly fearsome, with hawk-like eyes, a slender, muscular build, and war-paint splotted all over his body. He wears bones all over his body, as a necklace, as a belt, and even just for decoration on his arms. The bare-chested fellow looks like he could wrestle a bear and win.

Satan's heart starts beating faster. "What?! By whom? Valac?"

"No. The attackers are three women and a man: two winged and wingless angels. They wiped out a platoon of grunts in seconds. We need your help! Lucifer showed up before I left, but she can't hold them off forever."

Satan nods. "Alright. Which exit leads to the enemy?"

"Red River. I don't think the enemy spotted our camouflage, but-"

Satan interrupts. "Find Agares. I'll head to the battle now. Move it, Artorias!"

The young demon, Artorias, nods. He dashes away and yells over his shoulder, "I'll return the moment I get a chance!"

Satan ignores him. Immediately, the leader of the demons barrels forward. His eight Vectors reach out, grabbing walls of the underground cave system to yank him ahead forcefully. Several injured demons run toward him, screaming and crying as blood spills from their bodies — Satan vaults over their heads, using his vectors to augment his agility in the cramped hallway.

After a hundred years, the demon living space has become quite impressive. The smoothed earthen surfaces remind me of the Labyrinth. Torches line the walls every thirty feet or so, providing illumination wherever Satan runs. The demon leader takes a left, a right, another right... I grow more and more confused about the shape of the underground catacombs the further he travels, but luckily Satan knows his way around.

Soon, the earthen floor slopes upward. Satan races toward an exit blocked by several layers of underbrush. He bursts into the summer daylight, wincing only slightly as the sun's rays pound his face.

Blinking, Satan swivels instinctively toward the sounds of screams and shouts. A hundred demons leap and dodge as two angels soar in the sky above, while two Titans attack from the ground.

Uriel, Uzziel, Hercules, and Megara engage in a surprise attack. Uzziel keeps her distance and focuses on ensnaring demons with vines. Uriel unleashes torrents of fire, water, and earth upon her prey. Hercules and Megara use their fists to punch and tear demons apart. The Titan male uses his incredible strength to smash one demon's head into bits with a single punch, while his wife wields a kunai in each hand. A scyther slashes at her with its bladed arms, but she stops the blade and uses the demon's

momentum against him. She knocks him to the side and sends him sprawling forward, then plunges her knife deep into his heart.

Satan pounces from the underbrush. "You ugly chickens! Attacking while the boss ain't here! I'll rip you apart!"

Hercules pauses his onslaught to wince as something invisible hits his body. Lucifer stands some fifty feet away, the eye on her forehead glowing like a hot coal as she aims it at Hercules. "It's about time, Satan! Get over here and help!"

The Titan holds his hand up to swat the air. He desperately tries to fight off some unknown force attacking him as Lucifer takes a few steps toward the mighty giant.

"Gah! Red-skinned witch! Not this again! Get out of my head!!"

Lucifer flashes a toothy grin. "Pathetic male! You will fall before-"

She doesn't get to finish her sentence. At the last second, Lucifer glances toward the sky, then leaps backward. A boulder the size of a Honda nearly crushes her flat, missing by mere feet.

"Thou art quite the lip-flapper for a dead woman walking!" Uriel yells from above. She motions with her hands, and a laser-thin beam of water shoots from her palm. Lucifer doesn't hesitate. She swivels toward the incoming attack. Her third eye glows for a split-second, and a blast of kinetic energy erupts outward. It slams against the water and melts it into steam, forcing Uriel to dodge to the left. Lucifer's attack sails past the Archangel at nearly the speed of sound, evaporating the clouds above.

Satan sweeps his gaze across the four enemies. *Damn. How did the angels find us? What are they doing outside of heaven? Why don't the two big ones have wings? Gah! So many bloody questions! Lucy could probably take one a couple of them at once, but four is too many!*

In a split-second, Satan concocts a plan. His Vectors lash out, tearing apart the ground around him. Eight wads of rock and dirt levitate into the air. He flings two at each target with ridiculous strength.

Uzziel is the first to detect the attack. "Look out!" She dodges to the left, protecting Uriel with her body by summoning a massive wooden shield. Satan's attack bounces off harmlessly.

Megara, her back to Satan, doesn't see the attack coming. Two dirt missiles smash against her neck and spine, jarring her before she can kill another scyther. The impacts fling her forward, past her husband. She slams into the dirt with a painful *whump*, nearly breaking her neck.

Hercules's superhuman senses alert him to the incoming attack. He swivels around just in time to bat the first projectile out of the air and dodge the second. A look of shock passes over his face when he spots his wife.

"Megara!"

With the Archangels momentarily distracted, Megara down for the count, and Hercules' attention firmly on me, Lucifer seizes the initiative. Her third eye lasers onto Uriel.

The Archangel screams in pain. One of Lucifer's unseen attacks hits her. Uriel loses her concentration and stops flapping her wings. She falls from the sky while clutching her head, plummeting toward the

ground at frightening speeds.

"Ahh! Uriel, no!" Uzziel dives toward her sister, motioning with her hands to quickly create a surface of soft, dense grass below. She barely manages to grab Uriel's hand and slow her descent a little, but both Archangels crash into the grass, landing atop each other.

With only Hercules still a threat, Satan presses his vectors against the ground and pounces toward the Titan. "You killed my grunts, shithead! Nobody hurts my boys, but ME!!"

The Devil lands beside Hercules and unleashes a brutal attack. Hercules, having never fought someone with Vectors before, gets battered and bashed from left to right as Satan's invisible fists turn him into a leaf trapped within a hurricane. The Titan holds his arms up to protect his face, but the rest of his body lies vulnerable and exposed. Satan grins sadistically while aiming for the Titan's kidneys, groin, and gut. He knocks the wind out of Hercules and trips him, then grabs the Titan's shirt with a vector and slams him into the dirt.

Hercules gasps for breath as Satan pauses his attack.

"Hm hm hm..." Satan chuckles. "What a chump. Dunno what sort of ugly fuckin' angel you are, but I ain't had a less satisfying fight in my entire life, pal."

Tears roll from Hercules' eyes as he creaks them open to stare at his wife, lying motionless beside him. "M...Meg...ara..."

Satan eyes the Titaness for a moment.

Then he attacks.

One of Satan's vectors lashes out and pulverizes Megara's skull. He crushes her head flat, spraying blood and gore in every direction.

"You killed my boys. Now, I return the favor."

Shock washes across Hercules' face. He opens his mouth to say something, but no sounds escape. His lips move, but he can't bring himself to speak.

Lucifer glares at Satan. "Kill him! Why are you hesitating?! The fight isn't over!"

Satan sighs. "Haah. Fine. I came all this way and won the fight all by myself. It seems you broads can't do anything without me."

One of Satan's vectors rears back to strike.

Hercules' entire body shakes. Veins bulge in his forehead. The young Titan's teeth gnash together as incredible rage boils in his stomach.

"You... you killed... my..."

Satan doesn't hesitate. His Vector lashes out to strike Hercules's head with the same force that killed Megara in one blow. Instead, it bounces off an invisible barrier surrounding the Titan's body.

Dread floods through Satan's body. Hercules' rage explodes, sending swarms of mana exploding from every pore. His eyes begin to glow pure white, and his broken ribs rapidly heal themselves.

Every hair on Satan's skin stands on end. *Danger! Danger!*

"YOU... KILLED... **MEGARAAA!!**"

The Titan vanishes. One moment he's lying on the ground, and in the next, he appears behind Satan, moving far too fast for the Devil's eyes to follow.

Hercules swings a fist toward the back of Satan's head.

His breath catches. *DEATH!*

Every bone in Satan's body screams in fright.

Before Hercules' fist connects, the Devil's Vectors bat his attack away, allowing only an icy *whoosh* of air to blow against his back. The invisible claws yank Satan to the left an instant later, pulling him out of Hercules' range.

He follows.

Each Vector has a mind of its own. They move independently of Satan's thoughts, deflecting attacks and parrying where possible, their movements a blur. Fear boils in Satan's stomach as the Titan roars angrily while kicking, punching, and battering his invisible limbs aside. Hercules's movements are erratic, moving far too quickly for Satan to follow. Each time a Vector rushes in for the killing blow, Hercules ducks it.

Much like when Phoebe fought Satan, the Titan's eyes have somehow enhanced to the point that he can see the changes in the air as the Vectors rush toward him. His glowing eyes dart around, following their movements with eerie precision.

Suddenly, he feints right. Hercules moves to strike my stomach, but pulls back and smashes a rock with his foot. The fist-sized mass explodes like a grenade, sending shards of stone toward Satan in a cone.

SHIK! SHIK!

Two shards tear through the Devil's defenses. They rip through his liver and neck, tearing holes and spraying blood everywhere.

Satan involuntarily gasps, but that only makes blood discharge through the newly-opened hole in his throat. The Devil trips on a twig and falls on his back, jarring his spine. He gasps wordlessly while clutching at his neck, even as Hercules appears above him, fist raised.

"DIE!"

Satan struggles to dodge, but his movements are like those of a snail compared to the cheetah before him.

It's over, Satan thinks to himself in the milliseconds before Hercules final blow connects.

Hercules jerks his gaze to the side at the last instant. "What?!"

Five icy projectiles smash against him. They knock the Titan away, sending him careening across the plains. He tumbles, twists, and turns as his body spins across the ground.

"Oh my gosh! Are you okay, Emperor Satan?!"

A woman speaks. I turn my head to look at her.

The midday sun shines against her aquamarine hair. The demoness, one I've never seen before, evaluates my condition instantly. Her crimson eyes scan the wounds in my chest and throat. Based on her lacy blue lingerie and tail twitching nervously behind her, I assume she's a succubus, like Belial. I can't help but stare at the dozens of white tattoo lines stretching across her blood-red body, forming all manner of intricate patterns.

Satan raises a hand and gurgles in his throat. Whatever he's trying to say, he can't get it out.

"Don't worry; reinforcements have arrived!" The woman says, worry in her voice. She quickly flicks her gaze back. "Agares! Satan is wounded! Help me kill his attacker!"

The demoness continues without me. A flash of green zips past as Agares, now in his lizard-form, pounces after her. "Come on, Nerissa! Nobody hurts the boss on my watch!"

I roll my head to the left and watch silently as both join forces with Lucifer, encircling Hercules. Other grunts from the catacombs reinforce them. Hercules quickly jumps to his feet and looks around. Soon, despite his rage, he takes a hesitant step backward, realizing the demons have surrounded him.

"That's enough!"

Uzziel flaps her wings. She rises out of the grass while holding Uriel. Ordinarily, Uzziel is one to smile pleasantly, but this time an agonized expression of rage sears itself into every inch of her face. Wrinkles appear on her forehead as she grinds her teeth together.

"Long have I tried to bridge the world of demons and angels. If thou dost intend to fight, SO BE IT! I'll end this conflict here!"

The Archangel uses her free hand to form several magical signs. Megara's headless body sucks underground. Ten cactuses pop up and surround Hercules. A moment later, he yelps in surprise as the ground swallows him as well.

The spiked plants explode. A thousand barbs fly in every direction, catching the demon reinforcements off-guard. Nerissa motions with her hands to materialize a wall of ice, shielding herself and nearby demons from Uzziel's attack. The others are not so lucky. Howls of agony pierce the air. Several grunts grab their bodies in various places as the barbs impale them. They stumble back, unable to stand. "Ahh!!"

Agares coils his legs and eyes the rapidly levitating Archangel. "Nerissa! Platform!"

The succubus nods. She aims her palm beneath Uzziel. Ice blasts out, forming a pillar twenty feet tall. Agares leaps at it, plants a foot on top, and pounces at the Archangel above.

Uzziel spots him coming. Forming another hand sign, she summons a wall of vines and flings it at the demon racing toward her. Agares tries to block but fails. The vines wrap around him like a net and yank him to Earth, smashing him against the grass with terrific force.

Lucifer aims her eye at Uzziel. She focuses her gaze and sends a wave of energy racing at the Archangel while Nerissa leaps into the air, propelling herself upward with her ice magic.

Uzziel's expression softens as she sweeps her gaze across the two incoming threats.

"No. No more."

With a single motion, Uzziel summons a hardened brown cocoon around herself, one resembling a giant walnut. Nerissa's hand morphs into a blade of ice. She stabs the Archangel's chrysalis at the same moment as Lucifer's attack connects.

The cocoon explodes into dust, blowing away into the breeze.

When the dust clears, Satan's eyes widen.

Uzziel and Uriel are gone.

Nerissa falls back to the ground below. She shoots ice out, creating a slide below herself. She glides down the ice on her bare feet at blinding speeds, but decelerates at the last instant and hops off smoothly, landing in a crouched position.

"Where did that Archangel go?!"

Lucifer sweeps her forehead's eye in every direction. Up, down, left, and right. "I can't detect their auras. Impossible. I should be able to see her for five miles in any direction. I can't find the wingless ones either."

I choke again, feeling more blood spurt from my throat. "Kuh... nkk..."

Nerissa glances around for a moment, as if waiting for an attack, then runs over to me.

"Lord Satan is in bad shape," Nerissa says to Lucifer. "He needs treatment as soon as possible."

Behind her, Agares tears out of Uzziel's fine net. He jumps to his feet and pivots around, scanning the skies for enemies. Once he realizes the Archangels and Titans have left, he quickly turns his attention to the demon grunts lying around, clutching their infected wounds. The reverse-pointed barbs dig deep into their flesh, refusing to come out, even as a few of the demons tug at them with what strength they have left.

"Everyone needs help! Nerissa, can you heal the wounded?"

Nerissa kneels beside me. "I'm not much of a healer. I'll try flash-freezing Satan's wounds to stop the blood loss, but that's the best I can do."

Nerissa's red and yellow eyes, the same as every other demon's, rise up and down my body. "Lie still, my Emperor. This is going to hurt."

It does. Nerissa's ice sears the veins in my neck shut, burning like lava against my skin. My back arches violently when she ices my liver next.

"Kahh.... nnguuhh...!" Satan growls painfully, still unable to form words.

Nerissa looks past me as I writhe around. "Sister! Where have you been? Two Archangels just attacked! Satan is injured!"

Footsteps pitter-patter to my right. I tilt my head toward the newcomer. Belial strides up and kneels beside me. "Sorry. I was busy frolicking with several men. I came here as quickly as I could. Where is he hurt?"

The two succubi quickly share the relevant information. Satan continues to clutch his injuries, but otherwise keeps his mouth shut so the women can speak. Eventually, Belial forms several magic seals and presses her palm against my chest. My pain eases once my wounds close.

Within twenty seconds, I feel right as rain.

"Guh... thanks, t-toots. You saved me." Satan pulls himself into a sitting position and rubs his head. "Ahh... I guess the chickens got away."

Nerissa turns around. "Lady Lucifer, are our enemies gone? Are they waiting to ambush us?"

Lucifer hisses to herself. "Kss. I don't think they are. Mother fled, along with Uriel and that glowing-eyed man. Satan killed the wingless female, so at least they suffered a loss."

I gesture toward all the dead and injured grunts. "Yeah, but lookit our losses. Cripes. I thought the troops were better trained than this. You ain't doing your job, Lucy!"

"Don't try to pin today's failure on me, you insipid little shit." Lucifer balks at my words as I climb to my feet. "Nobody expected an ambush from the skies! Especially not from Titans and angels!"

Satan raises an eyebrow. "What'd you say? Titans? The hell are those?"

Lucifer pales. She jerks her head away, trying to avoid Satan's burning gaze. "Kss. Never mind."

"You know something." Satan takes a step toward her, pushing Nerissa aside. "Tell me. What do you mean by 'Titans'?"

Lucifer bristles.

She relents after a moment.

"Fine. Since I slipped up, I might as well tell you. I spotted several large creatures roaming a nearby forest some years ago. Giant, wingless angels. Fifty feet tall. I stealthily followed them to their resting place and observed them for several days."

"Yeah? And what'd you find?"

Lucifer's lip quivers. She looks like she wants to scream at me for revealing her secret, but she contains her anger. "They're called Titans. I don't know much about them, but I know they aren't angels. From what I gathered when I forced one to speak, they don't get along with our former captors. Or, at least, they *didn't*. It appears that has changed."

"No shit! Why didn't you tell us? Having devil-damned giants walking around is worth a mention."

Lucifer sneers at me. "I don't tell you everything. I have my reasons."

"Your reasons suck, you dumb broad. Now our soldiers are lying in the grass, waiting for death. Cripes. Got anything else I need to know? Anything that might cost us more lives?"

Lucifer crosses her arms. She glances past me, at Nerissa and Belial. "None worth mentioning."

"Bullshit."

My single curse flares her temper more. "You want to hear something juicy? Very well. Here's a treat. I happened to meet Valac three years ago. His body was far more powerful than the last time I saw him. He

told me about a few things he's been planning. It turns out he's been killing Titans ever since he left."

Satan wets his lips. "Valac, huh? You don't say. If he's murdering the giants, that might be why they're working with the angels now, but they weren't before. Damn. All he does is stir up trouble. That worthless, bony piece of shit..."

"There's more. Valac is planning to overthrow you and take over as leader of the demons." Lucifer flashes one of her signature, toothy grins. "I don't see a way for you to beat him."

Satan's heart bubbles angrily. He takes a step toward her. "What a surprise. You and Valac are too close for my liking."

Lucifer doesn't back away. "What's wrong? Are you going to fight me? Maybe you'll use that special soul magic of yours. You can force me to lose. That's the sort of thing a pathetic manipulator like you would try."

Several moments pass. Belial and Nerissa watch silently as two of the top demons stare each other down. With their lackluster fighting power, they haven't a chance of stepping in to stop the conflict.

Not that they'd try, even if they could.

"You're lucky I don't like ta' hit broads," Satan says. "Or I'd lay you out."

"You killed that female Titan. Don't pretend you care about women."

The two continue to glare at each other. Satan breaks away. "Tch. I don't need to fight you. I won the battle when you signed my contract. All you've got is a mouth. It won't ever win a war."

Lucifer pivots on her heel. She growls under her breath, "We'll see about that."

The demoness storms away, leaving Satan with the two succubi. Satan glowers at Lucifer's ass for a moment before turning around to the remaining women. "Belial. Why ain't you healing up the others? I don't need more dead troops."

Belial shakes her head. "There's no need. The thorns are paralytic, not poisonous. They won't kill anyone. The other medics can heal our troops just as well as I can. I healed you, so my job here is done."

A hint of sarcasm enters Satan's voice. "Yeah? So, you popped in here to shake that tush, heal my wounds, and that's it? You're a lazy one, ain'tcha. Not like this dame here-" Satan gestures to Nerissa. "She showed up and saved my life, then nearly took out the Titan herself. That's the kind of go-getter attitude we need."

Nerissa nods cutely. "Yep! Anything for you, Lord Satan!"

Belial sighs. "Sister, can you stop fawning for a few minutes? Remember our discussion last week?"

Nerissa cocks her head. "You mean... how you like having your ear nibbled?"

"No. The other thing."

"Oh! Your sensitive toes?"

Belial groans. "No. It was about our sisters."

While the ladies have their chat, Satan's anger evaporates away. He sighs. "Haah. So, you mean the other succubi? What about them?"

"The men are mistreating us," Belial replies. "Most are gentle, but a few of them have started acting out their more violent urges. There's a lot of pent-up aggression from sitting around uselessly. You need to do something."

"Like what?" Satan asks.

Nerissa raises her hand. "You should set some rules! Tell the men to treat us nicely. We do our best to accommodate them, but there are five of them for every one of us. Can you help us even a little?"

Satan's eye twitches.

"I'll try. Don't expect anything now. Since angels are targeting us, I'm bettin' more'll show up eventually. I've got bigger fish to fry."

Belial smiles. "That will do. I just don't want to see my sisters hurt. Keep up your end of the deal, and I'll always be there to heal you."

"You will anyway," Satan mutters. "You signed my contract, remember?"

The succubi's smile fades. "Right. That. Well, I thank you anyway. If you'll excuse me, I have several friends waiting for me in the Relief Rooms. I left them high and dry."

Satan chuckles. "Hehe. Yeah, I bet you did, doll."

Belial spins on her heel. She turns and walks away, leaving Satan and Nerissa alone.

Satan's mouth coils into a smile. "You know, I really appreciate you savin' me. I don't usually say this, but I saw my life flash before my eyes. That wingless freak nearly took my head off. Dunno what I'd have done without you."

Nerissa blushes. Her tail coils into a knot behind her. "Oh, it was nothing. I'd do anything for you, Lord Satan."

"Course you would. You can't disobey me."

"No. I don't... I don't mean because of your... uhm... contract."

Nerissa trails off. She reaches up to play with her sky-blue hair.

Satan's eyes travel up and down her body. "You know, I make it a policy not to fraternize with women. I get offers constantly, but it seems wrong."

Nerissa bats her eyes. "Wrong? How so?"

"Well. I've got everyone under my contract, see. I make imps sign as soon as they whelp. The problem is, I don't trust anyone, especially a woman, with keeping secrets. I also dunno if a dame really likes me, or if she's following my orders 'cause of the contract."

Nerissa takes a step toward me. "And? You're the leader of demons. It wouldn't do for you to be lonely, would it? A man should have a woman by his side."

Satan's eyes narrow. "That's the thing. I don't see what you get outta bein' with me. Prestige? Power? What's your shtick, toots? What are you into?"

"I like whips!"

"Well, duh, but I'm talkin' about your motivations. What makes you tick."

Nerissa's smile widens. "Oh, I just like you a lot! Is there something wrong with that? You're big, and strong, and handsome..."

"Right. That's all a given. What else?"

The succubus pauses. A look of frustration passes over her face. "I... I don't know! What does it matter? Most men would die to have a beauty like me by their side! Do you think I'm ugly or something?"

Satan scoffs. "Pft. Not a chance. I have standards, though. It ain't all about looks. I like a lady who doesn't run her mouth, but can help me out in a pinch. I ain't found one yet."

"My mouth can do all *sorts* of things."

"I get what you're saying, and that's filthy as sin, babe. However, I wanna see some proof. You need to show me you're willing to do anything for me."

Nerissa's posture slumps. "Oh. Okay. Well, what do you mean?"

Satan rubs his chin. "I'm the leader of demonkind. I don't want a weak little girl by my side. Find a Titan, kill it, and bring me its head. If you do that, I'll let you be my girl."

"Oh my gosh! That's all?!" Nerissa's attitude brightens instantly. "So easy! I can do it tomorrow- no, today! Just give me a few hours!"

Satan frowns. "You're awfully eager, toots. I like that attitude, but there's no need to rush. This battle has shown me that I need more muscle in the ranks. We need to hit the angels and save my friends. I'd rather you stick around for that. If you get killed by a Titan, it'll be one less competent fighter."

Satan turns to face the battlefield. Agares and several dozen reinforcements slowly help the injured to their feet. Satan's eyes swivel around until he spots a nearby bloody patch on the ground.

The place where he executed Megara.

"We did good work today, but the fight ain't over. That Titan fellow wasn't a chump. He had spirit. I can't imagine he'll leave us alone for long. Stick around with me, and-"

Satan returns his gaze to Nerissa. However, the succubus is gone. Only a stream of ice leading into the distance betrays where she went.

Satan's mood sours. *Bloody devils. You try to talk to a dame for one minute, and she runs away. Guess the pressure was too much.*

He shakes his head and groans. "Stupid, cowardly woman. Knew I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up. Yo! Agares! Lemme help you out. We need to get these soldiers underground."

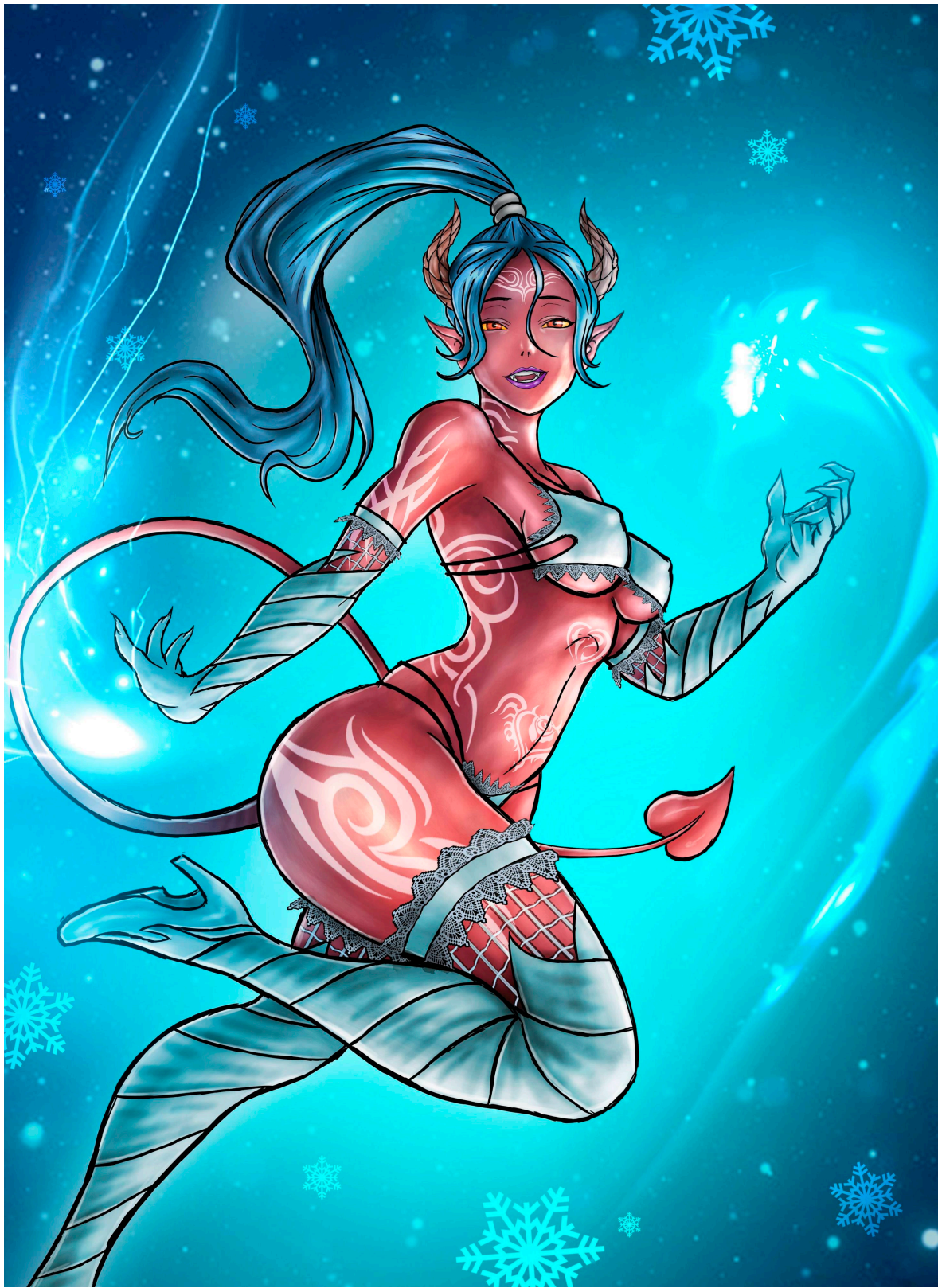
Satan ignores Nerissa's abrupt departure and heads toward the injured demons.

I, on the other hand, wonder to myself where she went. I also question what happened to Uzziel, Uriel, and Hercules.

Well, the visions are nowhere near complete. I'll have to wait and see.

Author note:

This is Nerissa



Part 105: Uzziel's Lament

I appear inside of Uzziel's body once again, and lightly tap Uriel's unconscious face as she rests in my lap. "Uriel... wake up, sister. Please."

Uriel mumbles something incoherent. "Nnn- mngh..."

Lifting my head, I scan my surroundings. Several dozen naked Titans surround me, each one twenty-five to fifty feet tall. Hercules is the only one wearing clothes, and by far the shortest of them all. He sits on a stump with his palms pressed together, his chin lightly resting on the tips of his fingers. His posture is that of someone praying, but his eyes are wide open, fixated on the headless body lying before him. Megara's corpse lies beneath a white sheet, light blood stains spilling through its top.

"Your sister might not move for a while," The Titan says emotionlessly, his voice completely monotone. "That she-devil hit our minds with horrific images. It's a miracle I didn't fall unconscious too. Yes. A miracle. That's what it was."

Hercules never takes his eyes off Megara. One of his shorter comrades, a brown-haired Titan with a shaven face standing twenty-five feet tall, kneels beside him and rests a giant hand against his back.

"Megara will stay with us in our hearts, brother. Know that we are here for you, for anything you need."

"Can you bring my wife back, Moros? No? Then it doesn't matter. There's nothing you can give me that will ease the agony in my chest, the burning in my blood. For three hundred years, Megara stood by my side. I cannot imagine another taking her place. She was my first, my all, my everything."

Moros pulls his hand away. "Sorry, cousin. I cannot fathom your pain. That was rude of me."

Hercules lowers his hands. He shakes his head slowly. "No. Don't blame yourself. Blame the demons. They killed Megara. Their leader, Satan, did. I'll never forget the look of joy on his face when he... when he..."

Hercules pauses. He chokes raw emotion back in his throat, then lifts his gaze slightly to look at me.

"Why did you retreat, Uzziel? I felt it. The ancient power of the Titans exploded inside my heart. I was about to kill all of them."

I blink twice. "Exactly for that reason. I'm sorry, child of the Earth. I was thy eye in the sky, but I failed to protect Megara. If thou hadst unleashed thy power during thy moment of utmost grief, verily, thou would have perished. The demons outnumbered thee."

Hercules' gaze hardens. "Do you think dying would have troubled me? Megara is gone. Those red-skinned bastards took the one person I loved most in this world from me. I care not for my life, not anymore. No matter what it takes, I will hunt her killer down. I will crush him into *dust*."

The Titan clenches his hand into a fist. He squeezes it with such force that his joints pop.

I quietly brush my fingers through Uriel's hair, soothing her as best as I can. Her body twitches. Her eyes press shut forcefully, leaking a few tears out. She appears to be enduring a terrible nightmare.

"Revenge... revenge is not the way, young one. I know what it means to lose someone precious. The demons forced my beloved brother to attack us. He killed himself to protect us, yet I feel the weight of his death upon my shoulders. 'Twas I who killed Samael. I may not have plunged a blade into his chest, but my negligence resulted in his death. I can never change the past. I cannot bring him back."

Uzziel shivers.

"For a moment... during the fight... I felt a deep hatred in my chest. Every fiber of my being screamed out in rage. I wanted nothing more than to kill Satan, Lucifer, and all the rest. I could have done it. T'would have been a simple matter."

Moros, Hercules' older brother rubs his chin. "If you could, why not? That would have been just."

"Would it? One life for another?" Uzziel closes her eyes. Darkness engulfs my vision. "Violence is a cycle. That is what Raphael has told me. The demons kill Samael; I kill them, and then they kill me. The only way to break such a cycle is by using love."

Hercules scoffs. "Love. You wish for me to forgive my wife's murderer?"

"No. I won't forgive the demons, and neither should thee. However, I also refuse to spread hate. No matter what it takes, I won't repeat the actions of my enemies. I won't incite a war. Hatred begets hatred, and death, death."

Uzziel opens her eyes. She motions with her hands to send a bit of mana into Uriel's body. Uriel stops twitching and steadies her breathing.

"Right now, thy anger and rage are at their most potent. As a Titan, thy killing potential lies in the intensity of thy emotions. That is how I created thy kind, after all. Thy purpose was to help angels slay the ancient dragons. The best way to kill a dragon is via a single, concentrated attack. However, in a sustained battle, one where thy initial attack fails to annihilate the enemy, thy mana will deplete to nothing. In short, the demons would slay thee shortly after thou destroyeth their initial attackers. 'Twould be a futile waste of thy life. Megara would not wish for thee to suffer such a fate."

The Archangel finishes. Hercules exhales quietly through his nose.

A minute of silence follows.

Hercules speaks again; his voice more measured. "I keep reliving the moment that bastard killed her; the look on his face as he smiled gleefully. He butchered a defenseless woman in cold blood. No honor. No mercy. How could you create such cruel creatures?"

Uzziel sighs. "I didn't. I conceived my children to be playful and carefree. Something corrupted them along the way. Perhaps my family's treatment of them was to blame. Perhaps their shift was because of the one who empowered them. Such darkness is present in all beings if given enough soil to sprout."

Several moments pass. Uzziel mutters under her breath, "...Even I am not immune to the corruption of hatred and despair."

Uriel stirs. Her eyes blink open, and the Archangel of Protection coughs weakly. "Ahh... hurts... sister? Is that you?"

"Aye. 'Tis me. Art thou alright, Uriel?" Uzziel says, gently stroking her sister's face.

Compared to her usual strong appearance, seeing Uriel lying in such a vulnerable position sends a pang of worry through my mind. I never pictured her as anything but an Amazonian warrior, yet here she appears at the edge of sanity. Her body lies limp in Uzziel's arms. She tries to shift her body, but her energy seems to diminish the more she moves.

"...Horrible. Samael. He blamed me. He said it was my fault. I couldn't beat him. He kept hurting me. All the others laughed at me... they called me weak..."

Uriel babbles incoherently about her dreams. Uzziel frowns. "The demoness struck thee with a magical attack, causing thee to plummet to the Earth. I barely caught thee in time. Thou must have suffered a terrible nightmare."

"No, no, no..." Uriel whispers. A tear streams down her face. "...It wasn't a dream. I saw Samael. I felt his fists. Every blow was as real as could be. It was awful. I begged him to stop, but he kept hitting me. He hurt me for a day... a month... maybe even a year. He broke every bone, over and over. How could my brother be so cruel? I thought... I thought he loved me..."

Hercules shakes his head slowly. "I know of what she speaks. During the battle, the demoness attacked me. That third eye... it caused me to see visions — terrible hallucinations. I watched my father and family die as my kingdom burned to the ground. It felt like several days passed, but in reality, only a moment did."

Uzziel licks her lips slowly. "In that case, it seems Lucifer possesses magic involving mental manipulation. She inflicts torture on her enemies by attacking their thoughts. How... how awful."

"It wasn't a nightmare. It wasn't. It wasn't..." Uriel babbles to herself, finally gathering enough strength to raise a hand. She tries to wipe a tear off her face, but her arm gives out midway, and she slaps herself instead. "Aaoo..."

Hercules grabs one of his sleeves and rips it off, then tosses it to Uzziel. "Here."

"My thanks," Uzziel replies. She dabs gently at Uriel's face. "You're okay now, beloved sister. The demons are gone. Let me help you up."

I lean forward, prop Uriel up, and wrap my arms around her in a gentle hug. Uriel's sagging body feels lighter than it should. She doesn't pull away or protest, but instead leans her head back against my shoulder.

"Why must we suffer?" Uriel asks. "Why do the demons torture us? Why make me relive my greatest regret?"

Uzziel's eye twitches slightly. "We attacked them, sister. Verily, thou didn't ambush them. Their actions were in self-defense. I cannot in good faith blame them for underhanded tactics... though I also wish thou hadn't remembered such awful images."

Moros, silent until now, speaks up. "These demons fight cruelly. Attacking the mind, whether with magic or words, is the mark of a coward. I would see them all slaughtered and beaten for their evil ways."

"Same, brother," Hercules replies. He glances around at the other Titans, all of them standing or sitting silently without moving. They appear like giant statues, unable to move unless something awakens them. "I should expect that when my father hears news of Megara's passing, he will finish assembling our people and mount a counter-assault against the demons. Above all else, we owe a blood-debt to Satan. We must pay it back in full."

Suddenly, a cry from the forest jolts the hearts of everyone nearby. "Ahhh!!!"

Someone's voice, female, shrieks in the distance — another Titan. Everyone present, save for me, leaps to their feet. Hercules spins on his heel, a look of trepidation etched into his face. "What was that?"

"That voice. It sounded like Selene's!" One of the Titans nearby balls his hand into a fist. "Quickly! Everyone to arms! Someone must be attacking her! It has to be the Reaper!"

The sudden change in atmosphere is jarring. The Titans, once silent monoliths looming over my tiny body, transform into unstoppable juggernauts. A fire lights in their hearts as the naked men and women wrap their hands around trees, tearing them from the ground to use as makeshift clubs.

Hercules' snarls viciously. "Damn! I won't lose another family member!" He grabs hold of his robes and tears them off, along with his pants and the rest of his clothes. Going commando, the young Titan leaps atop Moros's shoulder. "Go, brother. I'll help!"

Uzziel's eyes dart all over the place. As the Titans leave, a sudden feeling of dread washes through her heart.

If it's a demon attack, then... I can't stay here alone! I'm exposed! I must protect Uriel!

Uzziel's panic subsides. An eerie calm descends over her as she lays Uriel on the ground and motions with her hands.

"Mother Earth, swallow us whole. I leave this fight to the Titans. We must return home to warn my brothers of the demons' wicked ways."

A sickening sensation of falling envelops me. The ground opens up beneath Uriel and me as I fall backward, screaming internally while the dirt rains against my face to bury me alive.

Uzziel, however, isn't bothered in the slightest. She is the Earthmother. Living inside the Earth is a simple matter for her.

The world goes black, and I feel my mind leave hers once again.

Part 106: The Soul Bridge

A crude stone knife nearly five-feet long rests firmly in my grasp, allowing me to shave the bark off an uprooted tree. I glance to my right and spot four Titanesses silently carving various figures and shapes into their section of the log. All four are naked, but none are particularly attractive. Their fat bodies and giant jowls give them wild, animalistic appearances.

I scrape off the bark, bit by bit. I'm not sure what my host is doing, but I seem to be crafting some sort of spiritual effigy. Something like a gravestone, except it's a tree.

A loud *snap* makes me flinch. I tilt my head to the right toward the woman at the far end of the tree. The Titaness, a fifty-foot-tall creature with scraggly black hair, grunts. "Damn. I snapped another knife. Selene, pass me a new one."

My host nods. I turn to my left, where ten additional knives sit. Grabbing the closest one, I lightly toss it to the Titaness. "Here, Kuva. Try not to break this one. That's the third already."

Kuva snatches it from the air with surprising dexterity. "I hate this work. The men sit around a campfire and tell stories while we carve the Soul Bridge. I'm no good with my hands."

"None of us like it," A redheaded Titaness across from me says. She pauses her carving for a moment to look at Kuva. "But such is our lot in life. This spiritual guide is for the good of our little sister, Megara. A day of work is well-worth ensuring her well-being as she travels to the ancestral spirits in Valhalla."

Kuva rolls her eyes. "Hah. I don't believe in them, Astarte. You're naive, believing in such tales."

"Kuva!" I gasp at her, my eyes widening. "Don't blaspheme our ancestors! A thousand years of bad luck follow those who do! Why, their specters guide us to this day!"

The black-haired Titaness appears skeptical. "Father claimed the Ancestral Spirits would protect him, but look at what happened. Zeus struck him down in his sleep. Where were the spirits when Cronus needed them most?"

"Kuva's right," a Titaness directly across from her says. She continues to cut into the log without stopping. "Cronus was the most devout of all Titans. For him to die only proves they don't exist. The Soul Bridge is useless."

"You're wrong," I mutter under my breath, returning my attention to shaving off the bark at my end. "Cronus angered the ancestors. They despised his lazy ways, and thus chose Zeus as his successor. How else do you think King Zeus could have overpowered our patriarch so easily?"

Kuva sneers. "With his *cunning*. Cronus was a lazy old man. I wept tears of joy at the news of his passing. He said nothing when the Clan of the Tiger attacked mine in the dead of night."

My blood begins to boil. I pause my cutting to glare at Kuva. "Don't try to turn this on my clan. Yours refused to repent for their profanity. They shouted vile insults at my brothers. The Ancestral Spirits

blessed our strike against you. We suffered no losses, while the filth-talkers among yours perished like seal cubs."

Kuva grips her knife tightly. Her eyes slowly lower to my throat as she considers slitting it. "I won't sit and listen to your poison, Selene. Another word, and I'll..."

"You'll what? Attack me? You can't win. Shame clouds your judgment. Perhaps if you gazed inward, you might see the truth in my words. The Ancestors looked down upon Cronus, as they do upon you. Profaning their name further only proves you've yet to learn your lesson."

"Oy, let's calm things down," Astarte says. She glances from Kuva to me warily, silently hoping neither of us escalates our spat any further. "There's no need to attack each other. We've lost one sister already. To lose another would be..."

"She wasn't *my* sister," Kuva snarls. "Megara was a pathetic little whelp, barely ten thousand years old. It's no wonder that she died to a bunch of tiny little red rats. I could crush them under my thumb."

"How... how *dare* you insult the dead!" I jump to my feet. Kuva echoes me, clutching her knife tightly. "I've had enough of you! Leave! I don't want your blasphemous carvings on my sister's Soul Bridge."

Kuva nods. A cruel smile stretches across her face. "I didn't want to be here anyway. Come, Lira. Let us leave these three to cut their logs. Perhaps we should pay them a visit later."

The Titaness sitting across from Kuva swallows nervously. She sits a few feet shorter than her elder sister, and appears less willing to escalate the conflict. Still, she stands up and gently sets her knife down. "Ah, m-maybe. Kuva, there's no need to be rude. We should..."

"Idiot!" Kuva slaps her sister, her strength sending a stiff breeze through the forest. "Now is the time to stand up for your clan! Stop with the indecisiveness."

"Don't bully Lira," Astarte says. "Unlike you, she is not quick to violence. You could learn a few things from her."

Kuva flares her nostrils. She rears her arm back and flings the knife down with all her strength. It stabs into the log with terrific force, splitting it from the top down. A crack rushes through the middle and stops halfway.

"That's what I think about your pathetic *clan*," Kuva says with a sneer. She grabs Lira's arm and drags her sister away. "Come. We'll leave these simple-minded peasants to their work."

My host, Selene, fumes silently. She clutches her knife tighter and starts to take a step toward Kuva. Something grabs my hand. I glance down to see the final Titaness, a brown-haired female who has stayed silent the whole time.

"Don't. The Ancestral Spirits will punish those blasphemers. Have faith. Damaging a Soul Bridge is a grave insult. I suspect their days are numbered already."

I start to pull away, but pause to consider her words. "Will the Ancestors punish them, Chantis, or will they expect us to do so in their name, as Zeus did to Cronus?"

Chantis shakes her head. "The ways of our ancestors are mysterious. Sit. Help me repair the Soul Bridge. Kuva damaged it greatly. We may have to start over."

I nod and plop down, still glaring at Kuva's back as she lumbers through the forest. I can barely make out the top of her head.

"The nerve of that woman. How dare she act so terribly on Megara's Day of Remembrance."

With my eyes still fixed on Kuva's head, something disturbing happens. She suddenly disappears, as though she had ducked down.

Thud.

In the distance, not far away, the sound of a boulder hitting the ground makes my eye twitch.

Astarte stiffens. "What was that?"

I narrow my eyes. A flock of birds bursts into the air as another massive *thud* shakes the Earth. "I think Kuva fell over. Maybe Lira did, as well. Strange. They have many undesirable traits, but clumsiness is not among them."

Chantis turns to look in the direction the other two left. "Hm? I wonder."

She clambers to her feet. Motioning with her hands, a film appears over Chantis's body. Her skin becomes transparent within seconds, turning her all but invisible in the waning daylight.

"Hold a moment," Chantis says. A shift of movement in the air reveals her body levitating off the ground. She hovers up until I lose sight of her after a hundred feet.

The sound of a twig snapping echoes from the forest. My stomach tightens.

I know what's coming. The women don't.

Valac. The Grim Reaper. In the previous vision, he attacked them. Since I'm seeing things from their point of view, it won't be long before he strikes.

My host jumps to her feet. "Astarte. Danger. Something's coming."

Astarte nods. She stands up and forms several magic seals. "Forest creatures, I implore you... be my eyes and ears."

Both of us stare breathlessly into the darkness. The fading sunlight provides little illumination under the dense canopy. I'm defenseless, standing in a clearing, naked with no weapons. When Valac appears, the three Titans won't have a chance.

A flash of movement. Something white rushes from the forest cover directly at my neck. Only Selene's reflexes save her, as she jerks to the right at the last second. A sharp pain on my left makes me wince. Something cut me.

Whatever it was, it zips past me too quickly for my eyes to follow. Another disc-like projectile silently rushes out of the forest, aimed at Astarte's neck.

"Look-!"

I try to warn her, but she sees it coming. Astarte bends over backward, allowing the circular object to *whiff* above her face harmlessly. My eyes track it for a split-second as it slices through the trunk of a tree, passing through the wood like it was air.

The tree falls over behind me, but I quickly turn my attention to the unseen assailant. "Astarte! Someone is trying to decapitate us! Protect your neck!"

Raising my hand, I form magic signs. Multi-colored crystals with the density of diamonds magically envelop my hands, giving me the world's sturdiest gauntlets. Similar crystals appear all across my body, hardening in place to provide me with natural armor.

Astarte dives to the ground and rolls behind me, shaking the planet. "I'm searching the woods. My pets haven't found anyone yet!"

A glance at the ground reveals hundreds of tiny movements near my feet. Rats and mice fan out through the forest, searching for our attacker. Suddenly, a chorus of screeches erupts a hundred feet away as birds fly into the air.

"There!" Astarte points her finger toward the disturbance. "That's-"

A sound like a dart whistling through the air sails past the back of my head. Astarte's voice cuts off mid-sentence. I spin around to gaze in horror as she stumbles backward, her head cleanly separated from the rest of her body.

"Ahhhhh! Astarte!! NOO!!"

Selene's vision goes red as she tries to grab her falling sister. Too late, she turns to see another circular disc sailing toward her neck.

I flinch, waiting for death.

Instead, the disc explodes against my throat, shattering when it impacts Selene's crystalline armor.

Now I understand.

The assailant isn't Valac. It's someone else. Someone who's hurling razor-sharp ice-discs. Perfect for slicing through flesh and bone, but terrible against high-density crystals.

Right on cue, a tiny demoness leaps into view. Her red skin, white tattoos, and blue lingerie identify her as Nerissa. She must have come here to kill Titans, just like Satan requested.

"You're a sturdy one!" Nerissa yells. "But I already killed the other three! You're the only lady left! Hahaha!"

Selene's blood boils. "YOU!! How dare you kill my sister!" A sensation like lava pours across her skin. She spins on her heel and kicks her foot into the dirt, pouncing at Nerissa with terrifying speed.

Nerissa's haughty smile vanishes. "Oh, shit!" She dives to the ground, narrowly avoiding my massive palm as I swipe my arm out and tear several trees from the Earth. They sail through the air and crash into the forest several hundred feet away.

Selene grinds her teeth together as she spins around, trying to find the demoness. "Where are you?! Coward! Only a vile monster attacks from the shadows!!"

All traces of politeness leave Selene as her inner rage continually increases. Every pore on her skin burns with the heat of a volcano. With a horizontal slicing motion, she sweeps the side of her hand out in a karate-chop and levels a dozen other trees.

Biting cold strikes my calf. "Ahh!"

I quickly lower my gaze to spot the demoness below me, darting around with her tiny little body as she pours waves of frigid cold on my feet. Any trace of overconfidence leaves her face as she spirals around, trying desperately to shatter my leg.

Nerissa jumps away when she realizes I've spotted her. However, something invisible grabs and lifts her into the air. She yelps in surprise. "What?!"

I half-expect to see Chantis materialize before me, but instead, her voice comes from the sky. "Selene! I have her with my telekinesis! NOW!"

I nod. My fist flies at the succubus faster than I think possible. I smash Nerissa with every ounce of strength in my body, punching her into the Earth with the force of a falling battleship.

Nerissa hits the dirt with a terrific *boom*.

Her body explodes into white particles, scattering snow and ice everywhere.

A moment later, agony rips through my spine. Several pointed objects, like knives, lance into my back, hitting the cracks in my armor. "Gahhh!"

"That was a close one!" Nerissa yells. "You almost had me! Too bad that was only an ice clone!"

I spin to face her, but my frozen foot has no feeling left in it. I trip and fall, gasping as she forms a massive ice spear beneath me.

SHIK.

The ten-foot-tall ice pole lances through my stomach. A quick glance to my left shows Nerissa leaping into the air. She blasts ice across my back, widening the pole's base to hold me fast to the ground.

"Hahaha! You're pretty pathetic!" Nerissa says. She lands on my back, motions with her hands, and materializes another spear directly above my heart.

No!!

Selene's voice screams in my mind.

I won't die here! I WON'T!!

Like a bank vault opening to reveal its treasure, something unlocks in Selene's heart. She smashes her fist into the ground and roars like a wild animal. "**GROOOOAAARR!!**"

The sudden, unexpected movement catches Nerissa off-guard. She slips and falls off my back as I shove myself off the ground, ripping up several tons of dirt stuck to her ice pole along with me.

I sweep around and slap the demoness in midair. This time, when my palm strikes her, the feeling of flesh and blood screaming in pain greets my ears. A wet *splat* is all I hear as Nerissa goes flying into the forest, tumbling end over end.

"Selene!!"

A masculine voice calls out from the forest several miles away. I spare only a fleeting glance toward the speaker and spot a dozen Titans running toward me, each one a potential reinforcement to help me fight off the lone demoness.

It'll be a few minutes before they can arrive.

Selene's voice bellows in my mind. *No! She isn't dead! I've got to find that little wretch and rip her head off!*

The Titaness's eyes burn like coals as she swivels around, using the ice-spear through her chest to knock other trees out of her way. If her body is in pain, I can't feel it. Endorphins increase her reflexes and senses to supernatural levels. The darkness of the night appears dramatically brighter with her incredible vision lasering around.

Three ice-discs *whiff* through the trees, slicing the foliage apart instantly. Selene easily bats them aside. She stomps fifty feet toward their origin point to see Nerissa standing, one arm hanging broken at her side. Nerissa's enraged expression mirrors Selene's as blood rushes from several open wounds on her face, chest, and legs.

"Stupid Titan! My blades can cut through anything! You must have a weakness!"

Selene doesn't reply. She aims her hand at the succubus, and the crystals adhered to her palm blast outward, showering the ground with a hail of darts.

They miss. Nerissa motions with her remaining arm and explodes into a cloud of icy vapor, allowing Selene's attack to hit nothing but air.

A voice squeaks from my shoulder. "AHA! I knew it!" I turn my head just in time to see Nerissa standing, another disc hovering over her palm and spinning like a top.

Nerissa's eyes jerk to the back of my neck. She flings the disc, sending agonizing pain ripping through my mind. My body gives out as she severs my head from my spine. My sense of touch vanishes as the ground rushes at my face.

"Selene, no!"

A voice calls out to me from the sky above. I can't reply. Another ice spear stabs through the back of my neck, bursts through the crystals hardened around my throat, and rips my head from my shoulders.

As the world goes black around me, Selene's mind whispers its last, agonized thought. *Sister Astarte... I will join you in Valhalla.*

I reappear almost instantly inside Nerissa's mind. She chokes on blood for a moment, then grabs Selene's bedraggled hair. The Titaness's bloody head hangs in her grasp as Nerissa pounces away, scanning the sky warily for the invisible Titaness. She sees nothing.

I'm injured — bad shape. Lord Satan will be disappointed to see me like this! I'll have to ask Belial to heal me before I deliver the heads. Ahh! He only wanted one! What if he's angry that I have four? Maybe I should just bring one?! I don't know! What should I do?

Nerissa grits her teeth. She keeps to the darkness of the forest after snatching Astarte's head, and quickly scans the area, looking for the other two. She finds their decapitated bodies not long after, and soon the tiny little succubus starts lugging four Titan heads behind her as she zooms through the woods, holding all of them by their hair with only one hand.

I find myself surprised at Nerissa's physical strength. She might even have muscles comparable to Belial.

Nerissa leaps from branch to branch, avoiding the ground.

*Everyone said I was only fit to be a whore, but I'm better than that. I'm a fighter! Succubi and Incubi aren't only fucktoys for others to relieve themselves. We deserve better! No, that's not right. We need to earn our keep. We can't expect a handout. I have to lead by example and show Lord Satan that we have value; that **I** have value.*

Satisfied that nobody is following her, Nerissa pauses after traveling a few miles. She drops to the forest floor and releases the Titaness heads, then sags against a tree.

With the adrenaline from the fight wearing off, she finally notices the agony ripping through her left arm. Nerissa clutches a rib and winces. "B-broken. Hurts to breathe."

She closes her eyes. *That giantess put up more of a fight than the others. I'm lucky I found that exposed part on the back of her neck, or I wouldn't have won. I'm fortunate I survived... if she had hit me any harder, she would have turned my bones into mud.*

Nerissa's breathing evens out. She pants quietly for a moment, then finally opens her eyes to stand up.

Her blood turns colder than her ice magic.

Standing before her is a massive demon wearing tattered clothes. His skinless body and face gaze at her without a trace of emotion.

"I would like you to know that I enjoyed your little show. Four Titans dead after you severed their heads, but I cannot let you go."

Valac clutches his lantern with his upper left arm and gazes at me. He appears at least a foot taller than the last time I saw him, and his presence is far more intimidating than before.

Nerissa's breath catches. "V-Valac... but... I didn't hear you... arrive..."

The Grim Reaper's smoldering red eyes gaze into my soul. "As you stand here among this flora, you also live within my soul aura. My presence has expanded to the ends of the Earth; I see all who die and all

who give birth. To date, three thousand Titans I have slain, but today you've amused me with the blood you let rain."

Nerissa's heart skips a beat. *I can't fight Valac. His power is... it's too incredible! He might be stronger than Satan! How can I escape? I can't! I'm barely in any shape to run!*

Valac's eyes lower as he scans my body. I feel creeped out, not because he's looking at me like a man looking at a piece of ass, but because he sees me as a mere lump of flesh. His casual disdain for pleasure comes across without him saying a single word.

"What... what do you want from me?" I ask.

"I came to watch the little bird shiver. Four heads to Satan you plan to deliver. To what purpose, I must ask? To toil for him, would you perform any task?"

I nod hesitantly. "Y-yes. These are for Satan. Are... are you going to kill me?"

Valac shifts his feet. I flinch, expecting an attack, but he only tilts his head questioningly.

"While you have potential, your soul is as weak as a sow's. I crave the power of the Titans, given the energy they endow. Still, for me to visit you, my goal you might deduce; I have decided that for me, you may yet have a use."

Dread creeps into the back of Nerissa's mind. "You... you want to use me? Why?! I'm nobody! I'm just a succubus! A whore! I can't do-"

Valac's hand darts out, too fast for me to react. He grabs me by the throat and slams me against the tree. "Lies, never-ending, they flow from your lips. You have no choice but to help me; you'd better come to grips. Satan's love and trust; that is what you seek. Sadly, under my employ, havoc is what you'll wreak."

Maggots crawl on Valac's bony arms. I try to pull him off, but he's far stronger than me. Slowly, his hand crawls up my neck, then my chin, and soon he clutches my entire face.

"Mmgh!" Nerissa tries to break free, but she can't pull him off.

Valac's voice turns monotone. "Quiet. I'm thinking."

Dizziness overtakes me. My body increases in weight, as a thousand anvils begin to compress my chest.

I can't speak. I can't scream. I can't even breathe!

A bloodshot eye appears in the darkness. The freakish specter shakes and trembles as it approaches me.

"Master Valac, he's the puppet master of the ages. His plans, complicated, come in stages. Resist, cry, and lie in defeat. It makes no difference; to him, you're a tasty treat!"

Something drills into my ear. The piercing agony makes me want to cry, as a creature burrows deeply. I feel it wriggle around and slide through my brain, down my throat, and stop somewhere near my stomach. Terror fills me, but I can't fight back.

"A gift we give, be glad you live. For us, you toil, conflict, you embroil."

The darkness vanishes. Valac retracts his hand, and I lose my footing, falling to the ground.

After a moment, I blink deliriously, only to realize my pain has vanished. I glance at my broken arm and watch as it mends itself, along with the rest of my body.

"I like you a lot, pretty little succubus. Your cute little face makes you quite innocuous. You'd better learn to trick people and tell moving lies. Say a word about me and your sister *dies*."

Nerissa freezes. "B-Belial? You'll kill her?"

Valac nods. "I will."

"But... but why? She's a demon, just like you! No, more importantly... what did you do to me?! There's... something in my stomach!"

Valac turns his back to me. "Farewell, Nerissa. Speak not a word, not a squeak, not a shout, and rest soundly... knowing you must be my loyal scout."

A soul exits Valac's lantern. It sails through the forest, and he disappears a moment later, teleporting after it.

Nerissa slumps to her knees. *He... he let me go...*

A voice whispers in her mind. **No. Master Valac always watches. Your freedom has passed. Now, you work for him.**

Nerissa's spirits sink. She rises slowly and grabs the four Titan heads; two in each hand. The succubus plods into the forest, despair weighing heavily on her heart.

The puppetmaster lays his traps... but how many will fall into them, and what are his goals?

Nerissa doesn't have the answer.

Neither do I.

I reappear inside Satan. The darkness of night stretches out ghoulishly as he stands in the forest, Nerissa by his side. No other demons are around. It appears Nerissa brought him here in secret.

The Devil stares upon Nerissa's haul. "Four Titans. You killed them by yourself?"

Nerissa nods. She smiles, but it seems painfully forced.

"I... I did. I would do... anything for you, Lord Satan."

Satan's nostrils flare. "I'd be lyin' if I said I wasn't impressed. You beat that white-eyed fella, and these ladies too. Judging by the size of their noggins, they must've been... huge."

"Fifty feet tall or so, yes."

Satan nods. "Delicious."

The Devil doesn't move a muscle. Four vectors lash out at astonishing speeds and crush the heads into pulp, spraying Titan blood in every direction.

Nerissa flinches in surprise. "W-what was that? What happened?!"

Satan smirks. "It's one of my abilities. I have to crush the heads and hide the evid-"

He stops mid-sentence. Satan suddenly clutches his chest and breathes hard as a wave of nausea hits him. Mana floods his body, and he blinks away several tears of surprise.

"Nngh, shit, I wasn't ready, that time. Maybe... maybe four at once is too many."

Nerissa frowns. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. D-don't worry... about it." Satan picks himself up and mops sweat from his forehead. "Let's just say I've been... *improving myself*."

Nerissa appears unconvinced. "Okay. If you say so- ah! Do you need help standing? You look woozy, Lord Satan!"

My legs give out, and Nerissa catches me. She helps me lay on the ground, but before she can pull away, I reach out and take her hand.

"Hey. Where do you think you're going? I was worried about you, doll. You left me high and dry."

Nerissa blushes. "I, ah, well... I don't know. Did you think about my request?"

"To be my girl? 'Course I did. I thought about you plenty when I looked everywhere and couldn't find you. Kept thinking it'd be a real shame if I never saw your fine ass again."

Nerissa's eyes widen. "Really?"

Satan pulls the succubus onto his stomach, allowing her to straddle him. "Damn straight. I need someone I can trust. Wouldn't hurt to have a little fun too. You've got a body to die for."

A vector snakes out behind Nerissa and touches her back. She flinches and looks around, trying to find who did it. "What the heck? Was that you?"

"I'm a demon of many talents. Having eight extra arms can come in pretty handy. I'll make you a deal, toots. You promise never to betray me, to always stand by my side, and to do as I say... and I'll take you to a place better than Heaven."

Nerissa's smile falters. She rests a hand on her stomach. "Uh... uhm... just a promise? Why not make me sign one of your... your... contracts?"

I shake my head. "Nah. You put your life on the line for me. You've already proven yourself. Just say 'yes', and we're cool."

Nerissa hesitates.

Three seconds pass. Five. Ten.

"Alright. I promise."

Satan's grin widens. "Perfect. Now that I've got you here riding me, let's move on to the fun part. I'm feeling frisky tonight."

Nerissa leans down, pressing her body against mine. "Anything for you, Lord Satan."

Satan doesn't know, but I do. Nerissa isn't who he thinks she is.

She's a puppet. Trusting her will likely prove to be his undoing.

Part 107: Set In Stone

This time, when I appear before the Archangels, I immediately slump to my ass and cross my legs under me. I sigh heavily. "Ugh. Those last few visions were rough. I might only be an observer to the past, but it feels like I'm really *there*, you know? I want to help, but I can only observe. It sucks."

I raise my eyes to stare at Gabriel on the left, Raphael across from me, and Michael to my right. All three appear deeply troubled.

"I have similar thoughts every time we return," Gabriel mutters. "Solomon's visions have revealed many facets of demon life I was unaware of until today. I am forced to reconsider all of my past actions while asking myself if I made the right choices."

"They have only strengthened my resolve," Michael retorts. "Seeing that demoness attack the Titan women without any hesitation, she enjoyed the sport of murder too much for my tastes. Killing is only enjoyable when one engages in equal combat."

"Oh?" Solomon's voice lilts. He sits on the ground beside me and pats my back, but keeps his eyes on Michael. "Since when did you approach violence with such nuance? I agree with the general sentiment, but your actions contradict your words."

Raphael rests his hands on his knees and leans forward. "Michael cannot be blamed for temporarily breaking his morality when it came to the demonic menace. Aye, my brother tortured the two little ones for decades on end, and he slaughtered demons whenever he came in contact with them, but he held a personal grudge because they murdered his brother. Nerissa had no reason to despise the Titans."

I scoff. "Hercules and Megara attacked the demons! They ambushed them! Seems like plenty of reason to me."

Michael glares at me. He opens his mouth to reply, but Gabriel raises a palm. "Calm thyself, brother. Like it or not, the Hero has a point. Concede so that we may continue."

The Archangel of Courage closes his mouth and looks away in annoyance. I wonder if he's disappointed, or if he simply doesn't like me? It's hard to tell.

I turn my attention to Raphael and switch the topic. "Speaking of Hercules, those Titans were something else. Why did their sizes vary so much? Cronus was well over a hundred feet tall, but Hercules barely hit ten."

Instead of Raphael, it's Solomon who responds. "Titans grew taller over time. The taller a Titan, the older they were. Cronus was hardly the biggest among them, given Earth's gravity presented a limiting factor. A few of his forebearers were mountain and planet-sized."

"What about their powers? How did those work?"

Solomon scrunches up his face. "Mmm. Titan abilities were tied to their emotions, particularly grief and rage. Additionally, Titans grew more powerful over time based on how many battles they engaged in."

"Correct," Raphael replies. "Uzziel created the Titans to escalate their power against the dragons. The more Titans the dragons killed, the hotter the rage of those left behind. The problem lay in that after we defeated Jörmungandr, we had to fight the Titans ourselves. The final war nearly destroyed us. 'Twas fortunate that I managed to end the bloodshed."

"Maybe," I reply. "But their basic nature didn't change. Zeus killed his father. Titans whittled each other down from millions to only tens of thousands. Hell, I'm not even sure how Zeus managed to kill Cronus. If they grew more powerful over time, how could a young Titan defeat his senior?"

Gabriel raises his hand. "Titans were far from invincible. They were flesh and blood, much like us, the demons, and the humans, too. Zeus murdered Cronus in his sleep. 'Twas a shocking revelation. I never expected such a thing might happen in all my years. A Titan with his defenses up was like an unbreakable wall, but when their guard relaxed, they were as vulnerable as anyone else."

"Zeus sounds like a backstabber. What kind of jackass murders his father in his sleep?"

"I won't argue in favor of his morality," Gabriel replies. "I respected Cronus. Knowing that he died without a fair fight made it difficult for me to trust his successor. However, I believe that eventually, Zeus proved himself as best as he could. 'Twas a difficult era for all involved."

Crossing my arms, I look at Raphael. "So, Camael's visions of darkness. Did you three know about them?"

Raphael bows his head. "Nay. To think our sister was hiding such overwhelming fear... she wanted nothing but for us to enjoy what little peace and happiness we had left. I remember that prior to the War in Heaven, our lives were bliss compared to what came after. Tsk. Camael always did keep her feelings close to her chest..."

"I'm continually surprised by how little we knew even about ourselves," Gabriel adds. "Let alone the demons. Seeing the past through the lens of Solomon's Crown has allowed me to reflect without the blurriness of faded memories clouding my mind. Perhaps I was so caught up in my grief over Samael's death that I failed to notice how hard Uzziel took it."

I raise an eyebrow. "What do you mean? She seemed to get over him pretty quickly."

"Nay," Michael replies. "I never knew that Uzziel exploded in rage during her battle against Satan and Lucifer. Our sister never displayed a single negative emotion in all the time we lived together."

"Nor did she fight during the Dragon and Titan Wars," Raphael mutters. "Always the gentle one, Uzziel continually attempted to bring peace between our people and the Dragons, Titans, and Demons. 'Twas her kindness that ended the Titan War, though she was forced to forget the act."

For some reason, Solomon rolls his eyes at Raphael's words. I decide not to ask why.

"She always tried to take the path of pacifism," I say. "And none of you listened to her. Had you done so, the demons might not have spiraled out of control. It was probably Uriel who decided to ambush the demons at that time. Megara's death is mostly on her hands."

"You're correct," Solomon says, confirming my suspicions. "Uriel convinced Hercules and Megara to attack the demons when they spotted them from the skies. Uzziel didn't want to help... but she lacked a backbone when standing up to her brothers and sisters."

Michael licks his lips. "I disagree. Uzziel softened us enough that when the demons attacked, we weren't ready. Her pacifism opened us up to attack from all sides. In many ways, she was a lot like this young Hero: afraid to take a stand for her family, even if her enemies were vile monsters."

"Michael!" Gabriel snaps at his brother. "Speak no ill of the departed."

"I meant no offense. I loved Uzziel as much as thee, brother. However, surely, thou must admit that her unwillingness to fight brought no end to our grief. Her powers were mighty enough that she could have helped us win the War in Heaven had she used her full might."

A moment of silence falls across the group.

Gabriel closes his eyes. When he speaks again, his voice is noticeably lower.

"Michael. Consider thyself fortunate that thy life had ended by the time of our Final Stand, at the end of the Energy Wars. When Satan and a billion demons flooded into Heaven to exterminate our people... on that day... on that day... Uzziel..."

Gabriel's voice becomes noticeably quieter than before. He forces himself to suppress his emotions.

"I... I lay dying, blood pouring from my chest. As Satan walked toward me, I heard the screams and cries of my brothers and sisters. Satan had already slain Raphael... but not me. He saved me for last."

The air goes still around the campfire.

"Satan chuckled deep in his throat. His final victory was at hand, his revenge complete. He gloated while knowing I was powerless to stop him. With my energy vanishing into the ether, all I could do was gasp for breath as his specter dwarfed me."

"But then, before he landed the killing blow... I saw *it*. Uzziel's face."

"The demons ignored Uzziel, instead deciding to kill the others around her. Satan knew she was a pacifist. He knew she wouldn't fight back. He wanted her alive for some sick fantasy."

Gabriel's voice turns to steel.

"That was his *mistake*."

"Uzziel exploded in rage. Millions of years of anguish poured from her body all at once. As the life force ebbed from my soul, I watched as every part of her mind shattered. Our sister broke completely, unable to control the rage, hatred, despair, and suffering she had suppressed for millennia. She slew a million demons within a matter of seconds."

Michael's breathing catches.

"Uzz... Uzziel? She did that? What happened next?"

Gabriel shakes his head. "I know not. I faded away, as my body and soul poured into my ring. I can only imagine she expelled every last drop of her mana. Had it been you or Uriel, I might praise her for

such a valiant final stand... but it wasn't. She was our sweet, kind, caring little sister. Her last moments were fraught with misery and despair."

Gabriel opens his eyes. They glisten in the firelight, but he makes no effort to wipe his tears away.

"I am sorry thou didn't witness such horrors," Raphael murmurs. "Had I the ability to go back in time, perhaps I would do things differently. Perhaps I wouldn't. Fate is a tricky mistress. Camael believed that the future was etched in stone. Perhaps she was right."

"Maybe she wasn't," I say. "If fate exists, if destiny is real, then our actions have no bearing on the future. We're predetermined to succeed or fail, and there's nothing we can do to alter the future. I refuse to think like that. Perhaps by looking into the future, Camael doomed the angels to suffer under a self-fulfilling prophecy. By expecting all angels to die, she deemed any actions that might negate that future pointless."

Raphael shakes his head. "I find such a notion unlikely, Jason. Camael never told us about her dire predictions."

"She wouldn't need to. By seeing the future, she might influence others accidentally. Maybe when they came to her for counsel, she might give them advice that would help in the short-term, but hurt in the long-term... when she expected the demons to have won."

Solomon nods. "Jason brings up a good point. Nobody can know what the future holds for certain, but such a concept is well within the realm of plausibility."

Michael leans back on his log. "Bah. This talk of human philosophy is pointless. Who cares if the future is set in stone or not? The angels perished. Demons took over. Nothing can undo that."

"It does matter," I retort. "If you think fate is immovable, then dwelling on the past is pointless. You couldn't have changed anything. Ironic, given that's all you seem to do."

"Jason..." Solomon nudges me, a note of warning in his voice. "Don't get snappy with the Archangels. They have had a lot of solitary time to think about their lives. Whether destiny is real or not, you can hardly blame them for wishing they had done things differently."

Solomon's rebuke gives me pause. He's not wrong. Even if the Archangels are hypocrites, hindsight is 20/20.

I decide to change the topic.

"If Titans were so powerful that they were able to slay dragons, why was Valac able to kill them effortlessly? He was only a single demon."

Raphael wipes his nose on his sleeve. "Because Valac was a soul manipulator. His scythe didn't kill his victims, but instead ripped the soul from their bodies, empowering himself. The first few Titans fell before they could react, increasing his might substantially. His power snowballed after that, making him almost unstoppable."

"Well, if he was invincible, then how did he die?"

Silence.

Solomon raises his eyes to the sky above. "We're not there yet, Jason. Everything until now has only been building to the midpoint. Valac perished during the War in Heaven, but the manner of his death isn't as important as what came before. If you're willing to listen, I can continue the visions now. It's probably for the best that we move away from these troublesome discussions."

"Aye," Michael says, annoyance in his voice. "Thy constant attacks on my family's morality are driving me to insanity."

* * *

Compared to my first impression of Michael six years ago, back when he saved me from my paralysis, he has become the most bitter and cynical of all the Archangels. The worst part, though, is that he refuses to change his opinion on anything. He believes the demons are evil, and nobody can convince him otherwise. He refuses to see where he was at fault. He dwells on the past, yet never tries to learn from it.

Michael represents everything wrong with the angels. They're self-aggrandizing, sanctimonious, smug, and far too sure of their righteousness. The Archangels look at their history, and instead of considering they might have been in the wrong, they blame others.

I hate that.

I hate when people can't acknowledge their mistakes. Maybe it's stupid of me to want to appeal to the demons and to try and make peace, but I think genuine stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result. If repeatedly antagonizing the demons for thousands of years only pissed them off more, then perhaps a sincere diplomatic effort might bear new fruit.

Something touches my shoulder. I turn to my right to see Solomon resting his palm there. He shakes his head. "I can hear your thoughts. Let's not focus on negativity, Jason."

I grunt, remembering that my mind is like an open book to him.

"Sorry. Let's get on with the next vision."

A long moment passes. Solomon stares at me silently, as if trying to discern some key part of my heart. He eventually breaks his gaze away and motions with his hands to form magic symbols.

"As you wish."

Solomon finishes his incantation. As the world shifts around me, the last thing I see is Gabriel's face. He gazes into the fire, wishing with all his strength that he could save Uzziel's life.

If he could go back in time, there would be only one thing he wanted to change.

We all have something in our pasts we wish we could fix.

Even me.

Part 108: Liar, Liar, Satan the Liar

"Ugh? Guh. Nnn?"

"Yes! That's the way! Rub those sticks together. Just like that!"

I appear inside Uzziel's mind. She sits at the edge of a forest with a dark-skinned, extremely hairy man. His face is rough, looking only vaguely like any human I know. Given the lack of wings and his short height, he isn't a Titan or an angel.

He looks like a Neanderthal, or some other ancient human.

Uzziel gestures toward a stick held between both of his palms, then motions with her hands. "Now... thou must, ah... rub them together. Do it quickly."

The Neanderthal blinks. "Bun-bun?"

"Like this," Uzziel says, rubbing her palms together to create friction.

The caveman stares at my hands silently for a moment. He mimics me, rubbing them against the stick. It presses into a notch on the log below, but it doesn't create any fire.

"No, do it faster," Uzziel says, increasing her speed. "Like this."

The man nods. A moment later he picks up the stick and snaps it in half, then hands it to me. "Guh?"

"No... not like... haah..." Uzziel sighs. She turns her head around to look at Raphael standing behind her. "They're certainly *slower* than the demons."

"Mmm," Raphael replies. "So these creatures... they're called monkeys?"

"They're part of the monkey species, according to the Titans. I call them 'humans.'"

Raphael strokes his beard. "And thou believeth these 'humans' will give us energy, as the imps once did?"

"Mhm. I created the imps from scratch, but with my limited mana this time, all I managed to do was change the inner language of these little ones."

Raphael raises an eyebrow. "Inner language?"

Uzziel taps her lip. "'Tis difficult to describe. All beings have a set of rules inside their bodies that explain how they look, act, and feel. I can create life from scratch, but it takes a lot of work. Adjusting the bodies of existing beings is much simpler."

Raphael narrows his eyes. Sweat drips down his head as he nods, clearly unable to understand her words. "Err, yes. I, ah, see. Well, as long as thou art confident these hairy creatures will be of use to us..."

Uzziel hops to her feet and smiles. "Oh, yes! I'll have to teach them some manner of civility, and then show them how to give us mana, but I think I'll succeed."

The old man strokes his beard with his left hand and leans heavily on the staff in his right. "The imps formerly lived with us in Heaven. How will these... these monkeys give us mana while on Earth? Isn't the

distance too great?"

"No, no, I've changed their inner language so they can give us energy even over vast distances. Unfortunately, it lessened the amount they generate in their bodies. Compared to the imps, and especially the demons... humans will be quite weak. I'm... worried."

"Worried? About what?"

"About them. The humans." Uzziel reaches a hand up and fiddles with her long, olive-colored hair. "The demons appear to be killing Titans rampantly. First, Valac attacked, and now there is a female ice-manipulator as well. She slew a dozen Titans since her appearance last week. What if they target the humans?"

Raphael shakes his head. "I don't think the demons will do such a thing. These 'humans' are slow, weak, and dumb. They pose no threat to our enemies. The demons seek power and thrills. I suspect their primary goals are all about our destruction, and everything else is secondary."

"Still," Uzziel replies quietly, "we should worry about the safety of our new vassals. Since they won't live in Heaven, they will be under threat from the demons. We must protect them until their numbers increase."

"How many are there now?" Raphael asks.

"A hundred or so. Not enough to benefit us. We must rely on the mana of the Titans, currently. They're acting quite... *stingy*."

I glance over my shoulder. The caveman ignores me completely, and instead chews on his broken stick. He stares into the distance absentmindedly; a blank look stretched across his face.

"As this one demonstrates, educating them will take some time."

Raphael nods. "Thou art correct, sister. I trust thy intuition, but beware. We must treat these new servants differently from the old ones. Do not let Michael learn of thy plans. I fear he will worry that thou art creating another problem."

"A problem? Oh no," Uzziel says with a laugh. She cutely waves her brother's concerns away. "I made these humans far weaker than the imps. They will not betray us. Even if they did, Michael should rest easy knowing they will not pose any threat."

As I speak, the caveman blinks, then sets the stick back against the log. He begins rubbing it between his hands once more. A look of concentration comes over his face as he rubs it harder and harder.

"Oh, look! He finally understands!" Uzziel says. She giggles and kneels down to stare at him. "Yes, that's the way. Thou art close to success, little one!"

Raphael speaks from behind me. "What is thy purpose in training this ape to... to... rub sticks together? Art thou teaching it a trick?"

"No, not a trick. I'm teaching him to make fire."

"I don't understand. Only Uriel and a few cherubim can create fire."

Uzziel shakes her head. She continues watching the caveman. "Fire is caused by a variety of physical forces, brother. 'Tis an essential ingredient in creating life. The Creator formed us from the warmth of his mana. Isn't that what thou hath told me many times before?"

"I suppose," Raphael says. His tone is that of uncertainty. "Thy plan is strange, but I shan't question it. 'Tis my turn to guard Heaven's Gate. I must go and relieve Michael."

Before Raphael leaves, I turn to him and raise my palm. "Ah, wait. Brother, has Camael discovered the source of Uriel's illness? Is she still incapacitated?"

The old man's wings twitch. He appears intent on leaving, but pauses to answer my question anyway. "She has not. Uriel is still unconscious. I sometimes worry she is at death's door. Whatever magical attack that demoness used, our sister has yet to recover from it. After thou dost finish thy business on Earth, thy next visit should be to her side. Uriel will rest easier if thou holdeth her hand."

I lower my gaze. "We need a cure. Whatever struck Uriel, it affected her more intensely than Hercules."

Raphael sighs. "Thy children have caused us much heartache, little sister. Farewell. We await thy return to Heaven. Do not idle here too long."

Raphael spreads his wings, flaps, and flies away. I wave goodbye, but he doesn't notice.

A minute later, once the old man is little more than a speck on the horizon, I return my attention to the caveman.

"Okay, Gronk! So far, so good. Ye need to-"

I pause and frown. The dry brush beside his log has already caught fire from a stray spark. Gronk looks at me with a stupid grin. "Gah! Gah!"

"Wow! I didn't expect ye to pick that up so quickly. Thou art a smartie pie!" Uzziel kneels again and motions toward the ground. A tiny branch sprouts, growing an apple within seconds, then falls off and lands in her palm. "Fruit for my special boy!"

Gronk takes the apple excitedly and chows down. His oversized jaw gives him the look of a gorilla, but it also allows him to devour the fruit in three bites, core included.

A movement behind Gronk catches my attention. An ugly-looking female with hair across her entire body peeks out from behind a tree curiously. She seems interested in what we're doing.

Uzziel claps her hands. "Oh, Milga! Perfect! I've been wanting to observe thy act of copulation in person! Come over here, please, and give me a demonstration!"

The female grunts. "Guh." She doesn't move.

"Oh, there's no reason to be embarrassed. I'll make sure Gronk is gentle. Come on, then! I'd like to see how the procreation process works for myself."

Several minutes later, Gronk and Milga start smashing bits together, going at it like wild animals. Uzziel stares at them intensely, watching as both moan and grunt in the least erotic ways possible.

"Fascinating. So the pointy end enters the crevice? Why does he thrust so vigorously? I don't understand how this strange act creates an infant. This oddness is what happens when I have no influence over the evolution of life."

Uzziel furrows her brow. Not a drop of excitement regarding the human's sexual activity stirs in her body. She watches with almost clinical dispassion, remaining interested only in how the act occurs. After Gronk finishes, Uzziel stands.

"Well, this has been very educational. I thank thee for the demonstration! I must observe the other animals to see how they reproduce as well."

Gronk's body sags after he finishes exerting himself with Milga. He smiles a stupid grin at me again. "Guh!"

Uzziel turns away. "Hm. The whole process is a bit messy. The fluids, especially... not sure if I like those. I hope the other animals are more interesting to watch."

With a burst of strength, Uzziel flaps her wings, and we take off. She soars into the sky, bathing in the mid-summer sunlight as it warms her back.

I have to keep a positive attitude, Uzziel thinks to herself. My family is counting on me. These humans are the key to saving ourselves. We can't expect the Titans to give us their energy, vast as it is. The wars might be ancient and erased from our memories, but erasing stigmas will take centuries, possibly millennia.

An hour passes. Uzziel lands periodically to investigate various creatures and landmarks. Her fascination with nature and amusement with every little creature gives me a warm feeling inside.

Uzziel loves life. She hates death. In her mind, life is a sacred gift bestowed upon the universe by the Creator. Those who deliberately end it sadden her. She doesn't understand why, due to greed or misfortune, different beings won't come to agreements to maximize their pleasure and reduce their suffering.

Uzziel is potentially one of the kindest people I've ever seen... and this is only a memory of her. I wish I could have befriended her.

Eventually, Uzziel soars over a vast sea. Mountains appear in the distance, including Mount Sinai. This time, however, surprise strikes me as I spot hundreds of angels and Titans milling around its base. Cherubs soar overhead, scouting for danger. Two fifty-foot-tall Titans sit near the tiny entrance to Heaven. The opening is much too small for them to enter, but they serve as mighty guards, ready to crush any attackers.

It seems that Heaven has grown much more fortified over the last week. If the demons attack, they will most likely fail to breach the mountain.

Uzziel lands a mile away in a field of flowers, with a forest to her back. Kneeling over, she begins plucking daffodils, tulips, and daisies.

I should brighten the room for Uriel. A little color will help rally her spirits.

A jackrabbit stares at me, not a trace of fear in its eyes. It nibbles on a flower quietly without considering me a threat. Uzziel smiles. She takes a few steps toward it, kneels down, and pets its ears. "Oh, my! Thou art a brave little bunny! So cute, and fluffy too."

She picks the ball of fur up. It doesn't flee, but merely gazes at her silently. She cradles it and continues wandering around, picking flowers at random. "Dost thou thinketh my sister would prefer yellows or reds in her room? We call her the Flame of God, after all, so perhaps she would like reds. Hmm, but some blues would be cute too. I think she ought to try a sky-blue dress someday. She would look adorable, just like you!"

The rabbit, unsurprisingly, offers no response. Uzziel kisses his ears sweetly, then places him on the ground. "Okay, little one. Run along now!"

The rabbit doesn't move. He wiggles his nose at me and immediately begins chewing on another flower.

Suddenly, from the woods behind me, a branch *snapping* makes me flinch. Startled, the rabbit bolts away faster than lightning. I spin to face the noise.

My blood turns to ice. A demon stares at me. "Mother..."

"Ah! Y-you! Satan!" Uzziel gawks at him, then quickly looks around, expecting an ambush.

"Wait, please. Mother. I came alone. I've been wanting to speak to you."

Satan hesitantly steps forward. His posture is meek, as if he's afraid to startle me. Something seems off. He's not usually like this.

Uzziel takes a step back, keeping her distance. "Why? What honeyed words couldn't thou speak to keep me from calling for reinforcements?"

Satan bows his head. "I know you're angry, Mother. I don't blame you. I've... I've done many bad things."

Uzziel hesitates. "Huh? I don't understand."

"I'm not here to fight. I only wish to talk."

"Is that so? After murdering Samael, and Megara, and killing a hundred Cherubs, ye expect me to believe thee?"

Satan winces. "I screwed up, okay? I didn't... I didn't want things to turn out as badly as they did. Besides, it wasn't all my fault. You and Uriel attacked my troops out of nowhere. We were only defending ourselves! Look at what happened because of you. One of the demons was angry. She attacked several Titans over the last week. I can't control my people. They're too scared to listen."

Uzziel relaxes her posture, but only a little. "Scared? Of what?"

"Your people. The angels." Satan raises his gaze. "I'm tryin' to rein them in, but I can't. Everyone thinks the angels wanna kill us! I'm tryin' to stop the fighting, but you guys keep aggravating the situation!"

Uzziel's jaw drops.

"We are? But- but I thought..."

"That I enjoyed killing? No way! I wanted to save my fellow imps. That's all!" Satan takes several steps toward me. He holds his palms up to show he's unarmed. "Mother, please. Tell me. What happened to the imps in Heaven? Are they alive? Are they dead?"

His voice has a note of pleading in it.

Uzziel's breath catches.

"Ah... they... that is..."

She closes her eyes.

"...Dead. I'm sorry, Satan. I didn't want them to-"

"Noo!" Satan wails suddenly and falls forward, throwing himself to the ground. The sudden outburst makes Uzziel flinch. "Not my brothers and sisters! Uwaah! They were innocent! Mother, how could you let them die? I thought you loved us! I thought you wanted peace! Uwahhh!"

Tears flow down Satan's face.

I gaze at him from inside Uzziel's mind. My suspicions slowly begin to rise.

This piece of shit... *he's lying*. He's faking his tears. Satan already knows what happened to the imps in Heaven. Samael told him.

He's planning something. But *what*?

Uzziel walks toward Satan, kneels, and touches his back softly. I wince, expecting an attack, but Satan doesn't try anything. "I'm sorry, little one! I... I attempted to stop my brothers, but their only desire was to wreak havoc."

Crocodile tears rush down Satan's face. "All I want is for you to forgive me! I don't know what I was thinking! Don't you love me anymore, Mother? Don't I deserve to live, too? I don't want to be scared for the rest of my life, hide in caves, and fear the light of day!"

Uzziel winces.

The poor thing, she thinks to herself. *I can't believe I never tried to talk to him. All this time, he's been suffering in silence. Why couldn't I show more compassion?*

Rage boils in my chest.

Satan is lying to her, and she's swallowing the bait whole. Uzziel is too kind, too caring, too innocent. She fell for his lies once before, and now she's doing it again. Her faith in others is misplaced. She isn't only a pacifist, but naive too.

"My apologies, Satan. I have forsaken thee. What can I do to help?"

Satan wipes his tears away. Almost immediately, his tenor changes. He raises his eyes to meet mine. "Are all my brothers and sisters in Heaven dead? All of them?"

Uzziel winces. "N-nay. Two remain. Friends of thine from when ye... when ye attacked us."

Satan keeps his gaze fixed on mine. "So... Deebs and Bael? They're alive?"

"They are. Why? I can't simply release them, not after what thy demoness friend did to Uriel. Nobody would stand for it! She lies comatose, unable to move."

Satan's eyes light up. "Uriel, you say... ah, that's right!" Satan jumps to his feet, startling Uzziel. She nearly falls on her butt, but Satan grabs her hand and pulls her to her feet.

"I came to speak to you about Uriel," Satan says. "I can, uh, heal her!"

"You can? Really?!"

Confidence appears in Satan's posture. His face is already dry, further proof his tears were only a facade to manipulate Uzziel. "Damn straight. I've got this friend; name's Grigori. He can heal her up in a jiffy."

Satan snaps his fingers and turns around. "Yo, Grigori. Come on out."

From the forest, a gangly looking demon with skinny arms and withered legs peeks out from behind a tree. Grigori slowly trudges toward us, his animal-skin robes dragging on the ground beside him. "Mmm. Here I am, boss."

Uzziel doesn't question Satan about why he claimed he was alone when he actually wasn't. It unnerves me that she can be so naive.

Satan returns his gaze to me. "I'll make you a deal, Mother. I want to see my boys. Grigori here can heal Uriel. You let me save my two demons, and I'll have Grigori heal Uriel. We can talk about a peace treaty after that."

Uzziel licks her lips. Thoughts bubble in her mind as she quickly considers his request.

"Art thou serious, Satan? Thou wouldst do such a thing for me?"

Despite the doubt in her voice, Satan grins jovially. "Course I would. I love you, Mother. I'd never betray you. It's Michael who scares me. If he weren't so violent, all this trouble could've been avoided. Don't you agree?"

Uzziel nods. "Indeed. I love my brother... but his personality is too rough for delicate situations. Samael, Uriel, and Michael all mistreated thy people. I understand thy grievances with them specifically. I wish thou had spoken with me before attacking us... I never wanted thee to suffer."

Satan waves his hand. "Look, you guys killed more imps than we killed angels: a hundred cherubs, and tens of thousands of my brothers and sisters. I say we consider it water under the log. If you promise nobody will hurt me, I'll go to Heaven with you and heal Uriel. Doesn't that sound nice? I'll go alone, just you, me, and Grigori. Two demons like us can't possibly cause any problems, right?"

Uzziel glances in the distance, towards Mount Sinai. In the skies above, thousands of angels soar about, forming a surveillance net where nothing can enter Heaven without them knowing.

"Yes. I understand, Satan. No tricks, right? Wouldst thou utter a lie to thy Mother?"

Satan shakes his head. "Oh, no! Never! Nor would Grigori... *right?*"

"Nope. Never, ever," Grigori replies.

Several seconds pass.

Uzziel exhales.

"Haah... okay. Alright. I shall guide thee into Heaven, Satan. Only the two of thee. Nobody else, no tricks. Understood?"

Satan salutes me. "Of course, Mother. On my honor as one of your children."

A flicker of doubt appears in Uzziel's mind. Something about Satan's smile seems to tip her off to the fact he might be lying. However, her optimism brushes it aside.

No. Satan wouldn't betray me. He's a good boy. Rebellious, but smart. He only wants what's best for his people. I can't assume the worst... even if... even if he did cause Samael's death...

Uzziel turns her back to Satan. Hesitantly, she begins leading him toward Heaven.

A pit forms in my stomach.

Don't do it, Uzziel. Don't. He's manipulating you.

Uzziel doesn't hear me. She can't.

I can only hope Satan won't do what he's certainly *going to do*.

Part 109: The Infinite Tsukuyomi

Uzziel walks toward Mount Sinai, with Satan and Grigori on her right. The gangly looking grunt looks around nervously. "H-hey, boss... are you sure we ain't makin' a mistake?"

"Quiet, numbnuts. 'Course we ain't. Mother would never lie. She'll protect us 'n hold up her end of the deal, no matter what."

Uzziel swallows reflexively. *I have to believe Satan. He must have come to his senses. He's going to help Uriel, and sign a peace agreement. Once we bind him to a magical contract, he won't be able to turn against us. The war will end. We'll all live harmoniously once more.*

Slight flickers of doubt occasionally appear in Uzziel's mind, but she pushes them aside to try and believe in the good inside Satan.

As we walk, movement in the sky draws my attention. I look up in time to see five cherubs swoop down, swords at the ready. They slam into the dirt feet-first and surround the demons. "Lady Uzziel! What is the meaning of this? Why art thou walking side-by-side with demons?!"

I raise my hand. "Lower thy weapons. I have promised the leader of the demons safe passage into Heaven. We are going to negotiate terms of peace."

"Peace? Bah!" The cherub's eyes narrow inside his silver helmet. "We cannot trust the words of-"

"Chester!" Uzziel raises her voice, interrupting him. "I am an Archangel. My authority overrides thine."

Chester flicks his eyes to me. He pauses for a moment to consider his words, then takes a step back. The other cherubs follow his lead.

"Of course. I meant thee no disrespect, sister. However, we will keep our weapons aimed at them. I pray thou shalt forgive me, but I cannot allow these cretins to try any tricks."

I glance at Satan, half-expecting him to protest. Instead, he raises his palms. "No, no, I understand. If you guys need to keep an eye on little old me, after all the angels I've killed, I won't blame ya."

Uzziel's thoughts bubble to the surface. *If Satan was going to try anything; he would demand the cherubim lower their weapons. Surely this proves he isn't lying. Right?*

The Cherubs allow us to pass. They fall into position in the rear, aiming their swords at Satan and Grigori's backs. In the skies above, several others notice the commotion. They fly lower and tail us from a distance. A sense of anxiety falls over the group. Neither Satan nor I say anything as we draw closer to the sheer cliff leading to Heaven.

Both Titanesses guarding the entrance lower their gazes to us. The one on the right speaks. "Archangel. You bring demons here. Why?"

"Peace negotiations," Uzziel replies, a hint of weariness in her voice. She already seems tired of answering the same question. "Where is Raphael?"

The giant stares at Satan for a moment, then reaches her hand up and lightly taps the mountain. The Earth trembles from the impact, sending a small shockwave deep inside the cave system.

A minute later, Raphael and two cherubs appear at the entrance. "Yes? What is the matter? Oh! Uzziel." Raphael smiles, only for the expression to vanish when he spots Satan. A bone-chilling expression appears on the elderly angel's face. "Why has *he* come?"

"Peace talks," Uzziel replies curtly. "I've agreed to give Satan safe passage into Heaven. He promised to heal Uriel in exchange for the freedom of his fellow prisoners. Additionally, he wishes to sign a peace agreement. There have been too many deaths of late."

"Tch." Raphael spryly leaps from the mountainside and lands on the ground far more smoothly than his aged appearance hints is possible. "Satan is lying, Uzziel. He speaks honeyed words to manipulate thee. We should strike him down before he kills us."

"Brother!" Uzziel's jaw drops. "I gave my word! I won't allow thee to attack an enemy who has waved a white flag! It's unthinkable!"

Raphael hesitates. He grips his staff tightly and glares at Satan. "Have thou any retort to offer, demon?"

"I came here to make peace!" Satan shouts. "Why're you threatening me?! I haven't hurt anyone since I arrived! I brought along a healer, but still, you doubt me?!"

Raphael's gaze drifts to Grigori. "A healer? Unlikely. The angels have the best healing magic in all the galaxy. What can this bag of bones do that Uzziel or Camael can't?"

Grigori shrinks under Raphael's gaze. "I... I c-can..."

"Brother." Uzziel's voice tightens. "Art thou throwing away a chance at peace for petty revenge? I've always imagined thee slow to anger. Use thy wisdom."

"I am," Raphael replies. "Look at the tells, little sister. The way they shift their feet. The false meekness on their faces. These two are lying. We cannot trust them."

Satan holds up his palms. "Alright, gramps, I get your hatred toward us. Let's bring the mojo down, eh? It's only Grigori and me here. If you really don't trust us, stick a whole army at our backs. Bloody hell, you're starting to piss me off. We can leave Uriel to die if that's what you want."

Raphael stiffens. "Impossible. Uriel's condition is stable. We'll heal her ourselves if that's what it takes."

"No, you won't," Satan replies. "Don't you understand? Uriel's head's in a spiral. Lucy's attack screwed up her mind. She's slowly gonna lose her sanity until she's a vegetable. Grigori can heal her, but hey... if you don't want our help..."

Satan casually takes a step back and shrugs nonchalantly. "...We can leave. I'm suuure you guys'll heal her in time."

Uzziel's heart skips a beat. She shifts her gaze from Satan to Raphael. A note of pleading enters her voice. "Please, brother. Cease thy hostility. We need Satan's help. *Uriel* needs his help."

Raphael balls his left hand into a fist. He scowls at Satan. "Tch. I know thou art lying, vermin. I see the deception hidden within thy eyes. I have met many a snake in my lifetime. Whether Uzziel believes thy words or not, my gaze remains affixed on thee. Enter Heaven... but make one wrong move, and thy corpse will be long cold before night comes."

Satan purses his lips. "Such loving words, gramps. You really know how to welcome a fella."

After several tense seconds of staring at each other, our little group continues up a narrow path recently carved into the side of the mountain. We travel single-file, with me at the front, the demons sandwiched between myself and Raphael, and all the cherubs in the rear.

My nerves tense up, knowing the demons can stab me in the back if they want, but they don't. If Satan intends to rip my spine out, he's waiting for the right moment.

We arrive at the clifftop and enter the mountain. By now, several cherubs have traveled ahead, sending word of our arrival to others. Hundreds of angels line the halls, their weapons drawn as they wait for us to pass. Most of their expressions are neutral, but a few of them shoot nasty glares at the demons. If their stares bother Satan, he doesn't let it show.

After thirty minutes of slowly descending into the bowels of Sinai, we arrive at Heaven's Gate. A dozen Cherubs, even more heavily armored than the ones we've seen up to this point, line the walls. The circular chamber with the blue portal hums thanks to its kinetic energy. Its opaque frame gives no hint of what lies on the other side.

I step through without any particular ceremony and arrive in Heaven. The fields of lush grass, beautiful flowers, and distant trees appear before me. The moment I step through, two cherubs, one on each side of the gate, tense up. After they recognize me, they relax, only to grab their swords when Satan and Grigori step through.

"Demons?!"

"They're guests. Please lower thy weapons," I say for the umpteenth time. After Raphael and the rest of our entourage steps through, the cherubs nod, satisfied we have the demons outnumbered fifteen-to-one.

"So, uh, where's Michael?" Satan asks. "I hope he isn't gonna fly in and lop my damn head off."

"As much as thou deserveth such discourtesy, no, he will not," Raphael replies. The old man pulls a pipe from his robes and lights it with a snap of his fingers. He appears to have a small bit of control over fire magic, but it's too limited to be useful in battle. "Come. We'll guide thee to Uriel's side."

Satan hesitates. "Hold on. I wanna know where my boys are. I want proof they're alive."

"Thou shalt prove thyself by healing Uriel first," Raphael says. His voice has a hard edge to it. "Uzziel might have offered thy comrades on a silver platter, but I expect *results*. If thou dost fail to heal Uriel, a swift end awaits thee."

Uzziel clears her throat. "Brother. Stop antagonizing-"

"Speak not of what I should do," Raphael replies, cutting me off. "My terms are simple. 'Tis the demons who have lied time and again, not us. If they heal Uriel, then naturally, we will maintain our end

of the bargain."

Satan grumbles to himself. "Fine. Cripes. Be like that. I came here with only one other guy, and you can't offer me even the slightest courtesy? I'm defenseless!"

"Defenseless?" Raphael echoes Satan. He pulls the pipe from his mouth and taps it against his forehead. "Another lie, I see. Something tells me thy power has increased substantially since we last met. Doubtless, thou cannot defeat two Archangels without assistance, but still, thou have yet to speak a word of truth. Please, cut the idle prattle."

Satan opens his mouth to retort, but rethinks it. "Suit yourself, gramps."

I tap Satan's shoulder and point to the left. "Michael is keeping thy friends over there, in a bunker a few miles away. I will take thee to see them after-"

"Uzziel!" Raphael snaps at me. "Speak not of such confidential information without my permission! I sense a vile plan bubbling under this demon's surface. Let him prove himself before giving him any leeway!"

Satan ignores Raphael. He smiles at me. "Well, thank you, Mother. I'm glad *someone* here has a hint of civility."

I nod. "Aye. Thou art, ah, welcome."

Raphael curses under his breath and turns away. "By the Creator... just tell the little bastard anything ye want. Tell him where we keep the weapons, our weaknesses... bah."

He plods toward Uriel's house, and we follow along. Satan's eyes rove around as he assesses the state of Heaven. Cherubs fly overhead. A sense of awareness like never before fills the region, as though the angels are acutely aware of our presence.

"Sure are a lot of guards."

"Obviously," Raphael mutters. "If I didn't know any better, I might suspect thee of trying to gauge our defenses."

"Nah. I wouldn't do something like *that*," Satan replies. A hint of sarcasm creeps into his voice. "We're only two demons. We can't stand up to the full might of angelkind."

"So thou hath said many times," Raphael mutters. Anger boils inside of him. It seems he could blow his stack at any moment and strike the demons down.

Uzziel, too, glances at Satan now and then. The Devil seems eerily calm. If he intends to spring a trap, none of us have a clue what it will entail.

Maybe he won't. Saving Diablo and Bael appears to be his primary goal, and it makes sense. All he has to do is heal Uriel, and they go free. Frankly, I don't see why he'd want to lie. I suppose he might do it to be a dick.

The Temple of Elderium appears in the distance. We travel for half an hour, and soon arrive near the outskirts of the capital city of Heaven. Stone buildings, hand-carved by untold numbers of workers, line a single street.

Satan smirks. "Imps made your houses. I don't recall ever hearing a thank-you."

"Thy people completed their assigned tasks. That is all," Raphael says. "It seems that at some point, they forgot their place."

Satan's smirk vanishes. He doesn't reply, but a flash of anger passes over his face.

Raphael seems to be trying his hardest to piss off the demon leader. I'm not sure that's a good idea.

Satan pauses. "I'll have you know-" Suddenly, his throat catches. Satan doubles over and clutches his stomach. "Kah! Hack! Buh-haaack!!"

Everyone flinches, including me. I kneel forward. "Satan? Art thou alright? What's the matter?!"

"Kah!! Gnn!!" Satan falls to his knees and clutches his throat as he chokes on some unknown substance.

I glare at Raphael. "What did ye do to him?!"

"Nothing!" Raphael retorts. "I didn't touch the little bastard! I haven't a clue why he's gagging!"

"Get me some water! I have to-"

A *whoomph* of air rushes against my back. I quickly spin around to see Grigori holding his hands up in a magic seal. A portal materializes, black as the night itself.

Uzziel's eyes widen. "What?! That's- gah!" Something hits my head, knocking me to the side and jarring my senses.

A moment later, I blink my eyes to see Satan standing up straight. He's no longer coughing, but instead bashing the Cherub guards away with his invisible Vectors. Raphael lies on the ground, having also been knocked aside.

The eldest Archangel jumps to his feet and winces. "Spawn of maggots! I knew thou were hatching a scheme! What is this black magic?!"

The portal widens further. The instant it finishes opening, demons flood through its opening, pouring inside of Heaven as if a dam had burst. Big ones, small ones, and others I can barely even comprehend pounce from the portal and leap at the Cherubs, overwhelming them with pure numbers. Demons tear angels limb-from-limb, ignoring the terrified screams of panic as blood explodes all around us.

Immediately, I summon the fury of nature. Vines leap from the grass and grab at the closest enemies like a hundred enraged squids. They rapidly bind and secure one after the other, but no matter how many I summon, more demons continue to rush through the portal.

The sound of a horn blares. I spare a glance at Raphael as he yells into his cupped hands. The power of his magic amplifies the sound, echoing all around us.

Satan pounces at the old man. "Damn you, gramps! I didn't say you could call for backup!"

Right as Satan's fist connects with Raphael's head, the Archangel vanishes. His body evaporates into mist, making the Devil slam into the ground and chew dirt.

Raphael materializes behind me. "To thy feet, little sister! Assist me! We must push the demons back into-"

The old man stops mid-sentence. He dodges to the side as a circular disc of ice *whiffs* toward him. It misses narrowly and continues into the distance. Raphael lands in a reverse-crabwalk and bounces back to his feet. His agility continues to astound me.

"Sataaan! I came to save youuu~!" A woman calls out. I turn to spot the skimpily dressed succubus, Nerissa, as she tosses several bolts of ice at me. Rolling to the side, I summon vines to protect myself, then send others to subdue her. Nerissa creates razor-sharp ice swords in each hand and slices my plants before they can close the gap.

"Right on time, toots!" Satan jumps over and blocks Nerissa with his body, putting a barrier between her and me. "Hah! It seems that Warper's plan worked out perfectly. Who knew grunts could be so smart, eh?"

"We must hold out until Gabriel and the other Archangels arrive," Raphael says to me. "He should be here any minute."

"What about Michael?!"

Raphael narrows his gaze. "I warned him several minutes ago the demons might attack. He's guarding the hostages."

Demons continue pouring through the portal. Hundreds. Thousands. A flood of flesh spews forth as if from the depths of Hell, spreading out to surround us. Given Uzziel's penchant for disappearing, we can easily escape, but she doesn't attempt to flee.

Uzziel clammers to her feet. "Satan! I trusted thee!"

"That was your first mistake, you dumb bitch," The Devil says with a look of glee. "Now you're outnumbered a thousand to one! Get 'em, boys!"

Raphael's eyes narrow. "Nay. Tis *thou* who art outnumbered."

With a motion of his hands, Raphael summons a portal of his own. An entrance to Elderium appears. Angels inside gasp when they spot the demons. Many begin jumping through, quickly realizing the demons have entered Heaven.

"Shit!" Satan and Nerissa retreat several steps as our reinforcements come out swinging. Steel blades slice the air as several cherubs lunge at Satan, only to miss.

Raphael's eyes glow. "Let not thy feelings of betrayal cloud thy judgment, sister. Set them aside, and help me remind these demons who are their masters!"

Uzziel swallows. "Y-yes!"

As the words leave my mouth, a sickening sensation washes over me. I turn to the left and notice Lucifer standing at the outskirts of the enemy forces. Her third eye glows cherry-red. The air distorts between us, and something resembling an invisible fist smashes against my face.

"Uzz-!"

Raphael's voice cuts off a split second later before he finishes calling my name.

The world goes black.

* * *

An eyeball appears as big as the Moon. It rushes toward me, engulfing the horizon. The pupil dilates, and bloody veins stretch across its sclera.

UNWORTHY. PATHETIC. WEAK.

A woman's voice, as loud as thunder, booms in my mind.

SAMAEL DIED BECAUSE OF YOU. ALL YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS WISH YOU HAD PERISHED INSTEAD OF HIM!

Uzziel grabs her forehead. She opens her mouth to scream, but no words come out.

THEY HATE YOU FOR CREATING THE DEMONS. THEY HATE YOU FOR EMPOWERING US, AND MAKING US INVINCIBLE!

A hundred swords materialize above me. I try to dodge, only to fail. The blades rain down upon me, stabbing every inch of my body and skewering me into the dirt.

The agony is unthinkable.

"Ahhnnn!" Uzziel whimpers pitifully.

The swords vanish. My arms and legs move of their own volition and bind behind me, as a rope wraps around my neck. Suddenly, I fall off a gallows and hang from a noose, dangling helplessly above an infinite abyss. The robe bites into my skin, compressing my neck and breaking my bones so I can't make a sound.

TEN BILLION YEARS OF PUNISHMENT AWAIT! LIKE YOUR SISTER URIEL, YOU TOO SHALL TASTE THE NEVERENDING TORTURE OF MY DEMONIC TRANCE! UNBREAKABLE, INESCAPABLE! STRUGGLE AND CRY, WEEP AND WAIL, BUT YOU SHALL NEVER WALK AMONG THE LIVING AGAIN!

A sword lunges at my throat, severing my head. I fall from the noose and lose sensation in the rest of my body as the ground rushes at my face.

Wham!

A dull sensation of pain hits me. My nose shatters against the dirt.

Suddenly, feeling returns to my body again. My head reattaches, only for a hundred wolves to pounce at me and begin tearing my flesh apart.

HAHAHA! MY TRANCE DOOMS YOU TO NEVERENDING SUFFERING! FOR EVERY DEMON LIFE LOST, A THOUSAND YEARS OF AGONY AWAIT!

Tears pour from Uzziel's face as the dogs rip apart her clothes and tear the skin from her bones.

This... this must be... the attack Lucifer hit Uriel and Hercules with! But... Hercules escaped it somehow... so... that means...

Uzziel's thoughts cut off as a wolf rips out her throat. I flinch reflexively when the agony hits me as well. Solomon's visions are far too realistic for my liking.

No! It's only illusion magic... can't... can't give up hope...

The wolves vanish. Uzziel's body heals, and for a moment, I think the hellish torment might end.

It doesn't.

The ground vanishes. A wall of spikes appears below the Archangel, and she screams in terror as she falls against the metal barbs. Untold numbers of them plunge through her backside, exploding forth like alien organisms.

SUFFER! ENDLESSLY SUFFER!

Lucifer's voice taunts me as her eyeball gazes from the sky.

Uzziel whimpers and spasms uncontrollably.

Must escape... must... can't think... hurts too... much...

There is no escape.

Uzziel is trapped under the same spell as her sister.

Forever.

Part 110: The Cosmic Realm

"Ahhn!" Uzziel cries out, pitifully. Her body slumps over as I travel from her mind the short distance to Satan's. The instant I can see through his eyes, I catch a glimpse of Raphael grabbing his sister before she can hit the ground.

"Uzziel? What's wrong?!"

Triumph plasters itself across Satan's face as more and more demons flood through the portal behind him. While angels continue arriving both from the skies and from Raphael's portal, it seems that, at least for now, the demons have a distinct advantage.

"Hahaha, sorry to tell ya this, gramps, but Mother's down for the count. And now, so are you!"

Satan turns and nods at Lucifer. Her third eye glows again, and she sends a psychic attack at Raphael.

When I return my gaze to Raphael, Satan frowns. Raphael appears wholly unaffected.

"Lucifer! Hit him! Do the thing!"

"I am, you imbecile!"

Raphael ignores Lucifer's attack. The old man slaps his staff against a cherub's chest as they charge through his portal. "Take Uzziel! Protect her with thy life!"

The cherub seems intent on battling the demons along with his hundreds of brothers and sisters, but quickly refocuses his attention. "Aye, Raphael!"

"Oh, no, you don't," Satan mutters. He pounces at the cherub, using his Vectors to clear the fifteen-foot gap in an instant. Satan's fist lunges toward his head, but Raphael appears out of nowhere, moving far faster than should be possible.

The old man catches Satan's fist and tosses him to the side, right in the middle of a group of cherubs. Each reacts instantly, stabbing their swords at his chest.

They fail.

Satan's vectors jab into the ground and yank him away while simultaneously striking the cherub's throats and other exposed areas. In the blink of an eye, five angels stumble back, unable to see Satan's attacks coming. Their bodies explode with pain, doubling them over in agony.

Demon grunts finish them off a moment later.

Satan's eyes flick to Raphael. The old man blocks Uzziel and her cherub protector with his body. It only takes a few seconds before the latter two rush through the portal to Elderium, leaving Raphael to fend for himself.

"Thy movements are quite erratic, little demon," Raphael hisses. "Telekinesis? Nay. Thy body appears to be anchored to specific points, almost as if thou dost possess several additional limbs."

"Ain't you a smart cookie..." Satan says. "I see the gears turning in your head, you old codger."

Something brushes against Satan's back. His Vectors don't alert him to danger, though, and he turns to see Nerissa and Belial crouched beside him. Nerissa rests her hand on Satan's shoulder. "We're here to help!"

"No, you ain't," Satan replies. "Stick to the plan, dammit. I don't need a couple of broads slowing me down — this geezer's mine. You two need to help Lucy- gah! Where'd she go?!"

Satan quickly scans the horizon. He spots Lucifer rushing in the direction of the prisons. "I didn't even tell her where- bah! Never mind! Bust a move and help Lucy! We've gotta rescue our guys."

Nerissa watches Raphael, and Satan follows her gaze. The old man has barely exerted himself, but already he seems to be breathing a little harder than usual. "Can you defeat an Archangel by yours-"

"I can! Go!" Satan smacks Nerissa's ass, making her yelp in surprise.

The succubus offers little protest and instead glances at him in annoyance. "Fine! Stay safe!"

She leaves, along with Belial. Satan disregards them immediately and turns his attention to the old man.

"I heard you loud and clear, pops. Michael's all alone, ain't he? Well, he's going to have to hold off against three of my best broads. You 'n me are due for a little... *playtime*."

Raphael closes his eyes. "'Twas to be expected, servant of evil. Never did I expect that thou might possess Samael's Vectors."

"Oh? Figured it out already, did ya?"

"'Twas a simple matter. The way thou moveth, the way-" Raphael stops mid-sentence. A Scyther charges at him from behind and plunges a bladed-arm into the old man's back. Raphael explodes into mist and reconstitutes himself a moment later, allowing the demon to stumble through his missing body. Raphael swings his staff out and pounds the back of the scyther's head with incredible force, smashing the grunt into the ground and knocking him out instantly.

His strength blows my mind.

Raphael frowns. "Tch. The young are always quick to action, slow to words. 'Tis no wonder havoc follows thee wherever thou go."

Screams of pain envelop the two of us as demons and angels clash on all sides. The demons use their element of surprise to overwhelm cherubs entering via Raphael's portal, but over time, more angels continue to arrive from every direction.

"Raphael!" From the skies above, a woman's voice cries out. Satan raises his gaze to spot Gabriel and Camael. The eldest sister slams into a group of demons, pounding a one-handed hammer into the ground with explosive force. The impact crushes two grunts instantly, spraying body parts in every direction. The rest go flying, landing painfully with sickening *crunches* as their bones twist and snap. "We're here to assist thee!"

Gabriel, on the other hand, levitates in the sky. His wings flap enough to keep himself out of the battle, but a surge of mana begins to build inside his body, causing his frame to glow.

"The demons attacked Uzziel," Raphael says, gritting his teeth. "I saved her, but for now, 'tis only the three of us. Michael is guarding the prison system. Go and help him!"

Satan quickly evaluates all three angels. His thoughts bubble up in his mind. *Stupid old man. He lowered his guard. Now's the time to strike!*

"We won't leave thee alone!" Camael yells. She swings her hammer in a wide arc and pulverizes the heads of three demons at once, sending their bodies careening away. "Allow us to stay and-"

Satan attacks. While the angels are distracted, he charges at Raphael and swings his Vectors toward the old man, attacking him from every angle.

The Devil smiles. *There's no escape.*

He's wrong.

Raphael forms a single hand sign. Satan's Vectors fly through the Archangel's body as though it isn't him standing there, but a hologram. Raphael vanishes and reappears beside Camael.

"Michael. Help him. Now! I'll deal with the demon's leader."

Having charged his attack, Gabriel aims his palm at a nearby cluster of demons. A cone of light shoots toward them. The grunts open their mouths to scream, but they utter not a word. Their bodies evaporate into particles of light as Gabriel's Holy Beam tears them apart at the molecular level. Within seconds, his focused mana slays a hundred demons as it rips across the field.

When he finishes, Gabriel gasps. His body sags, and he starts to fall. Camael acknowledges Raphael's words with a nod and soars into the sky to catch her falling brother. "Very well! Defeat Satan, and the rest of the rabble will scatter to the darkness from whence they came!"

Satan watches silently as the two Archangels fly away, with Camael carrying her huge brother by herself.

The old man dodged my Vectors. He's pretty sly for his age. Doesn't matter, though. If he's too stupid to let the other Archangels help him... then I guess he's going to die.

Once Gabriel and Camael leave, Raphael turns his full attention to Satan, ignoring the battles continuing around them. "I cannot help but notice thy confidence, young one. However, in thy eyes, I am but an aged and decrepit old man. Isn't that right?"

"I'm sure you've got a few tricks up your sleeves. Nothing I can't deal with," Satan says with a smirk. "You're looking pretty tired. I'll make sure you take a nice, permanent dirt nap."

"Thou shalt *try*," Raphael replies. "Sadly, ye lack the prescience to see how our battle will end. I am no pacifist, Satan. I have fought many battles. I have slain dragons, Titans, and today I shall kill my first demon as well. I swore long ago not to return to the path of bloodshed, but since thou seemeth so determined to make me change my ways..."

Satan charges again, seeming not to have learned his lesson. With no backup for either combatant, the leader of the demons rushes the leader of the angels furiously, grabbing rocks with his Vectors to smash them against Raphael's skull.

The old man releases his staff. A fraction of a second later, his hands begin to move at impossibly fast speeds. For every step Satan takes, Raphael completes a hundred magical signs. Compared to Raphael, Satan seems like a slug trying to swim against a river's current.

Raphael's eyes glow pure white. "Today, the full power of angelkind shall rain upon thee, foul demon."

The eldest Archangel vanishes. He appears in front of Satan a split second later, far too fast for us to react.

WHAM.

Raphael pounds his palm against Satan's ribs, blowing all the air from our lungs.

"Holy Trigram! I release the Creator's power!"

A sensation engulfs me akin to falling into a black hole. The world shifts, distorts, and sucks away, stretching into a blur of motion.

My body tumbles end over end, spinning and careening into an endless black void. Nausea overtakes me as I pass out from dizziness.

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Satan's eyes bolt open. A world of light surrounds him. The sky, ground, and horizon feature no visible borders, no discernable terrain, or anything else of note. All I see in every direction is a pure white void.

Using his Vectors, Satan levitates into a standing position. He cautiously turns around, scanning the horizon for the Archangel of Wisdom.

Welcome, tiny demon.

A voice booms from above. Raphael materializes in the sky. He swoops down and lands twenty feet away, but this time, he doesn't use his staff to prop himself up. It's nowhere to be seen.

Today marks the last day of thy existence. Had thee any faith in the Creator, I would advise thee to give up without a fight. Sadly, the rage I feel prevents me from allowing thee a painless death.

White mana flows off the old man's body. His fatigued appearance is gone. Instead, his glowing eyes and upright stature give him a fiercely intimidating appearance, as if he could tear me limb from limb.

"What are you tryin'a pull?" Satan mutters. "Where are we? What did you do?!"

So many questions, so little time. Currently, thou dost reside in the Cosmic Realm, the former birthplace of my people. Once, billions of angels lived here. Now, only I may access it.

"It looks like shit," Satan replies, spitting the last word out. "Nothin' to see, nothin' to do. I should have known you'd use some trickery to fuck with me."

This realm is no illusion. 'Tis the place where angels once fought at their strongest... myself included. It amplifies the power of Holy Energy a thousandfold. It gives me quite an

unfair advantage against one as ignorant as thyself.

Raphael motions with his hands. A copy of himself phases from his body, then materializes on his left. He repeats the process over and over. Within seconds, a hundred Raphaels surround me, forming a circle of flesh.

All of them speak at once.

The Creator's pure essence floods this plane. Those who cannot tap into it are doomed to fall at my hands. 'Tis one of my many ultimate techniques, the one I've specially chosen to ensure thy destruction.

Satan's voice falters. "S-sounds like a bunch of malarkey to me. If you're so bloody strong, then get on with it! I won't just sit back and let you-"

Raphael moves. Each of his mirages rushes at me. In the time it takes me to speak two syllables, each of his copies delivers a gut-busting punch to every inch of my body. Satan's Vectors flop around uselessly, unable to keep up with Raphael's speed. The world spins and careens again, but this time a wall of pain accompanies the disorientation.

WHAM.

Satan hits the deck so hard it takes a moment for us to feel the impact.

"K... kah..."

A weak gasp slips from Satan's mouth. His eyes wiggle in their sockets, trying desperately to refocus on the world around him.

"Wh... you... how..."

When my eyes finally readjust to pierce the array of colors blinding me, I can only stare at Raphael in silence. Every copy of Raphael tears off their upper-body robes simultaneously, revealing pale white skin, hundreds of horrific scars and burn marks... and incredibly toned muscles.

Raphael exhales.

Haah... long has it been since I fought at my full capacity. Striking thee reminds me of punching a rock. I might break my fingers on thy blood-red hide.

Satan clutches his stomach. He staggers to his feet, using several Vectors at once to stabilize himself.

"Buh... bastard... c-couldn't beat me in... in the real world, huh? You had to take me to... to your home turf... just to stand a chance."

Raphael motions again. A sword created from pure Holy Energy appears in every copy's hands.

There's no need to waste thy energy speaking, Satan. For the crimes of killing my beloved brother and attacking the minds of my two dear sisters... I banish thee to an eternal sleep.

Raphael disappears.

One hundred blades of holy energy impale my body. I never see them coming.

Satan tries to scream but fails. A sword stabbed through the back of his head forces our mouth open.
My vision goes white.

* * *

Im... impossible!

Raphael's voice booms again.

I open my eyes.

Raphael's hundred copies gaze at me in horror.

Regeneration... of... of that level?! I destroyed thy entire body!

Satan blinks.

What's that... that old codger talking about? How am I alive? He killed me. I felt my life slip away.

Blinking, Satan pulls himself to his feet. To my astonishment, he seems noticeably stronger than before. His energy has returned. He doesn't use his Vectors to stand.

Satan lifts his hand and stares at his palm, opening and closing it again.

"I'm... alive?"

Not for long!

Raphael's clones charge. For a split second, my heart stops. I can almost make out their movements.

I'm still far too slow to react.

One hundred swords made from Holy Energy impale my body. The sensation of my head leaving my shoulders reaches me.

Again, the world goes white.

* * *

I awaken.

No! No, no, no!

Raphael's eyes widen in horror.

I've seen this... this despicable magic only once before... never did I think such vile, putrid corruption would return to the cosmos.

Satan pulls himself up, but this time he hops to his feet as though he's slept for a hundred years. Cracking his neck, the Devil blinks and stares at the old man.

"What's the matter, gramps? You didn't expect this turn of events? Neither did I."

Do not play the fool with me, Satan. Thou knoweth the horrible deeds thou hath committed.

One of Raphael's copies, possibly the primary one, takes a step forward. He points at me with a shaking hand.

Thou art a *soul manipulator*! I know it! Thou art rebirthing thy body by expending a soul! Tell me the truth!

Satan rubs his forehead.

Expendng a soul? Is grandpa off his rocker? How would I know what he's talking about?

Satan's breathing catches.

No. That's right. I know what he means. My contracts. I sensed they were making me stronger... but... I didn't know souls could be used to revive myself.

Satan's eyes widen.

"Eight hundred and eighty-three."

Raphael frowns.

What?

"That's how many souls are in me. I feel 'em. Ha... haha... HAHAHA!" Satan doubles over in laughter, slapping his stomach. "Aw, shit, that's priceless! The look on your face is killin' me!"

'Tis no laughing matter!" Raphael straightens his posture. All of his clones rush me again. This time, I clearly see their movements as they fan around me and rush in from every angle.

I'm still too slow to react.

When the swords impale me, it takes several moments of agonizing pain before one of the copies forcibly removes my head from my shoulders. Raphael unleashes a blast of Holy Energy, eradicating the rest of my body.

...And not long afterward, my body reconstructs itself.

Raphael doesn't hesitate. He attacks again, killing me before I can get my bearings.

Five times in a row, my eyes open, only to fade to pure whiteness as Raphael murders me over and over.

During my sixth reconstruction, Raphael charges in to attack again, but Satan pounces off the ground with astounding speed. His Vectors lash out, grab five of Raphael's copies, and crush them, tearing his copies into particles of light.

"Hahaha!!!" Satan cackles maniacally. "Oh, I am a lucky demon, aren't I? Bahaha!!!"

Raphael's clones jump back, avoiding my attacks. They regroup a short distance away and turn to face me, eying the Devil warily.

Tch. Thy movements and strength are somehow stronger after slaying thee several times. Such improvements should be impossible, even with the manipulation of souls!

Satan flexes his arms. Already, his strength seems ten times higher than it was before. His body ripples with power.

What dumb luck. All this time, I thought my contractees were only making me a little stronger and faster... but they were turning me into an unkillable monster as well. I can't imagine a better turn of

events. The old man can't beat me, not even after all his bravado!

Satan sets his jaw and grins wickedly.

I can only wonder what other effects these souls have had on me.

The Devil takes one step toward Raphael and his copies. The old man shrinks slightly, but holds his ground.

Had I known thy capacity for evil would become this grand; I would have ignored the Titan treaties to hunt thy people down. Manipulation of souls is a disgusting and vile form of black magic. It corrupts the manipulator, and curses those bound to him to a lifetime of unending agony.

"Like I give a crap. The idiots signed their lives away to me. If they died, I got their souls. It ain't like I killed them myself."

Satan pauses. Something bubbles inside his stomach, as though he's trying to wretch.

Nine-hundred and five souls, now. Damn. Demons are dying like crazy in Heaven, but Raphael has me trapped in this light-realm place. Their souls are powering me up even more, but I can't help them if I'm here.

The souls slowly tick upward inside of Satan as more and more of his demons perish.

A drop of sweat drips down Satan's forehead.

The others are counting on me. I have to kill this old bag of bones... or else.

Satan charges. This time, it's his speed that catches Raphael off-guard. The Devil's Vectors move twenty times faster than before. They lash out and rip apart several copies in the blink of an eye, forcing the others to soar into the sky, scattering about to put distance between themselves and Satan.

He jumps from one copy to the next, hurtling through the air like a stinger missile made of flesh. It only takes a minute for him to destroy over fifty of Raphael's clones.

Suddenly, before Satan can land the killing blow, one of Raphael's copies motions with his hands. A brilliant light like that of the sun erupts outward, blinding Satan.

"Geeeyagh!"

The Devil screams in pain, but his Vectors continue tearing the clone apart.

Satan rubs his tear-filled eyes. Surges of pain ebb and flow inside his mind.

As I thought. Thy Vectors act in a manner identical to Samael's. Even when thou art blinded, they continue to attack.

Raphael's voice has an edge to it, as if he's changed his opinion of me. He considers Satan a threat now, not merely a trifle to look down upon.

While my Vectors thrash around, something speeds past my left side. Satan tries to grab it, but he misses. A Vector suddenly starts behaving erratically, not moving to attack clones as it was doing a moment before. Instead, it begins spiraling around, thrashing as if trying to shake something off.

Whiff.

Another rush of air, this time to my right. A second Vector begins thrashing.

By the time my vision has returned, all of my Vectors have stopped following my mental orders. I turn my head back and gape at a rope of magical energy binding them all together.

"What?! How did you...?!"

Raphael doesn't answer. His remaining clones, still several dozen strong, surround me. Each one draws a holy sword again and charges.

SHIK! SHIK!

Several of the blades impale me. Raphael raises me in the air and slams me against the ground.

There's only one way to stop a Soul Manipulator of thy caliber!

Raphael swings his swords of light up and down. In a single second, he systematically dismembers all of my limbs. By the time I can process the pain, I'm completely limbless.

Raphael motions with his hand.

Light begins to build in his palm, like that which Gabriel unleashed not fifteen minutes before.

Satan gasps. Blood spills from his shoulders and hips. He wriggles his head around and tries to move his arms and legs, but fails.

Raphael unleashes his final attack.

A torrent of Holy Energy slams against my body, burning and charring my skin.

Satan opens his mouth to scream in pain, but nothing comes out.

After twenty seconds, Raphael ceases his final assault and concludes the battle.

A minute passes.

Satan slumps against the ground and breathes heavily.

"You... you..."

The Devil shifts his head from left to right, but his limbs don't react. The Vectors wriggle slightly, but Raphael's mana rope binds them tightly so they can't break free.

Raphael desummons his clones. He walks toward me and stops, his sandal inches from my face.

I cannot kill thee. Given that thou art a soul manipulator, the safest course of action is to render thee immovable and paralyzed. I shall seal thou here inside the Cosmic Realm, whereupon thou shan't be able to assist thy people. Tis the only way to prevent thy filth from spreading.

Satan's breath comes in heavy, ragged gulps. "You... you beat me? No! I won't stand for it! F-fuck you, old man! Coward! What kind of bastard leaves his enemy to bleed out and die?!"

Raphael shakes his head. His eyes and voice return to normal as he summons his robes once again. "I have sealed thy wounds with my holy magic. Thou shalt not perish here. With thy troublesome Vectors

rendered useless, and thou left unable to move, thou shalt lie here for all eternity."

Raphael turns away. "I must go. My people need me."

"Hey! Don't leave me here! What's wrong with you?! Raphael! Raphael!!"

Satan howls angrily at the old man, but Raphael ignores him.

"I will check on thee periodically. For now, I must ensure the destruction of the invaders. Farewell, Satan."

"Bastard! BASTAAARD!!"

Satan howls in rage, but Raphael creates a portal and steps through it, ignoring the demon leader's tantrum.

* * *

Silence follows.

Satan's breathing slows to a crawl. He gazes at the spot where Raphael left, and his eyes widen in horror.

"No... no no no... he can't leave me here... he can't do this to me! I'm Satan! I rule the demons!"

Satan's voice carries into the distance, echoing around a now dead-silent room.

Inside Satan's mind, a voice speaks.

Most amusing. It seems my brother has discovered thy weakness.

"Samael?"

Satan's eyes lower to the pure white ground beneath him, now splotched red with his blood.

"That's right. You're still inside me, Archangel!"

As are many others. I must applaud my brother's brilliance. With thy putrid form locked away inside the Cosmic Realm, no longer will thy power pose a threat to the angels. Thy minions are far weaker than thee. They will fall when the cherubs rain upon them.

Samael's face slowly coalesces in Satan's memories. The Archangel smirks self-assuredly.

I might have to suffer within thy mind, but at least I can rest easy knowing thou art sealed here, forever.

Satan flicks his gaze to the Vectors behind him. Concentrating, he tries desperately to free himself, wriggling them back and forth. However, the mana ropes bind him tightly. The Vectors can't break their bonds.

"Gahh!! How did Raphael beat me?! I was invincible! I was faster than him!"

Nay, Samael replies. My Vectors have a weakness. While at first glance, they might seem to be the ultimate offense and defense, their effectiveness relies on the wielder's mental prowess. With thy mind temporarily dazed from Raphael's stunning light, thy Vectors slowed considerably. Raphael was able to outmaneuver and bind them.

Samael's smirk widens.

Just as I trained him to do several millennia ago.

Satan's jaw drops. "You told your brother your weakness? Are you stupid?!"

Nay. I trusted Raphael wholeheartedly. All of us did. He knows every Archangel's weakness, in case a terrible event should befall us. While I no longer possess memories of the Dragon Wars, Raphael explained to me that a terrible sickness once overtook one of us. The mental illness resulted in them going power-mad. They slew a thousand other angels, and only the combined might of angelkind was able to stop them. I never wanted such a thing to happen to me.

Satan's body sags. He rests his face against the warm ground. "I see. Damn. Shit. So that's how it is, eh?"

A minute passes.

Neither the Devil nor the Archangel says a word.

Satan breaks the silence.

"So... I'm stuck here, then?"

Aye.

"And you're the only person I can talk to?"

I will not provide thee any further conversation, demon. I merely wished to mock thy predicament for a while.

Satan gnashes his teeth together.

"No. You're going to *help me* find a way out. That's an *order*, Samael. Remember? You're still my servant. I can make you do anything I want."

Samael's grin vanishes. He winces as if something were striking his skull.

Tch. I won't. I'll resist thy orders, even to my dying breath.

"No, you'll obey! Help me escape, Samael! You're a devil-damned Archangel! Use your brain!"

Samael recoils. His figure shrinks in my mind as he swoons back and forth.

Stop... stop making me... do thy dirty work... I won't listen... I won't...

"You WILL!" Satan howls at the top of his lungs. He lifts his head and screams into the void. "Help me escape! Help me heal myself! Do it, you stupid, worthless chicken!!"

A moment passes. Samael goes quiet.

When he speaks again, his voice becomes monotone.

Of course. I will help thee, Master Satan. What are thy orders?

Satan slumps again. "Cripes. I've gotta pull teeth around here to get anything done. Alright, kid. First order of business... break those Vectors free and help me reattach my limbs."

"And after that?"

"Freedom."

Part 111: The Unstoppable Archangels

After leaving Satan's limbless body, I next arrive inside a dark room. My senses go numb, making it impossible for me to feel anything. At the same time, dull pain ebbs and flows through me, the result of sore muscles that have ached for a hundred years without anyone bothering to soothe them.

I hang limply from a wall, but despite how badly I want to shift to get comfortable, I can't.

Everything hurts.

My mouth opens. "Hm... gnn..."

A guttural grunt escapes my lips. My eyes crack open, but I still can't see anything.

Beside me, chains rattle. "Wha...? You... say somethin'... boss?"

The man's voice is weak and fragile. Speaking a single word seems to take the wind out of his sails.

My host grunts. "Unh... noi... noises... out... side..."

A monumental effort to lift my head ensues. My host gathers his energy for several seconds, willing every muscle in his neck to move. Slowly, he tilts his head up to look away from the ground and across the room. While everything around us is pitch black, a sliver of light, so faint I can barely see it even if I concentrate, washes across the floor.

It comes from the crack underneath a wooden door.

With a start, I suddenly realize where I am.

Michael's dungeon.

I'm inside Diablo's body.

Diablo stares at the slit for several seconds before his strength gives out. His head flops forward, allowing his chin to rest against his chest.

As the minutes pass, my eyes slowly adjust to the darkness. I begin to make out faint objects illuminated by the doorway's light. A table, covered in blood, with straps at each corner to hold someone immobile. Torture tools, including knives, saws, and meat hooks, lay across a tool bench, ready to be used on Michael's victims. I don't recognize half of the implements... nor do I want to know what purpose they serve.

The doorway's light shifts. Bael and Diablo both stop breathing for several seconds, turning the room deathly silent.

Diablo's thoughts bubble in my mind. *No... please... not again. He already hurt me twice today... I want to die. Someone, end my suffering. Please, Master, no more. No more... no more...*

A tear squeezes from Diablo's eyes. It slides down his face, and he desperately snakes his dry, cracked tongue out to lick it. Even the slightest drop of water is an oasis to the helpless, battered demon.

He fails. The tear drips off his chin and plops to the ground below. Diablo's body sags even further as whatever hope he had left vanishes entirely.

The shadows at the doorway continue to shift. Suddenly, the door flies open. Blinding light radiates inside, making Diablo wince as he tries to close his eyes and block it out. I catch a glimpse of his scarred brown skin, an unhealthy color for a demon. The mottled patches here and there tell tales of torture involving cuts, burns, and possibly even acid.

The figure in the doorway stares at us for several seconds. Diablo presses his eyes shut. *No, please... not again... not again...*

Finally, the newcomer speaks. "Di... Diablo? Bael?"

Her voice, sweet and pure like nectar, tickles Diablo's ears.

Still, he keeps his eyes shut.

It's a trick. Master is trying to make us react. If we do, he'll cut us for twice as long. I can't listen. Must... must look away.

Footsteps. Several people enter the room.

"Bloody devils," Another woman says. "I... I can't believe it..."

"Help me get them down," The first says. "Diablo? Are you alive? It's me. Lucifer."

Diablo's heartbeat quickens. *It's a trick. A trick! It can't be Lucy. Lucy died! Master said so. Master killed her himself.*

Something touches my chest. Diablo's entire body seizes up as every muscle comes alive. He squeezes his eyes shut, waiting for something to stab, prod, or burn him for the Archangel's amusement.

"Easy, easy. I'm here to get you down. Nerissa, he's alive. They both are. Thank the devils."

Clink. Clink.

Sounds echo above me, where my arms are restrained. Suddenly, the shackles open. I fall off the wall and plummet into the soft, warm body of a woman.

Diablo finally opens his eyes.

A mouth filled with teeth greets him. Lucifer smiles in possibly her most genuine display of affection. It sends terror through my heart, but joy through Diablo's.

"Lu... Lu... cy...? You... came... for me?"

His voice, hoarse, croaks out, barely audible even as a whisper.

Lucifer's arms wrap around my back. She grunts and hefts me up, pressing me close to her chest. "Tch. Damn. You might be only skin and bones, but you still weigh a lot. Belial, you get Bael. Nerissa, keep watch. I don't know why Michael isn't here, but-"

Diablo's eyes shoot open.

No! No!! They're here to rescue me? They can't! Master will kill them! He'll hurt Lucy, and Bael, and me too!

"Leave... me... here!" Diablo puts up the weakest struggle of his life as he forces himself to lift one weary arm. He barely manages to touch Lucifer's side, let alone push her away. "Mas... master... returns... soon..."

Lucifer ignores him. She pivots Diablo around to hoist him onto her back, then wraps his arms around her front and carries him in an uncomfortable piggyback.

"Come on, Belial. What's taking you so long?"

I raise my eyes to the succubus. Belial shakily tries to jam a key into Bael's remaining cuff as he hangs by one arm from the wall. The poor guy is in awful shape. His body, usually fat and disgusting, is withered and thin. I can barely make out the ribs piercing through his flesh in the dim light.

"I... I c-can't get the key to work..." Belial flicks her gaze to the doorway, then back to the shackle. "Oh, devils... come on, come on..."

Lucifer snarls. "Just break the cuff, idiot. It's rusted. You're strong. Must I do everything around here?"

Belial's breath catches. "Right. Break it. Sorry, I... I-I'm not thinking straight. Nnn..."

I've known Belial for years. She hangs out with Phoebe all the time. Never once have I seen such genuine terror on her face. With her tiny little horns and diminutive figure, the succubus appears like a scared little girl in this vision. She's a different person from the Belial I know now.

Belial reaches up and pinches the cuffs. They shatter in her grasp and fall apart. Bael falls forward, and the succubus catches him effortlessly.

Bael appears to be a bit more lucid than Diablo. "Ugh... sugar-tits... long time... no see, eh? Took you... took you long enough."

"Sh-shut up," Belial whispers. She extends her right arm, loops it around Bael's waist, and hefts the tall demon at her side. "C-come on. We need to get out of here. Now."

"No shit," Lucifer mutters. "Nerissa. Take the lead."

Nerissa nods. She appears relatively confident, as does Lucifer. Both of them seem unconcerned about Michael's return, but Belial looks like she could shit her pants at any moment.

Bael sighs contentedly as the succubus holds him against her thigh. "Haah... feels good... to be off that wall. If I could just... lift m'damn arm... I'd cop a nice feel..."

Nerissa glares at him. "Maybe we should leave this moron hanging-"

"Quiet," Lucifer snaps, cutting her off. "Keep those thoughts to yourself."

"Whatever."

Nerissa quickly shimmies over to the doorway. Lucifer tails her, while Belial and Bael stay to the rear.

"Clear," Nerissa whispers as she peers into the blinding light.

Outside, the distant sounds of screams, roars, and metal clanking against metal reaches my ears. The prison isn't as far from Elderium as Raphael and Uzziel implied.

The three of us step into the open, ducking low to stay close to the ground. A field of tall flowers obscures us somewhat from the vision of the battlefield combatants.

Belial whimpers in the rear. "Oh... oh no... how are we going to make it to the portal? Look at all those Cherubs! There are so many of them!"

"Quit your whining," Lucifer mutters. "Aren't you supposed to be strong? You can handle a few cherubs one-handed, no problem."

"Y-yeah, but... I'm a lover... not... not a fighter..."

Lucifer winces. One of the demon grunts gets hurled into the sky thanks to some incredibly strong cherub. The demon screams in terror as he hurtles toward the ground, landing on his back with a sickening *crunch*.

"There won't *be* anyone for you to love if we don't make it out of here alive. Now, focus, and start thinking of ways to-"

Lucifer freezes mid-sentence. "Impossible!" She dives to the side as a blur of motion smashes into the ground where she stood only a moment before. I go flying as the demoness releases me, sending me sprawling onto my spine. The pain is no worse than what's already wracking my body.

My eyes take a moment to adjust before I recognize the newcomer.

Michael.

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The Archangel, his sword stabbed into the ground, stares at us silently. The gem in the sword's hilt glows blue, seeming to pound in tandem to each beat of my heart.

Michael stares coldly at Lucifer as he pulls his blade from the dirt. "How spry thou art, demoness."

Nerissa spins on her heel and hops backward to put distance between herself and the Archangel. Her confidence vanishes. She must have thought we were in the clear.

Belial shrinks back, inching toward the field of flowers to make herself a smaller target.

Michael ignores the two succubi. He focuses his attention on Lucifer.

"I suppose thou art the leader here."

Lucifer tenses up. She takes a defensive stance, waiting for him to strike. "Sharp eyes, little chicken."

Michael narrows his gaze. "I'll put an end to thy insults, wench."

He vanishes.

The Archangel of Courage's movement is far too fast for me to follow. He appears right in front of Lucifer with his sword in mid-swing, aimed at her neck.

Lucifer jerks her body backward, allowing the sword to pass over her by mere inches. Michael chops off several hairs, sending them blowing into the wind.

What follows next is an impossibly fast sequence of events. Michael slashes, chops, and cuts Lucifer. She tries to dodge, but falls short as the Archangel cuts her skin to ribbons.

The tip of Michael's sword glances across the demoness time and time again, dicing her leathery clothing apart, gashing shallow wounds into her flesh, and poking at her weak points.

Lucifer sprawls to the ground. The Archangel moves to stand atop her, dominating the demoness with his shadow.

"Oh. It's already over," Michael says, his voice emotionless.

Lucifer's breaths come in shallow gasps. Her confidence shattered, the demoness stares up at the Archangel with a mixture of awe, disgust, and fear.

I didn't know he was this fast, her eyes say. I couldn't dodge or block anything. I've never seen someone move like that in all my life.

"Get away from her!" Nerissa shouts. The succubus summons two blades of ice in each hand and launches herself at the Archangel.

Michael lightly tosses his blade from his right hand to his left and begins deflecting all of Nerissa's clumsy slashes like an adult poking at a toddler with a stick.

Nerissa screams a bloody warcry as she swings at Michael, battering and bashing her ice-swords against his. The succubus hops backward and launches ice projectiles at him, but he bats them away effortlessly.

Never once does Michael take his eyes off Lucifer's.

"Aaah!" Nerissa screams. I miss what happened. She stumbles back; a hundred bloody gashes carved out across her face, chest, arms, and legs. Her pure white tattoos run red with blood.

"Pitiful," Michael murmurs, as he gazes at the unmoving demoness below him. "I defeated both of thee in seconds, while that other one is too frightened to move a muscle. Thy goal was to take *my* prisoners... but ye haven't the strength to succeed. In the end, all thou hath accomplished is giving me three new toys to play with."

"T... toys..." Lucifer echoes.

"That's right."

More screams in the distance sound off as angels and demons collide. Nobody moves a muscle. The rescue plans fall apart in an instant as Lucifer and her comrades face off against the unyielding warrior.

Nobody can beat Master, Diablo thinks to himself. It's impossible. But... now, Lucy can be with Master and me. It's... it's all okay. The light hurts my eyes. I don't... I never wanted to leave. I don't want Master to hate me...

"B-Bastard!" Belial drops Bael unceremoniously, plopping the tall, skinny demon on his face. Her eyes illuminate with fire as her protective instincts take over. "Nobody hurts my sister!!"

Each of Belial's fingers transform into tiny knives as she pounces at the Archangel's backside.

Michael flicks his gaze away from the four-breasted demoness beneath him. "Oh? Maybe that one does have a little fight in her."

Belial ducks, dodging Michael's instant strike before I can see it coming. By the time his sword reverses direction, she manages to deflect it with her knife-like hands, batting the blade away from her neck. It misses by inches.

While the fight with Lucifer may have finished within five seconds, Belial's speed greatly surpasses the triple-eyed demoness. She moves with precision, allowing instincts to take over as she dodges would-be lethal strikes from her opponent.

However, despite Belial's superior combat prowess compared to her sister and Lucifer, she's no match for Michael.

Michael stares at her with a blank expression as they trade blows. Not a trace of joy or fear passes over his face.

"Thou dost lack spirit and vitality, demoness. Perhaps, given a thousand years, thy combat potential might come within a mile of mine... but today, thou art a petulant child, unable to contain her emotions."

Belial grits her teeth. She swings her claws at the Archangel, but he easily dodges the attack.

Shik.

With her flank exposed, Belial doesn't see Michael's counter-attack incoming. He races up to the succubus and plunges his sword through her stomach, then rushes forward, slamming her against a nearby boulder.

"Aaaaaaieee!"

Belial lets out a pitiful shriek of pain. Michael responds with a backhanded fist to her face, knocking the daylights out of her.

After a moment, Michael grabs the succubus by her throat, yanks his sword from her gut, and casually tosses her aside.

"One hundred years of planning, and these females are all the bloodskins could muster. I'm... disappointed."

Michael sweeps his gaze across the three defeated women. Each of them shivers as he looks upon them, only to shudder in relief when he turns away.

"W... we... can still... fight..."

Nerissa pulls herself to her feet. Despite blood covering every inch of her exposed, naked body, she shakily raises a hand to summon another blade of ice. With Michael having chopped off the few bits of cloth she used to cover herself, she seems so weak and pitiful that I want to laugh. Indeed, Michael does.

"Huhu..." Michael shakes his head. "I thought I shattered thy fighting spirit, but it seems thy sister's blood has restored some of thy willpower. Amusing. Her pain might seem unbearable now, but after I finish-"

"CANNONBALL!"

A single shouted word interrupts Michael. He turns to the side as a mass of green rushes him. Agares, now in his lizard form, slams against the Archangel's back with his full body mass. He wraps around Michael, digging his claws deep into the Archangel's chest.

"Gah! By the Creator-! Ye damned...!!"

Michael rolls around, trying to shake the green-skinned demon off, but he fails. Agares chomps onto Michael's shoulder with his snake-like fangs, sending poison deep into Michael's arteries.

Lucifer quickly hops to her feet, only to wince in pain. "Tch... to be rescued by a male... bah! Many thanks, Agares! Now, hold him still. Nerissa! Heal your sister!"

Nerissa nods. "On it!"

While she rushes over to cauterize Belial's wounds, Lucifer gently touches the slash-marks covering her body before quickly forming several magic seals. Her third eye begins to glow. "Time to take a nap, *Archangel*. After I'm done with you, the others won't be able to put you back together again."

"Cowards!" Michael's thrashing grows noticeably weaker as Agares' poison seeps into his body. "Attacking from behind... always... the mark of... vermin..."

Lucifer's eye glows, turning a fiery red.

Right as she aims to unleash some devastating attack on the Archangel, a blur of motion from the sky forces her to cancel. She dives to the side as an angel rushes at her from above, slashing at her with a blade made from pure Holy Energy.

An armored cherub, small in stature, but wearing silver and gold platemail from head to toe, points his glowing sword at her. The silent specter immediately reminds me of Barbatos. His helmet fully obscures his face, save for a few narrow slits for his eyes.

"A cherub? Bah! Pathetic! Enjoy a quick death, you little rat!"

Lucifer's third eye glows. The instant she fires a laser at the warrior, he motions with his left hand, forming a tower shield of Holy Energy in his grasp. He ducks and deflects Lucifer's attack, reflecting the superheated beam into the sky.

The demoness continues firing, aiming for the cherub's arms and legs. Never once does Michael's armored savior speak a word, or even so much as grunt. Silently, he hops, dodges, and rolls to the side, easily evading her attacks.

Gasping for breath, Lucifer pauses her assault. Given the damage Michael dealt to Lucifer already, and her rapid use of her mana reserves, she must be low on energy. Indeed, the cherub seizes his chance and rushes at her, clearing the fifty-foot gap in an instant. He holds up his Holy Shield and slams against her like a wrecking ball, smashing the demoness backward until she crashes into a tree.

"Ahh!" Lucifer gasps and flails for a moment before going limp against the cherub's shield.

"Lu... cy..." Diablo gasps out her name. His eyes bulge as the cherub pulls away, leaving the demoness to collapse, exhausted, the majority of her bones broken.

Lucifer falls unconscious. However, in her stead, the two succubi rise to their feet. Belial, having healed both herself and her sister, takes a defensive posture.

"This... this guy is trouble," Belial whispers to Nerissa. "First, Michael, and now a cherub. Don't underestimate him. He seems strong."

Nerissa glances at Lucifer's unconscious form. "Don't worry. I won't. How are we going to beat him?"

"We have to work together. Like we practiced. No more solo attacks. Got it?"

"Right."

The cherub warrior slowly approaches them, keeping his distance. He cautiously evaluates his new opponents, perhaps sensing that they might be more trouble than his former adversary.

"Hey! You! Angel!" Agares yells out, startling the cherub. He flicks his gaze toward the lizard. "Give up, or Michael gets it! I've poisoned him! If you hurt one more hair on any demon's head, I'll rip his throat out!"

Michael lays unmoving in Agares grasp. Despite the young reptile's confidence, Michael doesn't appear as weak to me as he should. His eyes, alert as ever, jump from the succubi to the cherub. Evaluating the situation, assessing his options, and waiting for the time to strike.

As Agares yells out and releases his fangs from Michael's shoulder, the Archangel seizes his opportunity. He swings his elbow back with terrific force, bashing Agares' face with a blow so stunning that a shockwave rips through the air. Agares goes flying. His tail and claws lose their grip on Michael's chest as momentary disorientation hits him. He tumbles and twists for thirty feet before coming to a stop in the middle of a patch of flowers.

"Aaaooo..."

Michael quickly rises, only to stumble forward and cough up bloody mucus. He blinks, and his eyes droop. "Nnn... curses... damned toxin..."

The Archangel rubs his affected shoulder and winces. "I... I won't... be much use. C-Catherine. Catherine!" He yells at the armored cherub and falls to his knees. "Don't hold back. Give it... give them your... your..."

Michael's eyes close. He flops forward and falls on his face. Dead? Unconscious? I can't tell.

Only a minute has passed since Michael first arrived. Already, time is a blur. Everything happens so quickly it's hard for me to follow. Nevertheless, the final battle appears to be between two succubi and a single cherub.

Catherine.

Catherine.

Is the angel warrior a woman?

I wouldn't know it by looking at her. Despite her short height, her armor seems as masculine as any of the men I've seen. I can't make out her face or hair or anything else underneath, and her fighting style

isn't especially feminine either.

Catherine.

I've heard that name before.

I can't recall where or when.

Catherine raises her shield as Belial and Nerissa charge. Belial tosses her sister into the sky, allowing Nerissa to fire a barrage of ice-shards at the angel below. Catherine swings her sword and bats them aside, imitating Michael's deflections not long before.

Belial stretches toward Catherine, turning one arm into a Scyther-style blade. She lunges for the cherub, but Catherine deflects with her shield, dives to a roll beneath Belial, and kicks upward. Her attack flings the succubus forward. Belial yelps in surprise, but rights herself with her stretchy limbs and lands on her palms and feet like a tigress.

Catherine hops backward, toward me. She flicks her head toward Michael, quickly checking his condition before returning her attention to the succubi.

Nerissa lands beside Belial and spins to face the cherub. "Sister. We don't have time to spare. Reinforcements will arrive soon."

"I... I know. If the cherub would take Michael and leave, we could all go in peace. For some people, violence is the only language they speak."

Agares, having recovered from Michael's stunning blow, clambers to his feet. He shakes his disorientation off and leaps behind the cherub, readying to attack her from the rear.

Catherine glances back at him. I can't see her eyes, but her body language suggests a tinge of doubt. *I can't fight three opponents at once. They have me pinned.*

She appears competent, and very adept at the art of battle. However, even with two badly injured opponents and only one relatively healthy one, her fighting potential is far below Michael's.

Sensing Catherine's hesitation, Nerissa charges. She rushes at the cherub and summons a massive warhammer of ice. With a single motion, she swings its face toward the angel. Catherine rolls to the side, allowing the weapon to pound the grass flat.

The moment the hammer hits, it explodes.

Shards of ice erupt in every direction. The cherub barely manages to raise her shield in time to deflect the attack. As soon as she does, Agares pounces at her exposed back. "Hoho! Chance!"

"Not so fast, demons!"

From the sky, a male cries out. I look up in time to see a beam of Holy Energy blast at Agares. The lizard's tail stabs into the ground mid-jump and yanks him backward, barely allowing him to avoid one of Gabriel's deadly attacks. Gabriel's Holy Beam explodes just behind Catherine, saving her from what would likely have been a lethal blow.

Belial stretches her arm out and grabs Nerissa, yanking her sister out of the way as Camael, the Archangel of Divination, joins the fray. Camael's slams her enchanted hammer into where the ice-succubus was standing only a second before.

The demons might have defeated Catherine, had she been their only opponent. However, with two Archangels on the scene, the fire dies in their eyes.

Nerissa retreats a few steps, falling into place beside Belial. Gabriel swoops down and pulls Catherine to her feet. "Art thou unhurt, sister?"

Catherine nods.

"Excellent," Gabriel continues. "My apologies, but a few stragglers slowed us down on the way here."

Catherine never says a word. She raises her sword and shield and turns to face Agares.

"No, Catherine," Gabriel says, touching her shoulder. "Tend to Michael. His wounds look to be quite severe. Camael and I will handle these *vultures*."

The Archangel of Power shields Catherine with his body, using his fourteen-foot height to form a wall of flesh between her and Agares. She rushes to Michael's side and cautiously hoists one of his arms around her shoulder, then flies away, taking the enfeebled Archangel with her.

Gabriel glares at the green-skinned demon. "Thy face is familiar to me, Scaled One. Have we met?"

Agares' eyes climb the Archangel's mountain of a body. "Eh. Yes. We fought the, err, last time I visited Heaven."

"I see. And that means that thou were, in part, responsible for Samael's death."

Agares swallows. "Uhm... *no*?"

"I don't like liars," Gabriel murmurs. "Not one bit."

The Archangel of Power stretches to his full height and towers over the diminutive six-foot-tall reptilian. With a flourish of his hands, he summons a ten-foot-long greatsword, dwarfing any weapon I've seen in my entire life.

"Thou shalt pay for turning my brother against me, little one."

Gabriel attacks. Agares smashes his feet into the ground and dives backward, barely avoiding the Archangel's two-handed strike. His blade tears into the dirt and rips up the soil, spraying it in a cone toward me. Diablo flinches as a small mountain of debris flies at us, covering us in rocks, grass, and worms.

I open my eyes and watch as Gabriel charges the reptile. His massive body pulverizes the ground beneath him, leaving huge footprints everywhere he stomps. Agares frantically dodges every swing, but Gabriel attacks much faster than his size implies should be possible. Every time his two-handed sword impacts a boulder, a tree, or anything else in its way, it shatters the object into a hail of materials scattering halfway across Heaven.

While Gabriel and Agares battle, Camael stands silently, facing her succubus opponents. She evaluates them for several moments, but they keep their distance, waiting for her to attack.

Camael licks her lips. "I have foreseen a great many things."

Belial shoots a nervous glance at Nerissa, then returns to Camael. "Archangel. I do not wish to fight. I only want to save our brothers. This might mean little to you, but I've never killed an angel. Can't we put down our weapons and issue a ceasefire?"

Camael's gaze hardens.

"I'm afraid not. I, too, would prefer to cease hostilities. However, such a prospect is not on the table for either of us."

"Why not?! Please! If we could only stop and talk, we might be able-"

"Nay." Camael squeezes her enchanted hammer tighter. "I knew thou wouldst attack us, today. I foresaw our battle in my dreams. I knew Satan was a liar and that he would betray his word, but still... *still*, I hoped the path of fate might change. I am an agent of the Creator. I do not choose where the river of destiny leads me. I merely follow its flow. Whenever I try to change His will, tragedy occurs. Therefore... as He demanded in my dreams... thou shalt perish here, along with the rest of thy brethren!"

Camael's words are confident, ripe with conviction. Nevertheless, she hesitates, if only for a moment, and a thought occurs to me as she raises her hammer to attack.

The Archangel of Divination is lying.

If Camael's thoughts from her vision were accurate, then she believes the angels can't defeat the demons. She's foreseen her enemies taking over the world and eventually slaughtering all of angelkind. To think her people would claim victory today is blind ignorance, or, more likely, a bald-faced lie.

Shaking her misgivings away, the Archangel of Divination flaps her wings. The movement allows her to rush at the succubi from a standstill, startling them as she swings Mjöltnir at Belial.

Belial tries to dodge. She dives toward Camael's legs, but Mjöltnir strikes her pelvis and sends the succubus flying. Belial spins and careens to the side, then skids to a stop twenty feet away. She opens her mouth to scream, but with all the wind knocked out of her, she can't. Her hip bends unnaturally, shattered from the hammer's impact.

Camael tries to crush the other succubus next, but Nerissa keeps her cool. She summons a wall of frost, blocking Mjöltnir before it can strike her. The hammer pounds her makeshift defense with incredible force, but it slows enough for the bloodied succubus to summon an ice spear. She stabs it at Camael, forcing the Archangel to release her hammer and leap backward. Camael's wings stabilize her retreat, allowing her to put more distance between herself and her pursuer.

Nerissa presses her advantage. With one hand, she spins the partisan over her head, hopping around and stabbing it at the Archangel, while her other hand shoots frost shards at Camael.

As if Camael can see the attacks coming before they happen, she narrowly avoids Nerissa's ice, allowing some shards to strike her armor while others *whiff* past her exposed head.

The Archangel never wastes any energy. Instead, like a practiced martial artist, she absorbs her opponent's attacks and redirects them harmlessly, taking a defensive stance for much of Nerissa's onslaught until the very end, where she suddenly lunges forward and slams her armored palm against the succubi's chest. Nerissa flings backward, flopping and spinning across the ground. She drops her spear at some point and lands near her sister, both of them gasping for breath.

Camael holds up her hand. Mjöltnir, stuck in Nerissa's ice-wall, trembles for a moment before leaping out and rushing to the Archangel's outstretched palm.

Meanwhile, Gabriel continues destroying everything in sight as he calmly swings his greatsword from left to right. Trees fall. Boulders cleave in half. Sweat pours from the reptile's body as he desperately tries to avoid Gabriel's attacks.

"Stand still. I would prefer for thy death to be quick," Gabriel says. "I do not enjoy causing others to suffer needlessly."

Agares backflips off a tree as it falls to Gabriel's blade. He spins in midair and lashes his tongue out, wrapping it around a large rock. The moment he hits the ground, the reptile flings his makeshift weapon at Gabriel's chest. The Archangel doesn't even bother with blocking the attack. The small boulder crashes against a force-field surrounding his body and explodes into pebbles.

"Gah! You're not playing fair, chicken!" Agares jumps again, narrowly avoiding another slash from Gabriel's greatsword. "No armor, but you're impossible to hurt! Why don't you pick on someone your own size?!"

A faint smile crosses Gabriel's face. "Amusing. I've slain many Titans in my time. That's what Raphael says. I do not remember their deaths, of course, but trust me, little one. I have fought plenty of beings who were 'my size.'"

As I watch the battles unfold, Diablo shivers.

Welp... this is it, then. Lucy's down. Everyone's knocked out. The Archangels are here. Master will torture us for all eternity. We deserve it. We never stood a chance... and now we're all going to die slow, horrible deaths.

Diablo's eyes wander over to Bael's face-down ass-up form. The starved husk of a demon lies in the grass, too weak to even flop to his side.

Now I only have to wait for the inevitable, Diablo thinks, closing his eyes.

"Eee!" A voice cries out from above. Diablo opens his eyes again to see a ghastly-looking Cherub, one arm torn off and blood streaming from it. The angel, an unarmored man with a badly broken wing, flops into the grass ungracefully.

He lands only a few feet away from Gabriel. The Archangel of Power glances at him. "Shepherd? What's wrong?"

"I-i-it's horrible! Brother, w-we need thy help!" The man grips his bloody stump and grits his teeth, flopping on his back to gaze at Gabriel in horror. "A demon just appeared! It's... it's Valac!"

Gabriel's calm demeanor vanishes. "What?! Valac? The same one who-?"

"Yes!! Him!" Shepherd gasps for breath. "He wiped out an entire platoon of Acolytes! A thousand cherubs perished to his scythe! I c-came as quickly as I could! Raphael needs thy help! He's facing the monster alone!"

"Raphael. No." Gabriel's face turns ashen. He barely spares a glance at Agares. All concern about the reptile vanishes as he unsummons his greatsword. Gabriel whirls to face Camael. "Sister! Forget the small fry! We need to-"

Gabriel stops mid-sentence. Camael stares at him in horror, having already heard Shepherd's news. "Im... impossible. I foresaw all of today's events. Valac didn't... he never appeared in my visions... how could he bypass Fate itself?!"

"I know not, sister. Come, we must save Raphael. Battling Satan will have likely drained his strength. If he falls, then Heaven will be lost forever! We can't leave him to the wolves."

"A-aye." Camael swallows. She flies over to Shepherd's side and quickly pulls him up. "Come, brother. Let me assist thee. Despite our rush, leaving thee with these demons is a death sentence."

"Thou art taking me to... to the Reaper?!" Shepherd pulls away. "No! No! I don't want to go! He'll kill me! He'll kill us all!"

"Calm thy nerves," Camael says, as her face twists into anger. "I'll drop thee off somewhere safe. I won't let more of my family perish to that abomination."

The Archangels ignore our defeated troupe. They flap their wings and take off, leaving all of the battered and beaten demons behind.

Agares gapes at them.

"Satan... he and the old man left. They vanished to fight alone. If Raphael returned, then that means..."

The reptile bows his head. A look of disbelief washes across his face.

"The boss... he's dead? No. He can't be! I fought beside him. He's strong! He must've... must've..."

Agares trails off. After a moment, he demorphs from his reptilian form and sags to his knees. Shaking away his disorientation, he glances at me, then all the others nearby.

"Devil-dammit. Now I've gotta save everyone here all by myself. Beats being dead, I guess."

He stands and walks over to me.

"Alright, Deebs. Get up. Satan sent us here to save you and Bael, and that's what I'm gonna do. C'mon, now."

Agares grabs my boney form and walks over to the succubi, Bael, and Lucifer. Belial whimpers and clutches her hip, unable to move, but Nerissa manages to flop to her back.

"Nerissa. I need your help. I can't lug everyone by myself. Can you stand?"

Nerissa clutches her chest for several moments. Crusty blood covers her whole body, blending in with her red skin while giving her a splotchy, disfigured appearance. The nude succubus finally pulls herself

together and stands.

"Y-yes. Just... give me a moment. I think... that bitch broke some of my ribs."

Agares grunts. "We don't have time. Make me something so I can lug everyone around. Neither Michael nor Gabriel managed to hurt me too badly. I can save everyone, but only if I have something to carry them on."

Nerissa nods. After a moment, she aims her palm at the ground. Her ice shoots out and creates a sled with enough room for everyone. She piles some dirt and grass on top so the others won't freeze, then helps Agares heft Belial, Bael, Lucifer, and me on it.

"I'll walk," Nerissa says. She forces a smile. "Don't expect me to fight, though. I don't have anything left."

Agares nods. He marches ahead of the sled, grabs a branch, and uses it as a makeshift handle to pull us along.

"Hey," Agares whispers to her as they begin plodding toward the exit portal. "Did you hear what the Archangels said about Valac? Think he came to save us?"

Nerissa takes a few moments to reply.

"No. We're the last thing on Valac's mind. If he came here today, it wasn't for our sake, but for his."

Part 112: The Unstoppable Valac

Author Note: Big thanks to Henk, who helped me with Latin in this part, and also became a \$5 patron! It means a lot!

Agony sprouts in my chest. It only takes me a moment to deduce I've appeared inside Nerissa's mind, given how Camael broke several of her ribs earlier. Nerissa walks beside Agares, wincing painfully with each step, yet trying her best not to complain. She glances down at her bloodied body and touches her ribs. They stick through her skin in a manner best described as *gruesome*.

The sounds of weapons clanging together grow louder every second. Agares uses his bulky muscles to pull the ice sled behind us, with Diablo, Bael, Belial, and Lucifer on it. Belial seems to be the most lucid of the four, but based on her expression, it seems she hasn't managed to heal her hip yet. Aside from her, nobody else has any healing magic.

Agares wipes his forehead. "S-sounds like there are still demons alive. I'm surprised the angels haven't killed us all."

"I thought... thought you were an optimist," I wheeze. Every word makes my chest ache. "Demons are strong. We can... can win."

Agares shakes his head. "Not a chance. If I hadn't caught Michael by surprise, he'd have beaten me in an instant. I barely managed to dodge Gabriel's attacks. Michael was way faster than his brother, from what I saw."

"Yeah. Faster."

Reaching up, I touch a hundred shallow scratches gouged into my face. Nerissa's voice appears in my mind. *I fought with all my strength, but the Archangel merely toyed with me. If he wanted to kill me, I couldn't have stopped him, not even at my best. He wanted me alive. He wanted me to suffer.*

Nerissa glances back at Lucifer and Belial. Lucifer's body, like mine, has cuts and scratches across every single inch of it. Belial seems to be in better shape since Michael didn't cut her like he did us, but her shattered hip probably hurts worse than my ribs.

Agares squeezes the branch in his hands a little tighter. "I... I was terrified... you know."

"Huh?" I turn to look at him. "When you fought Gabriel?"

"No. When I jumped Michael."

Agares glances at me. His eyes roam up and down my body, but he isn't looking for a peep show. Instead, he lingers on my innumerable cuts and gashes.

"I watched from the grass. At first, I meant to jump in and help Lucy when she took on Michael, but the moment he started swinging his sword, I lost my nerve. I couldn't follow it with my eyes. Then he took out you and your sister..."

Agares continues pulling the sled, but he closes his eyes.

"I've never felt fear before. Not like when I saw the Archangel dice you girls apart. It was only when he turned his back to me that I realized I had to make a move. If I didn't, he would kill me too. I'm... I'm a coward."

Nerissa shakes her head. She takes a step toward Agares and lightly touches his shoulder, ignoring the pain caused by the movement. "No. You were brave, Agares. I attacked because I thought I could win, but you did even when you knew you couldn't. Satan would be proud."

Agares squeezes his eyes shut. "You're wrong. I'm pathetic. I thought I was a tough guy... a big, bad lizard. Several other demons said I was the strongest of all of us, barring maybe Satan and Valac. But look at me now. I'm nothing. A coward who attacks his opponent from the back. Even with my poison in him, Michael nearly knocked me out in one blow."

"Don't think such thoughts," Nerissa says. "I might be dead if it weren't for you. Would you prefer that?"

Agares opens his eyes. He quickly shakes his head. "N-no. Of course not."

"Then cheer up. We still have to fight our way out of-" Nerissa flinches as a shadow passes over our bodies. A moment later, three cherubs soar past us, flying toward the commotion in the distance. Despite the fact we're easy targets, they ignore us completely.

Something big is happening elsewhere. We aren't a priority anymore.

"Say, uh... do you think the boss is okay?"

Nerissa nods. "Satan is a survivor. He must have escaped Raphael's clutches somehow. We'll know soon enough."

"But... but what if he didn't?" Agares pauses for a moment to tug the sled up a small embankment before glancing at me. "What if Satan died?"

"You need to stop with your negativity," Nerissa says. She frowns at him. "We have to prepare ourselves for any eventuality. If Satan dies, someone else will step up to lead. Maybe you. Maybe Lucifer."

Agares glances back at the unconscious demoness.

"Bloody devils... I hope not."

"Same," Nerissa murmurs. "I respect her abilities... but she's... *abrasive*."

After a moment, we continue walking. I sigh. "Let's focus. We don't know what's up ahead. The angels might be preparing an ambush."

"What if Grigori closed the portal? How will we get back to Earth?"

"There's that negativity again," I groan. "Just keep walking."

"Aye."

Several minutes pass.

A small hill blocks our view of the battle up ahead. The two of us creep up to it and pause to peer over.

My jaw drops.

"What in the name of...?"

"I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it with my own eyes," Agares mutters. "Angels turning their swords against one another. I thought they were all relatives. A civil war, perhaps?"

Hundreds of angel bodies lay motionless on the ground, gashes carved across their armor and skin. Thousands of demon corpses join them as well. Their unmoving forms tell a tale of hellish warfare, one where each combatant fought to their dying breath, but in the end, there could only be one victor.

In the sky, a hundred thousand Seraphs hover in place, all of them motioning with their hands to summon magical spells. On the ground, an incomprehensibly vast army stretches into the horizon, comprised of armored Cherubs and unarmored Acolytes. The front liners clash weapons with a hundred other armored and unarmored angels, all of whom surround a singular figure, one shrouded in rags and tattered cloth.

Valac.

The Grim Reaper stands ten-feet-tall, towering over the angels protecting him. Each of his four hands clasps together. His signature scythe is nowhere to be seen.

"Ehehehe!" Valac cackles. "Tremble in fright! Bow to my might! Eternal night! Your end within sight!"

Three Archangels stand a short distance away, each of them in a defensive posture. Raphael leans heavily against the staff in his left hand. His right arm hangs uselessly, broken during some unseen battle. Blood drips down his face, his fingers, and sops through various parts of his robes. The old man gasps and wheezes for breath, apparently having exerted himself against someone other than Satan.

Gabriel and Camael, meanwhile, step in front of their older brother, forming a barrier of flesh to protect him from the cackling demon.

"Where is everyone?" Agares asks, panic etched into his face. "I only see Valac! Did all our friends die?!"

Nerissa's eyes dart around. As she looks for demon survivors, every Seraph above finishes a combined magical chant, pouring their energy together to unleash a divine attack of unimaginable proportions.

"Incumbite, invoke... tibi divinitus interitui!"

Every Seraph's palm ignites with the brightness of the sun. One million light-missiles rush at Valac from every direction, screaming toward him at frightening speeds. In the blink of an eye, their combined force will annihilate not only him but every last molecule of his body as well.

Valac raises his hand. Before the light missiles can strike him, a bubble of green energy erupts from his body. The Seraph attack bombards him with the force of several tons of TNT, blinding me and nearly blowing out my eyes. Nerissa and Agares duck behind cover just in time to avoid the overwhelming glare of Heaven's onslaught.

For several seconds, the shock of consecutive explosions rattles and shakes Heaven. Nerissa stumbles and hits her ribs, whimpering in pain as the ground tosses her around like a ragdoll. Agares doesn't fare

any better. He slams into the grass with an audible *whump*, making him curse the angels with every breath.

Finally, Heaven goes still. Nerissa lands on our back, making me wince all the same as her when stabbing pain shoots through our chest.

Nerissa pulls herself up. She rubs the pain from her eyes and peers over the dirt mound. Agares joins her.

Valac stands, unharmed, along with his angelic protectors. A pit ten-feet-deep surrounds them. All his enemies stand back, staring at him in awe. The Grim Reaper lowers his hand, and the energy bubble vanishes.

"You attempted to bombard my impenetrable guard, yet only Heaven you scarred despite trying so hard. Now, give your regards to my trump card as I send in the charge; my walking graveyard."

Valac's angel followers pounce over the gaps in the ground and rush at their former brethren. I can only gaze in stunned silence as screams of panic erupt in the angel's ranks.

"Servant of the damned!" Camael yells. "Blackheart! How dare thou desecrateth the dead!"

"My mercy is incredible, wouldn't you say? I've brought back your family so everyone can play! Some might claim I've made them my slaves, but all I've done is revive their remains!"

One of Valac's servants smashes through the front ranks. The giant angel, clad in thick steel, shoves aside everyone in his path and beelines for Camael. The Archangel gasps as he charges her. At the last second, she swings Mjölnir up and slams it against his chest, knocking the 7-foot-tall Cherub on his ass. Camael jumps atop him and summons shackles of holy energy to bind his arms.

"Alemin! Fight back against the body-stealer! Do not attack thy family!"

The male grunts and writhes, struggling desperately to break free. "*Sister... can't resist... kill me... kill me...*"

"Nay! I shan't! Struggle with all thy might! Thou must-"

She halts awkwardly, dodging a Holy Arrow from one of Valac's servants. It whizzes past her face and nicks her cheek, then sails into the distance, impaling some unlucky sap who didn't see it coming.

"Camael! Finish him!" Raphael howls. "Valac's mental bonds are unbreakable. We must release our brothers and sisters from their torture. Give them a quick, painless death!"

Weapons *clang* together as allied and enemy angels attack one another. Several allied cherubs weep as they battle, their hearts tearing apart from the inside out. Having to kill their undead brethren is not something they wish to do. One anguished cherub's scream cuts off midway as an undead slave thrusts a spear through his chest.

Agares grabs my shoulder. "Nerissa. Behind Valac, look! The portal!"

Not three feet from Valac's towering form, the gateway to the demon's domain hums quietly. I can't see through its opaque opening, but Nerissa immediately vocalizes my thoughts. "That's our escape route?!"

We can't make it there! All the damned- ahh... the damned angels are in our way." She winces, clutching her broken rib.

"I know. Tch. If I camouflaged myself, I might be able to slip past the cherubs during the battle... but... I won't leave any of you behind," Agares says, nodding matter-of-factly.

Camael yelps in surprise. I quickly refocus my attention on her as she jumps off Alemin's chest. The massive cherub shatters his bindings and swipes his meaty gauntlets at her, missing his sister by inches.

Alemin shoves himself off the ground using his wings. The massive berserker-Cherub deflects Camael's counter, batting Mjölnir aside with his glove when she moves to strike him.

"Kill me! **KILL ME!**" Alemin shrieks. He charges Camael again, knocking her to the ground. As he grabs a sword from a fallen angel and raises it to murder his eldest sister, a missile of light explodes against his chest. Gabriel steps forward, aiming his palm at the smaller cherub. He unleashes continuous blasts of Holy Energy, hitting his brother with cannonballs of light.

Alemin gasps and wheezes as he flops onto his back. Gabriel motions one last time, and a ballista-bolt of Holy Energy rushes forward, impaling the cherub's head. Alemin slumps to his back, dead.

"As thou wish, brother, I shall free thee from thy pain. Forgive me," Gabriel says. The Archangel of Power spins around, leans forward, and yanks Camael to her feet. "No mercy, sister. As much as it hurts, we cannot consider Valac's slaves our family anymore. The Reaper has corrupted their bodies. Kill them. Spare them the torture of having to fight us."

Camael pales. "I... I cannot! I won't! None of this makes any sense! I didn't see Valac in my dreams! How can he unravel Fate itself?! How can he raise our brothers from the dead and turn them against us?!"

Several allied angels shriek in horror. "Aaah! Gabriel! Camael! Th-the dead! They're standing again!"

Both Archangels pivot on their heels. They turn and gape as several allied angels, ones who fell to the attacks of the undead, begin to rise, joining their undead comrades.

I understand what's happening. I have the benefit of hindsight and a culture that created many stories about zombies.

The Archangels, however, do not.

They stare in wide-eyed horror as dozens of additional angels join Valac's ranks. Even when one of his undead servants takes a spear to the heart, or loses a limb, the resurrected vassals continue fighting without missing a beat.

And, all the while, they beg for death. They scream and howl at the top of their lungs for their former allies to slaughter them.

"Nyehehe! Yes, it is painful to kill a fellow angel, but no matter how disdainful, you cannot remain faithful-" Valac starts to taunt the Archangels again, only for two Cherubs to rush him from behind, somehow having broken through his undead followers.

Valac stops speaking, whirls around, and summons his scythe. In the blink of an eye, his two-handed weapon appears. He sweeps the blade to the side, piercing it through the kidneys of both Cherubs at once.

Their eyes bulge in panic, only to close as he retracts the blade.

Valac gazes at the dead cherubs for a moment before returning his attention to the Archangels.

"Curses. Those buffoons ruined my rhyme. Oh, well. Now they're *mine*."

Valac motions with his lower left hand. A stream of dark miasma leaves his body, splits in two, and enters each of the soulless cherubs behind him. After a moment, they stagger to their feet and join the other undead in attacking their former brethren.

Nerissa inhales sharply. "Valac is... he's holding off three Archangels and hundreds of thousands of cherubs and Seraphs as well. I knew he was powerful, but..."

Agares shakes his head. "If I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes, I wouldn't believe it. Every time one of his serfs gets cut down, another joins them. He's slowly adding more and more to his side."

Nerissa points at several fresh angel corpses near him. "They haven't arisen, though. Why do you think that is?"

"Not a clue," Agares mutters. "It doesn't matter, either. We still have to escape Heaven. Any ideas?"

Nerissa shakes her head slowly. "I don't know."

Hardly have the words left her mouth when the ground begins to rumble beneath us. Nerissa stumbles backward in surprise, and Agares quickly begins motioning with his hands to enter his Lizard Form.

The ground bursts open, revealing a single male demon, one with Lord-length horns. As the newcomer steps out of a hole burrowed through Heaven's Soil, I manage to get a good look at him. His chiseled body, as well as the warpaint spread across his bare chest, gives him a fearsome appearance. Various animal and angel bones line his chest and arms, held in place via twine. He looks like a mixture between a Spartan and a Witch Doctor.

The demon nods at Agares and me. "Hm. I wasn't sure if it was you standing up here, or a stray cherub. Too bad. I'd have liked to dirty my hands a bit more."

"Artorias?" Agares lowers his hands and breathes a sigh of relief. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to save you. Satan's orders. He told me you guys might run into trouble. If you made it past Michael, but the angels managed to prevent your escape, it would be my job to get you out of here."

"How?" Nerissa asks. "There's a wall of cherubs between us and Valac's portal!"

Artorias hops out of the dirt. He takes a peep over the hill at all the commotion. "No worries. We're not leaving that way. We're going through Heaven's Gate. Valac has all the chickens distracted, so now is a perfect time. There are only a couple of Cherubs at the gate."

"Only a couple?" I ask. "I'm wiped out. I can barely walk. Agares is exhausted too. What if there are more than a few there? We could die!"

"Not a problem. I'm still fresh," Artorias says with a smirk. The tattooed witch-doctor gives my naked body a once over. His eyes settle below Nerissa's breasts, on the ribs poking through her skin. "Don't worry; I'll protect you. Come on. We need to get moving."

Agares raises an eyebrow. "What about our injured?"

"Drag them along. I'll widen the hole a bit."

Artorias punches the air with his fist, expanding the hole's entrance dramatically. Even as a mere Lord, his earth manipulation appears to be at the top tier of demonkind.

The witch doctor glances around for a moment, then marches underground. I follow him, and Agares takes up the rear position, pulling the sled as he walks. Once we enter, Artorias seals our exit.

"Cripes. It's pitch-black down here," Agares mutters. "Can't see a damn thing."

I can almost hear Artorias roll his eyes. "Oh, you poor dear."

Periodically, the ground trembles. The titanic battle on the surface rattles my teeth as weapons and fists collide, each blow far mightier than anything a human could achieve.

"Even if we make it out of Heaven, there are still angels everywhere in the skies above Mount Sinai. We won't escape," Agares says. "What's your plan then, boney-boy?"

"Must you even ask?" Artorias grumbles. "Obviously, once we leave Heaven, I'll burrow us underground. We'll head several miles west and come up out of sight and out of mind. Easy."

Several seconds pass before Agares speaks again. "W-what?! I have to lug this sled through miles of pure darkness?! Come on!"

"Considering all the praise everyone lavishes on you, I didn't expect you to be such a whiner," Artorias groans. "If you'd like, I can leave you with the chickens. Is that what you want?"

Silence.

After several long, awkward seconds, Agares grunts. "No. I guess not."

"Then shut your trap. The sooner we're out of here and back home, the sooner I can return and kill some stragglers."

Nerissa sighs inwardly.

Men.

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Leaving Nerissa's mind, I sail through the ground and appear in Camael's head. The instant I arrive, two undead cherubs grab my arms, holding me in place while a third attacks my front. Before I can understand what's happening, the third one thrusts a spear into my stomach, slipping past the cracks in my armor and spraying blood from my back.

Camael lurches forward, coughing violently as she struggles to catch her breath. The cherub takes a step back and yanks his spear out. At that moment, Camael musters her strength to throw Valac's servants aside. She charges her attacker and raises her hand, summoning Mjölnir to her grasp. With a swipe of her arm, the Archangel slams her hammer into the undead enemy's arm, shattering it and sending him flying.

Camael stumbles slightly and grabs her gut. Blood gushes from the wound.

"Sister! Camael!" Gabriel calls out her name in alarm. I glance backward to spot ten undead cherubs swarming the massive Archangel. Gabriel balls up his fist and swings it in an arc, knocking all of them aside like an adult fighting off a horde of infants. They try to get back up, but Gabriel quickly shoots successive blasts of holy energy into their chests, stunning them for a moment. "Art thou injured?"

Camael's teeth chatter as a wave of nausea hits her. "I... I am... f-fine!"

Bile roils inside my belly. I vomit acid and blood, then raise my head in time to hear the stomping of feet behind me. Ignoring the disgusting taste in my mouth, I spin on my knee and fling my hammer at the sounds. The cherubs who pinned me in place moments before charge at me, looks of sorrow on their faces. "Sister! Kill us! Kill-"

Mjölfnir hits the one on the right. He goes silent as the weapon crushes his ribcage and sends him flying. The second continues toward me, but with a twist of my hand, I send a wave of telekinesis at him, yanking his feet aside and sending him sprawling to the ground.

Once again, Mjölfnir sails into my grasp. I swing the divine weapon down and crush the second cherub's head into pulp, spraying gore in every direction.

Camael uses her free hand to clutch her stomach while she clambers to her feet. The Archangel's thoughts bubble in her mind as she readies herself for another confrontation.

Hacking off the limbs of our former family members isn't enough. Nor can we shatter their chests, stab them, or punch them to death. The only way to permanently send them to the Great Beyond is by crushing their skulls or cutting off their heads.

The cherub Camael sent flying jumps to his feet. Despite his fragmented ribcage and the blood pouring from his body, he rushes me again, moving as if he were in perfect health.

Unholy abominations. After what Valac has done to my brothers, I'll never forgive him. Ten thousand years of suffering would be a punishment too light for one as accursed as he.

Camael tosses Mjölfnir a few feet upward, then motions with her hands. The hammer pivots in midair and rushes at the undead cherub. It slams into his head and crushes his skull, killing him instantly.

By the time Mjölfnir returns again, Camael's legs have begun to shake. She coughs and wheezes.

How... how long has it been? An hour? Two hours? They never stop coming. Every time one of Valac's corruptions kills another of my family, they rise to join his ranks. We've never fought someone who can turn the dead against us. What can I do?! I can't get close enough to attack the Reaper myself!

Her eyes flick to her stomach.

Tch. And this injury is the worst one I've suffered yet. Time is not on my side. While our forces weaken, the Reaper's strengthen.

Camael sweeps her gaze across Heaven. Finally, I get a good look at what's happening. Where before Valac only had a hundred cherubs on his side, now he has thousands. Each of his servants wails as they plead and beg their bodies to halt. Despite their protests, they can't resist. The undead angels attack the

living with reckless abandon, ignoring their missing limbs and any other wounds that might stop someone still alive.

Allied angels attack their enemies, but every so often, one's reflexes will slip up under the brutal onslaught, allowing Valac's servants to impale him. After he perishes, he rises to join the Reaper's agents and turn his blade against his allies from only moments before.

A nearby cherub, someone on my side, turns to me. Blood drenches his face. The young man's lip quivers as his panicked eyes settle on me. "S-sister, what are we to do? More keep coming! They won't stay dead! I don't want to be next! I don't want to join the damned!"

Camael grunts. She wipes the vomit from her lips. "Stand up straight, Ishmael. We cannot waver. The Creator favors us. I have foreseen that we will not perish... not on this day." Camael shakes her fist at him. "Never give up. Never lose faith in the Creator's will. We are angels. He will never forsake us!"

Ishmael's eyes lower to my stomach. "Ah! Heavens! Th-that injury!"

"'Tis merely a flesh wound," Camael says, even as she swallows blood. "Where are the Valkyries? I'm going to fight Valac. I'll need backup."

Ishmael's face pales. "B-but... in thy condition, he will slay thee! Sister, I must protest! If thy strength fails, Valac will have an Archangel for a servant! I cannot allow it!"

The cherub gestures toward the Reaper. Half a mile away, Valac stands silent and unmoving, watching as his angels battle the living. Nobody moves to attack him, because they can't. A mana shield surrounds him, making confrontation impossible.

"Don't question me," Camael says, growling under her breath. "If losing my life will save those of my family members, I am always willing to place it on the line. Once we kill the Grim Reaper, his servants will surely fall. Find the Valkyries! Get them over here, on the double!"

Ishmael's face turns white as snow.

"A-aye, sister. I'll find them for you, then. Continue with caution. I've lost too many sisters already."

"As have I," Camael replies.

Ishmael wipes his bloody face, flaps his wings, and takes off.

Left alone, I glance around, checking to see if any attackers are coming at me. The main forces of Valac's army appear to have shifted away from me, as has Gabriel. The Archangel of Power stands out from the crowd, towering several feet above his peers. He stomps about, swinging his greatsword and cleaving enemy angels in half. Despite the agony etched into his face, Gabriel never wavers as he cuts down his former family members.

Gabriel can't help me, Camael thinks. Raphael is too weak. Lucifer's magic incapacitated Uriel and Uzziel. The demons ambushed Michael. I'm the only Archangel left who can fight the Reaper.

She hardens her gaze and flaps her wings, rising into the air. Several undead cherubs spot her ascent. Before they can make a move, Camael flings Mjölnir with a flick of her wrist. The hammer rushes toward

the undead below and crushes their skulls one by one. Manipulating the weapon from a distance, Camael turns it into a mobile battering ram, capable of killing undead without her having to hold it.

However, as she does, I note with alarm that her mana reserves dwindle and lower every second.

I can't fight like this forever. I must save my energy for the battle against the King of the Dead.

Camael recalls Mjölfnir and wastes no time. She sears her stomach wound shut with a bit of Holy Energy and flies toward him.

As Camael approaches, something strange happens. The sea of undead below gazes up at her, but returns to their battles against the lower-ranked angels — the few cherubs guarding Valac part, allowing her passage. Camael skids to a stop and lands clumsily only a few feet before Valac.

"Valac! I've come to put a stop to thy butchery once and for all! Face me, Reaper!"

Valac's shrouded face lies in blackness, seemingly impossible given Heaven's light radiating around us. I can't make out his expression, nor the meaning in his body posture. He appears relaxed, confident, and uninterested in me, yet also confused, withdrawn, and uncertain.

Several seconds pass. Finally, Valac's shrouded face tilts down as he notices my presence.

His voice lilts in amusement. "Oh, my, isn't this cute? An Archangel has come to lick my boot. She's come to bargain and settle our dispute, but soon she'll find her leverage is moot."

Camael grits her teeth. "I didn't come to bargain, servant of evil. I came to *fight*. Thy wickedness knows no bounds. I know not how thou were able to bypass the strings of fate, but I do know that thou shan't survive past today."

Valac stiffens. His tone darkens.

"Oh? You dare threaten *me*?"

"'Tis no threat, but a promise, blackheart!" Camael twirls Mjölfnir in her grasp and starts twitching as she amps herself up for a fight. "I won't stop with thee, either. After I crush thy spirit and slaughter thy minions, I'll chase down thy people and burn them to ash! Never will I forgive thy depravity!"

Camael jumps forward and brings her hammer down, smashing it against Valac's shield. Mjölfnir impacts the hardened mana with the force of a car crash, ricocheting off as if the Archangel had struck solid rubber. Camael and I stumble backward, lose our footing, and fall on our ass.

Several seconds pass.

"Hu... huhuhu..."

Valac chuckles softly. His tone sends a pang of terror through my heart.

"Ehehehe... huhuhu... most amusing. You foolishly flew to face me alone, without any backup. The only reason my minions haven't torn you apart is because I foresaw your coming. I foresaw... *everything*."

Valac takes a step toward me. Camael flinches.

The Grim Reaper's eyes begin to glow red under his cowl.

"Pathetic... weak... empty-headed Archangel. Do you honestly think you're the only one whose vision penetrates the barrier of time?"

Ice crystallizes inside my veins.

Camael opens her mouth, but it takes a few moments before she can speak. "Im... possible... impossible..."

"Huhuhu..." Valac chuckles. "I know what you've seen, Archangel. A future filled with pain and suffering. Your brothers... sisters... friends and companions, all trapped in eternal torment..."

The Grim Reaper snickers quietly as he summons his lantern.

"I, too, have obtained the gift of foresight. The difference is... *my* might exceeds yours. Every soul I consume adds to my *perfection*. I care little for the angels... the demons... or any of the other beings walking the cosmos. The only thing which matters to me is amassing even more *power*."

Valac uses his free hand to form a magic sign. Camael jumps to her feet and assumes a defensive stance, but nothing happens. Suddenly, three of the undead cherubs nearest the Reaper limp forward and fall to the ground, dead.

"Beautiful, isn't it? I control the souls of my servants with absolute authority. I tell them what to do, and they obey, even if they wish not to. In a way, it brings back memories of how the angels once treated me. Don't you think so, Camael?"

Camael's hand trembles as she clutches Mjölnir.

"Revenge? Is that what this is all about?"

"Only a little. Huhuhu..."

Valac trails off. He raises his head and gazes into the distance.

"You believe the future to be set in stone, Archangel of Divination. You believe it has been laid out by the Creator, and that you are an agent of his, carrying out his will. You seek not to control it, yet you also attempt to guide it along a path befitting his grand plan."

Camael nods slowly. "Aye. What is thy point?"

Valac cocks his head.

"You don't know? And here I thought one as old as you would see the contradiction in your beliefs. I ask you now, Camael: Will you continue to follow the Creator's plan, even if it means all the angels must die?"

Camael's shaking slowly becomes more noticeable. Mjölnir quivers in her grasp as she gazes up at the Reaper.

"The angels are... they're... they're agents of the Creator. He wouldn't plan such a fate for us."

"Are you *certain* that is a fact? Have you *spoken* to the Creator recently?"

Camael's breath comes hesitantly as she tries to regulate her breathing. Disorientation washes over her mind as she lowers her gaze.

"I... I have not."

"Then you are a liar!" Valac snarls. He stabs a finger at me. "There is no divine plan! The Creator you pretend to follow is a hollow god! A figure you made up to hide the fact that you are powerless to save your people! You foist your insecurities upon your imaginary deity, lying to yourself and those around you, all so you can pretend your actions are a means to an end!!"

Valac stomps toward me. In the blink of an eye, his mana shield knocks me off my feet and crushes me into the ground. It rolls over top of me and flattens me into the dirt. The moment I arrive inside of it, the Reaper lurches toward my prone form. Before I can react, his lower left-hand jerks down and grabs my throat — he presses me against the dirt.

"The Creator is nothing! If he does exist, he favors me, not you! That is why he gave me this power! That's why he shows you a future of death and suffering!"

Camael wriggles and writhes, trying to escape his grasp. However, the Reaper's hands clamp on us like titanium shackles, impossible to escape.

Camael uses her free arm to slam Mjölnir against Valac's arm.

The Reaper remains unharmed.

"Get off me, demon!"

"No! I won't! I'll reap your soul, and Gabriel's, and Raphael's, and all the rest of them! I'll tear every angel limb-from-limb, and then I'll kill the Titans, too! Ohh, but worry not, wretched woman, for my rampage will continue forever and ever, until all life has succumbed to my touch!"

Camael stares into the faceless demon's eyes in horror.

"No... no... no! I won't allow it! I'll fight you to my dying breath! We all will! We'll never surrender!!"

Valac laughs. "Bahahaha! You will fail, just as you already have!"

The Grim Reaper raises his scythe above his head. A flicker of light shines against the tip as he prepares to swing it down, impaling my body and ripping my soul out in the process.

Camael struggles mightily, but her efforts are in vain.

Valac sneers.

"Welcome, Camael... to your NEW FAMILY! NYEHEHE!"

KABOOM!

Before Valac can bring the scythe down, something strikes his mana shield with incredible force. Startled, the demon jerks his gaze upward. A sword of light energy stabs through his mana and wrenches back and forth.

Holy magic begins to pour inside the bubble.

"What?! My shield!"

I shift my gaze from the sword to its wielder. *Catherine.*

She and a few other Cherubs stand atop Valac's shield, having somehow made it past his undead followers.

"Let our sister go!" A male voice bellows. I shift my head to the right and spot Ishmael standing at the edge of the barrier.

Catherine holds her hand above her head. She balls it into a fist and punches the barrier in its newly-weakened spot.

Valac's barrier vaporizes and explodes outward, sending Catherine and her sword of light plummeting toward his backside.

Valac releases me and dives to the side. Catherine narrowly misses him and impales the ground.

Behind her, the three other Cherubs land, each of them wearing similar armor, though with slight differences.

Ishmael trembles, but forces himself to stand up straight.

"The Valkyries have arrived!"

Author's Note:

This is Artorias.





This is Catherine in her armor.



Part 113: Dragonslayer

Recommended Listening

While Camael jumps to her feet, Catherine yanks her sword of light from the ground. Valac slithers backward, while the other three Valkyries take up their positions between their sister and me.

"Catherine!" Camael says. "Keep thy distance. Avoid the Reaper's Scythe. It will tear out thy soul if it strikes thee!"

Catherine nods. She summons a shield of light in her left hand and charges at Valac, aiming to knock him off balance by throwing her weight against him.

Unlike Catherine, the other three Valkyries don't wear helmets. A short, pink-haired girl cries out in alarm. "Gah! Hey, Cath! Don't just go off on your own!" She creates a bo staff out of Holy Energy and follows her sister.

Camael's eyes follow the newcomer. *Sophia and Catherine are both too reckless. I need to help them. However, my mana is slowly draining from my wounds. I'll only slow them down in my current state.* She gestures to the other two Valkyries, both of them dark-skinned women of above-average height. "Hyacinth! Valac's minions badly injured me during the battle. Come quickly and heal my wounds!"

Both of the remaining Valkyries turn to me, looks of concern on their face. The one on the left has white hair like most other angels in Heaven, but the one on the right, nearly seven-feet-tall, has green hair like Uzziel.

The tall one nudges her white-haired sister. "Hyacinth. Don't worry. I'll keep the Reaper busy."

Hyacinth nods. "Alright. Once I finish, I'll suppress the demon with my arrows. Make sure Sophia doesn't do anything stupid."

Penelope groans. "That's impossible, but I'll try. We must avenge Uriel and return our mentor's honor."

"Aye."

The dark-skinned giantess stomps toward Valac, and all Hell breaks loose.

Catherine shoves herself against Valac, knocking him off-balance by using her shield as a battering ram. In the next instant, she swipes her sword downward toward his shoulder. A rush of mana fires from her blade, releasing a curved projectile that rushes at the Grim Reaper's chest. Valac turns slightly to the left. Catherine's attack gashes apart the hundreds of disgusting, fetid rags covering his skeleton, but misses his exposed bones.

Not waiting for the Reaper to counter her, Catherine dives under his robes and slashes right, intending to cut his leg off. Valac hops quickly, somehow righting himself with remarkable agility and avoiding her attack in the process.

A flash of movement.

Valac's fist lashes out faster than Catherine can react. He batters her helmet and knocks the daylights out of her. The Valkyrie tumbles several feet backward, but manages to right herself mid-sprawl. She lands in a cat-like pose and runs at him again, readying her sword for another attack.

Valac snarls. "You're resilient and tough; everything I hate in a female. However, your movements are stilted, destined to fail!"

The Reaper pivots on his heel to face the incoming threat. His Scythe rushes forward and deflects Catherine's sword. *Ting!*

He reaches out and tries to grab her. Catherine bats his skeletal hand aside with her shield and kicks at his leg. The unexpected counter trips Valac.

Penelope swings a massive two-handed mace of Holy Magic against Valac's spine. The undead demon slams into the grass, shaking Heaven violently. At the same time, Sophia bounces, twirls, and backflips over her giant sister. She pirouettes off Penelope's head and brings her staff down, smacking it square against what I can only presume is his skull. Valac's body holds no mass as he lies collapsed in the dirt, so it's impossible to tell which parts are his rags and which are his bones.

Catherine pauses. The armored woman glances left and right, seemingly looking for something. Suddenly, she bolts forward. Catherine dives at Sophia and shoves her aside as Valac materializes out of thin air and swings his Scythe toward the pink-haired Valkyrie. He misses by inches, nearly tearing off the back of Catherine's armor.

Camael narrows her eyes. *What was that? The Reaper teleported without hand signs. They knocked him to the ground, but did he disappear before he landed? I've never seen similar spatial magic in all my life.*

I glance at the white-haired woman beside me as she furrows her brow and weaves a spell.

"Come, Hyacinth. We haven't much time. Heal faster."

Hyacinth flicks her gaze from my stomach up to my eyes, then back down. "Apologies, eldest sister. My healing spell is nowhere as potent as Uzziel's. I am not as well-versed in the ways of medical magic as she."

"Do thy best," Camael replies, a hint of urgency in her voice. Grunting, she quickly returns her attention to the other three Valkyries.

Having somehow predicted Valac's reappearance, Catherine shoves herself off the ground and narrowly deflects the tip of Valac's Scythe with her shield as he swings it around to impale her. The Reaper's immense strength flings Catherine to the side, but she manages to land on her feet with only a minor stumble.

Everything I've seen from Catherine indicates that not only is she physically strong and agile, but quick-witted, too. However, she never says a word, and I don't know why. She might be mute.

Valac, now hovering a foot off the ground, pulls back and cackles as the three Valkyries regroup. "If this is the peak of your technique, then squeak and shriek, for your future looks quite bleak!"

Penelope reaches her hand out and rests it on Catherine's shoulders, stopping her sister from charging again. "No. Follow-up. I lead."

Catherine nods and allows her taller sister to take the lead, never showing any doubts regarding Penelope's abilities.

Valac's bundle of rags lies on the ground where the Valkyries toppled him before. However, while they still appear cut-up and torn from all of the earlier attacks he dodged, his new rags are in mint condition, the same as when Camael first attacked him.

Gears slowly click in my mind as I ponder the possibilities.

When I battled Satan several years ago, the First Emperor told me he could regenerate his body by dissipating one of the ten-thousand souls within himself. Given Valac's status as a fellow soul manipulator, I wonder if he might have a similar ability.

...No, that seems unlikely. When Satan regenerated, he rematerialized in the nude. He had to summon a new pair of clothes. While not the most critical detail, Valac reappeared with all of his rags on. Further, there was a short delay before his reappearance, almost as if the Reaper was casting an illusion...

Penelope takes several measured steps toward the Grim Reaper. Soon, they stand only ten feet apart. She holds her two-handed mace in a defensive posture, as if ready to deflect any attack he throws at her. Catherine stays to her right and Sophia to her left.

Valac giggles to himself. "Kekeke, look who's come to fight, a little girl with a twig. You should have brought a shovel for the grave you'll soon dig."

Penelope shifts her feet. A moment later, she tilts forward and swings her mace down, slamming it into the dirt. All of Heaven seems to shake as the ground spikes and explodes in front of her. A hail of soil and stones flies at Valac. The Reaper raises an arm to shield himself, but that proves to be a mistake.

Sophia motions with her hands. A ball of water materializes in midair. She stabs it with her bo staff, and a thin beam of liquid shoots out. Valac flies backward as the compressed water hits him with the force of a firetruck. The Reaper tumbles and rolls into the dirt as Heaven itself tears apart and tries to swallow him whole.

After Penelope's planet-shaker attack subsides and Heaven goes still, Valac rematerializes in midair above his fallen body. The Grim Reaper glances around hesitantly, almost as if waiting for a follow-up strike.

"Okay! My turn!" Sophia shouts. The Valkyrie flaps her wings, dashes toward the Reaper, and begins executing a series of spins, kicks, and flips as she bounces toward him.

"Sophia! No! Don't rush in!" Penelope yells. "Wait for-"

Valac follows the Valkyrie's movements, and at the last second, he lashes his Scythe out, aiming to skewer her in midair. Sophia executes an upside-down triple-spin, counters Valac with her bo staff, and uses the momentum of his attack to flip to his side and swing at his knee.

"Gah! Pesky chicken!" Valac trips awkwardly as Sophia's attack hits. He tries to grab her by the hair, but she twirls her staff and bats his hand aside. With another spin, she dives behind the Reaper and swings her staff in a wide arc. Her weapon slugs Valac's spine like a baseball bat. He folds over awkwardly and tumbles to the side, once again landing as a crumpled set of rags in the dirt.

After several seconds, slightly longer than before, Valac rematerializes in midair. This time, however, he keeps his distance.

"Look at all of you, ganging up on me. I'm just one little demon, so why won't you let me be? While this small one bounces around and giggles with glee, I've realized the lot of you are far too pesky for me!"

Sophia frowns. She takes a step back from Valac. "Hey, why does this weirdo constantly rhyme? It's creepy."

Valac's shrouded face betrays no emotion. He slowly raises his upper left arm and summons his lantern. "Kukuku... All this time, I've been holding myself back. I wanted to test your might after you talked all that smack. I don't like to brag, but my powers are quite prophetic. I guessed as much already, but your strength is simply *pathetic*."

While Valac's two right arms grip his Scythe and the upper left one lifts his lantern high, the lower left one begins weaving magic signs.

Camael's eyes widen. "Sophia! Get back! Catherine, Penelope, watch-"

Screams erupt from Valac's lantern. A hundred translucent faces rush out of it and tear through the air, aiming for each of the Valkyries, as well as myself.

Hyacinth yelps in fright. She stops her healing spell and throws me backward right as one of the ghostly apparitions slams into her back.

Boom!

The ghost explodes like a stick of dynamite, sending Hyacinth spinning and twisting. She tumbles across the ground and careens to a stop, while I, too, land on my ass. Her last-second save allows me to avoid one of Valac's kamikaze souls. It harmlessly explodes in midair.

After pulling myself to my feet, I wince and rub the back of my head. Hyacinth lays on her back; black scorch marks etched across her white armor. She swallows shallow breaths and blinks, trying to recover from Valac's surprise attack.

"Sister!" Camael stumbles toward the Valkyrie and pulls her up, helping Hyacinth to her feet. It takes a moment before she can shake the disorientation from her mind. "Can thou standeth?"

"A-aye. Ohh. My mind throbs..."

Camael nods. "Those were souls of the damned. They released mana when they exploded; you must have suffered some feedback. Ah! The others!"

I quickly turn to look for the rest of the Valkyries.

Catherine remains standing. She holds her shield up to protect herself. Her chest shifts forward and back as she breathes heavily. Behind her, Sophia and Penelope lie on the ground, almost catatonic from

Valac's surprise attack.

Valac towers over the sole remaining Valkyrie. "Kukuku... your friends thought splashing me with water would bring me strife, and burying me in the dirt would end my life. However, my power is infinite; going beyond time and space. Now bow before your new god, as I reveal your face."

Another soul ripples out of Valac's lantern. This time, when Catherine flinches, waiting for an attack, it doesn't come. Valac leans forward, exposing the skull beneath his robes. He opens his mouth, and the soul enters his body.

Nothing happens for a few seconds.

Then, a bolt of lightning shoots from Valac's robes. It slams into the ground with a thunderous *crash*! Several more follow. One thunderbolt arcs outward and hits Catherine's shield, but it only nudges her back a few inches.

Valac gasps. He leans forward and curls his arms forward. "Haah... haah... yes... YES... **YES!!!** Such power can only come from the netherworld! I feel it in my bones, the creaking of muscles! The rebuilding of my body!"

Valac holds up his lower left hand. Mottled, grey skin begins rushing up his bones, covering his hand in nasty, rotting flesh. The Grim Reaper howls in delight as glowing red eyes appear beneath his robes.

"Ahahaha! Here it comes! Ready yourself, little girl!"

Catherine digs her foot into the ground.

Then, Valac disappears.

In the blink of an eye, he appears behind Catherine. The Valkyrie jerks in surprise and whirls to face him, but his meaty fist swings out and smashes her in the back, sending her flying forward, toppling end over end. Catherine drops her shield and sword as she plows into the dirt, bounces off, and sails into a boulder.

Hardly has the Valkyrie come to a stop before Valac appears in front of her, moving at incredible speeds. He yanks a hand out, grabs one of her arms, and lightly tosses the Valkyrie behind himself.

"Catherine!!!" Camael howls in shock. She jumps forward to try and save the Valkyrie, but Valac appears before us, a fist raised.

"Ah-ah-ah. *You stay right there.*"

I don't even feel the impact of his fist.

The Reaper hits me so hard that several of my teeth shatter and splinter to pieces. It takes several seconds before my vision is anything more than a mass of spots. At some point, I end up on my back in the dirt, but I don't know when.

Somewhere in the distance, the sound of muffled *clangs* and *whumps* unveil Valac's onslaught. The Reaper batters and bashes Catherine savagely, striking her as viciously as possible as he obliterates every last vestige of her defenses.

"This is what you get for defying me, foolish insect! Nobody makes a fool out of the Grim Reaper! Nobody!!"

I slowly raise my head to watch as Valac grabs her by both arms, raises her above his head like a doll, and slams her into the ground.

Catherine never once cries out or screams.

I pull myself together and slowly claw myself to my side. Camael gasps as she tries not to choke on the blood pooling in her mouth. "C... Cath... Cath..."

Valac holds the Valkyrie by her right leg. She hangs limply in his grasp as he titters to himself. "Nyehehe... No more fight left, hm? I suppose you are only a *woman*, after all. Useless like all the rest."

Motioning with his Scythe, Valac reaches its tip over and lightly pulls on Catherine's helmet. The dented and battered iron falls from her head and lands in the torn-up dirt below.

Finally, I get a look at Catherine's face. Her short, curly brown hair contrasts a massive burn wound going from her right eye all the way past her jaw, neck, and further into her armor than that. Her right eye sags noticeably... but the burns don't appear to be from Valac. They're old. Ancient, even. They tell tales of a battle from a different era.

Camael's thoughts come to me in slow, measured bursts. *No... Catherine... Penelope... Sophia... Hyacinth... please, one of you must fight. Don't let... don't let the Reaper win.*

As if to answer her request, Sophia leaps to her feet. Blood drips from her nose, but she appears to have recovered from Valac's attack. Penelope rises as well, though the giantess appears less steady on her feet. She swoons back and forth and leans on Sophia's shoulder for support.

"Release my sister, foul demon!" Sophia yells. "I'll only give thee one warning!!"

Hyacinth appears at my side. "Eldest sister. Forgive my weakness. I'll heal thee at once."

Their sudden recovery astonishes me. It hasn't even been a minute since Valac swallowed one of his souls, but they appear to have regained their composure.

Valac turns his head back to gaze at Sophia. "Hmm? Do you want to fight? Foolish women. You don't stand a chance against the King of the Dead."

In the few seconds where Valac's attention leaves Catherine, her eyes bolt open. The battle-scarred woman rapidly motions with her hands and summons her inner mana. Valac turns to look at her just in time for Catherine to open her mouth.

FWOOMP!

A wall of fire bursts out of Catherine's stomach, tears through her lips, and pounces at the Reaper's face. Valac's rags immediately catch fire. Reflexively, he drops his captive and jumps back in surprise. "EEEEEH! What- what is this?! Ahhh! It burns! IT BURNS!!"

The Grim Reaper flails around wildly. He drops his Scythe and screeches like a banshee as he tugs and tears at the rags covering his body. Catherine doesn't let up. The moment he releases her, she pivots in midair, lands on her feet, and continues her infernal onslaught.

Hyacinth begins to heal me, but Camael's gaze narrows.

Sister. For thou to summon Jörmungandr's flames... thy rage must burn like never before. I am sorry that thou hath awakened such a primal hatred.

Catherine's single functioning eye presses together, and she holds up her hand to narrow the flames racing from her mouth. Valac screeches and falls on his back, futilely holding his hand up to try and stop her inferno. His rotted flesh melts away. His bones crackle and snap as the seconds pass.

Finally, Catherine stops. She pauses to gasp for breath as the Reaper writhes on the ground. No longer does he speak a word. His mass of bones, now charred black beyond recognition, begin to curl together and snap as they cool.

Soon, Valac's body stops moving.

Several seconds pass.

Hyacinth finishes healing me. I jump to my feet and quickly fly over to Catherine's side, keeping a wary eye on Valac's bones.

"Catherine! Art thou alright? Hath thee any mana left?"

Catherine looks at me. She shakes her head. Slowly, she raises a trembling arm. Magical runes appear in the air as she begins writing letters with her magic.

No mana. Fires burned. Reaper dead?

Standing closer to her, I begin to understand the extent of her scars. Catherine's burns cover not only half of her face, but they extend down to her throat as well.

That's why she can't talk. The scar tissue prevents it.

Camael nods. "I think... thou hath defeated the Reaper. Be on thy guard. He may yet rise again and-"

"Sister! Sister, look!" Sophia yells excitedly. I turn to follow her gaze as she points in the distance.

Valac's undead servants, once embroiled in a brutal battle against Gabriel and his army, stand and hover silently, unmoving. Many of them hold their weapons above their heads as if to strike, yet they don't move.

One by one, each of them lowers their weapons. Looks of confusion pass across the faces of the undead and the living. Valac's servants blink their eyes and glance around.

"What's happening?" Camael asks. "Why aren't they fighting?"

Sophia's voice lilts. "B-because! Cath killed Valac! He lost control over them! It's a miracle from the Creator!"

"What?" Penelope's jaw drops. "I can't believe it. Is that true, Camael?"

I shake my head slowly in disbelief. "I... I don't know. Is it? What if Valac comes back to life again? Hyacinth, check his bones for traces of mana."

Hyacinth nods. She flies over to Valac, summons a knife made from Holy Energy, and gingerly pokes at his bones. Like logs that have burned for too long, the pile of black bones hisses and falls apart. They

melt into a pile of ash and blow away into the wind.

"I don't sense anything. If he's still alive... I would be surprised."

Catherine nods. A wave of fatigue hits her. The brown-haired woman closes her left eye, stumbles, and falls forward. I quickly reach out and catch her before she hits the ground.

"Aye, sister. Rest, now. Thou hath earned it."

Sighs of relief pass between Sophia, Penelope, and Hyacinth. The three of them come together in a group hug and share huge grins with each other at a job well done.

Camael, however, lowers her gaze to the ground. Scuff marks, torn-apart grass and dirt, and shattered boulders tell the story of Catherine's epic battle. Camael's thoughts turn inward.

The undead hath ceased their fighting. That means... all we needed to do was defeat the Reaper, and our brothers and sisters would have been spared. Instead, we slew thousands of them. We murdered them. The others haven't realized... but I have.

Valac. Bastard. Thou hath planned this all along. Even in death, thy touch haunts us. I can only pray the Creator will damn thee eternally to the lake of fire. Burn... fall to ash... forever.

Recommended listening

A few minutes later, all five of us fly toward Gabriel. He and Raphael stand facing one another. Raphael yells at his younger sibling. "Nay! Their souls are damned! We must kill them at once!"

Gabriel clenches his fist. "Raphael. Calm thyself. Camael slew the Reaper. The undead are no longer our enemies. Please, have we not lost enough of our brethren today?"

I flap my wings and land behind Raphael, along with the Valkyries behind me. "Raphael. Gabriel. What is the problem?"

The old man turns to me. Anger boils in his eyes. "Camael! Gabriel doesn't understand, but surely thou will. We must finish the job. Our brothers and sisters have been tainted by Valac's touch. We must send them to the Great Beyond at once. 'Tis the only merciful way to treat them, now."

My jaw drops. "What? Why?! Raphael, I... I can't believe thou wouldst utter such filth!"

Cherubs and Seraphs congregate around us. Upon hearing Raphael's words, they begin to whisper among themselves. Rumors spread like wildfire.

Raphael shakes his fist. "They're tainted, Camael! Can't ye see? Even if their faculties have returned-"

"I won't hear another word," Camael replies, cutting Raphael off. "We slew the Reaper. In doing so, we saved the lives of those he brought back. Their minds have returned. They control their bodies once again. There is no need for further bloodshed."

"Camael speaks the truth," Gabriel replies. "Brother, I know thy body took a beating during the battle, but ye needn't harbor such ill will towards our family. 'Tis a miracle we may embrace them once more."

Had we focused on killing the Reaper sooner, we might have saved other lives. Why must thou wish death upon them now?"

Raphael grumbles for a moment. He quickly glances around at the thousands of cherubs surrounding us, as well as those floating above. The undead angels keep their distance. They bow their heads in sorrow, unable to process the horrible deeds they've committed. Looks of anguish stretch across the faces of many. Some turn their gazes towards Valac's resting spot with expressions that speak a thousand words of rage toward him.

Raphael squeezes his staff. The old man's bloodied robes, once a beautiful tapestry of wealth which encased his body in lavishness, are now torn apart like those belonging to a beggar. He appears haggard, worn-out, and exhausted.

"Gah... perhaps I am over-reacting. I know not. Thy victory over Valac seemed impossible. He repelled the attack of a million seraphs effortlessly. How did'st thee defeat him?"

Raphael's gaze settles on me. He thinks I killed Valac.

Instead, I step aside and gesture toward Catherine. The exhausted Valkyrie blushes and looks away as she leans against Sophia for support.

"Oh? 'Twas not thee who slew the Reaper, but Michael's apprentice?"

I nod. "Aye. Catherine unleashed Jörmungandr's balefire upon Valac. The Grim Reaper could not withstand the flames of the last dragon."

Raphael clicks his tongue. "Tsk. I see. Catherine, our thanks go out to thee. Thou hath saved countless lives today."

Catherine bows her head and motions with her hand, forming more signs in the air.

Protect family. My duty.

"'Twas not duty, but valor," Gabriel says. He walks over to Catherine and kneels to hug her. "I thank thee, sister. We all do. Not only did'st thee save Michael's life against the demon hordes, but Camael's as well. Thy deeds mirror the ancient past, when-"

Gabriel halts. He pulls away from his embrace of Catherine, and a look of awkwardness passes over his face. "Ah, that is... I didn't mean to bring up..."

Catherine glances at Sophia, then hastily writes, *Ancient era. No memories. Do not worry.*

Gabriel nods. He stares at Catherine for a moment, then traces his fingers across her burns. "Already, thou hath given up so much for thy family. Never will we forget thy bravery."

The Archangel of Power shuffles back to Raphael's side. His gaze turns distant as he internally curses himself for dredging up ancient scars.

Catherine motions in the air. *Michael. Where? Alive?*

Raphael nods. "Aye. He is recovering. I am sure thou wisheth to see thy brother soon. However, first, we must sort out the mess in Heaven."

The old man glances warily at the undead. Unlike those untouched by Valac's magic, the skin of the undead have begun to turn ashen and cracked. Their blackened eyes give them a horrifying appearance, almost as if they have become agents of evil. Even the more open-minded cherubs keep away from those touched by Valac's soul manipulation.

"I am not so certain that allowing these... these *Damned* to live is the best course of action. Still, that devil's black magic appears to have faded. Maybe this aged one is too tired to think properly."

"Aye," Camael says, nodding. "Thou hath earned a rest, brother. Ah! Satan. What happened to him? Dids't thee defeat him?"

Raphael smiles, but the expression appears hollow. "In a manner of speaking. He will not bother us anymore."

"Excellent. Well, since the dirty business has concluded..." Camael shifts her sore shoulders and sighs. "I shall begin the sorting of the dead. We will burn the demon bodies and hold a twelve-hour vigil for each of our brethren who perished today. All deserve the highest honor."

Murmurs go through the crowd. One of the seraphs raises his hand. "Eldest sister, if I may be so forthcoming... only twelve hours? Is it not customary to hold a one-week dirge for any angel who perishes, no matter the reason?"

Camael stares at the young man for several seconds. "Aye. However... given the number of us that have fallen... t'would be decades before we finally concluded our mourning. We might finish by the end of next year if I expedite the..."

The Archangel of Divination trails off. Looks of anguish cross the faces of those present. Several cherubs shake their heads, unable to believe my words. She closes her eyes. *Tsk. Only twelve hours... such a short vigil for each of our brethren would sully the light of Heaven. Have I forgotten how important every one of our lives is?*

After a moment, she opens her eyes.

"I apologize. It occurs to me that we mustn't desecrate the dead any further than the graverobber already has. If we were to only mourn for twelve hours, I believe that would give the demons a victory, one they do not deserve. Nay. Instead, perish the thought. We will offer a *two* week vigil for each of the fallen. We will etch their names into every rock, tree, and carving in Heaven. Never will we forget them or their noble sacrifices."

Sighs of relief pass through the crowds. Despite the dead lying around unmoving, several angels openly smile at my words.

Camael smiles back, as do Gabriel and Raphael. However, in her heart, an inferno of rage burns.

Valac surprised me, but in the end, he was a false prophet; a devil consigned to the eternal flame. We will mourn for every single fallen angel, no matter the circumstances. We will rebuild and heal the wounds of today at any cost.

And... for those demons who escaped... we will hunt them. We will scorch their burrows, tear them limb-from-limb, and make them rue the day they turned their backs on us.

I will kill every last demon, and nobody will be able to stop me.

Camael's smile stays frozen on her face, even as she balls her hand into a fist.

"Sister?" Sophia pokes me. "Is something the matter?"

"No. Let us begin gathering the bodies. The sooner we begin, the sooner we may rest."

Author notes:

I have a whole bunch of art for the Valkyries! Also, alternate artwork for a helmetless Catherine!

This is Catherine, but without her helmet!



This is Hyacinth, the healer.



This is Penelope, the giantess.



This is Sophia, the cute one!



Alternate artwork for Catherine.



A combo banner for all the Valkyries, and also Uriel!



Part 114: Solving the Puzzle

I wake up face-first on the ground — dull, aching pain throbs across my whole body. Everything hurts, almost as if there were a pickup truck slowly pressing against me and crushing me into pulp.

The next thing I notice is the sense of calm and acceptance slowly swirling around inside my mind.

Satan stares forth into the blinding white of the Cosmic Realm, but he makes no attempt to move. He grunts while talking to himself. "Huh. So, we don't know how to get out of this place, or how to heal my limbs?"

Samael appears in Satan's mind. His washed-out, ghost-like form hunches over, as though he's fought a long battle but is too exhausted to fight any longer. The Archangel sighs. "Correct."

"There has to be somethin' I can do. When Raphael destroyed my body, I grew back. What's up with that?"

Samael shrugs. "I assume that the demon souls inside thee unlocked thy ability to regenerate from death. Thy powers of darkness are beyond anything I've seen in my life."

"Thanks, kid, but compliments won't get you anywhere," Satan says with a smirk. "Look, I've got all these souls in my body, right? Raphael seems awfully scared of me. Can't I use 'em or something? They ain't doin' me any good just sittin' there."

Samael throws his hands up. "Maybe. Possibly. 'Tis hard to say. Thou art the soul manipulator, Satan. 'Tis thy duty to understand thy powers."

"Yeah, yeah."

Satan rolls his eyes. He turns his head so he can rest on his other cheek, then glances down at his severed, rotting limbs. They lay off to the side a few feet away, decaying and browning under the holy light of the Cosmic Realm. The smell makes me want to gag, but Satan seems not to care.

His eyes travel lower, to his naked body and the stump where one of his arms used to be. The burnt flesh is black and crisp, yet I feel no sensation coming from it. The Devil's pain resistance is much higher than mine.

"Why is Gramps so strong? I have a hard time believing he beat me so effortlessly."

Samael smirks. "My brother is a mighty warrior, and the last remaining angel to remember the Ancient Wars. As part of a peace agreement, our people and the Titans all gave up their memories to stop an endless cycle of bloodshed. Raphael did not. He alone is the sole keeper of those memories. Defeating him in combat is hardly a feat someone of thy caliber could hope to achieve."

"Sounds like a sweet deal for him," Satan replies. A hint of boredom creeps into his voice. "Still, don't you think it's a little weird he gets to remember the past, but nobody else does?"

Samael cocks his head. "Why wouldn't thou say such a thing? Raphael was the most trusted among our people. The Titans were as tired of war as we were. 'Twas only natural for the wisest among both our

species to keep some memories intact. Besides, 'tis a burden Raphael wears around his neck. Rarely does my eldest brother smile."

"Uh huh. Suuure," Satan groans audibly. "Did any of the Titans get to keep their memories?"

"Nay."

"Why not?"

"I do not know."

Samael's reply hangs in the air for a moment. Satan clicks his tongue.

"Kinda convenient, don'tcha think? You don't know why Raphael kept those memories, so you have to take his word on what happened. Maybe he pressured the Titans to concede."

"Perhaps," Samael replies with a nod. "But I doubt that very much. After all, t'would have been a simple matter for Raphael to share his memories with other angels later. Millions of years have passed since those dark times. Not once has my brother let slip the circumstances behind the treaty."

"You're naive, kid," Satan says. A throaty chuckle escapes his lips. "Kuhuhu. Man. What a dope. Raphael is hiding somethin'. I bet he deliberately stole everyone's memories. Didn't you see that body of his? When he fought me, that old man was ripped like a wild bull. Plus, there were all those scars, too. There's no way he's only some peaceful wiseguy. Shenanigans were had, and you morons fell for his tricks."

Samael leans against something unseen. "Oh? So sure thou seemeth. Yet, no evidence cans't thee present. After all, whatever the circumstances, we lived in peace for millions of years until thy people rebelled. My brother may, potentially, have used some trickery to end the war... but the results speak for themselves."

Satan rolls his eyes again. "Kid, if there's one thing I've learned from living among demons, it's that everyone has an ulterior motive."

"Do not belittle my age. I am far older than thee."

"Yeah? Well, you're dumb as a baby."

"Thou art a simpleton too, Satan. That is why my brother outwitted thee."

Satan's smile disappears. "Tch. Ain't you just a mouthy little cunt."

A minute passes. Neither the demon nor the angel says a word to the other.

Satan yawns.

"Cripes. How long have we been here? Feels like months."

No response.

"Hey. Fucker. I'm talkin' to you. Answer me."

Samael sighs. "I assumed thou were positing a rhetorical inquiry, one which thou already kneweth the answer."

"No, dumbass. It's a serious question. Ain't no sun or moon up here. I can't tell one hour from the next. You got any ideas?"

Samael cocks his head. "A few hours at most. Does it matter how much time has passed? As my brother said, thou shalt spend eternity here."

"Maybe it doesn't. Gah! Why couldn't I have trapped someone else's soul?! Mother would've been better."

Samael bristles noticeably. "I would have torn thee apart with my bare hands if thou had touched Uzziel."

"Whoaaa, someone's a little defensive," Satan says. His gloating grin returns. "I've gotta ask, are all of you angels brothers and sisters?"

"We are. Why?"

"Just wondering. You seem especially touchy about Mother. Maybe there's a little something else goin' on there, eh?"

Samael glares at me. "I know not of what thou speak."

"Oh, come on," Satan says, pressing further. "You and Uzziel never got a little too close? Maybe warmed each other's beds? There's no need to blush. We're stuck with each other."

"Cease this line of questioning!" Samael yells. "I have no desire to hear such filth directed toward my sister!"

"Alright, alright. Hey, pal, whatever you say. I mean, your defensiveness ain't really helping your case, but I'm just speculatin'. Makin' small talk. You know how it is."

Samael looks away. "Tch. Small talk, indeed."

Whoomph.

A silent rush of air to my left makes Satan flinch in surprise. He lifts his head to look toward it as Raphael strides through a portal into the Cosmic Realm.

"Hello, Satan."

Satan nods. "Gramps. Came back to gloat, did ya?"

Unlike the last time Raphael stood in the Cosmic Realm, he has already restored his broken, bloodied body back to its former glory. The Archangel of Wisdom once again dons beautifully hand-stitched robes, returning to his formerly regal appearance. It seems a lot of time has passed, based on the color restored to his cheeks. "Nay. I came to inform thee that thy plans failed. We successfully killed all of thy people who entered Heaven. However, that isn't all..."

Slowly and deliberately, Raphael procures an animal-skin pouch from beneath his robes. He unties the top, tilts it upside-down, and pours charred black ash all over the ground.

Satan stares at Raphael for several moments. "What's that?"

"The remains of thy ally, the Grim Reaper. Despite his unexpected arrival, we successfully managed to kill him. All of thy plans failed. With thy main army crushed, thy body trapped in the Cosmic Realm, and the bane of the Titans dead... we will quickly spread out across all of Earth and eliminate the last vestiges of thy people."

Satan lowers his head. He rests on his chin, and a sensation of loss spreads across his body.

"Valac wasn't my ally. He was a selfish piece of shit. As for the rest of the demons..."

The Devil closes his eyes for a moment.

"I'll never forgive you, Raphael. You'd better kill me now, while you still can."

The old man shakes his head. "Such a feat is beyond my capability. Thou art a soul manipulator: The vilest of dregs littered across all the universe. It seems that every time thou dost perish, thy body increases in strength once thou returneth from the Great Beyond."

"Oh? So that's what's going on."

"Aye." Raphael slowly lowers himself down to sit in a cross-legged position. "Most interestingly, thy strengthening ability is quite reminiscent of the Titans. Uzziel designed their bodies to adapt and grow over time, becoming more powerful for every battle they survived. The Titans were instrumental in killing the dragons, though understanding the importance of such brutal wars would be a foreign concept to a pest like thee."

Raphael pulls out his pipe. He snaps his thumb, lights some tobacco, and sighs contentedly.

"You're chatty today," Satan replies. "Maybe you shouldn't be telling me all this stuff."

"Pahaha! With the Grim Reaper dead, and the leader of the demons trapped for all eternity in the Cosmic Realm, t'would never be easier for me to relax than right now. The existence of thy people has long been a thorn in my side, but as Camael's visions demonstrate, soon thou shalt be nothing more than a stain on our past."

"Uh huh..."

Satan stares at Raphael suspiciously.

"...Then why're you here?"

Raphael puffs on his pipe for a few moments before responding.

"I love the Cosmic Realm, and I often come to escape questions and prodding from my people. It pains me to allow a disgusting creature such as thee to gaze upon its glory and to sully it with thy blood, but the alternative is keeping thee in Heaven, where thy people might have a chance of rescuing thee. So, here thou must stay."

Satan rolls his head around on his chin. "Mm. So you come here to relax?"

Raphael's expression turns grim. "Relax? I think not. Nearly five thousand angels died today. Long has it been since I said goodbye to so many of my brothers and sisters. The battle ended only five months ago,

and so their deaths are still fresh in my mind. I could not bear to help move their bodies... not after everything else that's happened."

"Hold on. Five months?" Satan frowns. "It's already been five months? You're joking."

"Nay. Time moves much more slowly in the Cosmic Realm compared to the physical universe. I imagine fewer than ten hours have passed for thee, while months have passed for my people. I hope ye weren't too uncomfortable."

Satan groans. "I'm just *peachy*."

Raphael waves his hand dismissively. "As long as thou art in constant searing agony, I'll consider it a fitting punishment for all the pain thou hath caused. The five thousand lives lost to thy treacherous, backstabbing attack were more than faceless soldiers to me. They were my dearest brothers and sisters."

"Yeah? And you think I don't care about all the demons you killed?"

"Thy comrades perished as a result of thy hatred and inability to control thyself. Think, Satan. Uzziel welcomed thee into Heaven, but thou intended to stab her in the back. Art thou proud, demon? We gave thee a chance, but thy choice was to betray our trust. Thou hath surrendered thy right to complain."

Satan's shoulders slump. He lays his face against the ground for a few moments and sighs.

"Yeah. Maybe I did. Doesn't mean I was wrong, though. You angels are all bastards. Haha... if I ever get outta here, I'll make sure you regret leaving me alive."

Several seconds pass.

Satan licks his lips. "Nerissa. Did, uh... did you kill her?"

Raphael shrugs. "I haven't a clue who that is. Barring the Reaper, all of thy people look the same to me."

Satan clenches his teeth. "Anyone ever told you what a shithead you are?"

Raphael taps the burnt tobacco from his pipe on the ground, sticks the smoking implement in his robes, and rises to his feet. "Nobody I know would use such foul words. Perhaps among thy people, illiteracy and crude verbosity run rampant, but among mine, we attempt to maintain a veneer of sophistication."

Like a kettle of water reaching its boiling point, Satan snaps. "That's it! Shut up! I can't take your shit anymore! C'mere! Walk a little closer so I can bite your fuckin' toes off!"

Having suppressed his anger since Raphael's arrival, the Devil begins thrashing his head around. He digs his chin into the ground and tries pulling himself toward the Archangel, but twenty feet is a long distance when only moving an inch at a time.

"I'll chomp your devil-damned head in half! I'll rip off your ear and pull your brains too! C'mere, you old fucker!"

Raphael wipes dust from his robes and stares at me as I slowly pull myself toward him. A wry smile crosses over the old man's face.

"I did not believe I would enjoy coming here, but witnessing thy pathetic state does tinge my cheeks with glee. Hm, hm. Perhaps I should poke thee more often, *little demon*. Hoho."

Tears begin to run down Satan's face. "BASTARD! I hate you! I hate you!! Murderer! Shit-fucker! When I finally wrap my hands around your neck, I'll-!"

"Thou shalt do nothing," Raphael says, the grin vanishing from his face. He kicks at the pile of Valac's ashes and sends them fluttering toward me. "Enjoy thy stay in the Cosmic Realm, Satan. I have several thousand more funerals to attend, so I'll be quite busy for a while. Try not to go insane before I return."

Satan finally stops pulling himself forward. He chokes on tears and sobs to himself as he presses his face against the blinding ground. My vision goes dark as he tries to wipe his eyes on the Cosmic Realm's smooth surface, but it proves futile.

"Awful... shitty... chicken..."

Raphael's sandals *slap* against the pure white surface as he turns and walks away.

"Blame not me, but thyself for thy predicament. Farewell, Satan."

Whoomph.

Raphael steps through his portal and returns to Heaven, leaving Satan behind. Alone. He only showed up for a few minutes, but in that time, he crushed the Devil's spirit completely.

Satan whispers to himself through his tears.

"No... no... Nerissa... Agares... they're dead. They're all dead. I couldn't save them. I couldn't save anyone. I'm no good. I'm worthless."

"Very true," Samael says. I expect to hear a hint of mocking in his voice, but he keeps it surprisingly measured. "Thou art quite pathetic. Thy attempt to fight the Eldest Archangel proved foolhardy, as any sane being might have concluded with a hint of introspection. Thy people attempted to battle Heaven's finest, only to taste the full power of the Creator's Might. All of thy plans failed because thou were a vapid dunce."

Satan doesn't offer a retort. He merely stares at the ground emptily. Slowly, his eyes raise to Valac's ashes.

"What were we fightin' for? The world is cruel. Evil. Those with power, win. Those without, lose. What's the point in goin' on without any of the others?"

Samael smirks. "There is no point. As I said before, thou shalt lie here forever. Tormented by the memories of thy failure, thy mind shalt slowly unravel, taking me along for the fall. In the end, nothing will bring me more satisfaction than seeing thy gradual descent into madness."

Satan doesn't reply.

Minutes pass.

The Devil's tears slow to a stop and dry out, eventually hardening on his face into a thin, flaky crust.

"Tch. There ain't any point livin', right?"

Samael nods. "Correct."

Satan gnashes his teeth together. "That's the solution, then. I've gotta figure out how to die. It's the only way outta this mess. Screw Raphael. Screw him and his big words. I'm Satan the fuckin' Devil. I ain't nobody's bitch."

Samael sighs. "Always with the profanity."

"Shut yer trap, moron. I'm thinkin'."

Ten minutes pass. Twenty. Thirty.

Satan silently stares at Valac's ashes.

I manipulate souls. So did Valac. Raphael's scared of us. There must be a reason. What can we do that non-manipulators can't?

Satan's tongue snakes out of his mouth. He wets his lips.

"Samael. I've got a question."

The Archangel sighs. "Haah. What is it this time?"

"Gramps said I get stronger every time I die. He said that's something the Titans do, too. Is that true?"

"Naturally. My brother is no liar."

Satan chuckles. "Heh. Agree to disagree. Hm. Funny story, Sammy boyo... I crushed the skulls of two Titans recently 'n took their souls. Ain't that funny? Bit of a coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

Samael freezes. His face whitens.

"Impossible."

"Nah... funniest thing. See, all the souls of demons who signed my contracts entered my body when they died. There weren't many at first. Five here. Ten there. But, wouldn't ya know it, a funny thing happened."

Satan smiles.

"My horns grew. I felt a new power awaken inside of myself. A new ability, if ya please."

Samael's hands begin to tremble.

"No... no, that can't be..."

"Yep. It's true. Then, after I learned about my power, another funny thing happened. This cute dame saved me from your two sisters. That was when I learned about the existence of the Titans. I told that nice piece of ass that I'd make her my girl if she brought me back a Titan's head. And wouldn't ya know it! She brought me *two*!"

Horror spreads across Samael's face. "Th-then... that's... when thou seized their heads and crushed them... it wasn't only because..."

"Because I hated 'em? Nah. C'mon. I ain't that petty."

Satan's grin widens across his entire face. The naked, limbless demon guffaws mightily. "Bahahaha! Aw, geez. Cripes! That's some good shit, ain't it? I was just hoping their souls would make me a little stronger! But to get their *abilities* too? Now that's a sweet deal! Now I see why gramps is so scared of me! Ahhh-hahaha!!"

Samael sags to his knees. The Archangel rests his face in his palms. "Taking the souls of other beings and using their powers for thy own purposes... thou art truly... a monster..."

Satan ignores the Archangel. "I mean, geez! I should've realized when I took your soul and got these eight handy arms! Ahaha... and... here's the best part..."

The Devil's voice lowers.

His smile vanishes.

"...I have thousands of demon souls inside me. Every demon the angels killed gave me their powers. Think of the possibilities, Samael. All that magic, and it's mine. I wasn't there for 'em, but I can still avenge 'em. The old man has good reason to be scared. He can't kill me, and I'm stronger than ever. Hoho, boy. I'm gonna turn my fortunes around."

Samael finally manages to regain his composure. The Archangel rises again and shakily points his finger at Satan. "I-it doesn't matter. Without any arms, thy ability to cast spells is nonexistent. Thou art still trapped and helpless... even if... if thy powers art unfathomable."

Satan sets his jaw. "Where there's a will, there's a way. Whether it takes one minute or one eternity... I've got all the time in the world."

"Hehehe... Raphael thinks he's got me licked. I'll teach that old bastard what happens when he underestimates Satan the Devil. I might be the last demon alive, but I'll carry our torch to the bitter end. Nobody looks down on me. *Nobody*."

The world goes black as Satan closes his eyes and begins to think.

It's time I took a closer look at the souls inside me. One of 'em's gotta have something that can free me from this prison.

One of 'em...

Part 115: For The Horde!

The sound of shifting rocks and dirt greets my ears as I enter the mind of someone familiar. Pitch-black darkness surrounds me.

Whump. Whump.

I take one step forward whenever the ground rumbles in front of me. Something bumps against my right arm, but Nerissa, my current host, ignores it.

The succubus fans herself as she stumbles along in the darkness. "Phew... Artorias, it's getting hot down here. Can we go up for air?"

Artorias's reply comes after a short pause. He shoves another load of earth ahead of us. "No. We're not out of the angel's territory yet."

"How much... much further is it?" Nerissa asks. "I hate the heat."

Artorias practically growls out his reply. "Well, summon some ice and cool yourself off. We have at least a few more miles to go."

"I can't. My body is too hot for that."

"I don't know what to tell you. If we go up, the angels will spot us. We'll end up mincemeat on the carving block. You know how good their vision is."

I loll my head forward in frustration. "Yeah. I know. Agares, how are you holding up?"

The demon to my right grunts. "I'm fine. The heat doesn't bother me. It's the cold I hate."

"Hah... guess we're opposites, huh?"

"Something like that."

After a moment, Artorias resumes punching the dirt away. We continue traveling forward at an agonizingly slow pace as Nerissa mops sweat from her forehead.

Agares nudges me. He keeps his voice low. "If you're tired, you can ride the sled. There's some room left."

"N-no. I'm fine. I just... I need some air. I wouldn't want to burden you like that."

I can barely make out Agares waving his hand dismissively. "Eh, suit yourself. How are your ribs holding up?"

"Still feels like a cave bear mauled me. Michael certainly didn't... didn't pull any punches."

Agares nods. "Sorry to hear that."

Minutes pass. We all continue walking in silence. I glance back at the ice-sled and frown. "Agares, I think it's starting to melt."

"Yup. It's getting harder 'n harder to pull every second."

"I can't make any more ice unless we surface. If it breaks down..."

Artorias continues punching the air to create our tunnel, but he tilts his head back. "If that happens, then we'll leave them behind. Once we make it to the Lair, we can send someone back to pick them up."

"What? No! We can't- ah... can't do that..." Nerissa gets a little too excited, sending a sharp stinging pain through her chest.

"Well, I cannot dig and carry our injured at the same time. You can't lift anything right now, either. Agares only has two arms. We don't have many options-"

Artorias pauses.

"Oh. Damn."

Panic creeps into Nerissa's voice. "What? Is something wrong?!"

"No. We've already arrived. I misjudged the distance to the Lair. I didn't realize it extended this far south."

With one last punch, Artorias shoves more dirt aside, and flickering torchlight floods the darkness, illuminating the three of us, along with the sled full of unconscious demons.

Blissfully cool air rushes into the tunnel. Nerissa gasps and stumbles forward, savoring the sensation of the breeze against her skin.

Seconds later, half a dozen demons appear at the opening. The battered and beaten survivors that managed to escape Heaven glance at us curiously before lightbulbs appear above their heads.

"Oy, ain't that Agares? And Satan's lady, too?"

"Artorias! Welcome back!"

"Whose bodies are on the ice thingy?"

Questions barrage us. Artorias pushes the nosy demons aside. "Out of the way. We've got injured here. Agares and Nerissa faced off against two Archangels and nearly died. Belial, Lucifer, Bael, and Diablo are in bad shape, too. They all need healing."

Agares rubs his head. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Treat the others first."

We step into the underground tunnels of the Demon Lair and arrive amid mostly dead space. Where before there were dozens of demons meandering in the halls, only the five or so that greeted us are here, now.

I look left and right. "Where... where is everyone?"

A young, scraggly-looking demon flicks his eyes up and down my cut-apart body. "Nyek! Big meeting at Death's Head to see who'll be the new boss! Satan's dead, so someone else has to lead!"

The young demon looks away from me and turns his attention to Artorias. "Where've you been, bro?! I killed like, ten angels all by myself! You should've seen it! I was all, 'wham, pow, koochaw!' And the angels were like, 'no, no, don't hurt us, please!' It was sick!"

Artorias blinks. He nods at the younger demon. "Yes, I'm sure you did a good job, Barbatos."

"I did, I did! I kicked all their asses!"

A large, obsidian-skinned beside Barbatos whacks him over the head. "Silence. All you did was cry and plead for mercy. If any angels perished, they did so out of embarrassment."

Barbatos rubs his head. "Y-you don't even know, Smealum! You weren't there at all!"

"Enough," Artorias says, cutting both of them off. "Barbatos. Show everyone to Hellga's healing chambers. Help Belial first. Once she's fixed up, she can heal the others."

Artorias turns to Agares and me. "As for you two, head to Death's Head after Hellga does her thing. I'll tell everyone at the meeting to wait until you arrive."

Nerissa raises her hand hesitantly. "Uh, um... Smealum? Satan... is it true... is he dead? Is there a chance he survived the battle?"

Before the dark-skinned demon can reply, Barbatos jumps in. "No way! That idiot got offed by Raphael! He went down like a total chump! Raphael sucked 'im into this weird portal and came back a minute later, barely injured. Satan got his ass handed-"

Artorias swings his arm out and backhands his brother, knocking the annoying little grunt on his ass. "Barbatos! Keep your trap shut. I won't listen to any insults regarding our former leader."

Barbatos glares at his older brother. "Hey! What's the big idea?! You can't tell me what to do!"

"I can and I will, as your older brother." Artorias crosses his arms. "Got something to say about it?"

Barbatos starts to retort, but he keeps his tongue in check. "Tch. Whatever." He turns to scowl at Agares and me. "Come on, then! I ain't got all day!"

Sighing, I shrug at Agares as the little whiney brat turns and stomps away. "It's not like we don't know where to find Hellga..."

Artorias turns to walk in the opposite direction from Barbatos. "Apologies for my brother's words. He can be... difficult. I'll see you all in a bit."

I nod. "Thank you, Artorias. We wouldn't have made it without you."

The muscular demon commander pauses for a moment before heading away. "My condolences for your loss."

I merely nod and turn away, offering no reply.

Nerissa's gaze shifts inward.

Satan... what will we do without you?

A gorgeous demoness with long black hair and slinky, cat-like legs kneels beside Belial, dabbing ointment all over her body. "Oh, my. This seductress took quite the beating! How about you, Nerissa? Are you doing alright?"

I nod. "Yes. My ribs are killing me... but I'll survive."

"Not if those get infected, you won't. Those bones are poking through your skin!"

The demoness barely wears anything. She isn't a succubus, but she has curves in all the right places. Barbatos and Agares' eyes follow her ass as she struts from one side of Belial to the other, bending down occasionally to rub healing solution on her broken body. Her leopard-print lingerie seems wildly inappropriate for a place of healing, but demons have a very different culture compared to humanity.

Agares slurps some drool from his mouth. "Damn, Hellga. You're a sight for sore eyes. Almost makes getting my ass beat by Michael worth all the trouble."

Hellga turns and winks at him, flashing a cheery smile in the process. "Oh, Agares! You're such a sweetheart!"

The lizard-demon blushes. He turns away, unable to meet her gaze.

Barbatos, on the other hand, grins like a lovestruck idiot. "I bet there ain't anyone sexier than you, Hellga! What's a guy gotta do to get you in the Relief Chambers, eh?"

"My chastity is what makes me beautiful, boys! You can look, but if you touch, I'll have to break all your bones! And after that, I'll heal you and break them again! Hahaha!"

Hellga resumes her doctoring of Belial's wounds. After a moment, she furrows her brow. "Okay, that's about it. Now to wake her up."

Lucifer, still unconscious, lies a few feet away from Belial. Diablo and Bael, likewise, can barely take shallow breaths. Their bodies, weak from a hundred years of torture, hardly give them enough energy to breathe.

Hellga presses her index and middle finger against Belial's forehead. Frowning, she closes her eyes for a moment to transfer mana to the unconscious succubus.

"Huhk!"

Belial jerks awake with a start. "Haah... haah..."

Her breathing comes in uneven spurts for a moment before leveling out.

"Wh-what happened? Where am I- ahh... ch-chest hurts... my legs, too."

Hellga leans back and flashes a pleasant smile. "I gave you some mana. Heal yourself if you can. After that, you've other wounded to heal in the tertiary chambers."

Belial shakily raises her hand. "Okay. Just... just give me a moment."

A minute later, she motions with her hand. Her internal organs rapidly heal, along with her battered bones and skin. Soon, the succubus leans forward and sighs. "Whew. Devils. I need to sleep for a week. I've never felt so tired in my life."

"Definitely. But first, you're going to help me. Up and at 'em!" Hellga grabs Belial and yanks her to her feet. "Here, have some more mana. Heal Lucifer, and then we'll continue to the other survivors."

Belial blinks. Her eyes widen. "Ah! That's right! What happened after Michael-"

"You'll see for yourself, in due time," Agares says, holding his palm up. He sighs and scratches his head. "Satan died. That's all we know so far. Those of us that are left are going to have a meeting in a little bit. The sooner you get everyone healed, the sooner we can sort out what's happened."

A sense of gloom descends upon us. Belial walks over to me. "Are you doing okay, Nerissa? I know you and Satan were..."

Nerissa turns away. "I'm fine. We.. we were only together for... a little while."

My words ring hollow. Belial crosses her arms. "Mmm. If you say so, we'll talk later, okay?"

"Sure."

Belial leans forward and winces as she examines the cuts and bruises covering my body. "Walking around naked with these wounds is going to lead to an infection."

I shake my head. "My body hurts too much to... to wear anything. The last thing I want is clothing against my skin."

Belial nods. She quickly weaves magical signs, mumbles something under her breath, and presses her palm against my shoulder.

The pain that hits me a moment later makes me pass out for a few moments. I wake up on the ground, writhing and whimpering as my ribs suck back inside my chest. My skin rapidly repairs itself, and within a minute, I can only shudder at the phantom pain coursing through me.

"Nnn... it's true what they say about your healing being worse than the injuries."

Belial tosses some bearskin clothing over to me. "Sorry. I tried not to make it hurt too badly."

After gathering her strength, Nerissa pulls herself up and gets dressed. While she slips into underwear and clothes, I find myself wondering why it is she's so comfortable standing naked and getting dressed around other demons. I'd feel weird if people saw me in the nude. She doesn't seem to care at all and has no inhibitions whatsoever. It's strange.

Again, it's probably demon culture, but I can't help thinking there might be more to it than that. Maybe I'm just a prude.

Nerissa fluffs her blue hair and sits on a cot, rubbing her hands together while Belial heals Lucifer and the others.

Eventually, Belial finishes. Lucifer rises and dusts herself off.

One quick chat later, and Lucifer nods.

"So that's what happened. I can only hope Valac survived his battle against the Archangels. His power dwarfs Satan's. If he leads demonkind, I believe we will soundly crush the angels."

Nerissa scoffs. "You think Valac has something Satan doesn't? *Please*. I appreciate Valac saving some of our people, but Satan gave his life to save Diablo and Bael. That's what makes him a true leader."

Lucifer groans. "Or a moron. We lost *how* many grunts trying to save two captured weaklings?"

The four-breasted demoness violently gestures toward Diablo and Bael lying side-by-side in adjacent cots. "Look what we have to show for it! Thousands dead, and these two saved! Wow, Satan was *such* a military genius!"

Agares clears his throat. "Ahem. Let me butt in. Satan wasn't just trying to save Deebs and Bael. We also went there to try and kill a few angels, and to see how we compared to them. That's why a few hundred of us stayed behind, just in case the angels annihilated our attack force. The broodmothers would allow us to birth more demons over time."

Lucifer rolls her eyes. "A test. Of course. You'd believe anything our *beloved* leader said. Oh, well. When Valac arrives, he'll bolster our forces. I can only pray he's smarter than the gobbler of meat we had before. Tch. What idiot would think facing an Archangel one-on-one was a good idea?"

Nerissa bows her head. Her cheeks flush red as images of Michael's emotionless face appear in her memories.

"Y-yeah. Probably not the best idea someone could come up with."

Belial leaves us as she heads off to heal the other demons.

"I'll finish as quickly as possible. Just give me a few minutes."

Footsteps echo down the hallways as several hundred demons march behind me. Agares, Belial, and Lucifer take the lead, and I follow them. All the demons Belial healed are in good spirits, which is remarkable considering the devastating losses they've suffered.

Barbatos chitters to another young demon. "Chee! My brother thinks he's big stuff, always going on about the rules and how important they are. Can you believe that? It's like we're livin' with the bloody chickens all over again."

The other demon raises an eyebrow. "But... weren't you born *after* leaving Heaven?"

"I lived there in spirit!"

Nerissa ignores him. Soon, the corridor begins to expand. We arrive at a massive underground room the size of a small stadium. Two thousand demons plunk on the floor in the middle and along the walls, each chattering to their neighbors about this and that.

Artorias stands at the entrance. He turns to look at us as we arrive. "Ah. There you are. Took you long enough."

Belial sighs. "Sorry. Healing two hundred demons with our remaining mana reserves took a while. It will be a while before I can heal again. I hope the angels don't discover us now, or we'll be goners."

Artorias nods. "Well, as long as you guys can talk, that will be satisfactory. I think this is everyone. We can begin the meeting."

Artorias's expression darkens. He gestures for Agares and Lucifer to follow him. The three of them head off toward the front of the room.

I sit down beside Belial and some other demons. We watch as Artorias claps his hands together.

"Everyone. I know you've heard the rumors floating around. Grigori did his best and held open the portal to the very end... but, unfortunately..."

Nerissa frowns. She turns to Barbatos. "Rumors?"

The young demon shrugs. "Dunno."

Artorias sighs. "...Valac perished. Camael and the Valkyries attacked him with their full might and scorched him with divine flames. There's no easy way to say it... so, there it is. He's dead."

Nerissa's jaw drops. The entire room erupts into frantic whispering as demons nudge each other, asking if they've heard the news or not.

"Quiet, please. Quiet." Artorias holds up his hand to silence the room. "The long and short of it is that with Satan and Valac gone, we need new leaders. I don't think anyone can argue that they were by far the strongest out of all of us... but we can't dwell on the past."

Artorias rests both of his hands on Agares and Lucifer's shoulders. "Lucifer created the Broodmothers. Her combat skills are excellent. Agares, too, is an excellent fighter. Both of them have the vision necessary to lead us-"

"NYEHEHE!"

A voice cackles around the room, interrupting Artorias's speech. Above us, a specter materializes in midair. Valac hovers and laughs wildly.

"Listen to Artorias, telling such a lie! Only a fool would think this king could die!"

Valac sweeps his arms outward, as if to call forth our gazes.

"How quickly rumors spread of my defeat, but in the end, the angels fell for my deceit."

Lucifer stares up at Valac. "What are you on about? What deceit? What happened to you?"

Valac lowers himself to the ground. He towers above all the other demons, like a living wall of bone.

The Reaper stabs a finger at Lucifer. "Silence, wench! Your performance against Michael was lame! Three against one, but you lost in shame! Against you, the Archangel's blade did maim, but it was our honor which Agares reclaimed!"

Agares quickly shakes his head. "Err, no- I didn't do all that much..."

Valac raises a finger to silence him. "Now, now Agares, there's no need to protest. From a distance, I witnessed your combat prowess. You stood your ground against the legendary Michael, then followed with a duel against his brother, Gabriel. All of that, and you fought alone, while these defeated women lay prone."

Agares bows his head. "W-well, I mean... I kinda, just..."

Lucifer scowls at Valac. "Hold on a moment. I thought we were working together. Where do you get off insulting me like that? Michael was unstoppable! It was hardly a fair fight!"

Valac chuckles. "Oh, what's that? Unstoppable, you say? Without any effort, I could keep them at bay. Admit it, Lucifer, you're weak like an ant. I thought you'd be useful, but your strength is scant."

Lucifer clenches her hands into fists. "Valac, you... bastard. After everything I've done for you, you're going to sit there and pretend you succeeded without my help?!"

The demoness's third eye begins to glow. Valac holds up his hand. "Careful, now, there's no need to get cranky. Don't do anything brash; you wouldn't like me when I'm angry."

"Screw you!!"

Lucifer's eye shifts to red. A moment later, a shockwave shoots out and slams against Valac's body. The Grim Reaper flies backward, and several demons barely get out of the way in time as he hits the wall with a terrific *CRASH!* Lucifer starts to motion with her hands to summon a magic spell, but she pauses and frowns. Valac's body goes limp as he falls from the wall and slaps to the floor.

Just like when the angels 'killed' him in Heaven, the Reaper's bones seem to evaporate, leaving his rags to flop in a pile.

"What? I killed him?" Lucifer's jaw slackens as she stares at his dead body in surprise.

A moment later, the air beside Lucifer shifts. Valac appears and swings his fist out. "SURPRISE!"

Wham!

He pounds the side of her head with terrific force, sending the demoness flying. Lucifer rockets to the side and tumbles into the crowd of onlookers. Her body becomes a fleshy projectile, battering dozens of demons aside. Yelps of shock go through the mob.

A moment later, the room goes dead silent as everyone gazes at Lucifer's unconscious form.

"You are weak, as I stated before! There's nothing worse than a mouthy little whore."

"Lucifer!" Agares jumps into action and runs over to her. He quickly pulls her out of the crowd and checks to see if she's breathing. After a moment, the reptile-demon scowls at Valac. "What's wrong with you?! You nearly killed her!"

Valac crosses his two lower arms. "She attacked me first, and I countered in self-defense. To blame me for her weakness would make no sense. Ah, well, women can't help being dense, but perhaps I can offer some recompense?"

The Reaper holds up his top-left arm. With a quick flourish, he summons his lantern. A moment later, he vanishes in a puff of smoke and reappears beside Agares. Before the young demon can protest, Valac shoves him aside and reaches his skeletal hand out. Valac grabs Lucifer's face, and goes silent.

Agares stares wide-eyed as Lucifer's body twitches. Despite being unconscious, she writhes for a moment, then suddenly awakens and begins thrashing like an enraged octopus.

"Mgm!! Mmm!" She grabs Valac's arm and tries to yank it off her face, but the Reaper slams her head against the ground. He pets her hair with another hand, sending shivers down my spine.

Only when the Reaper nods and finishes his magic does he release her and pull away. Lucifer gasps and slumps to the side. She claws at her neck, as if trying to tear something out of her throat.

"Ah... ahh! What- what did you do?! There's something... something inside me!"

Valac chuckles. "Hehe. Satan's magic is gone, and now I've set you free. Well? Aren't you going to thank me?"

Nerissa shifts uncomfortably. *Valac must have done to Lucifer what he did to me. He grabbed me by the face and... put something in my body. It felt like... like a **worm**.*

Lucifer shudders to her feet. The demoness eyes Valac warily. "Why would I thank you? You've done nothing for me."

Valac places his lower palms against each other and fans his upper arms outward. "Ah, but you are wrong, for I have given you a gift. Take a look inside yourself; for your powers, I did lift."

The demoness stares at him for several seconds. When she doesn't immediately praise him, Valac launches a fist at her face. Startled, Lucifer jerks to the side, avoiding his fist with impressive speed. Valac continues swinging at her, using all four of his arms, but her body moves far faster than before, to the point that I have trouble following her actions.

Up, down, left, right. Lucifer moves astoundingly fast, avoiding all of Valac's punches. Valac finally stops, and she retreats several steps, gasping for breath the whole time.

"Haah, haah! What happened? I... I dodged before I even saw you move!"

Valac wraps his hands behind his back. Satisfied with the looks of astonishment from the demons filling the chamber, he spins on his heel and struts away from Lucifer.

"Listen carefully, you little feeders. There's no need to gawk and stare. Accept me as your leader, and with you, my power, I will share. While Lucifer's increase has proven quite ample, she has had but a meager sample. Countless souls are mine to grant, but more will come once Satan's post I supplant."

Artorias, having watched Valac's rampage the whole time, raises his hand. "A question, Valac. What are these 'souls' you speak of?"

Valac tilts his head back. "Oh, you don't know? I thought you were bright. Souls are the essence of every being; that which gives them might. To wretched demons like us, creatures of the night, souls are the gifts that keep on giving; our eternal light."

Artorias purses his lips. "So, you're saying souls are inside of everyone? They make us stronger?"

Valac nods. "Indeed, how sad I am that you do not know. Were Satan a better leader, upon you this knowledge he might have bestowed."

Artorias narrows his eyes. "Satan knew of that which you speak? He knew about these... these *souls*?"

"Indeed. Satan was a soul manipulator, just as I. He kept his powers a secret, and left you all to die. After all you'd been through, he showed you no respect. A pathetic excuse for a demon; what more could you expect?"

Barbatos jumps up beside me. "Holy crap! I want souls! Where can I get some souls?!"

Valac's cheerful tone hardens. "Silence, you insipid little shit. Speak only when spoken to, or your lip I'll split. Times have changed. Satan is your leader no more. I am your King now; many changes I have in store."

Slowly, Valac begins pacing back and forth. "No longer will demons regard one another as equals. Such lies will poison us and prove to be lethal. Satan was a caring demon, one who took too many risks. With him gone, our evolutions must become brisk. Sit back and listen; take my knowledge to heart. My conquests will soon be yours, but only after my wisdom, I impart."

* * *

Valac begins weaving a series of words together, describing his recent triumphs. He goes into exhaustive detail about the thousands of Titans he's killed, and how they fear him at every turn. His rhyming grates on my mind the longer he speaks, but as long as I'm in Nerissa's body, I can't protest.

Finally, the Grim Reaper stops. He rests a hand on Artorias's shoulder and gazes out at the crowd.

"Any questions?"

The room is so silent that I could hear a pin drop.

Nerissa raises her hand.

"I have one. If you're so strong and so far above the rest of us... if the Titans fear you and you held your own against the Archangels... then what purpose do we serve? Can't you kill all of the Titans and Angels by yourself?"

Her question hangs in the air for several long seconds, like a rotting apple moments before it falls off a branch.

Valac rubs his hands together. The movement seems unusual, given what little I know about him. He looks nervous, almost as if he isn't sure how to respond.

The moment passes. Valac rises to his full height and cackles. "Nyehehe! I don't, foolish little girl! Listen to you, pretending you're a pearl! I could chew up every demon and spit them in the dirt, but I'm offering you all a chance for your powers to exert. A war is coming, one I'd sooner not avert. We'll draw a line in the sand, and our dominance, *assert*."

Cheers ring out in the hall. Nearly all the demons in the room yell wildly and clap their hands, excited at Valac's tales of dominance and power. Several of them eye Lucifer, imagining how strong they'll be when they join Valac's side.

Nerissa doesn't clap. She crosses her arms and frowns as Valac turns away.

He's lying. Satan told me about Valac. He's a self-serving demon, one who doesn't give the damndest about others of his kind. Satan cared about all of us. That's why he sent my sisters and me to rescue Diablo and Bael. Valac would never do such a thing.

As the cheers ring out, Valac raises a hand.

"Quiet. I have one last thing to say. It regards our future, and how our fortunes could decay."

The applause dies down. Most of the onlookers lean forward and listen intently for Valac to deliver some bad news.

"Fate, unyielding, is the cruelest mistress. Her ways are filled with death and distress. Some of you may look ahead with a hunch or a guess, but I see perfectly our path to progress."

"I have foreseen that a threat will soon arise — a Titan, unlike any other, with rage burning in his eyes. His power, terrifying, has the potential to dwarf even mine. We must all work together to eradicate his bloodline."

Artorias frowns. "How do you know this specter of tomorrow will be a Titan? Furthermore, why not kill him now if you know who he is?"

Valac shakes his head. "The rivers of time branch out in all directions. His face hides among a thousand others to evade detection. Seeing the future is not an exact science. It resists my gaze and offers endless defiance. If his face I could see, I would kill him in an instant while cackling with glee."

Satisfied, Artorias nods. "I understand. I think everyone here has made it known who they want to rule demonkind. I don't know if you'll be better than Satan... but it's clear you have experience dealing with Titans."

Lucifer shivers. "I don't trust him, even if he did give me a little boost. Nobody hits me and gets away with it."

Nerissa jumps to her feet. We pump our fist boldly. "Yeah! I don't trust you either, Valac! You're hiding something from us!"

"Nerissa!" Belial hisses at me from below, but I ignore her.

Valac's head turns from left to right as he evaluates Lucifer and me both.

"Watch your mouths when you talk to your king. Anger me, and I'll make both of you dance on my string."

Valac seethes for a moment before turning to Agares. The reptile-demon stands a few feet to Lucifer's right and grows visibly uncomfortable when Valac's gaze sets on him.

"You there, Agares the Brave. I haven't forgotten you, nor the lives you've saved. Your battle against Michael left me impressed; A mighty warrior like you deserves only the best. Your reward is near; come close and kneel. Your body will strengthen, and your skin will steel."

"I... I haven't really, uhm..."

Agares glances at me. Guilt washes over his face, as if to say, *I don't deserve special treatment.*

However, he loses his nerve. Swallowing, he kneels before Valac and flinches as the Reaper reaches toward him.

Instead of violently grabbing Agares face, Valac merely rests his hand on the demon's scalp. Agares winces after a moment as one of Valac's worms enters his mind, but he utters no audible complaint.

When Agares stands, Valac claps his hands together. "There it is, your powers have awakened. Make sure that during battle, you remain unshaken."

"Y-yeah," Agares mutters. He shuffles backward as Valac beckons to the crowd.

"Let's get a move on; I haven't got all day! Once everyone is empowered, we've Titans to slay!"

The room explodes with two thousand cheers. "Yeah!"

All the while, Nerissa watches disapprovingly.

Dammit. I wish Satan was here. With Valac leading us, I see only misfortune and loss in our future.

Part 116: Sanctity of Heaven

I appear inside Camael's mind once again. She walks beside Raphael through a much bigger city in Heaven than I've seen before. Tall stone houses stand erected alongside the road, offering ample space for the cherubs and seraphs who live inside.

Raphael turns to look at us. "Art thou certain this artifact will heal Uriel and Uzziel?"

I shake my head. "Nay. However, 'tis our best bet. I had hoped to refine its magical properties further, but with Uzziel and Uriel both comatose, I cannot simply rest on my laurels and do nothing."

Camael raises her fist. In her grasp rests a simple golden band, perhaps 8 inches in diameter. The unadorned object, apparently one of her holy artifacts, is unassuming and barebones compared to the others I've seen.

"What is that?" Raphael asks.

"'Tis a unique artifact, unlike others I've created. When someone places it upon their head, it grants a substantial increase to their cognitive abilities. I designed it to help me focus my mind... especially given the disturbing visions I've seen of late."

Camael lowers the band to her side. It takes me a moment to deduce it must be Solomon's Crown... or at least, the early prototype.

Raphael clears his throat. "Oh? What sorts of visions addle thy mind, sister?"

The moment Raphael asks, Camael pales. She continues staring straight ahead, a neutral look etched into her face, but her heart races.

"Ah, well, I suppose 'disturbing' might be too strong a word..."

Raphael reaches up to touch my arm. "If there is anything troubling thee, I am always here to listen."

"I know, and I thank thee, brother. My dreams of late have merely been..."

Camael trails off. She glances away for a moment as she tries to think of something to say.

"...they have been confusing. Yes, confusing. That is an accurate statement. I foresaw the demon attack, but I did not envision Valac's appearance."

A moment passes. The two of us slowly continue walking, and Camael lowers her eyes.

"The Grim Reaper told me something before our battle. He said that he, too, could peer into the future. His vision, like mine, could pierce the fog of time."

Raphael's eyes narrow. "Oh? Is that so? Art thou certain?"

Camael's heart flutters. To herself, she thinks: *Yes. He spoke of the same events that I have foreseen. Short of a lucky guess, t'would be impossible for him to invent such a future.*

However, she shakes her head. "Nay. After all his bold claims, he perished in a most unceremonious death. The Reaper was, most likely, lying."

Raphael nods. "Let not the words of silver-tongued demons worry thee, sister. The Hammer of Heaven has never failed us in the past. Thy foresight has saved us from many a calamity, especially during the..."

The Archangel of Wisdom falls silent. His words hang in the air.

"The Ancient Wars?" Camael asks.

"Mmm."

Raphael grunts, but doesn't elaborate.

Camael cocks an eyebrow. "Art thou saying that in all my life, I never once failed our people?"

Slowly, Raphael swallows. His gaze darkens.

"Well. There was... there was one moment where thy visions failed to predict something. 'Twas in regards to Michael, and how he... he..."

The old man falls silent once more. Camael raises an eyebrow.

"Did something happen to Michael?"

"Nay," Raphael says. He takes a moment to think before choosing his next words carefully. "'Twas not what happened *to* him, but... something he... bah..."

Raphael waves his hand flippantly. He leans against his staff and shuffles a little faster. "'Twas a different era. Ignore the ramblings of this old man."

An awkward silence falls between the two Archangels.

"Aye," Camael whispers.

Each of them, the two eldest angels, carries a secret. Neither of them wishes to burden the other with their load, but as a passive observer, I can only wonder how differently things might have turned out had they spoken more honestly to one another.

* * *

The two Archangels chatter idly for a while, and soon I begin to notice a marked increase in the buildings lining the streets. Up ahead, in the distance, a massive stone castle looms against the backdrop of Heaven. Until now, I hadn't noticed its presence due to fog obscuring it. Indeed, the further we travel, the cooler Heaven becomes. It never reaches a level I'd call 'uncomfortable,' but the decrease is probably more noticeable in the sky.

A massive stone wall surrounds the fortress. Cherubs and seraphs fly to and from it, landing in the streets to our left and right. Several angels wave and bow respectfully at us.

Despite the losses angelkind suffered during the battle with Valac, the mood in the city seems relatively positive. That is, until I begin to notice telling glances here and there. A few angels smile at us, only to quickly look away as if they have questions they dare not ask.

Camael glances at Raphael. "Now that the initial remembrance ceremonies have concluded, who should we first honor among our brothers and sisters? Many died valiant deaths against the demon scourge."

Raphael rubs his forehead. "Hmm. I've given that matter much thought. Many of our siblings are high-strung, fretting over whether we will pick a cherub or a seraph. None of the Valkyries or Templar perished during the battle against the demons, so we cannot begin with someone of high rank."

"Perhaps, Brother Listrus? He fought bravely and gave his life to save four cherubs."

"Possibly," Raphael mutters. "I am also considering Sister Vera. She slew a hundred demons before the vermin overran her. By the time we pulled them off, she was scarcely recognizable."

Camael nods. "All of our family members fought courageously. Despite Valac's servants terrorizing our ranks and driving some of our finest to madness, everyone held the line. Choosing the first to venerate will prove quite difficult."

Raphael pulls his pipe out from under his robes. As he lights it, he murmurs under his breath, "Yes, hmm. I wonder who Muriel would choose."

"Muriel? Why mention her?"

Raphael puffs on his pipe. "These recent tragedies have weighed heavily on my mind. Muriel was always one to stand strong and conceal her emotions. She never faltered, not under any circumstance. To say she was the most steadfast in her convictions would be to undersell her devoutness to the Creator's will. She would have chosen the perfect candidate - someone that none could argue against."

A moment passes. Raphael sighs.

"Sadly, I lack such prescience."

"As do we all," I remark, while gently squeezing his shoulder.

* * *

We continue onward, but before we arrive at the fortress, Raphael turns left towards a large, stone monastery. It lacks the religious symbolism I've seen in similar buildings on Earth, but retains the beautiful stained-glass windows and intricate stonework. A twenty-foot doorway opens up onto a porch with several marbled pillars. When I scrutinize the columns more carefully, I notice that they aren't held together with mortar or any adhesive agents. Instead, each stone has been precisely cut to fit in with the others. A gentle bump might send the whole thing crashing down.

Camael's thoughts turn inward. *The Holy Haven. Our injured brethren usually come here to rest and meditate after training. For now, we've converted it into a makeshift healing sanctuary.*

The closer we draw to the monastery, the more injured angels I spot. Several limp around, while others lack arms, ears, or other appendages. One older angel, someone who looks to be about fifty, appearance-wise, rests on a stone bench outside the door. His left leg, cut off above the knee, hangs off the side of his seat uselessly, while his right rests on the ground to stabilize himself.

He glances at us. "Camael. Raphael. How dost thee fare on this fine day?"

I nod at him. "Brother Klein. I am well. We're here to try and restore Uriel and Uzziel's sanity. Is Michael inside?"

Klein nods. "He is. The poison caused some lasting damage to his right arm. The healers say it might lose some of its speed and strength... but given time, they hope he'll make a full recovery."

"Time, perhaps, yes," Raphael replies noncommittally. "We'll see what Uzziel has to say when she wakes up. Isn't that right, Camael?"

I nod. "Uzziel is our best healer. If she cannot remove the poison, nobody can. I thank thee for thy assistance, Klein."

Klein tilts his head respectfully. "Farewell. May the Creator's light shine upon thee."

Camael and Raphael nod before heading inside.

Even more injured angels mill about within the Holy Haven's interior. One of them spots us and hobbles over. I recognize him as Shepherd. His right wing, still broken, tilts awkwardly to the left, while his left arm is little more than a stump.

Shepherd's face flushes as he draws near. "S-sister Camael. I... I wanted to apologize for my conduct."

Camael raises an eyebrow. "Apologize? What for? Thy warning alerted Gabriel and me to Valac's appearance. Had thou not done so, many more of our brothers and sisters might have fallen."

Shepherd bows his head. His scraggly white hair spills off his shoulders and over the front of his robes. "Ah, well, my panic was unbecoming of a cherub. In the face of evil, Heaven's Finest mustn't lose their composure and beg to flee the battle. I, ah... I ask thy permission to resign from my post. I intend to rejoin the acolytes in praise of our Creator."

Before Camael can reply, Shepherd gestures to his missing arm, where a bandage lines its stump. "Besides, I won't be much use in battle."

Raphael nods. "Very well. I know that stepping down is considered shameful by many, but far be it for me to stand in thy path. The Creator favors those who speak the truth and gaze inward to reflect on themselves. I am certain that one day, thou shalt become a fine servant of Heaven."

Shepherd forces a smile. "M-my deepest thanks, brother Raphael. Thy words soothe the regret in my heart, even if only a little. I leave both of thee in peace."

All three of us bow stiffly, and Shepherd leaves.

Raphael waits until Shepherd is out of earshot before sighing. "Haah. The last thing we need is one less warrior among our ranks. With the demon menace temporarily curtailed, things might seem to be looking up, but until we've eradicated every last one of them, we cannot sit idly."

Camael rubs her gauntlets together. "Speaking of that, I have a question. How dost thee suppose the demons grew so rapidly in number? Dozens escaped Heaven, yet thousands attacked us after only a hundred years. Such an explosion in population seems... unprecedented."

Raphael immediately waves her question away. "Bah. Soul manipulators stand amidst the ranks of our enemies. Those who deal with darkness and pull power from the blackest evil gain many unnatural talents. 'Twould be an infinite guessing game if we were to speculate."

"Certainly. However, if the demons can spawn more of their brood, then we won't know if we've killed them all. Discovering the source of their reproduction will be essential to eradicating their filth."

Both Archangels pause for a moment as they draw near to one of the inner chambers. Raphael pokes at his beard with his pipe. "Mmm. Yes. A fair point. I will give it careful consideration."

"My thanks, Raphael," Camael replies.

We step into a spacious room, one with dozens of beds. Many angels lie comatose, including Uzziel and Uriel. Both of them rest in the center of the room, while male and female healers walk around, gently pressing cloths to the heads of their brothers and sisters.

Raphael furrows his brow. "Everyone here fell under the demoness's spell?"

"Aye. While traveling to rescue her captured brethren, Lucifer struck dozens of cherubs down. I know not how her spell works, but perhaps if I can awaken Uzziel and Uriel, they might offer some answers."

"Did she manage to free them?"

Camael shrugs. "We have yet to confirm the whereabouts of Michael's prisoners."

"Hmm. I see," Raphael says, his tone neutral. "Doubtless, they've escaped our clutches."

We walk over to Uriel's side. Her labored breathing and pained expression makes me wince inwardly, especially when remembering what Lucifer's mental barrage against Uzziel entailed. While I may not know what visions dance in Uriel's mind, they likely involve her worst nightmares.

Camael raises Solomon's Crown. The dull, drab band seems very small and insignificant compared to the one I wear now.

She reaches over and places it on Uriel's head.

Immediately, Uriel stiffens. She stretches out and goes rigid like a plank of wood. Her eyes squeeze shut, her hands ball into fists, and she begins to twitch in pain. "Unhh! Ahhh!"

Raphael's expression turns to shock. He reaches for the crown. "T-take it off! Thy artifact is hurting her!"

Camael watches silently as Raphael tugs and pulls at the band. "'Tis impossible, brother. Only the wearer of my artifact may remove it. Thy efforts are pointless."

Raphael tugs on the crown for a moment before recoiling as Uriel's arms suddenly swing-out in a wild frenzy. Spurts of fire shoot out of her mouth. "Ahh!! Ahhh!!" She flails around like an angry animal while screaming and crying. Her wings twitch and spasm.

After thrashing around violently for nearly a minute, Uriel goes still.

Her eyes open.

"Uh... uhhhh...."

"Sister? Sister?!" Raphael's jaw drops. "Cans't thee speak? Art thou alright?!"

I wipe my forehead. "Do not worry, Raphael. Uriel is going to be fine."

Uriel stares at the two of us for a moment before fully shaking off her stupor. "Raph... Cam... where...?"

"Welcome back to the realm of the living, little sister," Camael says. "Thou hath slept under a dark spell for quite some time."

* * *

Several minutes pass. We wake up Uzziel and all the other angels in the room via Solomon's Crown.

With everyone conscious, Camael breathes a sigh of relief. "Brothers, sisters. I am overjoyed that all of thee hath awakened once more. A demoness placed a spell upon thy minds, sealing all of thee inside a terrible trance. Fortunately, I managed to break thy mental shackles."

The now-healed patients nod politely, but flickers of emotions pass across each of their faces. Uzziel bows her head, unable to look me in the eye. Uriel clenches her fists as tears streak down her face.

"It was only a dream... only a dream," The Archangel of Protection whispers. "I have never felt so much pain and anger... in all my life. What sins have I committed to deserve such suffering?"

"Blame not thyself," Raphael says, as he sits beside Uriel and touches her fist. "Instead, focus thy anger on the one who attacked thee. Lucifer, the three-eyed she-devil. Cans't thou explaineth the magic she employed? We must prepare a counter, if possible."

Uriel slowly shakes her head. Her expression turns to disbelief. "I don't know. One moment I was preparing a spell to attack the demon den, and in the next, my mind collapsed on itself. I felt as though I had fallen into a never-ending abyss. The faces of my friends, past and present, judged me. They told me I was worthless; that I was a failure. That's when the torture began."

Uzziel nods. "The same happened to me. This... this *eye* appeared. It dismembered me time and time again. I suffered a thousand deaths in a thousand different ways. I'm still having trouble believing that it's all... over..."

Several angels grunt in agreement. A few of them reach out to hold the hands of their nearest brothers and sisters, squeezing their palms together as they silently pour out their emotions through touch.

Camael stares at Uriel for a moment before closing her eyes. "I am sorry the she-devil hurt thee, little sister. We shall make her regret attacking Heaven."

Spinning on her heel, Camael turns and heads out of the room, leaving Raphael to comfort the injured. He makes no move to follow us.

"Many thanks, Camael, for saving us," Uriel says.

I don't reply.

Once Camael leaves the room, her nostrils flare.

Lucifer didn't merely hurt my sisters. She violated their minds. I knew she was a vile monster, but to go that far...

Camael wanders around the Monastery with her fists clenched. Her blood slowly boils as she mentally pictures the hateful displays of violence she wishes to unleash on the demoness.

"Sister? Camael?"

A voice interrupts her thoughts. Camael turns to face the speaker. The cherub, a man wearing heavy armor similar to Camael's, evaluates us silently.

"Chester. Is something the matter?"

The cherub coughs into his fist. "Ah, thy expression just now... 'twas quite intense. Art thou in low spirits?"

Camael unclenches her fist and exhales.

"Something like that. I've successfully awakened Uriel, Uzziel, and the others from their trances. It seems the she-demon, Lucifer, beset terrible visions upon them and tortured their minds. I... I am trying to control my thoughts, but my anger is reaching a tipping point."

Chester nods. "When Uzziel arrived at Mount Sinai with the Devil himself following her, 'twas I who led them into Heaven. I barely survived Satan's attack, but my brothers were not as lucky as I. Mordred and Listrus fell shortly afterward."

Bowing his head, Chester turns slightly to show me his back. Gashes in the metal reveal animal claw-marks, like those belonging to a dire wolf.

"By the Creator!" Camael's jaw drops. She steps toward him to trace her fingers across the metal. "What manner of creature could rend apart my enchanted metal?"

Chester swallows. The white-haired angel turns away, unable to meet my gaze. "'Twaz the doing of a green-skinned demon, one who resembled a reptilian creature of nightmarish origins. His fighting style caught me off-guard. Were it not for Brother Listrus tearing the cretin from my back, I might have died. Sadly, Brother Listrus perished moments later when a flame-manipulator demon seared his eyes out. His screams... they still haunt me."

Camael wraps her arm around Chester's back. "I am sorry, brother. Thy suffering is surely immeasurable."

"I keep replaying that moment in my mind," Chester says, as his throat cracks. "When I landed before Uzziel, and she told me that Satan had come in peace. I... I should have run my sword through his heart right then and there. I should have severed his head from his neck and left his black blood to sully the landscape. I-"

"Enough of that talk," Camael says, pressing her finger to his lips. "If anyone must replay regrets in their mind, t'would be I. My visions foretold a battle would happen, but I ignored them. I tried to change the future and failed. Thousands of our brethren left the realm of the living because of me. Thy actions hath no bearing on the future. Do not blame thyself, Chester."

The young man opens his mouth to retort, but thinks better of it. "Aye, Camael. I apologize for placing my load upon thy shoulders. Surely, thou hath suffered more unimaginably than I."

"Every brother and sister lost is irreplaceable," Camael replies. "Do not compare thy pain to someone else's. Now, if thou will excuse me... have thee any idea where I might find Michael?"

"Michael?" Chester asks. He pauses for a moment before nodding. "Ah, yes. I believe he is visiting the Haven gardens. Catherine has been attending to his needs."

"Naturally," Camael murmurs. "She is Michael's most devoted sister. Well, I must take my leave. Farewell, Chester."

"Peace be upon thee, Camael."

* * *

Camael heads outside and flaps her wings. She soars above the Monastery's roof and swoops down to the rear. A lush garden with thousands of flowers, each one a different color from the others, lines the grounds. Neatly trimmed hedges combine with handcrafted stone benches to give a peaceful area to meditate and relax.

The Archangel frowns.

As we land, she looks to the center of the garden, where Michael and his four Valkyrie sisters stand in a circle around a foul sight. A demon, long-since dead, stands strapped to a cross made of wood. The demon's broken and battered body tells a story of abuse after his death. Even as Camael stares, Michael rears back and punches it in the stomach, sending tendrils of blood shooting from the corpse's nose.

"-many weak spots, like so," Michael says. I head toward him, but none of the others notice me immediately. "Never turn thy back on one. We've seen how the wretches lied and deceived Uzziel. She gave them passage into Heaven, only for them to turn-"

Michael stops mid-sentence. He spins around and yanks out his sword to point it after me. His body language is that of terror, but it only takes him an instant to register my identity. "Ah. Camael. D-do not sneak up on me like that."

Camael brushes Michael's sword aside. "My apologies. I did not mean to frighten thee, Michael. What art thou doing with... with this cadaver?"

Michael quickly sheathes his blade. His right arm, now in a sling, hangs uselessly before his stomach, but he appears perfectly adept at using the left one for swordplay.

"Training. I am teaching my sisters the best methods for slaying the bloodskins."

Camael's frown deepens. "Bloodskins?"

"Aye. An apt name, is it not?"

"I don't like it. Such a term is too vulgar and foul for the purity of Heaven."

Michael scratches his chin. "Respectfully, I disagree."

Camael sweeps her gaze across the other angels present. *Catherine, Sophia, Penelope, and Hyacinth. Why has Michael gathered the Valkyries? For training? Nay. 'Tis unlike him to take anything seriously.*

When Camael's eyes settle upon Catherine, she blushes and begins tracing her fingers through the air to form magical letters. *Sorry, Camael. Michael wouldn't listen. Do not be mad.*

Camael nods. She returns her attention to Michael. "Must thou string up this demon's body so near to Cassiel's Citadel? Our brethren needn't gaze upon its remains, especially so soon after the battle."

Michael shrugs. "Tis no matter. Before long, Earth will run red with their blood. We might as well grow used to the sight of dead demons."

A moment passes. Camael wipes her forehead and sighs. "I care not what hatred thou unleash upon demons, dead or alive, but keep thy recreational activities away from our places of healing."

Turning away from Michael, Camael nods at Catherine. "I am glad to see thee, sister. Have thou suffered any serious injuries?"

Catherine shakes her head. She traces her fingers through the air. *No. I am well.*

"Excellent. Well, thou art the one I wanted to see anyway. I've come to deliver a present."

Camael lowers her gaze to a satchel tied to her waist. She pops open the leathery bag and reaches inside to procure a small, marble-like object. She holds up the tiny ball and motions with her hands to pour mana into it.

After a few seconds, the blue marble begins to glow and spin energetically. It explodes into a puff of smoke, and Camael snatches two large objects out of midair before they can hit the ground.

"Long has it been since I gave away one of my holy artifacts, Catherine. However, thou hath proven thyself many times in the past. During this last battle, thou didn't courageously save Michael's life, while also slaying the Undead King, saving countless other lives. To say Heaven owes thee an unthinkable debt would be a gross understatement."

Camael holds out the objects. My breath catches as she lowers her eyes, allowing me to see them in full detail. "This sword is little more than one of my scraps. I have hastily decided to name it the Sword From Heaven. The Creator knows I am terrible with names, haha."

Camael holds out the blade. Every fiber of my being aches as I realize it's the same weapon I summoned to fight Amelia.

Catherine. Of course. I recognized her name, but I didn't think she was *the* Catherine. After all these years, I've finally come to learn another fascinating detail that led to the present day. The puzzle pieces click together ever faster.

With a nod, Catherine respectfully takes the sword from Camael's grasp. Her expression turns to awe as she hefts it, comparing its weight to other weapons she's wielded before.

In Camael's left hand, she holds a tower-shield, substantially larger than the light-construct Catherine summoned during her fights against the demons. While surprisingly lightweight, it seems sturdy enough to deflect the explosion of a grenade at point-blank range.

Catherine's jaw drops as Camael holds the shield up for her to take it. *Two artifacts? No. No. I am unworthy.*

Michael smiles. "Take our sister's gifts, Catherine. 'Tis a rare sight for me to witness her giving out such powerful relics. Honor Heaven by using these relics to kill our enemies unceasingly."

Behind Catherine, Sophia clutches her fists to her chest. The pink-haired angel *squees* excitedly. "Ahhh! Cath, this is great! Thou dost deserveth a present after thou hath done for us! Come now, don't be shy!"

Catherine hesitantly reaches out and takes the tower shield from me, then holds it to her side and smiles sheepishly. Despite the burns on the right of her face, her radiant grin lights up my day. She's astonishingly beautiful.

She summons mana with her new sword to trace letters in the air. *I offer my eternal gratitude, sister. I will honor Heaven.*

Camael returns her smile. "That isn't all. Next week, dear sister, Raphael and I intend to promote all of the Valkyries. Thy bravery in combatting Valac allowed us to defeat him, as well as drive the demons from our sacred realm."

Michael's jaw drops. "A promotion, too? Heavens, sister! Thou art starting to make me a little jealous."

"Hah, a most excellent jest, Michael. Raphael and I have decided that Catherine has earned a new title. Naturally, Sophia, Penelope, and Hyacinth deserve praise too. While I have no relics to spare, know that all of thee shalt receive rewards aplenty in the coming years."

Hyacinth bows her head. The white-haired beauty blushes. "We need no gifts, Camael. 'Twas Catherine who slew the Reaper, after all. We are ecstatic that thy blessings rain upon her."

"I knew thou would utter such words," Camael says with a smirk. "How lucky I am that all of thee art so humble, even-"

Before Camael can finish her sentence, a voice cries out. "What is the meaning of... of *this*?!"

Frowning, Camael turns around to spot Raphael, Uriel, and Uzziel standing some distance away, though when they arrived, I don't know. A look of horror stretches across the eldest Archangel's face. "Michael! Why is that... that *corpse* strung up in the Haven's gardens?! How dare thou defile Heaven's holiness with this wretched filth!"

Behind the old man, Uzziel gazes in abject horror. Uriel, however, appears indifferent.

Raphael squeezes his staff, embedding his bony fingers deep into its wood. His teeth grind together, and veins bulge in his forehead.

"Remove this corpse at once! I will not allow thee to profane the Haven's sanctity!"

Michael sighs. "Brother, I am merely using this creature's body to teach our warriors their weak points. I'm too infirm right now to leave the Haven's vicinity, so I merely-"

Raphael growls. "No! There is no excuse for this barbarism! We do not defile the dead! We are angels! What would the Creator think if he knew thou were disgracing his holiness?! Take it down! NOW!"

Raphael storms forward and violently shoves Michael aside. The Archangel of Courage stares in disbelief as the old man summons a small knife from his holy energy and begins cutting at the rope securing the corpse to its cross.

"'Tis only a demon, brother! Why art thou so angry?"

Raphael looses both of the demon's arms and lowers its body to the ground, then begins working on the rope securing its feet. "*Why am I so angry*, he asks? Because, this is not the angel way. Such acts belong firmly in our past, not here where-

Raphael pauses. He shoots a look of surprise at Michael, realizing he nearly said too much. Then, he quickly returns to cutting the last binding.

"Tch. Do not test me, Michael. Thy bloodthirsty ways will only lead down a path of evil. Angels should not torture and maim. We only kill if we must, and strive always to be merciful."

Raphael finishes freeing the corpse. Before he can heft it, Michael balks. "*Mercy?! Never did I consider thee a jester, brother! After all the atrocities and betrayals these bloodskins have committed, dost thou expect me to show them mercy?!*"

Raphael jumps to his feet. The old man turns to face Michael. Despite being a few inches shorter than his younger brother, the eldest Archangel's presence seems to increase. His aura towers over Michael, and he takes a menacing step forward.

Raphael's voice lowers to a rumble in his throat.

"We. Show. Mercy. Angels must never relish cruelty. Dost thee understand, *little* brother?"

Michael shrinks back. The fearless Archangel cowers under the gaze of his eldest brother.

A moment passes.

"Y-yes. Of course, Raphael..."

Michael's voice shakes. Terror appears in his eyes as the eldest angel stares him down.

Raphael's tongue snakes out of his mouth. After a few seconds, he turns to the nearest Valkyries. "Penelope. Hyacinth. Take this body and burn it with the others." He bites off every other word, and the Valkyries merely nod, their faces ashen.

Whirling on his feet, Raphael glares at me. "Dids't thou not think to rebuke our foolish younger brother? And here I thought thy honor mirrored mine."

Without waiting for a reply, the Archangel of Wisdom flaps his wings and takes off, leaving the others behind.

Camael opens her mouth to speak, but decides against the idea. Soon, Raphael disappears into the distance, leaving those nearby to tremble in silence.

Michael gazes at the body for several seconds. Confusion, shock, and anxiety flash across his face like a raging thunderstorm.

"I... I do not understand. Why does Raphael... why does our brother care so much about... about..."

Camael's voice hitches. "I th-think... it might be due to our history. The ancient wars."

Michael reaches up and rubs his face as if to try and smooth the worry-wrinkles from his brow. "Our ancient history, thou sayeth? Tch. How am I to know about those dark times? How are any of us?"

Camael lowers her gaze. "I don't know, Michael. Hyacinth, Penelope... follow our brother's orders. Burn the body. Do not question him. He knows best."

Uzziel appears at my side. She touches my arm. "I'll help."

"Nay. Thou art still weak from thy mental imprisonment. Allow the Valkyries to perform their duties."

I turn to fly after Raphael, but pause. Uriel stares at me, a look of irritation in her eyes.

"Sister. Is it true that demons slaughtered thousands of angels while I was comatose?"

Slowly, I nod.

"Aye. Satan launched a surprise attack on Heaven, but we managed to repel the attackers."

Uriel curls her lips up in disgust. She turns her head away to look at Michael. He averts his eyes, unable to meet her gaze.

"While I lay dormant, the demons slaughtered thousands of my brothers and sisters. Raphael expects us to show the little bastards mercy? I never got to say goodbye to my family. I'll never see them again."

I hold up my palm. "Cease this discussion. If Raphael tells us we need to show mercy to the cretins, then I'm sure he has a good reason. Let me speak to him. Maybe I can ascertain why he is so concerned."

Michael relaxes. He crosses his arms. "When wretched hounds scratch at our doors and kill our family, the only mercy they deserve is a swift death. I love Raphael, but he is an old man stuck in his old ways. I disagree with his orders, but I will do what I can to respect them nonetheless."

Michael gestures to the body. Penelope and Hyacinth nod and pick it up, though they try not to touch it too closely. Penelope recoils in disgust. "Tch. The fiend smells of death. Let us hurry and send it to the eternal fires where it belongs."

Both of them fly away to burn the body, leaving the rest of us behind.

Sophia, the quickest to recover, waves at Uriel. "Sister! I'm glad to see thee awake and lucid! Everyone was worried stiff about thee!"

Uriel's face, still a mixture of anger and disgust, softens immediately. "Yes. I apologize for troubling thee, but I am awake now. My dreams, while tormented and painful, only served to harden my convictions. I am pleased that all of my students survived Valac's attack."

Sophia springs over to Uriel and hugs her eagerly. "Yup! We tore that boney brat to pieces! By the time Cath used her flames, the only thing left from him was ash!"

Uriel's smile falters. She glances at Catherine. "Sister. Thou unleashed Jörmungandr's Dragonfire?"

I nod. "Aye, Catherine did. Worry not. Her sacrifice saved my life and those of her sisters. Valac would have slain all of us had she not done so."

Uriel pulls away from Sophia and walks over to Catherine and Michael. She reaches out, lifts Catherine's right hand, and pulls her gauntlet back. Charred black flesh from a recent burn stretches up past her gauntlets and deep inside her chestplate.

Anger flashes across Uriel's face. "Tch. I warned thee not to use those flames! Thy body cannot handle Jörmungandr's draconic mana."

Catherine pulls her hand away. She motions with her fingers, causing words to appear in midair. *I am fine. Barely hurts.*

"Don't give me that. I know thou art lying." Uriel grumbles. She turns away and motions to Uzziel. "Come. Try and assist our sister. Perhaps thy magic will relieve some of her pain."

Uzziel, having recovered from the shock of seeing the demon-punching-bag, meekly walks over to Catherine. She nods. "O-okay. I'll try. I've never succeeded before, though. Draconic mana poisoning is ordinarily too potent for my healing to affect."

After a few moments, Uzziel gathers her thoughts. She begins to trace a series of intricate patterns in the air, forming magical signs with her hands. After a full minute passes, she touches Catherine's burns. The Valkyrie winces and tries to pull away, but Uzziel holds her steady.

"Do not move, sister. This is going to hurt, and I cannot lessen the pain. Stay strong for me, okay?"

Catherine continues to tug and pull, but Uzziel's grip is surprisingly firm. As magic pours from Uzziel's palm into Catherine's burns, Catherine opens her mouth as if to scream in pain, but no words come out. Only a slight hissing of air escapes her lungs. She begins to fight back even more violently, but Uriel jumps in to hold her left arm back.

"Resist, Catherine! Don't- gah!" Uriel staggers back as Catherine flails her arm wildly and decks the Archangel in the face. She starts to punch Uzziel, too, but as if she's done this a thousand times before, Uzziel uses her free hand to summon a wall of vines. They burst from the ground and wrap around Catherine's body, holding her in place.

"Stay still! I know it hurts, but thou must allow me to finish my incantation!"

Tears pour down Catherine's face. She continues to struggle, but Uzziel's vines prove too strong for her to escape. All she can do is whimper and sob while Uzziel's magic eats at her burns.

Camael's stomach churns as she watches. Sophia stares wide-eyed as the black, seared flesh slowly pulls back and regenerates. However, before it can finish, Uzziel releases Catherine and staggers back, sweat drenching her skin.

"Ahh... I... I cannot do any better. That... that is all I can manage..."

Catherine sags against the vines. With Uzziel's healing over, the Valkyrie melts into an incoherent, hiccuping mess. Her arm, now only half-healed, still looks like she fell into an oven and barely escaped after ten minutes.

Jörmungandr's flames... how did she come to possess them? Catherine hasn't complained once, but it appears she's in incredible pain. Is she always like this? Is her pain so extreme that she has simply learned to ignore it?

Michael reaches over and caresses Catherine's face. "Thou didn't well, Catherine. Rest, now. I'll carry thee to the healing pools."

Uzziel flops on the ground and motions with her hand, desummoning the vines. Michael gingerly lifts Catherine and helps her to her feet. He wraps his left arm around her waist and flaps his wings, taking off.

As they leave, Camael glances at the sword and shield she gave Catherine, now lying on the ground.

"Sophia. Please be a dear and carry those for Catherine."

"S-sure," Sophia says. She reaches down, grabs the artifacts, and takes off after the other two.

Only Uriel, Uzziel, and I remain. I turn to leave. "I'll speak to Raphael. Get some rest. Both of thee require time to heal thy bodies. Especially thou, Uzziel. Exerting thyself by expending magic so soon after waking up... thou art lucky ye haven't fallen comatose again."

Uzziel exhales. "Yes... I'm not the brightest... haha..."

With a flap of my wings, I take off, leaving the other two behind.

Camael's thoughts turn inward.

Why was Raphael so disturbed about the corpse? Even for him, such an outburst is unusual.

Part 117: Raphael's Secrets of Yore

It feels like an eternity has passed since I last saw the bonfire. When I open my eyes to find myself sitting before the three Archangels, with Solomon at my right, it takes me a moment to remember who I am.

"Oh. I'm back."

Solomon squeezes my shoulder. "Those were quite the series of events, eh, Jason?"

"Yeah, I'll say. Valac's rise... a massive battle in Heaven... Satan's defeat. How long was I under?"

Solomon smiles. "Thirteen seconds."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. As I said, my crown accelerates your mental processing speed. It probably felt like days passed, but in real-time, you've experienced my visions in a matter of minutes."

I blink and turn away. "Oh."

Solomon frowns. "Is there something wrong with that? Would you prefer it if time passed more quickly?"

"No, no, I'm just... it's weird, you know? I've walked hundreds of miles in the shoes of several beings. I've seen through the eyes of Satan, Nerissa, Valac, Uzziel, and even Camael. All of them in a matter of minutes. It's a bit surreal. I've never met the people in your visions, but I know how they think, their worries, their fears... all that stuff. I feel like I *get them*."

"Bah. I very much doubt that," Raphael says. The old man sits across from me on his log in the same position as before. In the darkness of the night, the flames from the bonfire send shadows dancing across his face, adding to the Archangel's mysterious air. "Hearing Camael or Uzziel's thoughts in passing hardly qualifies thee to claim thou knoweth them."

I raise an eyebrow. "Maybe not, but you didn't know about Camael's visions, or how harshly Uzziel blamed herself for Samael's death. More importantly, if you're such a wise and knowing Archangel, why did you let Uzziel enter Heaven with Satan? If Camael knew Satan was going to launch an attack, why didn't she stop him? You guys are friggin' illogical sometimes."

Solomon socks my arm. "Jason!"

"Nay, 'tis an excellent question," Raphael says. "I know not why Camael failed to use her knowledge of the future to bar Satan from entering Heaven. Perhaps, had we tried to stop him, Satan would have forcefully entered despite our best efforts. Perhaps the future might have played out the same way even if we had resisted. What I *do* know is why *I* did not try to stop Satan."

Raphael pauses. He narrows his eyes. "Not once did I believe that slimy snake had the best of intentions. 'Twas plain to me that he intended to deceive us. However, despite what others may say, wisdom does not entail omniscience. Even Camael, who could gaze into the future, was no god-like figure.

I wrongly assumed that, since the Devil entered Heaven with only one ally, he would be no threat to us. My senses were alert. I awaited his backstab, but he still caught me off-guard."

The Archangel of Wisdom crosses his arms and sneers. "Portal magic. I would never have guessed the demons had evolved such spells. Portal magic is dangerous and unstable. Among the Angels, only I and a few others, including Gabriel, could create rifts and gates to travel from one plane to the next. Of them, only I was adept enough to perform it without mutilating myself."

A moment passes. Raphael slowly peels back his robes to reveal the same scarred body I saw when he battled Satan.

"'Twas not always the case. Learning to master portal magic and the illusory arts caused me unimaginable agony. At the time, assuming the demons had unlocked such abilities was beyond my imagination. Now, of course, I no longer underestimate them, for I understand how their magic works."

"You do?" I ask.

Raphael clears his throat. "Hmph. Demon magic is frighteningly diverse, yet narrowly-focused at the same time. The so-called Warper demons can summon portals, but only one at a time. They lack all other forms of spellcraft and are remarkably fragile to boot. The ability to summon portals makes them valuable assets for traversing vast distances, but they are utterly worthless when it comes to combat."

I tap my chin. "So you're saying Warpers can open portals even more effectively than you?"

"I can open several at once, but doing so devours my mana. Warpers can only summon one portal at a time, and they also have to wait for their bodies to recover from the shock. I would not imply their abilities are superior to mine, though they're certainly more adept than any other angel."

I lean back and rest on my hands. A few moments pass as I think about Raphael's words. "Can I create portals? It seems within Wordsmithing's realm of possibilities."

"I believe you can," Solomon replies. "You can teleport, after all. Your manner of teleportation doesn't involve disassembling your body and rematerializing it elsewhere. You simply step through a rift in space and appear in a different area. As far as I can tell, you create miniature portals whenever you jump to new locations."

Raphael nods. "The Knowledge Seeker is correct, Jason. There is only one limitation regarding teleportation and portal-travel, and that is that thou must have already visited the location ye intendeth to travel. So long as thou dost fulfilleth that condition, it should be possible to summon a gateway there."

"Makes sense," I mutter. "Hmm. If that's the case, I might be able to make new gateways for humanity's use. It might allow us to travel further than the Labyrinth Core currently allows. Once I finish with these visions, I'll try making one."

* * *

Gabriel and Michael have stayed silent since my arrival, but now the Archangel of Power leans forward to stare at me. "So, Jason, what sayeth thee about Catherine? I'm sure thou hath questions."

"Not especially. I figured out at some point that Catherine was the angel the Sword of Heaven was named after. I'm not certain how she and Joan of Arc were related, though."

Gabriel nods. "Due to how Catherine saved Michael's life and defeated Valac, we promoted her to the rank of Saint, along with the other four Valkyries. Her promotion was unique, in that Camael gave her two magical artifacts to boost her combat prowess. Unfortunately, her fellow Valkyries did not receive such gifts."

I raise an eyebrow. "But Valac didn't die. He survived."

"We had no way of knowing that at the time, *obviously*," Michael says, biting off the last word. "Nor did we understand the lengths Valac took to deceive us. That demon was one of the cruelest monsters ever to walk the mortal plane. Even with the benefit of hindsight and Solomon's visions, it baffles me how far the Grim Reaper went to sow chaos among our ranks."

"You weren't much help," I shoot back. "Between torturing Diablo, Bael, and fucking with corpses, it's no wonder the demons started plotting your demise. What the hell were you thinking?"

Michael glares at me. His gaze turns to ice. "I hated the bloodskins then, and I still do now. They murdered Samael, one of my beloved brothers, and killed thousands more in the blink of an eye. 'Tis I who still wonders why Raphael demanded we show mercy to those... those... *animals*."

The Archangel of Courage grits his teeth and flicks his eyes to Raphael. "What were thy thoughts, brother? Do not tell me 'twas all about respecting the dead or some other rubbish. Bloodskins, be they dead or alive, merit no honor. They deserve fires and torture."

Raphael meets Michael's gaze. The two Archangels stare at each other for a few seconds before Raphael replies.

"My anger had little to do with Heaven's sanctity, 'twas true. Nor was I angered that thou were disrespecting a demon's body. Nay, 'twas for a different reason entirely."

Raphael purses his lips. The old man takes a moment to collect his thoughts before pulling his gaze away from Michael's. He opts to stare into the fire, allowing the crackling embers to pop and illuminate his haunted expression.

"Jason. The Heaven thou art seeing through Solomon's Crown was a stunning jewel. Angels lived in peace and harmony. We treated each other with respect and dignity, and never spoke badly of one another. However, 'twas not always the case."

The eldest Archangel's breath catches. "Once, in the eternity before time, brother fought brother, and sister, sister. Angels were a warlike species unlike any that came after. I remember those dark ages. Before we created the dragons, we drifted in the Void, bickering and squabbling over this and that. Back then, our mana seemed limitless. Each angel possessed the equivalent of galaxies worth of energy. As the eldest, 'twas my desire to curtail violence among ourselves, but I was only one person. I could not do it by myself."

"And so, when I discovered that my brothers and sisters had begun battling each other to determine who was the mightiest, I knew trouble was brewing. I tried to stop them, but I couldn't."

Raphael narrows his eyes. "How dost thee suppose the dragons came into being?"

Solomon bows his head. Michael's gaze softens. Gabriel's jaw slackens.

"Brother..." Gabriel whispers. "Art thou saying we created the dragons out of a desire for war?"

"Aye," Raphael replies. "Before, I stated that angels created the dragons to alleviate boredom. 'Twas not the case. Angels worked together to create a powerful monster; something that would challenge their newly awakened battle instincts. They poured vast reserves of mana into the dragon's body, infusing it with enough power that it rivaled the Creator. And thus, eons of bloodshed began."

Raphael shakily raises his pipe. He lights it with his thumb and takes several long drags on the tobacco inside.

"Some angels unleashed their bloodthirstiness with greater fervor than the rest. Naturally... Michael was among them."

Michael nods. "I guessed as much."

The old man closes his eyes and exhales a stream of smoke. "Is that so, little brother? Dost thou understand the past, the present, and the future as well? Dost thou *fully* comprehend why I went to the lengths I did to curtail our violent urges?"

"I am not all-seeing, Raphael," Michael replies, his voice low. "I believe violence serves a purpose. Thou may not savor my beliefs, but that is how they stand. Pacifism allowed the demons to overrun us. Seeking peace with our enemies enabled them to run roughshod over our defenses. Hads't thee followed my advice from the beginning; we might have snuffed out the demon threat before they overpowered us."

"At what cost?" Raphael asks. "Should we have tossed aside our morality in pursuit of vengeance? Perhaps we should have tortured the demons more! Perhaps we could have stirred up even greater animosity!"

The old man begins to raise his voice. He opens his eyes to reveal smoldering embers of anger.

"And then what, Michael?! Where would'st thee draw the line? Once we slaughtered all the demons, where might thou turneth thy gaze next? On the animals of Earth? The humans? Perhaps even thy brothers and sisters?!"

Michael balks. "I would never..."

Raphael rises to his feet. His teeth gnash together. "Thou would'st, Michael! I know such rage lies within thee! I saw it once! When Muriel and Cassiel begged thee to end the war against the Titans, ye turned thy cold, dead eyes upon them... and then... AND THEN..."

Raphael's entire body shakes with rage.

"Cassiel... Muriel... thou did'st *murder* them. Not because they dared speak against thee, but because of thy greed. Ye looked upon them and felt jealousy! For, after all the love they poured upon thee, ye only saw them as... as..."

"No..." Michael's eyes widen and his lower lip trembles. "I... I couldn't... I wouldn't have..."

"Ye could, ye would, and ye did!" Raphael says. He sits down again and turns his head away; disgust etched into every inch of his face. "How many eons did it take for me to end our bloodthirsty ways? How many of our siblings did ye kill before I finally found a solution? The mind-wipes weren't only to erase our bloody history, Michael. They were my last-ditch attempt to purge our destructive tendencies."

The old man closes his eyes. "They were my last attempt... and I failed."

Silence.

Nobody says a word.

Michael's entire body shakes and trembles as waves of guilt hit him over and over. Gabriel stares blankly at Raphael, seemingly unable to comprehend his words.

As for me, a question appears in my mind. *What did Raphael mean when he said Michael killed Cassiel and Muriel out of greed?*

Greed? What part of murdering his sisters made Michael greedy?

I don't understand the circumstances. The politics of angels are beyond my comprehension. What I do know is that my opinion of them continues to drop the more I learn. The demons are starting to look like saints compared to the so-called arbiters of righteousness.

The angels remind me of many people from my era. Self-aggrandizing, they would proclaim their virtue to the ends of the Earth, but in the end, they were little more than empty husks. That's what the angels are — flawed, destructive beings, and in some ways... *evil*.

As the thoughts cycle through my mind, Gabriel shakes his head. His appearance normalizes, as if he's already come to terms with Raphael's proclamation.

"Raphael. If thou were afraid of Michael returning to his old ways, why did ye not sit down and have an honest discussion with him? Our brother might be stubborn and obstinate, but had thee simply laid bare thy grievances, might not ye have been able to come to a resolution?"

Raphael waves his pipe in the air. "Perhaps in another life, I might have taken a different path. Michael is right, after all. There's no point dwelling on the past. Solomon's visions have proven that I failed my people repeatedly, and then I perished. What a miserable existence. What a pathetic *Archangel of Wisdom* I am."

* * *

Several minutes later, after all the Archangels have sulked and brooded on their thoughts, Michael stands up. He sweeps his gaze across all of us.

"I'm leaving."

"Huh?" I ask. "What do you mean?"

Michael ignores me. He turns to Raphael. "Had I known thou detested my presence so, I might have made different choices of my own. I'll leave thee to thy regrets, eldest brother."

Michael raises his hands to form a magic sign, but pauses.

Raphael slowly raises his head. His eyes meet Michael's.

The two of them gaze at each other for several long seconds before Michael breaks away.

"I'm sorry, Raphael. I didn't mean to... I didn't know... I couldn't have..."

Michael's words lodge in his throat. He closes his eyes, motions with his hands, and vanishes from the bonfire, leaving the rest of us behind.

I stare incredulously for a few seconds at the spot where Michael was just standing, then I nudge Solomon. "Uh. Where did he... go? Is he, like... dead?"

Solomon sighs wryly. "...Haha. No. He seized control of his ring and withdrew inside of it. I cannot contact him, for now. Not unless he wishes to speak to us again, if ever."

Raphael silently sticks his pipe back in his robes, leans forward, and rests his face in his palms.

"I... I swore never to say anything. I vowed to myself that I would never tell Michael about his past. I let my anger get to me, and now Michael has departed. 'Tis his right, given how many secrets I've kept from him."

I clamber to my feet, walk around the fire, and sit on the log beside Raphael. Gently, I pat the old man's back. "You made a hard choice, Raphael. Despite your tone, I know you love your brother. He'll come around eventually. You and he can have a long talk and work things out, right?"

Raphael doesn't reply for several seconds. The old man strokes his hands against his face in a circular motion, seemingly trying to rub his anxiety away.

Finally, he sighs.

"No. Michael is right. I hate him. I've hated him with all my being for so long that I can scarcely remember a time when I didn't. He is my brother — my flesh and blood. I love all the members of my family, but I could never bring myself to look at him the same way — not after what he did. He didn't stop with Muriel and Cassiel. Michael continued murdering hundreds, even thousands of other angels during the dragon wars. All to satisfy his... his wretched bloodlust."

Raphael lifts his head and folds his hands on his lap. He turns to Gabriel. "Tell me, Gabriel. What point is there in living anymore? What reason have I to go on, knowing 'twas my failure to lead the angels that led to our downfall? What right have I to continue drawing breath when our brothers and sisters have long since returned to the Cosmic Realm?"

Gabriel sheepishly rubs his shoulders. The gentle giant shrugs, unsure of what to say. "Well, I suppose our task now is to aid the hero? Ending our existences would mean giving the demons a final victory. I don't believe the others would like that. 'Twould dishonor the name of Heaven."

Raphael nods. He stares forward, his eyes looking not at Solomon, but through the ancient king as if he doesn't exist.

"Right. Of course. Counsel. Bah... what good is the guidance of an old man who couldn't even..."

He trails off.

* * *

I've never seen Gabriel and Raphael in such dismal spirits. Both of them stare forward, glumly thinking about the fate of their species, their failures, and a hundred other things I can scarcely imagine.

I grow antsy and get up to pace around. While the angels silently sulk and fret over this and that, I decide to break the silence.

"Why do some angels have different hair colors from the rest?"

Gabriel raises his head. "Hmm? What sort of question is that?"

"I'm curious. From what I've seen, most angels had white hair, but there were several women with different colors from the rainbow."

Gabriel stares at me blankly for a few moments, then shrugs. "Our sisters often liked to tint their hair. Uzziel created dyes from her flowers, and the women used them. That's all there is to it."

"Why, though? I mean, you guys were all siblings, right? Nobody was trying to look sexy for anyone else, were they?"

"I... I suppose not?" Gabriel shoots a glance at Raphael. "This hero is asking strange questions."

I nod. "Yeah, and here's another. You guys mentioned that Catherine possessed Jörmungandr's flames. How did she get that ability?"

Raphael blinks. He seems to come out of a trance and raises his eyes to look at me. "Oh... Catherine. Mmm. She, Gabriel, and Michael battled the mother of all dragons. In their final conflict, the three of them took a portion of the dragon's essence and sealed it within themselves. Michael took her body. Catherine, her flames. Gabriel, her spirit. Catherine wasn't supposed to use the dragon's flames because the essence of Jörmungandr's body and spirit were required to protect her from the dragon's fire. Dragonflame burns not only flesh, but mana as well."

I glance at Gabriel. "So... you and Michael are part dragon?"

Gabriel shakes his head. "Not exactly, but I suppose 'tis a decent allegory."

Before Gabriel can return to his thoughts, I fire off another question. "If Angels lived in Heaven after the mind-wipes and lived lives of peace, why were so many of them wearing armor when the demons first attacked? Why have a standing army if you guys weren't at war?"

Gabriel rubs his forehead and groans in annoyance. "Ugh... so many questions. We always worried the Titans might attack. 'Twas a minor risk, but nevertheless, we strove to maintain our defenses."

"When you and the Titans decided to ally against the demons, why were they so stingy with their mana if they could regenerate it? Why not simply-"

Jason," Solomon says, interrupting me. "I think that's enough questions for now. The Archangels need time to collect their thoughts."

A moment passes.

I sigh.

"Right. Sorry. Things were a little too tense for my liking."

I pause for a second before walking over and plunking down beside Solomon on the ground. He raises an eyebrow questioningly. "How many more questions *do* you have?"

"Several. I'm curious about some other things, like how Valac faked his death and why. I'm also trying to get a scope for how big Heaven's forces were. I know there were millions of angels, but their organization and structure evade me."

Solomon nods. "In due time, all those questions will be answered, especially the ones about Valac. I find his story to be the most fascinating of all the players in the Ancient Era."

Pausing to take a breath, Solomon cracks his neck. "Alright. We've dilly-dallied long enough. It's time to push forward. We're coming closer to the War in Heaven. By now, you've gained a solid idea of the circumstances leading up to the war, but there is still much to learn regarding the power dynamics of Ancient Earth. Are you ready for me to continue?"

I glance at Gabriel and Raphael. The giant Archangel rests his chin on his palm and stares at me blankly while Raphael gingerly begins to knock the burnt tobacco from his pipe before adding more and lighting it again. He's quite the avid smoker.

"Daisy's still asleep, right?"

Solomon closes his eyes for a moment, then opens them. "Yes. She's fine."

"Great. Let's return. I can't wait to see what happens next."

"You're not just saying that, are you?" Solomon asks.

"Nope. I genuinely enjoy learning about the past. That's why I studied mythology in high school."

Solomon purses his lips. "Mmm. That makes sense. Well, let's get on with it, then."

"Take me away, captain."

Part 118: War Is Coming

I awaken inside a new host's body and immediately wince at my dozens of sore, cramped muscles, electricity running through my fingertips, and fire seemingly burning on the surface of my skin.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..." My host says. "Don't... don't move it so fast... dammit..."

The person speaking is Diablo. His weak, pained voice escapes my lips as he grunts and moans under his breath.

We tilt our head to the left to gaze at Lucifer. The triple-eyed demoness sits beside me on my bed and slowly lifts and lowers my left arm, over and over.

Lucifer snaps at me. "Stop crying like an imp. Suck it up, buttercup. If we don't get your muscles moving, you might never walk again."

She bends my arm toward my chest, and a bolt of lightning shoots into my heart. "Ahh! Shit! You're hurting me on purpose, Lucy!"

Lucifer scowls at me. She twists my arm slightly, sending more agony coursing through my spine. "Don't call me *Lucy*."

"Fuuuck! Seven devils!" Diablo tries to raise his right arm to swat her away, but the slight motion only hurts us further. He grinds his teeth together and whimpers. "Lucy... Lucy, baby, please... it hurts..."

A flicker of doubt flashes across Lucifer's face. She rolls all three of her eyes and sets my arm on my stomach. "Fine. I can't stand all the racket you make."

Someone chuckles to my right. "Hehe. Lucifer's got a soft spot for you, boss."

I turn to look at Bael as he sits up in his bed. He holds one rock in each hand and slowly hefts them up and down to exercise his muscles. They look somewhat heavy, at least ten pounds each, but not so much that they're stressing his body.

"I most certainly do *not*," Lucifer says, as an edge of coldness creeps into her voice. "Nobody else wants to help Diablo recover, so I offered. That's all there is to it."

"Suuure," Bael says with a grin. His body, while still skinny and weak, appears more intimidating than it should, largely in part due to his confidence and charisma. While Diablo lays in bed infirm, Bael exercises on his own without any assistance.

Lucifer seems to notice this fact at the same time I do. "Did Michael torture you less, Bael? I'm surprised to see you moving, considering the Holy Energy still in your body."

Bael snorts. "Pff. Nah, he hurt us both about the same. *Sadistic piece of shit*. After a while, his magic stopped hurting me. Deebs wasn't so lucky."

I shift my head, weakly attempting to nod. "Y-yeah... Bael's made of tougher stuff than me. I... I still see Master's face, sometimes. His horrible... glowing eyes..."

"Don't call that Archangel *master*," Lucifer hisses, biting off the last word. "We are demons. We are our own masters. You're free of him, and don't you forget it."

Diablo closes his eyes. As the world fades to black, images of Michael's unsmiling, sociopathic gaze appear in Diablo's mind. The demon winces as Michael's ghost slowly drags a knife across his chest, splitting open his skin. We open our eyes and flinch as the unpleasant images fade away.

"I... I can't help it, Lucy. I see his face all the time — every second of every day. I'm helpless in this bed... what if he comes to get me? I don't want to go back. I don't want Mast-... *Michael* to hurt me again."

Both of the other demons fall silent. Bael continues grunting while he lifts his rocks, and Lucifer turns away.

"I doubt that will happen," Lucifer mutters. She appears uncertain, likely because she, too, is wrestling with memories of how easily Michael bested her.

The sounds of demons in the hall outside the healing chambers fills the emptiness in the air. While the three of us sit and ponder recent events, someone cackles beyond the doorway. A shrill voice rings out, annoying and nasally. I recognize it immediately as Barbatos's voice.

"Nyehehe! Me 'n Smealum did it! We did, I swears! There was this BIG cave bear, right? We ganged up on 'im and took that sumbitch down! We cut off its legs and ate its soul! It was freakin' awesome! You should've been there, bro!"

"As always, your propensity to ramble and exaggerate does little more than cause others to doubt you," Smealum says. Artorias steps into our room, and Barbatos trips through the door behind him, rubbing his head. Smealum, the black-skinned demon with a weirdly unique appearance, rubs his fist. It seems he must have lightly punched Barbatos's head at some point. "I hate listening to liars. In the future, each time you utter an untruth, I'll strike you again."

Barbatos spins on his heel to face his taller demon comrade. "Nyeh! I'm not lying! What are you on about?!"

"There was no cave bear, tiny one," Smealum says with disgust. The obsidian-skinned demon rolls his eyes at Barbatos. "It was a squirrel. You spent fifteen minutes trying to kill it. I wasn't involved in the slightest."

Barbatos smirks. "It was a BIG mean squirrel, though! Huge! It bit me all over the place!" He holds up his arm to reveal several small wounds. "See?"

Artorias sighs and rests his hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "Yes, yes. You beat the big bad squirrel. Let's not be impolite; we came here to see the wounded."

The annoying young demon wants to protest, but he gives up when his big brother shoots a glare at him. "S-sure..."

I cough to clear my throat. "Hah-hum. Artorias... how are you doing?"

"I'm well, thank you," Artorias responds. The muscular demon scrutinizes my frail, withered body with a look of pity. "Have you regained any of your former strength yet?"

"No. I haven't. Bael's doing okay. He'll probably be up and walking around... eventually..."

Bael grunts. "M'legs ain't there yet, but they will be soon."

"That's good to hear," Artorias says. He maintains a neutral expression for a few moments, then sighs. "Haah. There's no easy way to say this, guys. I've come to deliver some bad news."

Diablo frowns. "What kind?"

Artorias rubs his arms. "Valac says he isn't interested in giving you or Bael a worm. I'm sorry... he says you're too weak, and there's too much Holy Energy trapped in your bodies. His worm won't work on you."

Bael scoffs. "What?! Too weak?! Why, that boney little runt! When my legs start working again, I'll hop off this bed and crush the little bastard into bonemeal!"

Artorias shakes his head. "I would advise against that. Valac took on an Archangel and several Valkyries and won. You wouldn't stand a chance. Frankly, nobody would."

The witch-doctor demon snuffles, jiggling the bones pierced through his nostrils. "By the way, Lucifer, Valac has ordered all the able-bodied males to prep for a forest sweep. I have to go, so I'm hoping you can hold down the halls while I'm gone."

Lucifer narrows her third eye. "A forest sweep? What is that?"

"Valac wants us to sweep across the forest, killing anything in our path. His worms give us the ability to take the souls of those we kill. He thinks that if we start killing small animals, we can work our way up to fighting Titans."

Lucifer balks. "I should go. I'm not going to sit back and play den-mother while the men go out and have all the fun!"

Artorias shuffles his feet. His expression sours as he lowers his animalistic eyes to gaze at the ground. Before he can reply, Smealum speaks up. "Ah, about that. Lucifer, you're the only demoness Valac gave a worm. He rejected all of the other women."

Lucifer pales. "Only me? You're joking."

Artorias shakes his head. "I'm afraid not. Valac seems to believe the women are... how to put it..."

"Are what?!" Lucifer asks. She jumps to her feet and tosses her arms in the air. "That worthless bag of bones! Just say it! He thinks we're weak!"

Artorias shrugs. "For what it's worth, I don't think that at all. You and Nerissa took out Uriel and Uzziel, as well as that Titaness. Agares and I have tried arguing with Valac, but, well, he's too stubborn. It's not like we can force him to give the women worms."

Lucifer balls her hands into fists. "That son of a- gahh! I can't believe him! If he thinks women are so pathetic, then did he give me one only to humiliate me? Is that what this is about?!"

Barbatos chuckles. "Nyeh, is the little lady getting all mad? Afraid you won't be able to stand up to us big, bad men? Oooh! Pahaha-"

Artorias backhands his little brother, sending the twerp falling to the ground. "Quiet. Do not test my patience."

"Indeed," Smealum adds. "It's amusing hearing such big words coming from you. Lucifer is more than capable of reducing you to a pile of ash, should she choose to do so. I would keep my mouth shut if I were in your position."

Barbatos jumps to his feet. The scraggly little demon scowls at his brother and Smealum, then spins on his heel and storms out of the room. "Screw you guys! I'll make you regret looking down on me! I'm gonna go kill ten cave bears right this instant!!"

After he leaves, Lucifer exhales. She sweeps a finger across her bangs, pulling hair out of her face. "I don't know what Valac's game is, but I don't like it. If he won't give us his stupid worms equally, then I'll do something about it myself. I still have the power Leviathan gave me, after all."

Lucifer plops down on my bed. Her anger slowly subsides to mere annoyance. She glances at me. "Valac thinks you're too undeserving of his precious worm. Well? Do you have anything to say about that, Diablo?"

Diablo blinks slowly. "I don't know. I don't want to be infirm forever. I thought Valac's power would allow me to walk again. What am I supposed to do without it?"

Lucifer slinks her tongue out and wets her juicy red lips. "Screw Valac. We don't need him. He's a false prophet. His little parasite is probably part of some nefarious scheme to kill us all. I don't trust the bastard for a single second. Satan was naive and idiotic, but at least he had demonkind's best interests at heart. Valac has no redeeming qualities."

Artorias frowns. "Now, wait just a minute. I would not go that far. Valac isn't trying to kill us, but to bolster our fighting capacity. It is clear he has many methods for dealing with Angels and Titans. Perhaps he has some instinct for power, which we do not."

"Or maybe he's feeding you cave bear droppings," Lucifer counters. "I gave him information for years about the angels, Titans, and ourselves. My reward was a public humiliation. Valac is a snake. Only a fool would believe anything he has to say."

"A fool, perhaps," Smealum counters. "Or someone who gazes at the future with hope in their eyes. I'm not fond of Valac's proclivity toward violence, but given I am in the minority among our people, I can at least understand why they look up to him."

Lucifer crosses her arms, sandwiching them between her upper and lower breasts. "Tch. That's what I just said, but with extra words. They're fools for believing in him, end of story."

Smealum turns away, shrugging in response. "One man's fool is another man's hidden guru."

The longer he speaks, the more I begin to recognize various aspects of Smealum's physiology. The obsidian-skinned demon appears to be a member of a rare demon breed, one which Phoebe once called an Animus. Known for their fearsome power fresh from a Broodmother's womb, every Animus is born with higher intelligence and base power than other demons, but they also tend to cap their strength much sooner, making them relatively competent mid-tier warriors, but poor Duke and Emperor material.

I've also noticed that Smealum speaks very eloquently. Something about his vernacular seems familiar, almost as if I've heard it somewhere. I might have encountered him at some point. Tough to say, given how many demons and monsters I've met.

"Anyway. Sorry for bothering you, but now you know," Artorias says. "We have to go. I'm positive that sweeping the forest will be the epitome of tedium."

Smealum rests a hand on his hip. "I'm not going. I don't enjoy killing."

"What? Why?" Artorias asks. He turns his head to raise an eyebrow at Smealum. "Everyone must join this expedition. No exceptions. You heard Valac."

"Valac might be the leader of demonkind, but so was Satan. He ordered me to kill on several occasions, and I refused. I don't agree with the path of bloodshed."

"Right, right. You've said that before, but I wouldn't go against Valac's orders if I were you. He seems somewhat... unhinged."

Smealum doesn't budge. "I don't care what Valac says. I'm not the only demon with similar opinions. We might be a tiny minority, but my friends and I believe agitating the angels will cause a great tragedy. We should cut our losses, burrow underground, and avoid them."

Lucifer snorts. "A pacifist, are you? You sound like Belial."

"She, I, and a few others call ourselves anti-war, yes," Smealum says. "I don't agree with violence in any form. There are better ways to settle disputes."

I shake my head in disbelief. "You're... you're naive, Smealum. I've seen how cruel the angels can be. We can't trust them. They want to kill and torture us. Do you want to see everyone captured and put under Mas- Michael's control?"

"Of course not," Smealum mutters. "I never said I wanted that. I think the entire Heaven debacle was a mess, one which hurt us more than it helped. Then Satan had the bright idea to deceive the angels... now they'll be out for blood. We've only escalated the fight further."

Lucifer jumps to her feet again. "What are you saying?! Satan wanted to rescue Diablo and Bael! Do you think they deserved to suffer just so we could appease the angels?"

"Quite the contrary," Smealum replies, keeping his tone measured. "I'm glad we saved Diablo and Bael, but their lives came at the cost of several thousand others. If Satan cared about saving lives, perhaps he should have tried negotiating for their release as he said he would. You've heard Grigori's story of what happened, I'm sure. Satan had their rescue in the bag, but he instead decided to act out his petty revenge. Now he and thousands of other demons have fallen, while Valac took over the position of being our leader. I fail to see how negotiating for Diablo and Bael's release was a worse choice than what Satan did."

"What a dumbass," Bael says with a snort. He sets one of his rocks beside himself to point at Smealum. "You're a doofy little wimp. Satan knew rescuing me was worth sacrificing a few thousand losers. Everyone who died to an angel did so 'cuz they were weak and pathetic."

Smealum raises an eyebrow. "Didn't you get captured? If you're such a mighty warrior, then how did that happen?"

Bael falters. "W-well, I, ah... I got surrounded. I had to fight off thousands of angels by myself! They, uh, hit me with a surprise attack! Yeah!"

"Of course," Smealum sighs. He flicks his gaze to Artorias. "In any case, count me out of this 'forest sweep.' I'm going to meditate in a meadow somewhere far from the rest of you. I'll come back once you've all slaughtered and killed tens of thousands of helpless animals."

"Cave bears and wolves are hardly helpless," Lucifer hisses. "You're just a coward, too afraid to get your hands dirty. What do your Animus brothers think of your passivity?"

"I stand alone in my objections," Smealum admits. He turns to walk out of the room, only to pause at the doorway. "Even so, I don't avoid confrontation out of cowardice. I do so rationally by examining all of the options on the table. I wish people would listen to me more carefully, even if only to save lives. Oh well. I can't change everyone's mind."

As Smealum leaves the room, the last thing he says is, "I wish I could change *anyone's* mind."

His footsteps grow distant until they merge with the dull noise of the other imps and demons outside, all walking up and down the corridors, preparing to leave.

Lucifer rolls all three of her eyes and hisses. "Kss. I can't stand demons like him. Unwilling to fight, and it's always because of some personal quandary. If we don't resist the angels, we die. It's as simple as that."

Artorias shrugs. "I see where Smealum is coming from, but in the end, I don't agree with his opinions. Anyway, I'm not going to risk my neck for someone who wouldn't do the same for me. I'll return later after Valac says we've finished. Farewell."

I grunt out a goodbye, while Lucifer and Bael wave at Artorias. After he leaves, only the three of us remain.

Lucifer, still standing, rubs her hands together in circles. "After all my hard work, Valac cast me aside without a second thought. I don't have words to describe how much I want to tear him apart."

Bael grunts. "Hnf. Are you really gonna use the dragon's power?"

"Yes, I am. I created the Broodmothers. Perhaps I can use my abilities again, but this time to augment our forces. Valac thinks his worms are all we need to increase our fighting potential, but I disagree."

While Lucifer fumes for several seconds, Diablo sighs. "Do you think Leviathan's power could... could heal me? Is there anything it could do to help?"

The demoness nods. "Perhaps. Your magical pathways are twisted and distorted, along with your inner aura. Michael's holy magic did a number on your nerves... so I'll need to look into it further. For now, I'll help you move your arms and legs where possible. That alone might restore some movement."

Lucifer closes her third eye and itches the sides of it.

"Or it might not."

I nod weakly. "Thanks, Lucy. I'm glad you're here for me. Nobody else cares, but you do. That means a lot."

Lucifer opens her mouth to say something, but stops midway. She turns her back to me and sighs.

"I don't care about you at all."

A smile spreads across Diablo's face.

"Of course you don't."

To my right, Bael groans. "Ugh, you two are so cute... I think I'm gonna barf."

"Shut up, Bael. Idiot," Lucifer snaps. She marches out of the healing chamber, leaving me alone with the lunkhead.

"What a gal," Bael mutters after she leaves. "Four tits, three eyes, and no heart. I don't know what you see in her."

"Lucy rescued us," I shoot back. "She has plenty of heart. You simply can't look past her appearance."

"Sure I can," Bael quips. "I just worry she'll try'n take a bite out of your arm one of these days. Don't let that broad get hungry."

"I'll smack you if you keep talking about my girl like that."

"She ain't your girl till you've spanked her with your tiny little sausage!" Bael laughs. "Pahaha! She'll take off your pants 'n flee for the hills! You're doomed, pal!"

Diablo ignores Bael's guffawing and stares at the room's exit, his eyes seemingly following Lucifer's after-image.

"We can joke around all we want... but Michael hurt my girl. I can't forgive him. He cut her up and left her lying in the dirt. I hate him, but I'm scared, too. He's going to come for us. We have to get stronger so he can't hurt any of us ever again. *I* have to get stronger. I can't stay in this bed forever."

Bael stops laughing. He clears his throat with a grunt. "Huh. Yeah. I owe that bastard for what he did to me. I'm gonna kick his ass next time I see him. I'll do whatever it takes to win. When I'm through with that ugly chicken, there won't be enough left of him to fertilize a garden."

"Here, here," Diablo replies.

Despite his tough words, a shiver goes down Diablo's spine.

Can I defeat Master? Is such an act even possible?

Part 119: He Who Suffers

A small, stone house greets me as I arrive in the body of my next host. I've grown used to instantly identifying people in Solomon's visions, often by their height, the way they walk, the weight of their armor or clothing, and even the taste of their breath... but my host this time is unfamiliar to me. While certainly a female angel, my host is neither Camael nor Uzziel. Her small frame and even breathing reveals her top-tier physical condition. Metal clinks against her body as she walks, while the weight of platemail presses against her shoulders, rooting her to the ground.

I stop before the house and raise an armored gauntlet to rap my knuckles against the door.

Knock, knock.

When I lower my arm, a spasm of pain shoots up it, all the way through my neck, and into the right side of my face. My arm, neck, and face feel stiff, as if stretching would cause my skin to split and rip apart. The pain, too, feels fresh and electric. It isn't from an old injury.

My depth perception, too, is gone. My right eye either isn't open or doesn't work. I think it might be blind, but it's hard to tell.

Fifteen seconds pass while my host silently waits for the door to open. I glance around and take in the sights. Several other houses, each of modest nature, line the narrow street. Perfectly cut stones form their foundations and walls, much like the pillars of the Holy Haven. Each one stands perhaps twenty-feet tall, with a few outliers that rise two or three stories.

The door cracks open half a foot or so. My host flinches slightly and turns to face the Archangel inside, Michael.

Michael stands against the dimly lit interior of the house; his body silhouetted against Heaven's light. He blinks a few times, then clears his throat. "Mmm. Catherine? Why hath thou come?"

I raise my right arm and summon mana to draw letters in the air.

Brought ointment. Uzziel's orders.

Each letter I draw creates a slightly different *chime* noise in midair, making Catherine's magic words sound somewhat like a timid voice.

Michael opens the door all the way, exposing the interior of his house. His shirtless body reveals several scratches and scars, each one timeless and ancient like himself. He wears a loose-fitting pair of pants, which Solomon's Crown identifies as a Sirwal. His right arm rests snugly inside a leather sling, while his left holds the door open.

"I do not require any medicine."

Catherine frowns. The motion makes the right side of her face tense up in a manner I've never felt before. It's not exactly painful, but instead, uncomfortable.

The Valkyrie traces her finger through the air again.

My ceremony. Where were thee?

Michael rolls his eyes. "Ugh. Is that what this is about? I apologize. I didn't feel like-"

No excuses. I'm coming in.

Catherine walks forward and lightly pushes Michael aside. He balks for a moment but seemingly lacks the willpower to deny me entry. With a sigh, he closes his front door and follows me into his living room.

It's only now that I notice Catherine is carrying a small basket of flasks and flowers in her left hand. She sets them on a wooden table and plops down on a bench in front of it with a bearskin stretched across for comfort.

Michael's home is a simplistic, barebones place to live. No matter where Catherine looks, I can't spot any decorations, memorabilia, carvings, or anything else. A heap of swords and shields lie off in one corner, haphazardly piled there at some point in the past. A pot of tea quietly simmers over a crackling fireplace. Aside from a few slits that barely pass for windows, the Archangel's house is remarkably dark and barren.

Catherine pats the bench to her left and draws signs in the air. *Sit. I apply ointment.*

Michael stares at me. "I don't need... I don't... haah... fine. Do as thou please."

Defeated, Michael sits and turns his back to me. He slumps forward, almost as if he wants me to leave but can't bring himself to utter the words.

Catherine, however, ignores his non-verbal signals. She reaches into her basket and procures a mason-jar-sized flask with mushy green goop sloshing about inside. When she pulls back a cloth covering the top, an odor like death rushes out, filling the room.

Michael gags. "Kah! B-by the Creator! What is that infernal stench?!"

Ointment.

Michael uses his left hand to pinch his nose. "Procured from the filthiest of rats! Uzziel never holds back for her big brother, does she?"

Catherine pulls off the gauntlets on her hands, exposing her burned flesh. Her hands look worse in the dimly-lit room than when I last saw them at the Holy Haven.

Michael glances back and watches as we dip our fingers into the disgusting green slime. The goop sticks to our fingers like glue and comes out in heaping gobs. I raise my eyes to Michael's shoulder and wince inwardly at the nasty marks left by Agares' bite. Michael's skin, pale everywhere else, is instead several shades of green and brown around his shoulder area, the result of poison infecting his bloodstream.

As I pull the slime out and rub it against his wounds, Uzziel's concoction crackles and pops. It glows faintly, as if sucking some of the mana directly from Michael's body. The Archangel winces and turns away, gritting his teeth as waves of pain hit him. Catherine doesn't let up and continues smearing the glop all over his shoulder, front and back.

Five minutes pass. Both of us sit in silence as I apply several coatings of Uzziel's salve. Finally, I finish. Catherine grabs a rag from her basket and wipes her hand clean.

Done. Don't wash off. Don't sleep. One week to heal.

Michael's shoulders sag. The glop continues to pulse and glow every few seconds, but it seems the worst of his pain is over.

"Right. I'll do what I can. Art thou done here?"

Catherine purses her lips, making the skin on her right side crack slightly. *Want me leave?*

Michael quickly averts his eyes. "N-no. Of course not. Why would'st thou ask such a thing?"

A terrible liar, thou art.

Catherine stands and walks over to Michael's fireplace. His kettle bubbles silently inside, and Catherine pulls it off the handle. She lifts the lid and sniffs. Her thoughts surface in her mind. *This tea is old and stale. How long has it been since Michael boiled a new pot? Must I do everything for him?*

I've never heard Catherine's voice before. However, her internal thoughts, an echo of when she once was able to speak, ring out like crystal wind chimes in the breeze. Her voice is soft and demure, yet stout and uncompromising. She wastes little time debating this or that, instead jumping to logical conclusions as quickly as possible.

Michael watches as I walk into his kitchen, grab the scorching hot metal by the bottom, and dump the soggy tea-water out of the slightly larger windows. Despite my expectations of incoming pain, Catherine doesn't feel anything out of the ordinary when she touches the kettle. Whether that's due to lack of pain nerves, or immunity to heat, I don't know.

Michael coughs. "Ahem, ah, there's a cistern of water beside the vase. Selma delivered it this morning."

Catherine nods. She turns to where he's pointing, and her expression flattens. She motions with her hands. *My flowers. Dead.*

A glance toward Michael reveals little. He averts his eyes and shrugs. "They're only flowers. More will grow elsewhere."

They're dead, Michael.

This time, Michael visibly winces. "Sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean to..."

Catherine exhales. She turns away and grabs the bulky cistern with one hand. Effortlessly, she lifts the ceramic as if it were a piece of paper and pours water into the kettle.

A few minutes later, Catherine places the kettle of tea back on the fireplace to boil, then plucks several assorted flowers from her basket. She walks over to the plain brown vase, yanks the dead flowers out, and releases flames from her hands, scorching them to ash.

As she places the new ones in the vase, Michael cries out in alarm. "Ah! Catherine! Why dost thee summon Jörmungandr's flames for a simple act of cleaning!"

Catherine glances at her palm. Despite releasing hardly any fire at all, her skin crackles and sputters as a few blisters appear. Still, she feels no pain.

The Valkyrie motions with her other hand. *No want me burn? Maintain flowers.*

Michael's jaw slackens. He clambers to his feet and walks around the kitchen counter and grabs my hand to examine it. "Bloody- I told thou *never* to summon thy fire! Dost thee simply seek to cause me pain?!"

Catherine cocks her head. *Yes.*

Michael scowls and turns away. "By the name of Heaven..."

Catherine draws in the air again, and the sound of her magic makes Michael turn around to read. *Punishment for killing flowers.*

"Thou art hurting thyself to... to punish me?! In all my years-"

Michael rubs his face aggressively. He starts pacing back and forth, agitated. "It's because I missed thy coronation, isn't it? I would have gone, sister, but my wounds-"

Thy injuries are but an excuse.

Catherine interrupts her brother's words with the chime of her magic letters. He stops pacing to read them, and his shoulders slump once again.

"Yes, perhaps they are. What of it? I can take a few days off if I please."

Thy defeat. Stop dwelling on it. I will cry.

Catherine etches the words into the air, but I don't sense a trace of sadness in her. She stares at her brother evenly, giving me the impression she's either being sarcastic, manipulating him, or simply lacks any emotional faculties.

"Will thou?" Michael asks.

Perhaps.

Michael groans. "Thy machinations are unknowable. Why must ye tug at my heart?"

Catherine pokes at the bubbles forming on her palm, popping them and scattering pus across her burned skin. Then she motions with her left hand to draw words again. *Thy prisoners. Gone. Not returning.*

"Bah." Michael waves his hand flippantly. He turns away and wanders back to sit on his bench. "They were in my grasp. Then that... that little green bastard jumped me. Nobody sneaks up on me. Nobody!"

Michael grinds his teeth together. He balls his hand into a fist and slams it against his knee. "Filthy little- that worthless bug nearly killed me! I've fought hundreds of dragons, Titans, planet-destroying entities, and this one *tiny* little piece of filth nearly brought my legacy to an end. I had to be saved by... by..."

Michael trails off. He suddenly looks at me; shock etched into his face.

"No. I... I didn't mean..."

Catherine tilts her chin up. She stares down her nose at Michael.

Art thou angry? Because I saved thee?

"No, no, of... of course not."

Unworthy. Thou thinketh me useless.

"It's not like that, Catherine. I..."

Michael swallows hard. Guilt washes across his face.

"I didn't mean to disparage thy skills. It's just... perhaps... perhaps I have lost my edge. Perhaps I am no longer the mighty Archangel whom the dragons feared during the Ancient Wars. I'm beginning to believe my glory days have fallen into the annals of history. Thou hath surpassed me."

Catherine's gaze softens. She walks over, sits beside Michael, and rubs his back.

That's not true. No dominant arm? Thy swordplay is still peerless.

Michael bows his head. His scraggly, unwashed hair flops over his shoulders and hangs beneath his chin.

"I do not mean my skill with the blade, sister, but all the other aspects of my being. I tortured two little creatures for a hundred years... but to what end? They were no mighty conquest. Has Michael, one of the three Archangels who slew the mighty Jörmungandr, fallen so far as to maim insignificant little demons for sport? Have my senses dulled so much during peacetime that even those same creatures could nearly kill me with one surprise attack?"

He shakes his head.

"I am a failure. This useless arm is proof of that. Even while suffering from self-inflicted burns, thou didn't prove thyself a more capable fighter than I. Archangels have always stood leagues above our brethren, but I no longer deserve my position. I should... I should step down."

Catherine recoils at Michael's words. It takes her several seconds to formulate a response.

No. That would be foolish. One moment of weakness. Wake-up call. What dost thee always say?

Michael watches my words appear in the air, then stares at the fireplace. "It wasn't merely one moment of weakness, Catherine. I feel it in my bones. Lounging around for millions of years has caused my skills to fade. The mind-wipes erased my memory of all the battles Raphael has mentioned. I no longer remember a time when I fought with all my might, nor do I remember any point where my life was in danger. My life has become a mundane, dreary existence. I sit in Heaven, eating fruits and jabbering with my family... all the while, my body and skills atrophy away."

The Archangel glares at the fire.

"What is the point of living? I exist to fight. Without an enemy, I long for death. When I finally met someone worth testing my might against, I lost. My singular purpose; nullified. With Valac slain by thy blade, and Satan by Raphael's, the rest of the demons will surely perish within a few years. What, then? We will be at peace, once more."

Why not train thy body?

"Again, I ask, sister, to what end? I could spar with other angels, but I'd never summon my full strength against them. None would be able to keep up with me. Without a worthy enemy for me to unleash my full power against... without an opponent to boil the blood in my veins... my existence becomes only suffering. I long for either battle or the grave. Nothing else sustains me."

Catherine's breath catches.

What about me?

Guilt appears on Michael's face once again. "I care about thee, little sister. I always have. The only reason I have not fallen upon my blade is that I know it would cause thee endless suffering. I would never wish to bring such heartache to thy soul."

Catherine nods. *Do I burden thee? Were I to die, would'st thee...*

Michael's expression darkens. "Don't say such things. As long as I draw breath, nobody will ever lay a hand on thy head."

Valac hurt me. Thou art a liar.

Michael groans. "Aye. I apologize. I should have been there to finish him off myself."

'Twas a joke, brother.

Michael doesn't smile. Instead, he sighs. "I have long since forgotten how to smile."

Catherine cocks her head. *Not even for me?*

"Nay. There is only one thing in this world that would bring me joy..."

The Archangel trails off. His eyes lower to my throat. He gazes at my burns for several seconds. Catherine tenses up.

Uzziel cannot heal me.

"Not all of thy burns, no... I only wish she could restore thy voice. Just once, I should like to hear it."

Turning away, Michael blinks back tears.

"I cannot remember my conquests, nor the sound of my little sister's voice. I have no identity. I have no purpose. Why... why must I go on forever, existing in limbo? Why must I live in this torturous reality?"

Michael breaks down. The stoic Archangel turns away to try and hide the tears running down his face. He wipes at his eyes furiously, but cannot stem the tide.

Catherine's thoughts turn inward.

Michael loves me. He loves Uzziel, Uriel, and all the rest of his brothers and sisters. Despite all that, he suffers from a loss of identity. I never wish to see him die... but 'tis cruel of me to demand he continue living, if only for my sake. What can I do to fill the void in his chest? What feats must I perform to bring the slightest warmth back into his heart?

Catherine pulls closer to Michael. Gently, she wraps one arm around his back and leans against his injured shoulder.

The Archangel continues weeping, even as his sister rests against him.

They love each other deeply, but one suffers from wounds inflicted not on his body, but his mind. Michael pretends to be a stoic, uncaring figure, but in reality, he's become lost amidst a sea of emotions. His memories, gone. Legacy, gone.

I can't fully empathize with him. I'm not someone whose entire existence revolves around war. But... I know what it means to float through a world where everyone else seems to have their lives figured out. My peers went to college and prepared for complex jobs, ones I couldn't begin to wrap my head around.

Life treated me in a manner less severely than it did Michael, yet at the same time, I suddenly realize we have more in common than I first thought.

Michael isn't the calm, collected badass he pretends to be. He's uncertain, doubtful, and constantly second-guessing himself.

I guess it's true what they say about judging books by their covers.

[This is Catherine.](#) (It's a full writeup this time, not just artwork!)

Part 120: Shepherd's Journey - The Damned

My next host, another unfamiliar body, slowly walks across a field of grass. We glance around every few steps, as tinges of fright shoot down our back. While Heaven's Light shines upon me once again, my host seems anything but calm. Our eyes dart left and right, not looking for specific threats, but seemingly watching for unseen horrors to come pouncing out of the grass.

It doesn't take long before I notice discomfort wracking one side of my body.

My host is missing his left arm. Not only that, but his left wing is badly broken, too.

The angel slowly paces forward, leaning on a walking staff to help himself along. I get the impression I know him based on his nervous breathing and mannerisms, but without seeing his face, I can't be certain.

As my host ambles forward, we walk over a hill and arrive at the gardens where Satan and Agares deceived Uzziel. Hedges grow several feet tall, and the sound of muted laughter and music rings in the air. Somehow, it feels forced, as if the angels are trying too hard to enjoy themselves.

I duck and keep my head below the hedges, placing each foot down as quietly as possible. Medium-sized trees begin to sprout to my left, shadowing my host as he continues skulking around the edges of the garden. I don't know why he's so nervous, or why he's trying so desperately to stay hidden. It worries me that he might harbor dark intentions.

My host pauses and turns his back to the hedge garden. In the distance, Heaven's Gate shines. Dozens of cherubs stand guard, facing it and holding their weapons at the ready in case any demons decide to burst through. Unlike the last time I saw the gate, nobody guarding it appears interested in chatting idly or wasting their time. It's only a half-mile away from Uzziel's favorite gardens, so they must be on high alert.

Oh, no, my host thinks. What are the Archangels thinking?! Why post the Damned to stand guard alongside the... the living? They're terrifying! I'm getting shivers just looking at them!

Based on my host's internal voice, I finally deduce his identity. He's Shepherd, the panicked angel who lost his arm during Valac's initial attack. He resigned at some point and gave up his position as a cherub.

I wonder what he's up to now?

Shepherd creeps toward the nearest tree and hunkers down behind it. He bites his lip.

I must get out of Heaven. I... I can't take it anymore! The Damned are everywhere! They're always watching me! I see the looks on their faces... they blame me... they judge me for their deaths. Everyone calls me a coward. They all hate me. It's true... I am undeserving of Heaven's beauty.

Shepherd squeezes his staff tightly. A drop of sweat drips down his forehead. Out of the corner of his eye, he spots a flash of movement. Uriel, Sophia, and Hyacinth all land near Heaven's Gate and trot toward the sentries. Their movements, while swift, appear unhurried. The newly crowned Saints wave

pleasantly at the sentries, though Uriel does not. They begin talking to each other, but I can't make out what they're saying.

Ah! Sister Uriel! She will grant me passage. Surely, after the trauma she's suffered, she will understand my pain. Now might be my best chance!

Haltingly, Shepherd takes a few steps before his nerves tense up. However, after forcing himself to inhale and exhale several times, he stands up straight and walks toward the portal as casually as possible.

Within a minute or two, I draw close enough to hear Uriel's conversation with the cherub guardians.

"-excuses. I want emergency drills performed three times a day. Each of thee is the second line of resistance, should invaders manage to bypass Sinai's defenses. Need I remind thee of what happened during the battle against the Reaper?"

Uriel stands with her arms crossed as she stares icily at one of the cherubs. I recognize him as Chester, the leader of an elite group of warriors, one who lost his entire troop to Satan's initial attack.

Chester nods. "Of course not, sister. Near the end of the battle, a small group of demons burst from the ground and ambushed the two cherubs standing guard at the gate. Only one of them survived."

She nods. "Correct. That means the little bloodskin bastards have Earth magic at their disposal. They might burrow beneath our defenses and emerge inside Sinai, bypassing the first line entirely. If that happens, there won't be any advance warning, and thou shalt have mere seconds to react. Therefore, I want ten cherubs posted inside and outside this portal at all times. Are we clear?"

"Crystal."

Satisfied, Uriel's posture and expression loosen. She forces a weak smile. "By the way, I'm sorry about brother Listrus. I know the two of thee were particularly close."

Chester's gaze betrays no emotion. "We were. However, his passing has only hardened my convictions. I must be far more vigilant, so that I may prevent any further deaths among my brothers and sisters."

Hyacinth raises her hand. "There is no need to place such a burden upon thyself, Chester. We all must work together if we hope to protect our home and family."

"A-ahem..."

Shepherd clears his throat, but the sound comes out stilted and weak. Everyone turns to look at him, and his veins run cold as ice.

"Ah, brother Shepherd. How may we help thee?" Uriel asks.

Heat rushes to my face. Shepherd stutters and stammers. "Ah, w-well, it's been- that is, I've been thinking... I need to, well, I mean, I would like to, um, uh..."

Sophia bounces over to me. "Whoa, whoa! Calm down! There's no need to get all worked up! Take a breath, then say whatever's on thy mind."

My teeth begin to chatter. Shepherd inhales sharply, but at that moment, one of Chester's fellow cherubs walks over to see what's happening.

And then I notice it.

The black eyes.

This angel, one I've never seen before, has eyes as dark as night-time. Not only him, but some of the other cherubs as well. Like those belonging to great white sharks, some of the angels here have eyes so dark that I might believe someone if they claimed these angels were creatures of the deep. They stare at me unblinkingly, making me notice other details, like their cracked skin and flaky hair. They look the same as any other angel from a distance, but up close, they're unmistakably different from their brothers and sisters.

Shepherd clams up. His breath catches, and he retreats a step, fear in his eyes.

"Shepherd? Is something the matter?" One of the black-eyed angels asks.

Th-the Damned! Oh, by the Creator! They're looking at me! M-make them stop!

My host begins to shiver uncontrollably, but he can't take his eyes off the undead angel. Suddenly, something blocks my view. Sophia steps in front of the undead angel, causing her poofy pink hair to obscure my view.

"I think I see what's going on here," Sophia says, quietly. "Why don't we get some fresh air, alright? Alright?"

Shepherd nods dumbly. He bows his head as waves of shame wash across his body.

"I... I n-need to..."

"Mhm, I getcha," Sophia says. She looks back over her shoulder at Uriel and nods. "I'm going to help Shepherd. He's feeling anxious."

Uriel sighs. "Certainly. We mustn't leave our brother to suffer. Chester, a word, if thou please."

Uriel and Hyacinth stay behind as Sophia pulls me aside. The moment Shepherd turns his back on the undead angels, his panic attack wanes. Sophia walks me a few hundred feet away and helps me sit. She plops down to my left and sighs.

"Oh, geez. Thou art suffering too, huh?"

Shepherd blinks. "Huh? I... I don't follow."

Sophia and I watch from our spot as Uriel and Hyacinth chat with Chester, his living brothers, and his undead brethren as well.

"Thou art scared of the... of the Undying, aren't thee? I, ah... I am too. Don't tell Uriel." Sophia flashes a cute smile at me, but it vanishes instantly. She's trying to put me at ease, but it's not working.

"Thou art afraid of the Damned? But... didn't ye battle Valac?"

"Oh, sure. Me, Hyacinth, Penelope, and Catherine, too. I, ah, didn't do much. I got a fancy promotion, but I don't think I earned it. Cath did all the heavy lifting. She always does."

Sophia fidgets uncomfortably for a moment.

"See, I know the Undying look scary, but they're the same family members they always were! We're lucky they're alive, right? There's no need to be scared of them... even if they *do* look like they could chew thy face off."

Shepherd shivers. "N-nay. Tis not only a matter of their appearance. When the Reaper died, why did they not perish as well? Such black magic is beyond our comprehension. I cannot trust them."

Sophia scrunches up her face. "*Well*, I tell thee how to live thy life, brother, but thou mustn't blame them for their current forms. Just because they seem scary doesn't mean they're evil. Anyway, what is thy purpose in coming here? Why come to Heaven's Gate? It's a bit out of the way."

The sudden line of questioning makes Shepherd freeze up. He flicks his eyes to Sophia, then looks away. "I, ah... I want to leave... to leave Heaven for a while. G-get some fresh air."

While we rub our missing arm stump, Sophia frowns. "Why wouldn't thee wish to leave Heaven? Don't tell me it's because of the Undying."

Shepherd squeezes his stump. "Aye. 'Tis because I cannot bear the pressure of their gazes any longer. They're going to attack me, I feel it in my bones. They hate me f-for failing them. For being weak."

A glance at Sophia reveals an unamused expression. She raises an eyebrow questioningly. "Oh? Well, if thou dost feel that way, perhaps thou should vacation over at-"

"No!" Shepherd yelps. He spins to face Sophia and lunges his hand out to grab her shoulder. "They're everywhere! Not even Raphael trusts them! He's the wisest Archangel of us all! He knows they're going to betray us! I can't go on like this! I can't... can't..."

Shepherd lowers his hand. He retreats into his shell, even as the Saint stares at us in surprise. Her mouth hangs open, as though she can't comprehend the pure terror in his eyes.

"A-alright. Well, I mean... only cherubs are allowed to leave Heaven right now... but if thou possesseth such strong feelings regarding this matter..."

My lip begins to quiver. Shepherd nods weakly. "I... I don't want them to look at me anymore. I can't stay here. I'd rather die than live with this guilt hanging around my neck."

"Now, now. That's being a bit extreme," Sophia says, a hint of warning in her voice. "But I understand thy meaning. If thou art that earnest in thy convictions, then I shall assist thee to the best of my ability."

My eyes widen. "Truly?!"

"Yes, of course," Sophia says with a wink. "But only this once. I'll help thee bypass Heaven's Gate, but do not wander far from Sinai. There aren't any Undying out there, so thou may feel more at ease, but all our people must continue to follow Titan law and beware the demons."

Shepherd nods. "I thank thee, sister! Thou hath truly blessed me. I will do everything in my power to repay thee, no matter what it takes."

Sophia jumps to her feet and holds out her hand to help me up. "Thou need not go that far, Shepherd. It's not a big deal. Just do me a favor and be careful out there, alright?"

"Aye," Shepherd says with a nod.

Shepherd's eyes lower from Sophia's face to her outstretched hand. Slowly, he glances down at his missing arm stump.

"Oh, shoot," Sophia says. She quickly pulls her hand back and sticks out her tongue. "Ehehe... I, ah, forgot."

Shepherd digs his staff into the ground and uses his still-functioning wing to lift himself to his feet. "Worry not, Sophia. In due time, I will grow used to lacking an arm. Besides... I was luckier than many others. The Creator demands that I... that I count my blessings..."

Despite his strong words, Shepherd trails off into uncertainty. He wants to believe that good luck and fortune are the reason he survived, but deep down, he thinks so little of himself that he wishes he had perished along with his brethren.

I feel bad for him. Shepherd looks at the world from the most negative viewpoint possible. He's miserable, but doesn't have to be. There's always a silver lining and something worth fighting for; one merely has to look for it.

That's only my opinion, of course. Others *have* called me an idealist.

Shepherd and Sophia walk side-by-side toward the others. We arrive in time to hear Uriel chatting with Chester. "Of course. That's what worries me the most. We should build an encampment nearby to house more cherubs, up to a hundred if possible. We could use seraphs too, for emergency healing. Uzziel, however, doesn't like the idea of buildings ruining the beauty of her gardens."

Chester shrugs. "I have no opinion one way or the other. Perhaps we could hollow out the area around the inner gate. If we reinforce it, that should stop unwanted guests from burrowing inside."

"Mmm. Perhaps Camael might be able to help. Stone would have too many chinks and cracks to withstand a demonic assault, but her enchanted metal might prove strong enough to repel the bloodskins."

Sophia raises her hand. "Hi, hi! I'm back with Brother Shepherd!"

Uriel stares at Chester for a moment, but her eyes gloss over, as if she's thinking deeply about something. After a moment, she turns to face Sophia. "Mmm? Oh, right. What was the matter?"

Sophia's eye twitches. She effortlessly blurts out a lie as if she's done it a thousand times before. "Shepherd told me thy expression was super scary. He felt intimidated by thy aura and couldn't bring himself to speak!"

Uriel raises an eyebrow at me. "My... expression? Come, brother, why must ye wound me so?"

Shepherd balks. "I... I said no such thing!"

Uriel's jaw slackens. She gazes at me incredulously. "My word. I didn't realize after all these years that I was frightening thee. I'll try to be more conscientious in the future."

"B-but... but..."

Shepherd turns to Sophia with a look of pleading in his eyes. Sophia smiles and nods. "Aaaanyway, Shepherd wants to visit the troops at the outer perimeter. He hasn't ever seen Earth, at least not since the

mind-wipes. Wouldn't it be nice if he could?"

Uriel crosses her arms. "No. Sorry, brother, but nobody is allowed on Earth until we coordinate with the Titans. After we finish the memorial services for all of our brethren and rain fire upon the burrows of the demons, then we can open the floodgates."

Sophia stomps her foot. "Oh, come on, Uriel! That's going to take forever! With all the funerals planned, it's going to be at least a few hundred years before he can go outside! Come on, just one little peek isn't going to hurt. Besides..."

The Saint trails off. She gestures at my missing arm. "Shepherd's spirits could use some lifting."

Right on cue, I bow my head and try to look as gloomy and depressed as usual. It's easy for Shepherd, given he's already standing at the precipice of despair.

Uriel holds up a finger to object. She falters. A hint of hesitation enters her voice as she speaks. "I can't allow... I mean... well, when thou dost put it in those terms..."

Several seconds pass. The Archangel reaches back to scratch her head. "Mmm. Alright, fine. I will allow thee to visit our troops. However, do not leave the outer perimeter. Take a weapon, too, just in case. I'm worried about a possible attack by the demons. With their leaders dead, it seems unlikely, but I refuse to risk any lives. Astrea and Hestia are guarding the front gates. From what I've heard, they're competent warriors, but I would advise thee not to put too much trust in Titan females."

Hyacinth nods. "Especially given how many Titans Valac managed to kill. What was the number, again? A thousand?"

"Close to three thousand, I believe," Uriel replies. "Anyway, go on, then. Miles, give brother Shepherd thy blade, then go fetch a new one from the armory."

Uriel gestures to one of the other cherubs. Shepherd's body tenses up as the black-eyed Undying angel nods and walks toward us. Terror rushes into our heart.

The Undying angel unbuckles his sword and belt from his waist and steps toward me. Ice washes through Shepherd's veins as the terrifying dark angel reaches out and holds the sword for me to take.

"Here, brother, wield my weapon. I pray it serves thee well."

Shepherd's body trembles as he cautiously reaches for the sword. "Th-th... thank... I thank thee... for thy s-s..."

We never manage to finish the final word. Shepherd takes the sword and immediately retreats a step back, nodding quickly as if to assuage the idea that *no, he is, in fact not scared at all*, despite the opposite being true.

Miles frowns. "Art thou alright, Shepherd? Thy complexion is as pale as snow."

Shepherd forces himself to swallow. "I am- yes, I... fine. I am good."

Uriel watches silently. She frowns, and I get the impression she's figured out a piece of the puzzle. However, she offers no commentary on my behavior toward the Undying angel.

"Very good. Shepherd, please stay safe outside of Heaven. Earth is a dangerous place at the moment. There are predatory creatures unlike any thou hath ever seen out there, not to mention the demons. Stay close to Sinai's base."

Shepherd nods. "Y-yes, sister. I thank thee for allowing this leave of absence."

"Mmm. Do not die on my watch, please. I would never forgive myself. Dismissed."

Thirty minutes later, Shepherd emerges from Sinai's cave system to the outcropping where the two Titan females sit, one on each side of the cave's entrance.

Thousands of angels mill around the mountain's base. Some fly in circular patterns above as part of their watch, while others hover in place and keep an eye on the distant forests below.

Shepherd lowers his gaze. A narrow path etched into the mountainside appears to be his only way down. He glances back at his broken left wing.

I suppose I'll have to walk. I can't fly.

With a shrug, he steps out of the cave, only to immediately be stopped by the Titan female on our left.

"Hold. Who are you?"

The massive woman, a chubby ball of lard, wears thin strips of animal leather across her sensitive areas. She casually holds a massive mace in both hands, as if the several-ton weapon weighs little more than a toothpick.

"I, ah, received orders to boost the morale of our troops," Shepherd says. "I'm heading out to speak to my brother's below."

"Didn't answer the question," The Titaness growls. "I asked *who* you were."

"Oh. Err, ah, sorry, ma'am. I'm Sh-Shepherd."

She lifts her gaze to her sister. "What an odd name. *Sh-Shepherd*. Ring any bells?"

"Not even one," The female on the right says. She wears nearly identical clothing to her sister. "Maybe we should send him back, Astrea."

Astrea shrugs. "He's not a demon. If the guards let him through, it's not my job to stop him."

"True."

Both of them turn away and return to gazing at the distant landscape.

Shepherd waits apprehensively for several seconds, but the Titanesses ignore him. "Um... uh... am I free to, err, go?"

"Huh?" Astrea glances at me again. "You're still here? Sure, whatever. Leave us alone already."

She rolls her eyes and looks away. Shepherd stares at her in baffled silence for a few moments before shaking his head and heading for the narrow path.

So, this is how the Titans act. I've never spoken to one before. They seem quite rude.

Ignoring his misgivings, Shepherd continues his journey to the camp below.

* * *

Eventually, despite his fear of falling over the cliffside, Shepherd reaches the bottom. A makeshift encampment with tents to protect the angels from inclement weather has sprung up since the last time I saw the place. The tents, made of leaves and sticks, seem flimsy enough that a stiff breeze could knock them over. As I draw near to the closest one, I note with interest that several vines have grown around the sticks to bind them together. Uzziel's handiwork, perhaps?

Shepherd, still awed by all the new sights and sounds, stumbles blindly into a circle of cherubs and seraphs. The group chats idly about various happenings, but pauses when they see me.

"Brother Shepherd! 'Tis been many a day since we've- ah! Thy arm! What happened to thee?"

Shepherd blinks away his confusion to stare at the armored warriors. Each one wears similar white platemail to the others, in addition to their individual flourishes. The man speaking to me has a red, satin sash running from his shoulder across his chest and around his back.

"Oh, Marcus. My arm. It, ah... during the battle..."

Marcus's complexion turns ashen. "My apologies. I did not mean to dredge up unpleasant memories. We haven't heard much about the conflict from anyone in Heaven. I still have yet to learn who among our brothers and sisters fell."

A seraph lady, wearing green and white robes, nods. "Aye. I am anxious over whether Miledy and Dannis fell. I always felt close to them. With any luck, the demons may have spared them a gruesome fate."

"Let us cast aside such talk," A lean, dark-skinned male says. "Brother Raphael will deliver a roster of the fallen soon. More importantly, brother Shepherd is with us, now. Let us make him comfortable."

Shepherd blushes. "I thank all of thee. I will be fine, now. I had to leave Heaven. None of ye have probably heard, but one of the demons, Valac... he... he used corrupted magic on many in our family. He slew thousands, and then used some accursed magic to bring them back from the dead. However, after Catherine killed him, the Damned continued to walk among the living. They gaze upon us with horrible black eyes. Their skin cracks like broken twigs, and-"

Marcus raises his hand. "Dost thou referreth to the Undying? Why not celebrate their return to the living, brother Shepherd? They've been granted a second chance at life. We should count our blessings! Despite their appearance, they retain their personalities and roam free among us. Why, Brothers Bertus and Skurn walk this very camp!"

Shepherd's heart stops.

"Th-the Damned... they're here, too?"

"As of a few days ago, aye. We requested additional troops for the frontlines."

"But... but I heard none were allowed to... to leave..."

Marcus waves his hand. "No, there were special exceptions made for a few of them. After all, they remain loyal to our people. Their appearances took some getting used to, but I have partaken in wine and broken bread with them. They are the same as they always were."

Shepherd begins to tremble once again. "Oh. I, I see. Well, I, err... I thank thee for the news. I am going to speak to some of the... the other groups. F-farewell, then."

"Hm? Thou aren't going to stay and chat a while? Come, we must offer thee a proper welcome to our camp!"

Shepherd shakes his head. "N-nay, not now. Perhaps later."

Marcus nods. He doesn't notice Shepherd's discomfort. "Ah, suit thyself. I am glad that thou still remain among the living, brother Shepherd. Have a wonderful day!"

Shepherd nods dumbly. "Aye. M-may Heaven's light shine upon thee..."

* * *

Shepherd leaves his fellow cherubs behind. His heart races as he tries to control his swirling thoughts. All around him, people gesture and wave, happy to see one of their brothers alive, but Shepherd barely returns their gestures.

The Damned are here, too. I believed I could rid myself of their gazes, but I couldn't. There is no refuge... no respite from their blackened eyes. I cannot continue to stay here. Oh, woe is me!

Slowly, Shepherd wanders toward the outskirts of the camp. Cherubs and seraphs begin to dwindle in number until I arrive at the edge of the nearby forest. Here, nobody patrols.

Shepherd glances around.

I want to be alone, but I won't go far. I'll stay close enough that my brothers will be able to hear me if I yell for help. Yes. That is the ideal solution. I won't go far. I won't... go far...

Shepherd shivers as he enters the forest.

Part 121: Unlikely Brothers

My next host is just as unfamiliar to me as Shepherd was. I arrive in a somewhat dark area of the forest. Beams of sunlight shine onto a large open patch of grass before me. My host sits cross-legged several feet away from the light and raises an apple to his mouth. He bites into the sweet, juicy fruit and smacks his lips contentedly.

A sense of serenity descends over me. Unlike so many of the people whose minds I've entered during Solomon's visions, my current host lacks even a trace of anxiety or worry. He watches a pair of rabbits hopping around in the clearing while quietly eating his fruit. Observing the animals seems to put him at peace. He doesn't attempt to call them over and pet them, nor do anything that might disturb them.

When he raises his hand again, I happen to notice that his skin is incredibly dark. Darker than Uzziel's, even. His arm is as black as obsidian, allowing him to blend in with the shadows of the forest effectively. Only a series of white tattoos painted on his skin breaks up the effectiveness of his camouflage.

Hmm. This apple is rather bitter. Perhaps I should try to find an orange. It has been many months since I last tasted one of those.

My host continues to stare at the rabbits while eating his fruit. Thanks to the sound of his internal voice and a few other clues, I piece together that he must be Smealum, the Animus demon from two visions ago. The last time I saw him, he refused to join the other demons during Valac's 'forest sweep.'

The realization makes my stomach clench. Considering Smealum is sitting inside of a forest, what does that mean for him? Did he participate after all? Has the sweep already concluded?

Whatever the answer, Smealum seems to be in a particularly good mood. He finishes off the last bite of his apple, tosses it behind himself, and sighs contentedly.

"Hoo... should I eat another? I wonder."

Shrugging, Smealum glances down at his waist. The fur coat wrapped around him, crafted from the hide of a black wolf, spins and undulates in many fascinating patterns. A small leather pouch rests on his waist, tied off with a bit of twine. Smealum reaches down, opens the bag, and reveals several dozen white twigs.

No, not twigs. *Bones*. Each one looks to be about the size of a bird's leg. He takes one out, closes the bag, and begins to poke at the gaps between his teeth, turning the bone into a makeshift toothpick.

The idea of jamming a dead creature's femur into my mouth sends waves of revulsion coursing down my back. Smealum, however, doesn't appear bothered in the slightest. He pulls bits of apple from between his teeth and swallows as he silently cleans his mouth. While a sickening feeling for me, I have to commend him for his oral hygiene.

Birds chirp above us. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howls. Smealum sighs contentedly and sticks the bone back in his bag after he finishes.

I should probably return to the burrows. Valac and the others must have finished by now.

Smealum contemplates leaving, but he doesn't stand. Instead, he continues to gaze at the rabbits as they frolick about.

Why bother? I hate living among demons. None of them represent me. They thirst for blood and seek to kill and wreak havoc, while I do not. Why? To right ancient wrongs? To unleash justice upon those who once harmed us? Valac's plans will engulf this beautiful world in war. Why must they devastate Earth? Why harm the beautiful creatures of this planet?

Perhaps I am too young to understand. I am scarcely a hundred years old, a child in the eyes of those like Valac and Lucifer. To me, the cycle of violence seems impossible to break. Each side presses upon the other, which only serves to validate the other's notions of evil. We hurt the angels, and the angels, in turn, hurt us.

Must the universe function in this way, I wonder? Must we feed off the angels' hatred to fuel our own?

Smealum sighs. He pulls another apple from a satchel at his side and stares at it.

Joy and love are everywhere across Earth. Beauty and splendor surround me. Even this juicy red fruit dazzles me with its vibrant color. If we could only set aside our hatred and prejudice for a time, perhaps we could grow to understand one another. If the angels treated us not as their inferiors, but as their equals... maybe we could heal the rift between our people.

The demon lowers the apple and places it back in his bag. With a shake of his head, he closes his eyes.

No. Peace is impossible. Even if the angels decided to listen, our leaders never would. Satan had a chance of attaining peace, and he cast it aside. Why should the angels trust us after he stabbed them in the back?

Smealum broods silently to himself for several minutes. His mind struggles and wrestles with difficult questions, many of which I've asked myself during Solomon's visions. It's a little refreshing to hear the thoughts of someone so similar to me.

More than that, though... Smealum's words, his tone, his inflection, and even his manner of speech seem familiar. I feel as though I've met him before. Have we spoken? Do I know him from the present time?

It's tearing me up inside. To be so close to an answer, yet lack a piece of the puzzle is the most infuriating feeling in the world.

Suddenly, a flock of birds burst through the tree canopy, squawking and shrieking in surprise. Smealum's eyes bolt open as he realizes the rabbits have fled.

All the creatures of the forest go silent after a few moments, leaving Smealum's breath as one of only two sounds echoing in the air.

Shambling footsteps greet my ears. Smealum stares wide-eyed and doesn't move a muscle. Across the open space of the illuminated forest clearing, an angel stumbles into view. Shepherd, still missing an arm,

hobbles forward, clearly out of breath. The angel leans hard on his walking staff and quickly scans the clearing.

"Oh... bother... where am I, now? This forest is a damned maze..."

Smealum's heart pounds in his chest.

An angel? Here?! I thought they were ordered not to come this far north! What should I do? He hasn't seen me yet. Perhaps I can slip away.

The Animus doesn't move a muscle. His body shivers with a mixture of fear and excitement.

I've never seen an angel up close before. Is there something wrong with this one's left wing? It's bent awkwardly.

Shepherd gasps and sinks to his knees. He leans back and plops on his butt to catch his breath for several moments. His white robes, now torn and ripped from walking through the forest, hang across his body in strips. His skinny frame looks anything but intimidating. Even the sword at his waist looks like it doesn't belong.

Smealum sits frozen in place. His blood warms and cools as his thoughts run rampant.

Despite my curiosity, I should leave. Angels are trouble. Where there's one, there might be more. I should go. I should...

Ignoring his thoughts telling him to leave, Smealum instead stays perfectly still. His black skin blends in with the darkness around him, allowing him to remain unseen.

Shepherd doesn't notice us. Instead, the angel slumps forward. A look of defeat passes over his face. He reaches his staff out and pokes at a rock absentmindedly.

"...failure. What was I thinking?"

Shepherd murmurs under his breath. The skinny acolyte, once a low-ranking cherub, appears more pitiful than anyone I've seen in my entire life.

"Don't leave the encampment, they said. Did I listen? Of course not. I never learn."

Smealum watches with fascination as Shepherd begins to berate himself. The Angel mumbles and mutters about his various failings, and Smealum's eyes turn to saucers as he listens.

The angel appears to be in distress. He's cut off from his family. If I were a proper demon, I couldn't imagine a better time to attack him. I'll never have a better opportunity than this.

Biting his lip, Smealum leans forward.

I should say something. A greeting, perhaps? How would that go over? Should I assert myself, or move slowly? I don't want to alarm him. At the same time, that sword could be a problem. Angels are all supposed to be capable warriors. Even if I introduced myself- what?! Why is he crying?!

Shepherd breaks down and drops his staff. He sobs into his hand and blubbers incoherently, browbeating himself for all of his failings recently. I lose track of what he's saying once his words turn into a mishmash of choked syllables and grunts.

He's pitiful. Pathetic, even.

Smealum's excitement and fear fade away. He watches as the angel paws at his eyes, trying desperately to stifle his grief.

Hm. From what I can see, this lanky fellow isn't like most angels. Maybe I'm thinking things over too much. In any case, I cannot let this opportunity go to waste.

Smealum slowly rises to his feet. Shepherd doesn't see us through the tears clouding his vision. He snuffles and snorts like a baby, choking back tears and wiping his eyes repeatedly with his tattered sleeve.

"H..."

Smealum starts to speak. His muscles tense up, but he forces himself to continue with his greeting.

"...Hello?"

The single word seems to boom in the forest like a gunshot in the dead of night. Shepherd's eyes bolt open. He jerks his head back and immediately lasers his eyes onto me.

A cry of terror escapes the angel's lips. "Hiiii! D-d-de... demon! DEMON!"

Shepherd jumps to his feet. He trips awkwardly, likely from his broken wing disturbing his center of mass. Stumbling backward, he hits a tree and digs his heel into the ground. Shepherd, his face still stained with tears, fumbles for his sword. He clumsily yanks it from its sheath and tries to aim it at me, but it slips from his grasp and *thuds* against the ground.

"Whoa, slow down, friend. I don't mean you any-"

"S-stay back! BACK, I say!" Shepherd motions with one hand and tries to form a magic sign, but after a few seconds, all he can manage is a sputter of light. A tiny dagger of holy energy briefly appears in his palm, but it fizzles into sparks and dissipates in his grasp.

Smealum takes a step forward. He raises both hands. "I am unarmed. Please, you have nothing to fear. There's no reason to be frightened."

Shepherd's eyes turn into saucers as I step into the light of the clearing. He sweeps his gaze up and down my body, evaluating me in an instant. "D-demon... black as the night... the s-same color as... the eyes... the Damned! 'Tis thy fault! Thou hath slain my brothers!!"

A surge of energy enters Shepherd's body. He dives for his sword, as if planning to take it before I can. Given Smealum has no intention of touching the blade, he merely raises an eyebrow at the angel's antics.

Once he grabs his sword, Shepherd rolls again, demonstrating surprising agility for a crippled angel. He uses the sword to push himself to his feet and retreats several steps, keeping the blade pointed at me the whole time.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Smealum says. "I have killed no angels."

"Liar! Demons always lie!!" Shepherd grinds his teeth together. His fear gives way to rage. "T-take one step closer, a-and I'll... I'll cleave thy head from thy shoulders!"

Smealum lowers his hands. He rubs his neck and crunches up his face. "I only wish to talk. There is no need for such barbarism."

Fire burns in Shepherd's eyes. "Thou shouldn't know a thing or two about barbarism, wretched creature. My brothers and sisters fell to thy claws. And now... I... I shall repay thee in full!"

After pausing for a moment, Shepherd lunges at me. He moves surprisingly fast, using his one working wing to accelerate forward in the blink of an eye.

His sword rushes at me. Smealum's eyes follow its movement. At the last second, the Animus dodges right. Shepherd's sword stabs where I stood a moment before, but with a single, precise blow, I karate-chop Shepherd's hand. Smealum's strength proves formidable. He nearly breaks the angel's wrist, forcing him to drop the sword.

"Augh!" Shepherd cries, as he yanks back his injured limb.

Recentering his body, Smealum pivots on his heel and slaps his palm against Shepherd's chest. The angel flies backward and lands on his wings, skidding across the ground.

The battle ends in seconds. Smealum kicks the sword behind himself and frowns.

"My apologies if I hurt you. I didn't want to use force. Perhaps, now that I've defanged you, we can talk to one another civilly?"

Shepherd lies in the grass. He stares at me wide-eyed, with terror etched into every inch of his face. The angel presses his arm against his chest and bites his lip. He tries to inhale, but his breath catches instead.

"B-buh... bastard... I won't... I won't... *guh*..."

Shepherd falls silent. His eyes close, and he faints.

Smealum's jaw drops.

What? The angel fell unconscious? I barely even hit him. How weak is this fellow to pass out after I held back all of my strength?

After a few moments, Smealum scratches the back of his head.

"Well, damn. This is awkward."

An hour later, I sit on a rock and stare at Shepherd's unconscious form, now tied to a tree. While Smealum waits for the angel to wake up, he silently puffs on a pipe made from a hollowed out tree branch. Smoke fills the air, but Smealum seems to enjoy the quiet time.

Shepherd stirs.

"Nnn... ohhh..."

He lifts his head and blinks, trying to clear the fog from his eyes. Suddenly, they bolt open as he spots me.

"Ah! D-demon! What happened? Where am I?!"

He tries to move, only to notice the ropes binding him to the tree. He struggles mightily for several seconds, only to then realize his arm is held fast above his head.

Smealum waves his pipe nonchalantly. "Apologies, mister angel. I didn't want you waking up and attacking me. I'd prefer not to fight, if at all poss-"

"Untie me at once, servant of the damned!" Shepherd snarls and tugs at his arm, trying desperately to pull it from the snare. "I do not fear death! I'll fight to my dying breath!!"

Smealum raises an eyebrow. He nods and listens as the angel rants and raves, threatening every demon and their relatives for over a minute.

Finally, Shepherd sags against the tree, his energy gone. He gasps for breath and starts having a panic attack as he realizes his life is now at Smealum's mercy.

"Are you finished?" Smealum asks. "If I wanted to kill you, I could have done so when I knocked you out. I am not one to rush to violence unless necessary."

Shepherd closes his eyes. "If... if thy goal isn't to kill me... I won't succumb to torture, fiend. I will never reveal any of Heaven's secrets."

Smealum scratches the back of his skull. "Ah, look, mister angel, I think you have the wrong idea here. I don't want to hurt you. I'm not a bad person. I would simply like to engage in a pleasant dialogue. Can't we set aside our differences, at least for a while?"

The angel opens his eyes. He stares at me for a few moments before replying.

"Thou wish to... to talk? About what?"

Smealum finishes off the tobacco in his pipe, taps the ashes out, and slips it into a pocket on his fur coat. "I don't know. Anything. I've never met an angel before."

"All demons were once imps, the servants of angelkind. If thou art going to open with such a bald-faced lie, how am I to believe anything thou hath to say?"

Smealum shrugs. "I'm not lying. I was born after my people fled Heaven. I am only ninety-five summers old. I have never spoken to an angel in all my life."

Silence falls between us as Shepherd digests my words. He swallows audibly. "I, ah, see. So, thou hath no intention to... to attack me?"

"Of course not. You pulled out your sword first, remember? I only struck you in self-defense. I do apologize if I injured you. I don't think I broke any bones, but I'm not talented in the medical arts."

Suspicion begins to grow on Shepherd's face. "What reason have thee to speak with me, an angel? If thy intention is to press me for information regarding my people, I shall bite off my tongue right this instant."

Smealum pales. "Oh, devils, don't do that! That sounds agonizing! If I release you, will you promise not to attack me? I don't feel good talking to you while you're tied up like this."

Shepherd's suspicion wanes somewhat. "...Alright. I will slow my impulses. For now."

"Excellent. That's all I wish to hear."

* * *

A minute later, Shepherd rubs his wrist with his chin. He shakily rises to his feet and stares me in the eye. For some reason, his cowardly aura seems to have diminished somewhat, despite standing in front of me, a demon.

"My name is Smealum. What is yours?"

"Shepherd," The angel replies. He rubs his sore wrist against his stomach to try and ease its pain. "Why is thy skin black? I thought imps and demons were red-skinned."

Smealum crosses his arms. "I don't know. Lucifer's experiments might have something to do with that. I am an Animus, a different breed of demon compared to others. There are others who look like me, but I prefer to think of myself as a unique individual."

Shepherd eyes me warily. "All demons appear the same to me. Thy skin color is the only difference I have noticed, so far. That, and also thy curious nature."

Smealum nods and gestures toward a stump. "Why don't we sit and talk? Standing so close to one another will only make both of us uneasy."

"Very well."

Both of us walk a few feet toward the blackened log. The rest of the tree lies off to the side, having fallen at some point in the past due to unknown circumstances.

After we make ourselves more comfortable, Smealum reaches into his bag. Shepherd flinches, waiting for a surprise attack to come, but his fears prove unfounded. Smealum pulls out two apples and holds out one for Shepherd.

"Here. You could probably use a little energy. Don't worry; it isn't poisoned."

Shepherd stares at the red fruit without taking it. "Angels do not require sustenance. As for thee, dost thy people not consume the flesh of other creatures?"

"We do, yes. Well, other demons do. I don't." Smealum starts to retract his apple, but pauses. "Angels don't eat fruit or vegetables?"

The angel scrunches up his face. "We do... but only because we enjoy the taste. Any consumed items turn to mist inside our bodies and expunge themselves as spiritual waste."

Smealum blinks. "I don't follow. Do you shit yourselves? Is that what you mean?"

"Nay. Consumed food simply turns to... to..." Shepherd trails off. He taps his lip thoughtfully, then motions toward his chest. "It leaves our body as spiritual waste. I don't know how else to say it."

"But you *can* eat this apple, correct?"

Sighing, Shepherd nods. "I can."

"Then take it. It'll be awkward if I'm the only person eating here."

Shepherd stares at me for a moment, then takes the fruit from my grasp. "Very well. Thou art an oddity, not only among demons, but among all the sentient creatures I've ever known."

"I get that a lot."

* * *

The angel and demon stare at each other silently for over a minute as they bite into the fruits. Based on Shepherd's look of disgust, he seems not to enjoy the apple at all. Then again, considering how incredible the fruit in Heaven tastes, it's no wonder why.

After five to six bites, Shepherd sets his unfinished apple on the stump. He starts to open his mouth, but pauses as his gag reflex threatens to take over. "I- hurr... mmm... I, ah..."

"Are you alright?" Smealum asks.

"S-splendid. I need to... mmm... hnn..."

Shepherd winces. His stomach growls violently, as if threatening to force the apple back up. However, it only takes a few seconds for him to get his body back under control.

Smealum pauses his eating to glance at the fruit in his hand. *How bad did Shepherd's apple taste? I gave him the juiciest one...*

"What now, demon?" Shepherd asks. "We've eaten together. We've spoken. Is this the part where thou intendeth to slay me?"

"No, of course n-" Smealum starts to retort, but pauses when he notices Shepherd smiling. "Was something I said amusing?"

The angel rubs his chin. "Oh, not especially. It's occurred to me that I feel more at ease speaking with thee than I've felt in centuries with my brothers and sisters."

"You do? We've barely said anything."

Shepherd shrugs. His eyes flick to my right, looking past me into the darkness of the forest. "My family looks down on me, as they should. When thy people attacked Heaven... I lost my arm and broke my wing. The cherubs called me to action, and I faltered. 'Tis no great proclamation to call me a pathetic weakling. Thou knocked me out in a single blow, after all."

"You were fatigued. Beating an exhausted opponent isn't something I could bring myself to brag about."

"I suppose."

Shepherd continues gazing past me. Memories seem to dance in his eyes as he loses himself in his thoughts.

Smealum taps a finger on the stump absentmindedly as he waits for the angel to wake up from his delirium. After thirty seconds, Smealum reaches into the pouch at his side and pulls out one of his bird-bone toothpicks. The sounds of the bones clinking in Smealum's pouch wake Shepherd from his stupor.

Shaking off his ponderings, Shepherd peers over the stump at my waist. "Hm? What have ye there?"

Smealum takes the bag from his belt and sets it on the log. "Ah, these are some bones I carry with me."

"Bones?" Shepherd's eyes immediately turn suspicious. "Why dost thee carry bones around?"

Smealum pauses.

Damn. After I explained how peaceful I am, seeing these is going to make Shepherd think less of me. Even among other demons, carrying around a pouch filled with bones is weird. He won't buy that I use them to clean my teeth.

A drop of sweat drips down Smealum's neck.

"Ahh, these are for, hmm... well, they're for a... a game!"

Shepherd's suspicion intensifies. "What sort of game involves desecrating the dead? It sounds barbaric."

"N-no, it isn't anything like that..."

Smealum trails off.

What was I thinking? Shepherd is right. What sort of being would play around with bones?! Admitting they're toothpicks would have been a better idea!

Wait, no, I can salvage this. I only need a moment to think.

Shepherd presses me further. "Well? What are the rules for this game?"

"Rules... rules..." Smealum echoes Shepherd under his breath. After a moment, he slowly begins dumping his bones on the log. Each one is shaped similarly to the others, but there are small differences in the curves to them, cracks from age and decay, and other such things.

Smealum's eyes light up. *Ah, that's it! There's a solution after all.*

"So, Shepherd, here is how we play the game. First, take half of the pile."

"Half?"

"Yes. You get half, and I get the remainder."

Shepherd curls up his lip in disgust. "Disrespecting the dead... no angel in their right mind would do such a thing."

"Ah. Well, if you don't wish to touch them..."

Smealum's eyes dart around. He spots a mess of broken sticks laying nearby. "Aha. Here, these will serve as a substitute."

Without hesitating, the demon leans to his left and snatches up the bundle of twigs, snaps them several times into a bunch of pieces, then places them on Shepherd's side.

"Okay. This game is rather simple. All we do is toss the bones down and describe the pattern they form."

"The sticks," Shepherd says, correcting me.

"Aye. I'll throw my bones, then you follow with your sticks."

"Okay."

Shepherd seems unconvinced about Smealum's so-called game. However, he follows my example, grabs a mass of the sticks, and tosses them down on his side of the stump.

As the sticks and bones clatter and rattle, Shepherd purses his lips. "Now what?"

"Well, what patterns do you see?" Smealum asks. We poke at our bones and scrunch up our face. "See, this pattern here looks something like a... a... a lion! Yes, it resembles the mane of a lion."

"A lion? What is that?"

"It's a large cat-creature. I've only seen one in my life. Big teeth, though. Quite frightening. Very majestic."

"Mmm."

Shepherd stares at his sticks silently for over a minute. Sweat continues to run down Smealum's neck as we wait.

"W-well? Do you see any patterns?"

"Nay. Not a one. What is the point of this game? What sport is there in staring at twigs?"

Smealum chews his lip. "Sport? Erm. Well, I hadn't... really... thought that far..."

Shepherd raises his eyes to meet mine. "I beg thy pardon?"

"Nothing. Ah, demons don't play games for sport. Most of my kin compete over everything else. Games are... ah... a way to relax! Yes, we play games expressly to pass the time and develop camaraderie."

"Sounds like a waste of time," Shepherd mutters. "I suppose angels are the opposite. We typically tend to work together for most tasks. Sport and competitions serve the purpose of allowing us to compete in a friendly fashion, determine who is the most competent at various talents, and so on."

"I see..." Smealum mutters. "Hm. Well, perhaps we can retool this game to be more, ah, competitive?"

Shepherd snorts. "That's an amusing idea. Unless thou dost plan to hold me here, I do intend to return to my family at some point."

Smealum's hopeful expression melts away. "Oh. Ah, yes. I see... that does make sense... we can't play games forever, I suppose..."

My words trail off. Smealum's expression turns crestfallen as he stares at the angel, a note of pleading in his eyes.

"If you leave... will this be the last time we speak? Will I see you again?"

Shepherd rubs his chin. "I don't know. Thou art a demon, after all. I shouldn't have entered this blasted forest in the first place. With my wing broken, I can't fly away. I don't imagine we will reencounter one another."

Gloom descends upon Smealum. "Ah. Well... I feel closer to you than I do any of my demon brethren. They lack compassion, can't see past the bridges of their noses, and seek death and destruction rampantly. I sense a kindred spirit in you, Shepherd. It would be a shame if... if we never saw each other after this..."

Shepherd's expression softens. "Well, I mean... I could probably try to visit in the future. I know not how I might contact thee. There is also a chance thou mayest perish in my absence."

Smealum nods. "Terrible things happen all the time. Will you pledge to return to the forest at some point? I will do what I can to make certain no demons harm you."

Silence descends upon the two of us. Shepherd glances away as thoughts splash around in his head. He debates the consequences of returning and weighs them against a thousand other possibilities, all in a matter of seconds. Smealum, on the other hand, procures his pipe. We light a wad of tobacco and begin puffing while we await Shepherd's reply.

Finally, Shepherd stirs. "Alright. I've made my decision. Come rain or snow; I will do my best to return."

Smealum smiles. "I'm pleased to hear you say that."

"It won't be easy," Shepherd murmurs. "Getting out of Heaven right now is almost impossible. I barely left, thanks to my low rank. Until my people slaughter the demons, the Archangels intend to limit travel between Earth and Heaven."

"Oh. That doesn't sound like a fun time," Smealum says while exhaling smoke. "If your rank is a problem, why not try to raise it?"

"I can't," Shepherd replies. He gestures toward his missing arm and broken wing. "I'm useless in a battle."

"Nonsense. If your left arm vanishes, then make your right twice as strong. If you cannot fly, then learn to run. Do not treat your injuries as crippling disabilities. Treat them as obstacles to push past. I always try to maintain a positive outlook on life, no matter what happens."

Shepherd stares at me with a look of disbelief. "Such words are pretty, but they do not reflect reality. The world is cruel to those who are weak. Maybe thou hath found thyself blessed with a strong body and high rank, but I have not. Everyone looks down on me. They shun and judge me, declaring that I am their inferior."

"Are you not?" Smealum asks. "I don't need a high rank among my brethren to attain happiness. You value yourself based on the opinion of others. That lack of self-confidence is why other angels look down upon you. If you change your outlook, you will change theirs, as well."

Shepherd remains unconvinced. "I suppose. This discussion grows more wearisome by the minute."

With a wave of his hand, Shepherd dismisses Smealum's words.

Despite his cowardice, weakness, and lack of any fighting ability, I get the feeling that Shepherd still sees himself as being better than Smealum. He appears to think that because he's an angel, he's automatically superior to all demons. He doesn't need to utter the words for Smealum to understand his views.

However, Smealum never comments on the angel's elitism. Instead, he continues to smoke his tobacco, ignoring any slights the angel lets slip.

Shepherd's eyes lower to my pipe. "Funny. There aren't many angels who smoke in Heaven. Only Raphael and a few acolytes during their free time."

"Oh? Have you never tried the joys of tobacco?"

"Nay. I fail to see the appeal of inhaling soot."

"It's quite calming, Shepherd. Here. Give it a try."

I lean forward and hold out my pipe. Shepherd stares at it inquisitively for a moment, before taking it from me. Rather than pressing it to his lips, he instead lifts and examines it. "What are these carvings etched into the handle?"

"They're rabbits, birds, and other small creatures. I like cute little critters."

Shepherd shakes his head. "Goodness. Thou art a strange demon. I can't say I've known many, but among those I have, thou stand out like a black spot in the snow. Err, no offense meant."

Smealum shrugs. "None taken. Are you going to let the flames extinguish, or are you going to puff, already?"

"My apologies. I was simply thinking about Raphael... my eldest brother."

With a shake of his head, Shepherd places the end of the small pipe in his mouth and inhales. A wave of disgust washes over him. He yanks it out and coughs wildly, expelling a breathy stream of smoke from his mouth and nostrils at the same time. "Kah! Kah! Haaack! Krrgh!"

The angel coughs violently as tears and snot spill from his face.

"Kah! Accursed- gahh! Foul! How could anyone smoke this?!"

Smealum suppresses a smile. He plucks his pipe from Shepherd's grasp and forces a monotone expression. "Ah, it seems you cannot handle something as simple as smoking. Tsk. How unfortunate that the lowly demon has bested his angelic superior once again."

"Bah! Shut up," Shepherd says as he hammers his chest to expel the last bits of smoke. "I know not what thou hath given me, but it was poison to my lungs. Only fools would deliberately inhale such vile chemicals."

Slowly, Smealum smiles. "Hehe. Well, the fact you shared my pipe fills me with glee, Shepherd. After all, any demon willing to share his smoking stash with another would only do so if he considered him a good friend. That is why I consider you a brother."

Shepherd frowns. "Me, be thy brother? I think not. Thou art a demon. I am an angel. We cannot be considered family."

"Why not? I'm different from most demons, just as you are from most angels. We're closer to each other than we are to members of our species. We both can speak, think critically, and treat each other with respect. If that is not the definition of brotherhood... then I don't know what is."

Shepherd ponders my words.

"I suppose thou hath a point. I am not sold on the concept, but I understand thy meaning."

A moment of awkward silence follows. Smealum places his pipe in his mouth, inhales, and pokes at the bones laying on the log.

"Well. Why don't we continue with this game? We can make it more interesting now, and when the sun lowers, I can lead you out of the forest."

"Why then and not now?" Shepherd asks.

"I'd prefer not to get spotted by your family," Smealum replies. "I hope you'll understand, brother."

"I do. But... I'm not your brother."

Smealum's grin widens. "In time, who knows?"

Part 122: Reptilian Ancestry

Diablo and Bael hang out together in a bedroom, different from the healing quarters where I last saw them. Diablo lays in bed, still paralyzed, but Bael does squats while also holding two heavy rocks, one in each hand. The hulking demon looks far more fit than before, indicating quite some time must have passed. His muscles make him look like he could chew solid granite without batting an eye.

Various trinkets sit atop a stone shelf to my right. Each one, carved from bone, is in the shape of a different figure. One resembles a cougar, while a larger bone carving looks like a cave bear. Its open mouth and swinging paws give it a menacing appearance as it towers over the other figurines.

Diablo stares at them absentmindedly.

Am I going to be stuck in this bed forever? It's already been a year. My body refuses to work, no matter how hard I try to move it. I thought the paralysis would wear off eventually, but I'm just as trapped as when Lucy rescued me.

He closes his eyes and sighs.

Maybe it would have been better if Michael had killed me.

Bael pipes up. "Geez, boss. What's with the gloomy look?"

The seven-foot-tall demon stands up and flexes his muscles. He drops the rocks in his hands, making them hit the ground with a resounding *thud!*

"Ah... it's nothing, I suppose..." Diablo mutters. "Same old, same old."

Bael grunts. "Ya gotta have faith in Lucy, boss. She'll getcha all fixed up. It'll take some time, that's all."

"Time. Right," Diablo murmurs. "None of the medicians can heal my body, not even Belial. There's too much Holy Energy trapped inside. There's no point in even trying."

"Oh, brother, there ya go with that give-up attitude again," Bael says. "Ya gotta open your eyes. Lucy's doin' her best. I know it ain't easy sittin' in bed and watchin' as I build my muscles up, but if ya hang in there, good stuff will happen."

"That's the problem," Diablo says. "Laying here *is* easy. It's the easiest thing in the world. The guilt is what makes my day unbearable. Haven't you been listening? The angels have started doing fly-bys. They're hitting us from the air, and we can't retaliate. I'm lying in this damned bed while my friends die out there!"

Bael rests his hands on his hip. "Yeah. I feel ya. It sucks knowing you can't do shit. Don't beat yourself up, boss. Even if a few thousand demons died to rescue you and me only for one of us to lie in bed and not do anything, it doesn't mean your life's worth any less than mine."

Diablo narrows his eyes. "Are you trying to cheer me up, or make my day even worse?"

"Yup."

Bael's shit-eating grin makes me roll my eyes.

"You're an imbecile."

"Yeahhh... I get that a lot."

Bael shrugs. He reaches down, grabs his rocks, and begins powerlifting them again.

Silence fills the space between us. Diablo watches silently as gloom enters his mind.

Outside, the sounds of hurried footsteps patter toward our room. The leathery curtain at the entrance at the back left corner flips open as Lucifer bursts inside, pulling Agares by his hand.

"Diablo! Bael! I've done it! I figured out the solution!!"

Agares scowls at her. "C'mon, let me go, already. You didn't need to drag me all the way-"

"Quiet, you. You're the key to all of this!" Lucifer releases Agares and pumps her fist in the air. "I can cure you, Diablo! Isn't that great?!"

Diablo smiles, but his expression holds a hint of uncertainty. "I mean, yeah... but you've said that before."

"This time is different."

"You said *that*, too. Still, I'll bite. What changed?"

Lucifer claps her hands together. "Agares is half-lizard, Diablo. Last week, he lost one of his arms during a fight against five cherubs. Look! It's grown back already!"

The triple-eyed demoness gestures with both hands at Agares' left arm. It is, in fact, attached to his body as it should be.

Agares scratches his scalp. "Yes. I can regrow my limbs and heal myself by hibernating. What good does that do for Diablo? He isn't me."

"Correct, he isn't," Lucifer hisses. She turns to Agares, a sparkle in her eyes. "However, I can use the dragon's magic to copy your inner aura. By extracting your essence, I can apply your abilities to Diablo. That will allow him to heal his wounds."

"You can?" Agares asks. His jaw slackens noticeably. "How? That sounds dangerous."

Lucifer waves his concerns away. "Psh. Not at all. I used the dragon's magic to make Broodmothers and Scythurs. In contrast, extracting your essence will be trivial. Sit beside Diablo so I can get to work." She motions to a spot on the bed near my feet.

Agares scratches his head. "I don't know about this..."

Lucifer shoves him onto his ass. "Sit, dammit! Stop worrying so much! Diablo's been laying here trapped in bed while you have all the fun. Don't you care about your friend?"

"Well, yes, but... you seem a little too eager for my liking."

"Psh. Of course, I am. I can't help my curiosity. Your body likely holds *many* secrets." Lucifer slurps up a spot of drool forming at the edge of her mouth. Her eagerness to experiment worries me, as well.

Diablo coughs. "Ahem. Ah, Lucy, don't hurt Agares, alright? If this has even a chance of going bad, I'd rather you didn't-"

Lucifer scowls at me. "Quiet! I'm doing this for you!"

I fall silent and watch with trepidation as Lucifer places her right palm on Agares' forehead, then uses her left to begin forming magical signs. The demoness closes both of her lower eyes, but the one on her forehead remains open. She murmurs under her breath. Smoke emanates from her hand. Agares closes his eyes and flinches as his breathing slows.

Bael inches closer to watch more closely. Despite continuing to exercise with his rocks, the big guy's movements slow as his eyes flick from Lucifer to Agares and back again.

"Nnn..."

Lucifer grunts painfully.

"Tch. There's too much information. Reading your blood is like swimming against a freezing current."

Agares doesn't reply. Sweat drips off his chin as minutes pass.

"Damn..." Lucifer mutters. "I can't find what I need. It's just... just beyond my reach. Here? No. There? Grr..."

"Lucy, call it off. You're hurting Agares," Diablo says. "Come on, that's enough."

"Quiet! Don't tell me what to do!" Lucifer snarls at me. Her eyes press shut even harder than before. "This much is nothing. I'll break through if I have to!"

Agares winces. He tries to pull away, but Lucifer forces her palm against his forehead. "L-Lucifer... burns... stop..."

"Quiet! You're disrupting my concentration!"

Agares' breath comes in ragged gasps. His eyes flutter open and shut as delirium takes over. Smoke begins to fizzle from his scalp, his black hair slowly turns grey, and his skin starts to sag.

I flick my eyes to Bael. "Hey! Pull them apart! Stop Lucy before she kills Agares!"

Bael tosses his rocks aside and nods. "I'm on it!"

The giant demon lumbers toward Lucifer. He pauses, uncertain of what to do.

When Bael reaches toward Lucifer's arm to pull her off Agares, her third eye jerks toward him.

"Don't touch me, you fat slob!"

Her eye glows. A massive burst of energy erupts from her mind, slams into Bael's chest, and sends the demon flying backward.

Wham!

The room shakes from the force of Bael's body impacting the wall. "Gah!"

By now, Agares has begun trying to pull away with all his strength, but Lucifer shoves him back and presses his head into the bed. "Stop moving! I'm nearly there, dammit!"

"Lucy! Let Agares go! You're killing him!" Diablo yells, terror in his voice. The demoness ignores us.

Bael grunts. He jumps out of the wall, unhurt. However, fire burns in his eyes.

"I was gonna take it easy on you cuz you're the boss's girl... but NOBODY lands a free hit on me!!"

Bael charges. Agares whimpers. Lucifer continues pressing the lizard-demon against the bed.

By the time Lucifer's eye locks onto Bael, it's too late. A massive fist slams into her head, tearing her away from Agares and flinging her like a ragdoll. Before Lucifer can hit the wall, Bael dashes forward, grabs her out of the air, and swings her over his head.

"Eat SHIT, you stuck-up BITCH!"

Bael pounds Lucifer into the ground with a tremendous *CRASH!* A human under the same circumstances would melt into a pool of blood and bone. Instead, the floor craters nearly a foot into the Earth. Lucifer lies motionless, unable to move.

Bael starts to raise a fist to hit her again, but Diablo interrupts him. "Bael! Stop! Don't go berserk!"

Pausing, Bael blinks and shakes his head. As if returning from the realm of the dead, the massive demon suddenly realizes what he's done. "Ah, fuck, shit. Sorry, boss! I didn't mean-"

"Forget that! Check Agares and Lucy. Are they okay?!"

Bael stares blankly at Lucifer's unmoving form. "Shit, shit, shit. Did I kill her? Aw, fuck! Devil-dammit!!"

Lucifer grunts weakly. The demoness twitches one arm, allowing Bael to breathe a sigh of relief. He lurches down, wraps one hand around her stomach, and lifts her over his shoulder. Bael's bed, a few feet to my left, sits against the opposite wall. He walks Lucifer over and lays her down. "Lucifer! Hey, you okay?!"

"Munguuuh..."

She moans pitifully, unable to speak. Satisfied she's alive, Bael and I both turn our attention to Agares.

Instead of the handsome, black-haired stud from before, a corpse-like figure lays across my legs. Agares' mouth hangs open, his skin appears halfway melted off his face, and his hair turns ashen. Lucifer seems to have sapped all the strength from Agares' body.

"Oy, oy! Agares!" Bael stomps toward him and kneels. He pokes Agares' sides gingerly. "Aw, shit! Wake up, man! Snap out of it!"

"Nuh..."

Agares breathes a single syllable into the void, but like Lucifer, he can't speak properly either.

Bael glances at me, worry-lines wrinkling his forehead. "Boss, what do I do?! I don't know nothin' bout healin'!"

"Get Hellga," Diablo says. "Find Belial, too. Either of them will be better than you or me. Hurry!"

Bael nods. "Right! On it!"

He jumps to his feet and rushes out the door, leaving Diablo to lay helplessly and watch as his two friends moan and whimper in pain.

"Come on, Bael. Hurry!"

Several agonizing minutes pass. Diablo's eyes jump from Lucifer to Agares. Agares stops breathing entirely, while Lucifer barely manages to twitch her hand before passing out.

Diablo whispers to himself. "Devils... where is Bael?! That damned oaf... he'd better not be playing grab-ass with the nurses again..."

Lifting his head, Diablo strains to get a better look at Agares. The half-reptilian demon continues laying across our legs, but we can't feel much of anything from the neck down.

"Hey! Agares! Blink twice if you're still alive!"

Diablo tries to kick his leg, but the movement fails due to his paralysis. He flops back in bed, exhausted from the physical strain. "Cripes. I hate this. I hate all of this shit."

"Boss! Boss, I brought Belial!"

Bael stumbles through the doorway, startling me. I didn't hear him stomping toward the room, which is odd given how noisy he usually is. Behind him, Belial slinks through the doorway as well, and her eyes laser onto Agares, then to Lucifer.

"Bloody sin!" Belial gasps. "Agares' face! It's-"

"We know," Bael says, as he nearly trips over his feet trying to get out of her way. "Use your magic! Fix him!"

Belial nods. She strides across the room, pauses to evaluate Agares' condition versus Lucifer's, and decides he's the higher priority patient. The scantily-clad demoness walks over and hovers inches above Agares body. She scans his face and winces in disgust. "Lucifer did this?! His skin... it's..."

Shaking the thoughts from her head, Belial immediately begins performing her strongest healing magic. While she concentrates on Agares, I turn to Bael. "What about Hellga?"

Bael stares intently at Belial as she rejuvenates Agares' body. After a few seconds, Bael blinks, realizing I was asking him a question. "Oh, uh, sorry. Couldn't find her. Belial's the better healer, anyway. Right?"

Belial jerks her head toward Lucifer. "Perhaps, but I can't heal two demons at once. Is Lucifer still breathing?"

"She is," I say. "What about Agares? What's the damage?"

Belial sucks air through her teeth. "Ahh... I've never seen something like this. It's as if Lucifer sucked out half of his soul. It'll take all of my skills to heal him. I don't think I can restore his former condition, either."

"Former condition? What do you mean?"

Belial shakes her head. "It's difficult to put into words, Diablo. His bones are weak, now. Restoring them is beyond my power. I think he'll pull through, though."

Diablo nods. We fall silent and watch as Belial continues motioning with her hands and sending healing magic into Agares' body. After three minutes of sweating, the demoness pulls away and wipes her forehead.

"Alright. Now for Lucifer."

Belial slides over to the three-eyed demoness. After only a few seconds of examination, her jaw drops. "Sweet mercy! What happened to Lucifer?! Half of her bones are broken!"

Bael winces and rubs his head. "Uh. Oops. My bad."

The succubus scowls at him. "And here I always thought you were a gentleman."

"Y-you did?"

"No."

Bael's shoulders sag. He ends up silently watching Belial's handiwork as she mends each of Lucifer's bones one by one. It takes her quite a while, nearly twice as long as Agares' healing did, but eventually, Belial finishes.

"Seven Devils. Would someone like to tell me what happened here?"

Lucifer gurgles in her throat. "Guh... the damned savage attacked me. When did... when did Bael turn into a cave bear?"

Bael rubs his fist. He looks hurt from all the insults. "Geez. I ain't even all that strong. The rest of you guys are just weak."

* * *

Soon, Lucifer and Belial stand over Agares, having moved him to Bael's bed. Belial bites her lip. "I healed him, but he hasn't woken up yet. What's wrong?"

"I tapped into his life force," Lucifer says. "Diminished it quite a bit, I'm afraid. I shouldn't have lost control like that."

"No kidding," I reply. "Is Agares going to wake up? Don't tell me you put him in a coma."

"He'll be fine," Belial says, reassuring me. "Lucifer drained his stamina. After he rests, he'll be right as rain."

The succubus pauses.

"Well, he'll be permanently weakened. Lucifer, I hope that whatever you were doing didn't cripple our best warrior for no reason. Valac is going to be *pissed*."

Lucifer closes her eyes and taps her chin. Her third eye twitches back and forth as she ponders several things.

"I succeeded. I copied Agares' lizard abilities. I'll try and see if I can heal Diablo, now."

"Heal Diablo?" Belial asks, echoing Lucifer. "How are you going to heal him?"

"I'll copy Agares' regenerative powers into him. With luck, it will counteract the holy energy wracking Diablo's body."

"Don't tell me this is all based off a hunch," Belial says. "Lucifer. You endangered Agares' life. If this doesn't pay off... Valac will have your head."

"Valac can kiss the shiniest side of my ass," Lucifer hisses. "Don't try and scare me with talk of the *mighty Valac*. He needs me. He might pretend he doesn't, but his tricks will only take him so far. Now, step aside. You're in my way."

Rather than waiting for Belial to move, Lucifer shoves her out of the way with a sweeping gesture. Belial's jaw drops. "Hey! Don't get pushy! I saved your life! Show a little gratitude."

"*Spare me*," Lucifer says, rolling all three of her eyes. "You did your job. Now let me do mine."

Diablo's heartrate increases. His anxiety begins to build as Lucifer motions with her hands to form spell seals above our chest. "H-hey, Lucy... baby... I won't end up like Agares, will I? You wouldn't hurt this good-looking face, right?"

"Don't call me 'baby,' imbecile. I'm putting my life force, as well as Agares', into your body. If anything, you should end up much stronger than before, not weaker. Lie still, or I might *accidentally* slip and break a chest-bone."

Her emphasis on 'accidentally' implies a threat. Diablo's eyes widen. He nods quickly and goes silent as she rapidly weaves dozens of signs.

Belial walks over and leans against Bael, crossing her arms while they both watch.

A sensation resembling ants crawling across my skin gives me the shivers. Diablo grits his teeth as the sensation of tiny feet transforms into prickling, burning fire.

"Shit! Shit! Ahh, baby, it burns! Devil's sake!"

Usually, Lucifer might scowl at Diablo and say something about how he's acting like a sniveling imp. Instead, she grimaces. "Apologies. I'm trying to do this quickly. Hang in there."

A tear drips down Diablo's face. "Nnn. Mhm. Just... do it... faster..."

"You think the boss is gonna be okay?" Bael whispers. I can barely make out his words through Diablo's grunting and spasming.

"I hope so. Lucifer hasn't failed us yet," Belial whispers.

Diablo ignores them. His consciousness ebbs in and out as invisible fingers reach inside of us and touch the inner parts of our spirit. The sensation, horrifyingly painful yet simultaneously euphoric, is like a drug that sears away all the feeling in our body.

Lucifer says something, but I can't understand her. Her speech translates into gobbledygook in my head, resembling the sound of a waterfall crashing against my face.

Time becomes a blur. All at once, everything stops.

I jolt awake with a start, sharply inhaling what feels like the first breath of my life. Lucifer spreads her mouth wide open, revealing a hundred shark-like teeth. "Welcome back to the living, Diablo. Does your body hurt?"

Diablo blinks. "Pain. *Pain*. No? Yes. No? Uhh..."

It takes several seconds for the demon to get his thoughts unjumbled. He sits up in bed and scratches his head. "No? I feel fine."

Lucifer's eyes widen, and her jaw drops. "Ah! Ahahaha! I did it! YES! Ohohoho!"

She does a little tap dance and skips over to waggle her fingers in Belial and Bael's faces. "Hah! I told you so! I'm a genius, the smartest demon of all time! Phoo! How dare you doubt my brilliance! Diablo is moving again, and it's all thanks to ME! Me, me, ME!!!"

Bael's expression flattens. He gazes at the demoness with a look of annoyance as she hops and skips around the room. "Yeah, yeah, big whoop. When you can wrestle a cave-bear with one hand, lemme know. Sheesh. Broads always think they're queen shit for any little thing."

Belial, however, looks extremely relieved. She walks over to me and sits on my left. "Are you okay now, Diablo? Can you move your legs?"

Diablo nods. He lowers his gaze to his legs, concentrates for a second, lifts one a few inches, then drops it back down again. "I can. Wow. This... this is..."

Our breath catches. Diablo turns away as intense emotions suddenly rush into his mind. He chokes back tears and rubs his eyes. "Devils. I... I can walk again. I have my life back. I thought... I thought I'd be stuck here forever..."

Lucifer grinds her skipping to a halt. She sighs, having unleashed her pent-up excitement. After a moment, she walks over, sits beside Belial, and touches my hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean to take this moment from you. I'm glad you can walk again, Diablo."

"It's all thanks to you and Agares. I owe you everything."

Lucifer stares at me for a moment. A smile appears on her face, but she turns away and forces a neutral expression before glancing at me again. "Thank you, Diablo. Be glad you have someone like me, willing to risk Agares' neck for you. Starting tomorrow, I'll start helping you exercise. We'll get you back in tip-top shape, pronto."

Bael claps his hands. "Alright! Me'n the boss are gonna kick some ass! Yo, Lucifer, you got any of that mojo for me? Don't I get a little boost, here?"

Lucifer never breaks her gaze from mine. "No."

"Aw, c'mon!"

"You nearly killed me. If anything, I ought to repay you in full."

Bael waves his hand. "Pft. That's old news. That was a long time ago."

"It's only been fifteen minutes, *Bael*. I still feel the phantom aching in my joints."

Lucifer forces a grin as she gazes into my eyes. Something about the expression seems psychopathic. She's probably going to beat Bael half to death at some point. Poor guy.

Across from us, Agares grunts. "Ohhh... where.. am I..."

Everyone turns to look at him. He lays on Diablo's bed unmoving, but his eyes blink open slowly. A milky film covers them until he blinks a bit more aggressively. "Wha-? What happened?"

Lucifer stands up. "Ah, Agares-"

"Eee! Stay away!" Agares' eyes widen in horror as he spots Lucifer. "Stay back, foul temptress! Keep your paws off me!"

"It's too late for that," Lucifer mutters. "Sorry. I, ah, may have damaged your body somewhat. On the plus side, Diablo can walk, now."

I wave at Agares. "Hey."

Agares turns and struggles to wave back. "H-hello?" He pauses and stares in horror at his skin. Where once his body was a mass of coiled muscle, ready to strike, his pale pink skin and paper-thin arms reveal the fact that Lucifer sucked a lot more out of him than half his spirit. "What in the name of-?!"

"Your muscles might be atrophied, but it isn't permanent," Belial says, sliding over to his bed. She holds his hand reassuringly. "You can rebuild your strength after you get some rest. I'm surprised you woke up at all. Your willpower is... incredible."

Belial's words soothe Agares' nerves. He nods and closes his eyes. "Yeah... I am feeling tired. Maybe I should... rest my eyes for a bit."

Hardly has he uttered the words, before Agares' head lolls to the side. He falls asleep instantly, causing a hint of dread to pass around the room. Nobody seems sure how severe the damage to his body was.

Belial turns back to the rest of us. "I gave Agares a mild sedative. He'll wake up soon. In the meantime, we should all allow Diablo to get some rest, and you too, Lucifer. I may have healed all your bones, but exerting yourself anymore could have permanent side-effects."

Lucifer groans. "Somehow, I knew you'd say that."

Both of the women climb off the beds and head over to Bael. Lucifer pauses. "Now that I have this ability... this regenerative power... I should begin testing it. It could dramatically improve our fighting capabilities. Everyone, do me a favor, please. *Don't* tell Valac what's happened, today."

Belial raises an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Don't play stupid, succubus. I know you hate Valac nearly as much as I do. The way he treats the women around here is unforgivable. I've heard about the horrors in the comfort rooms as of late. If I don't do something... Valac is going to try and turn us into cattle."

Bael smirks. "Sounds like a good deal to me."

"Shut your trap," Lucifer hisses. "You're already in hot water. I've half a mind to rip your arms off and shove them where the sun doesn't shine."

"Uhh..." Bael frowns. "But there already ain't no sunlight down here."

Lucifer growls under her breath. "Blasted... nnn...!!!" She storms over to the doorway, flings the leather curtain aside, and stomps out of the room.

Bael glances at me, confusion written all over his face. "Is Lucy stupid? She doesn't really think there's sunlight down here, does she?"

Belial smirks. "Yes, Bael, I think you've got Lucifer *all* figured out."

Part 123: Vengeance of the Damned

A disorienting rush of motion greets me when I arrive inside my next host. After lying sedentary in Diablo's body for the previous vision, appearing inside the mind of someone right in the heat of a battle sends waves of nausea through my stomach. I bounce, twirl, and spin on a spear grasped in my right hand, while using a second spear in my left to lash out and impale a demon through his mouth. The demon's eyes bolt open in terror, but he isn't fast enough to dodge.

"Hahahaha! Bloodskin bastard, take that!" My host, Uriel, cackles with glee. She lifts her crimson spear to stare at the demon skewered on its end, only to then violently slam it into the ground, tearing the demon's head in half and killing him instantly.

All around us, a small battle of perhaps thirty demons and half a dozen angels erupts into chaos. Scythers and grunts take up their positions, quaking in fear the whole time. To my right, Catherine and Sophia work together to eviscerate five Scythers, while on my left, Gabriel, Hyacinth, and Penelope take turns hitting the rest of the enemies.

Gabriel aims his hand at one of the demons. An instant later, a laser of holy magic fires from his palm and sends the demon's brains splattering out all over the grass. The grunt flies backward and lands in a pool of blood. His limbs twitch, then go still.

The Archangel of Power doesn't smile or scowl. His face betrays no emotion as he systematically turns and kills another demon immediately. He never hesitates. He moves with precision, not wasting a single bit of energy.

Uriel pounces over to her brother and skewers a demon sneaking up behind him in the grass. She stabs through his spine, impales him to the ground, and decapitates him with the bladed end of her golden spear.

"Cheer up, Gabriel!" Uriel says with a smile. "Have some fun! I love letting out aggression on these bloodskins!"

Gabriel doesn't echo her grin. "I do not. Let us finish this battle quickly."

"Oh, come on. Lighten up, will you?"

The Archangel of Power shakes his head. "I am incapable of enjoying such barbarism."

Uriel's smile vanishes. "Fine. Be like that!"

Pivoting on her heel, Uriel dashes over to two Scythers. They swing their bladed arms to disembowel her, but she leaps into the air and flaps her wings, rushing at them before they can react. She tears the one on the right in half with both spears while scorching the second to ash with a fire-kick.

Sophia screams. I turn around just in time to see a scyther yank his bladed arm out of her kidney. The pink-haired angel staggers away and clutches her wound. Uriel's eyes widen in horror as the demon prepares to cut her down. "No!!"

A flash of light rushes forward and slams into the demon's chest, tossing him like a sack of potatoes onto his back. Hyacinth raises a massive longbow of light, summons arrows one after the other, and riddles Sophia's attacker with holes. Each one travels at nearly the speed of sound, impacting her enemies with enough force to launch them off their feet and send them flying.

The ground rumbles behind me. Instinctively, Uriel whirls to face the incoming threat and summons a wall of light. Right on cue, the dirt bursts open, and Artorias pounces out. He slams against Uriel's light-wall while dozens of other demons flood out of the tunnel behind him.

"Angel scum!"

Uriel growls in her throat. "Burrowing bastard."

With a twist of her wrist, Uriel sends her light wall toppling forward to pulverize Artorias. He dives underground just in time to avoid the counter-attack, narrowly avoiding a gruesome death. Her light wall flattens the grass and dirt, crushing the legs of one unfortunate demon who couldn't evade in time.

Uriel cackles. "Hahaha! An ambush?! Do not make me laugh! I felt the vibrations of thy approach from a mile away!" She lifts her right foot at the exact instant Artorias's hand bursts from underground. The demon tries to grab her, but fails. A second later, he dives beneath the Earth again.

The Archangel of Protection narrows her eyes toward his burrow points. *The bloodskins are trying to surround us from the sides and below, eh? They won't live to regret that mistake.*

Uriel plants the butts of both her spears in the terrain and quickly forms magical signs. As demons pounce out of Artorias's tunnel, the Archangel finishes her conjuration and slaps her palm against the dirt.

Let's shake things up a bit!

Three seconds later, a massive earthquake rumbles the continental plates. The demons trip and fall, losing their footing as they try to stay upright. Uriel takes the opportunity to grab her spears and charge at the nearest enemies.

Within a minute, all of the horned fiends end up corpses laying in the mud. The planet ceases its shaking, but the remaining demons scurry away. They run for the hills, barely escaping with their lives. Uriel glances around, looking for the burrowing demon, but her search proves fruitless. Artorias escapes with his life.

Uriel turns and flies toward Sophia. The pink-haired Saint leans against a boulder and grits her teeth as Hyacinth quickly directs healing magic into her kidney. "Ahh! It hurts!"

The remaining Saints and Gabriel fly over and land in a protective circle around us.

"Sophia. Art thou gravely injured? What happened?" Gabriel asks.

"A scyther nearly cut our sister in half," I reply. "Luckily, Hyacinth was able to save her. I had my hands full."

We all watch silently, pausing only to look around for potential ambushes. None appear. Hyacinth furrows her brow as she finishes healing Sophia. "Alright, sister. I've finished. We must have Uzziel give

that wound a second look. My healing magic is nowhere near as potent as hers."

Sophia gingerly touches the skin where a black spot is all that remains of her impalement. "It's fine; barely even hurts. Is everyone else okay? Uriel?"

Uriel rolls her eyes. "The fiends didn't land a scratch on me. More importantly, thou must watch thy back, Gabriel. One of the little bastards nearly struck thee from thy blind spot. Thou art lucky I caught him in time."

Gabriel stares at me for a moment, then shrugs. "Everything worked out in the end, did it not? Hyacinth would provide healing if the demons managed to hurt me, despite how unlikely such a feat might be."

Uriel frowns. *There goes Gabriel again, with his talk of luck and fortune. If I don't watch his back, the big oaf is liable to get himself killed.*

With a shake of her head, Uriel turns to Penelope. "I encountered that demon. The one who tunnels underground. Dids't thou get a good look at him?"

Towering over everyone but Gabriel, the giantess angel shakes her head. "I did not. Sorry. Hyacinth and I were preoccupied with one of the fire-type demons."

Catherine raises her hand and draws words in the air. *I felt a presence. Someone watching us. Distance. Chilling sensation.*

She gestures toward Mount Sinai's peak, visible nearly ten miles away. A forest stands between the summit and us, indicating that to return, we have to fly above it.

Hiding in forest. Didn't see the watcher.

Uriel scowls. "One of the demon scouts, I'd wager. Damn. We know their burrows are somewhere in those woods. I ought to scorch the whole thing to the ground."

"Uzziel would not like that," Gabriel replies. "Besides. The trees aren't hurting anyone."

"It's not about the damned-" Uriel catches herself before berating her brother. She sighs. "Haah. Never mind. Since the red rats have fled underground, we can't pursue them now. Let us return to Uzziel and Raphael. We need to have Sophia's injury double-checked, anyway."

Sophia looks like she wants to protest, but Uriel waggles a finger. "No if's, and's, or but's."

The two Archangels and the Saints flap their wings and soar into the sky. Catherine and Penelope flank Sophia on both sides, staying beside her just in case her injury turns critical, and she loses her ability to fly. As for me, my eyes flick to the hundred or so demon bodies below us. Instead of flying south toward Sinai, we head to the east of it, away from the cloud of Cherubs circling overhead.

These past several months have proven troublesome, Uriel thinks to herself. It seems every few days our scouts spot packs of bloodskins roaming the Earth. And now... their Blight has become so pronounced that it's impossible to ignore.

Uriel flicks her eyes to the north, where a horrible sight makes my stomach churn. A second forest nearly five miles away, once a beautiful patch of green I saw when the angels flew toward Mount Olympus,

has transformed into a dead chunk of land colored black and brown. It's only now that I begin to notice how *silent* the world sounds. No birds fly around in the skies or chirp in the trees. Below us, not a single animal wanders the plains. Uriel's eyes wander across the landscape, searching for the faintest speck of life, but no matter where she looks, none presents itself.

The Blight has transformed this land into a valley of death. It won't be long before the forest nearest Sinai begins to crackle and fizzle away as well. Without the creatures and insects to maintain the greenery, only a scorched Earth will remain. Why, I wonder, must the rat bastards choke and kill everything they touch? Is it their nature, or is this some new tactic?

Uriel shakes her head.

Their reasons don't matter to me. They murdered thousands of my brothers and sisters, including Samael. I will pay them back ten times over.

Turning her gaze away from the smothered, dead forest to the north, Uriel continues leading the Saints alongside her brother.

Gabriel stares ahead, unblinking, at our destination; A small hill range about twenty miles away, where Uzziel and Raphael await our return. I recognize it as the place where Uzziel observed her pet humans during a previous vision.

Uriel purses her lips. "Brother. Art thou alright? I do not appreciate thy lack of vigilance during that fight. If I hadn't been there to protect thee..."

Gabriel shrugs. "I know not what is causing thee such consternation. After all, the bladed arms of those demons would not have pierced my Divine Aura. Even if they had, Hyacinth would have healed me. In the end, thy spears saved me. Everything worked out as it should."

Frowning, Uriel turns her head to stare at Gabriel in annoyance. "I care not how much faith thou dost place in thy 'divine aura,' Gabriel. 'Tis no excuse to lower thy guard amidst a heated battle. I may not always be capable of protecting thee. Thou art lucky the Undying didn't overwhelm thee during the battle against Valac. From what I heard-"

Gabriel raises his palm to silence me. "I understand. Thy concern is touching, Uriel. However, a few small fries wouldn't be able to kill me even if they put their very essence into an attack. As always, thy fixation on death and murder disturbs me. Along with Michael, thou hath little interest in seeking peace with our enemies. Both of thee could stand to take a step back and ask who is to blame for this war."

Uriel balks. "Who is to blame? Brother! Look no further than the little red rats who murdered Samael! How couldn't thee insinuate we were responsible for their barbarism when so much evidence exists to the contrary?"

Gabriel frowns. "My words did not come out as I intended. All I wish to convey is that the demons are not the only ones at fault for this ongoing war. Perhaps, had we treated them more fairly, they might not have revolted in the first place. Even now, rather than pursuing the demons with the aim to eliminate them, we could stay in Heaven, and they would never be able to hurt us again."

The Archangel of Power sighs, and he closes his eyes for a moment. "We've lost brothers and sisters needlessly, all because of some worthless quest for vengeance."

The ground rushes below us as the angels fly forward at nearly a hundred miles an hour. Uriel shakes her head, unable to fathom Gabriel's words as we hurtle toward our destination. "I always have trouble understanding thy logic, Gabriel. Our quest for vengeance is far from worthless. It is a goal worth pursuing. It sounds to me like thou wouldn't prefer we had ignored Samael's death."

Gabriel falls silent. He continues staring forward, unblinking, as thoughts swirl in his mind.

"Nay... that is not what I mean. I wish only to prevent more needless suffering. Samael was a precious brother. I loved him deeply, as I love thee. However, I also loved Brother Listrus, Sister Vera, and all the others who have fallen. None of them would have perished, had we simply sealed Heaven after the first attack."

Gabriel's lip trembles. "From my point of view, my entire family has gone mad. Even if we slaughter all the demons and wipe them off the face of the Earth, we won't be able to bring Samael, Listrus, Vera, or anyone else back. Instead, more of my dear family members will die. In the end, we might succeed in fulfilling some petty revenge, but our losses would prove far more costly than our gains."

Uriel opens her mouth to reply.

After a moment, she closes it.

Turning away, several emotions run through our mind. Uriel blinks several times as she tries to parse Gabriel's words.

My brother believes it would be better to allow Samael's death to go unpunished, so long as no more of our family members die.

At first glance, his argument appears reasonable. However, it also irks me. It is both rational and irrational, simultaneously. How could we allow Samael's murderer to walk free?! Perish the thought. If we do not uphold the name of the angels, it will invite future destruction and disrespect upon us.

Bah. Even if I'm right, I cannot correct Gabriel. My brother is set in his ways, and has been, for millions of years. Better to agree and let him think what he likes.

Uriel scrunches up her face and turns back to Gabriel. "If thou despiseth the idea of killing so much, why travel with us to eliminate today's demonic scouts?"

Gabriel shrugs, a movement I've grown used to seeing him perform. "Raphael told me to help. I don't wish to see anyone in my family die, so I came along. Wouldn't thou prefereth I hadn't?"

Uriel sighs. She looks away. "Haah... no. Thy coming has eased my heart. No matter how we might disagree on the merits of this war, I know thou shalt always have my back."

"Naturally," Gabriel murmurs.

* * *

We arrive at the human encampment, some twenty miles from the base of Mount Sinai. I'm immediately struck by how many hundreds of Neolithic-era humans are roaming the plateau. Their

numbers appear far more substantial than the last time I saw them.

Several cherubs hang out at the top of the hill, while one stands guard at the entrance of the cave. The humans ignore their winged protectors and instead opt to munch on berries growing from vines at the edge of a cliff, or they poke at the fires dotting the bottom of the hill.

The six angels, including Uriel, land smoothly at the base of the hill. The crest rises only a hundred feet above us, but the entrance to its cave system appears halfway up the hill, along with a flat, rocky plateau.

Uzziel and Raphael stand a few feet away, both listening to a report from a cherub messenger. Uriel glances around the human village.

Hrm. It seems Uzziel's new children have exploded in number within only the last year. Has she, perhaps, underestimated their reproduction speed? If only angels could grow our numbers as these mortals do.

"Gabriel! Uriel!" Uzziel spins to face us. Her look of horror sends a chill down my spine. "Oh, thank Heavens thou hath returned! Come quickly."

Uriel's heart sinks. *Bad news? Tch. I don't like the look on my little sister's face.*

The six of us trot over to her and Raphael's side. The old man's face appears ashen, as if just he's seen a ghost. "Leopold just informed us... there was a battle in Heaven. Two thousand of our brothers and sisters have fallen."

Uriel's eyes widen. "No... that's impossible... we stationed guards everywhere! Inside and out! How could the demons get in?!"

Raphael shakes his head. "Not the demons, Uriel. The Undying."

Gabriel's eyes narrow. "Raphael. What is thy meaning? What's this about the Undying?"

Raphael gestures to the cherub messenger. Only now do I notice the expression of pain on his face as the loss of his family members hits him in waves. "'Twas so sudden we hadn't a moment to react. Brother Jonus went berserk. Before we knew what was happening, he cut down Krugman and Gail. By the time we managed to gather our wits, he had impaled three others at the end of his blade."

Leopold wipes his eyes. "We managed to subdue Jonus, but then two more of the Undying joined in, and five more after them. Every single one of the Undying began to attack the living, all at once. I... I watched as Brother Jonus begged for death. He couldn't control his body. Camael arrived and crushed the heads of all of the Undying involved. Now, she is trying to corral the remainders in one area. As all of thee know, the Undying art scattered across all of Heaven in pockets here and there. Everyone is on high alert, terrified they might attack again."

"Tch," Raphael mutters. "'Twas as I feared. Even in death, the Reaper confounds us. First, he killed our family members. Then, he brought them back from the dead. After his passing, we believed they had retaken control of their souls. However, they hadn't! The bastard confounds us again with this recent development!"

Raphael stomps his foot. "Damn! Damn, damn, damn! I knew it! I should have pressed my case when I had the chance! This is all my fault! Now, more members of our family have passed as a result of my negligence!"

Uriel shakes her head skeptically. "I do not understand. Why now? Why did the Undying wait for over a year before attacking?"

"How should I know?!" Raphael yells. "Perhaps their minds degraded! Perhaps the Reaper's spell wore off or gained more power as time passed! What does it matter?! Thousands more of my brothers and sisters have died, and it's all my fault!"

Raphael turns away, rage seething in his eyes. He forces himself to take a deep breath, and exhales it through his teeth. "By the Creator's name, I won't allow the Reaper's treachery to tear us apart. We must return to Heaven and kill the rest of the Undying ourselves."

Raphael's words cause every angel within earshot to gasp. Uzziel covers her mouth in shock. "B-brother! Thou cannot be serious! Please, reconsider-"

"I won't!" Raphael says, whipping his head to the left to face Uzziel. "I warned all of thee that allowing the Undying to walk among us was a mistake! I didn't understand how badly things would turn out, but I only wish I had been wrong! I only wish..."

The old man trails off. He turns away and shakes his head.

"Gods. How could I have been so blind? The answer was right there in front of us, the whole time."

Gabriel frowns. "I don't understand, Raphael."

"The Undying, Gabriel. 'Tis no wonder they've reverted. Valac isn't dead. He's alive!"

Catherine appears at my side. A look of worry appears on her face. She quickly traces letters into the air. *Impossible. Scorched his body to ash. Nothing left behind.*

Raphael shakes his head. "Nay, little sister. Remember the tale thou didn't weave regarding his abilities? Several times, thou didn't land a killing blow, only for the Reaper to reappear in midair, unharmed. He must have faked his death so his minions could plant themselves among our ranks. His ploy worked! Now thousands of other angels have died, and until we eliminate his reanimated agents, we will continue-"

Raphael stops mid-sentence. A look of alarm washes across his face.

"What... what is this... this chill?"

It takes Uriel a moment, but she notices, too. A sensation, like icy fingers, caresses her arms and sends a chill down her spine.

Gabriel shudders, along with everyone else present.

Sophia's eyes dart around. "H-hey, what was that? I saw something, just for an instan-"

Before Sophia can finish her sentence, Catherine whirls to face her. The Saint of Swords dives at her sister and slams her to the ground just in time to avoid an attack aimed at her chest. Valac appears in

midair and swings his scythe, narrowly missing the pink-haired Saint by a few inches. He levitates backward, and every angel quickly leaps away, putting distance between themselves and the ten-foot-tall Valac. Catherine yanks Sophia to her feet and retreats several steps.

"Kukuku... so you've solved the riddle, Raphael, my friend. Sadly for you, my investment paid back dividends. Two thousand angels dead, and more will soon expire; the only way to win is to cast your brothers into the fire."

"Valac!" Raphael yells. "Bastard! I knew it! Everyone, attack him at once!"

The Reaper levitates several feet away and raises his scythe threateningly. His massive form towers over everyone present, making us feel small and insignificant. "Ah ah ah, I'd be careful if I were you. There's no such thing as armor my scythe can't tear through. One little nick, that's all it will take. If it touches your skin, your soul, I will break."

Catherine holds up her hand. *Stay back. Valac, killable? We don't know. Do not rush in. He might kill us.*

Uriel grinds her teeth together. "So thou art the bastard who turned thousands of my brothers and sisters into walking freaks. I haven't stopped thinking of thee, Valac. How *dare* thou showeth thy face again."

She raises both spears and prepares to attack, but Valac appears unphased. "Four times, five times, six times, or more. Whether you crush or burn me, it doesn't matter anymore. You look at me as though I draw breath, but I have ascended past the limits of life and death. I'm the Grim Reaper, Valac, so you'd better fly away; Even if you kill me here, I'll rise to fight another day."

Valac's face, shrouded under his hood, betrays no emotion. However, his words and attitude reek of smugness. Uriel's rage dials up to eleven. "This talking bag of bones dares mock Heaven's mightiest Archangel?! Thou art lucky I wasn't there during thy first appearance. How about I teach thee the meaning of TRUE power?!"

Gabriel grabs my shoulder. "Uriel. Don't. He'll-"

The Archangel of Power doesn't get to finish his sentence. Uriel wrenches out of his grasp and stomps toward the demon. Holding two spears proves no barrier to Uriel. By the time she's taken her first step, her hands have already finished a complicated series of magical signs.

Whoomph. Whoomph. Whoomph. Whoomph.

Four beings created from light pop into existence. Two winged angels, a floating orb, and an oscillating cube.

Uriel's eyes blaze with rage.

"For killing my family members, I sentence thee to DEATH!!"

Beneath Valac's hood, I catch a glimmer of a smile.

"Try your hardest, Uriel, and don't disappoint me. I'd hate for you to embarrass yourself before royalty."

Part 124: Battle Against the Black Soul

Recommended Listening

My mind travels to Catherine as she gestures to the other angels. *Take humans, leave. Uriel and I, battle the Reaper.*

Raphael, Uzziel, and the Saints all nod. They issue orders to the cherubs nearby, and the small contingent of angels begins quickly shoos the primitive humans away, guiding them to safety.

Gabriel shakes his head. "I shall help, as well. We cannot take any chances with Valac. He's too dangerous."

Uriel grits her teeth. "Over my dead body. This bastard is mine. I've been itching to pay him back for setting his whore upon me. Her Demonic Trance was an experience that shall haunt me for the rest of my life."

"Do not be brash, sister," Gabriel says, a note of warning in his voice. "The Grim Reaper can kill anyone he grazes with his scythe. Thou shalt need all the help-"

"I need nobody's help!" Uriel yells. She gestures toward her four light constructs, each one waiting to pounce. "Stay out of our way!"

Gabriel hesitates. He and Catherine share a look of worry. *Uriel's going to get herself killed if she faces the Reaper alone*, our eyes say.

Meanwhile, Valac merely watches as the humans flee. He fixates his gaze on Uriel and ignores everyone else. "Those who face me alone have a death wish, methinks. How unfortunate it would be if your eyes were to blink!"

Valac vanishes.

A movement like a flash of light rushes at Uriel's back. Valac appears behind her and impales the Archangel, sending her careening off the edge of the cliff.

Sister?!

Catherine's stomach flip-flops. By the time she starts to react, it's already too late. The Reaper turns to face us.

"Ehehe. That's what happens when you-"

Valac pauses.

His head turns to stare at Uriel's light constructs. Despite her apparent death, they have yet to disperse.

The Reaper spins to face the edge of the cliff. "Curses!"

Uriel swoops up the sheer bluff and swings her golden spear at the Reaper. He manages to deflect it with his scythe, but the impact from her blow sends Valac careening backward - right into the arms of

Unit One. The male Light Construct holds its sword and shield defensively and slashes at Valac the instant he enters its range.

Swish!

Valac's body cleaves in half, sending his particles scattering into the ether. His cloak crumples against the light construct, then flops to the ground.

Uriel! Catherine's eyes light up in surprise. *How did's't thou...?*

The Archangel ignores my question written in the air. Instead, her eyes begin roving the cliffside.

"Valac can reform his body if something happens to it. That means he's not dead. Be on thy guard!"

Catherine's look of relief vanishes. She nods and raises the Sword from Heaven in her right hand, and Aegis in the other. The tower shield seems to engulf our body with its presence, but in reality, it doesn't protect our flank at all. Catherine seems acutely aware of this fact. She divides her attention halfway between her front and back, hesitantly waiting for Valac to strike.

The Grim Reaper materializes several dozen feet away, hovering over the hundred-foot-drop once again. His face, still shrouded by his hood, betrays no emotion. However, his body language appears tense, and his voice seems to echo that impression. "Tch. I impaled you with my scythe, yet still, you live. Surviving my attack is something I cannot forgive!"

Uriel smirks. "Thy scythe can rip the souls from thy enemies' bodies, isn't that right? I shifted mine away from where thy accursed weapon struck me. It missed completely."

Valac's fingers tense around his scythe. "That's impossible. You're lying."

Uriel smirks. "Perhaps I am. Perhaps I am not."

The Archangel of Protection appears confident in her assessment. However, a moment later, her eyes flick to the left. A shimmer of movement in the air reveals an incoming attack. Uriel slams the butts of both spears into the ground and shoves herself away as Valac appears. He swings his scythe out and misses her by inches.

Catherine blinks, stunned by what she sees.

Two Valacs? How?!

In addition to the one that just appeared, the original Valac continues to hover over the edge of the cliff. Interestingly, only the newcomer wields the scythe. The weapon vanishes from the original's grasp.

"So, thou possessest the ability to copy thyself," Uriel murmurs. "That must be the trick to thy deceptions, Valac."

The Undead King titters to himself. "Kekeke, all this time, I've been quite discreet, but at last you've discovered my deceit. For a century I've planned your ultimate defeat, and soon I'll have you licking my feet!"

Uriel snarls. "Thou shalt chew dirt if I have anything to say!"

A blur of motion ensues. Uriel throws caution to the wind and pounces at the second Valac. Her spears twirl and stab like angry vipers, lashing at his blind spots and weak points. However, Valac counters, batting her attacks away with surprising agility. At some point, Unit One lunges at the first Valac, while Unit Two maintains her distance and summons a bow and arrow of light.

The original Valac dodges all of Unit One's attacks. Without his scythe, he seems unable to counter-attack the light construct slashing at him. The Grim Reaper never grunts or hisses as he dodges, instead choosing to quietly size up his opponents and learn their attack patterns.

Catherine's eyes dart between the two battles. She squeezes her sword's handle hard enough to send tingles of pain up her arm.

What should I do? Uriel told me to stay back, but I can't let her fight by herself! Valac is too dangerous!

Suddenly, the scythe vanishes from the second Valac's grasp. Uriel slashes his chest and kills him, but the weapon reappears in the original's grip. He instantly reverses the flow of battle and impales Unit One. The Light Construct explodes into particles of Holy Energy, and Valac vanishes. He reappears behind Unit Two and pierces her spine, transforming her from an angelic figure to dust in the wind.

Uriel spins to face him. Her eyes narrow. "Interesting."

Valac keeps his back to Uriel, but turns his head slightly to peer at her from the corner of his cloak. "Figure something out, did you?"

The Archangel doesn't respond. With a flourish of her hands, she resummons Units One and Two.

Valac stiffens.

"What's this? You can revive your minions?"

Whenever the Grim Reaper drops his rhyming scheme, it sends a chill down my back. This time, he isn't playing around. He sounds genuinely surprised.

Catherine flinches as Gabriel places his hand on my shoulder. The Archangel of Power stares at Valac for a moment, before whispering to me. "Catherine. Do not lose faith. Uriel is a legendary warrior, even among the Archangels."

I use my sword to draw letters in the air. *Valac has the upper hand.*

Gabriel nods ever so slightly. "For now."

Uriel smiles. "Ever since I stepped foot on Earth's soil, I've noticed a strange sensation tingling through my feet and wings. A current of mana in the air. Though faint, the taste is unmistakable. Demonic energy taints the very air I breathe."

Valac turns to face her. "Oho, aren't you perceptive like a hawk? I do hope you're more than just talk."

"Shut up, abomination," Uriel hisses. "The longer we continue to trade blows, the faster I'll unravel thy tricks. Let our weapons do the talking."

Catherine's eyes dart behind Uriel. From the ground, a faint but unmistakable shimmer of light rushes toward her.

Valac nods. "Hehe. Oh, yes. I agree."

Before Catherine can warn her sister, the shimmer of light detonates like a grenade. An explosion of toxic gas discharges against Uriel's spine, blasting the Archangel off her feet. Uriel flips head over heels, spins, and twists through the air. She slams against the ground only a dozen feet from Valac.

Catherine's eyes widen in terror. The Reaper instantly teleports atop Uriel and swings his scythe down.

Ting!

Valac's weapon ricochets off Gungnir, the golden spear, knocking the Reaper off-balance. Uriel swings it behind herself to protect her flank, surprising both Catherine and Valac. Neither of them anticipates the movement.

The Archangel of Protection bashes her head against the ground. The odd maneuver allows her to use her Earth Magic to fling herself back to her feet. With Valac still caught off guard from her deflection, she easily pivots into a sweeping attack with Gae Bolg and decapitates the Reaper.

It takes me a moment to blink and figure out what happened. Valac's cloak falls to the ground, while my eyes travel to Uriel's wings. His acrid smoke chews at her feathers like ravenous parasites, but eventually fizzles away into nothingness. With a few hand signs, Uriel summons water magic to heal herself.

Once again, Valac rematerializes several feet away. "You're starting to piss me off, wretched little chicken. Despite my ambush, your movements did quicken. I underestimated you, this crafty vixen... tell me how you saw through my attack, and I'll have a listen."

Uriel glowers at the Reaper. "I owe thee nothing. But thou art correct. I'm beginning to understand something about thy nature."

Gabriel mutters under his breath. "Catherine. Valac is neither here nor there. Somehow, the Grim Reaper's aura has expanded to fill this entire area."

I flick my gaze to the towering Archangel. *His aura? How?*

"I do not know. Most beings have an invisible aura surrounding their bodies. In my case, it grants me a nearly impenetrable defense. In Valac's, it appears to grant him spherical vision of everything around himself."

Valac turns his head to look at Gabriel. "Ehehe, so you've detected my Soul Aura, after all this time? Perhaps I was wrong about you; your perception seems sublime."

A chill goes down Catherine's back. *How could Valac hear Gabriel from two hundred feet away? My brother barely whispered.*

Uriel plants Gungnir's butt in the dirt and switches to using Gae Bolg in a two-handed style. "I've noticed something else, Valac. Why dost thou not wieldeth thy lantern? My family spoke of its appearance in vivid detail."

Catherine's eyes dart to Valac's left arms. Indeed, he wields his scythe, but not his bone-lamp.

Valac lowers his head. His voice takes on a menacing edge. "You're a little *too* perceptive for my liking."

"Heh. Maybe so," Uriel says with a smile. "And now that thou hath grown used to my dual-wielding style, how about I mix things up a bit? So far, thou hath used all the same tricks against me as ye did my sisters. I must say I'm... *disappointed*."

Valac chuckles. "Hoho. It seems you think yourself a challenger worthy of the King."

"Thou art no king. Thou art a dead dog!"

Uriel charges Valac. This time, she twirls her single spear around her entire body. It flips, spins, and jabs with three times the intensity of when she wielded both spears. It almost seems like using two was a hamper on her combat capabilities.

Valac summons not one, but five copies of himself. Each one swoops and screeches like an enraged banshee, diving at the Archangel from all directions. Valac's scythe disappears from one of his copies and reappears in the grasp of another, only to disappear and reappear again. It transmits from between them so quickly that I lose track of which one has the weapon.

Uriel doesn't. Each time Valac's copies aim for a finishing strike, she bats his attack away with enough speed and confidence to rattle mine.

While Uriel deflects Valac's barrage, she occasionally unleashes a wave of fire from her body, forcing the Reaper to retreat for a split second. Uriel uses the opening to cut down two to three of his clones, only for him to resummon them again.

Catherine's stomach churns as she watches the battle. From my point of view, everything seems to be going well, but worry builds in my host's mind. *Even if Uriel cuts down a thousand of Valac's clones, he will merely summon more. She will grow fatigued as time goes on. There's no way to defeat him using her current tactics!*

Uriel's smile maintains itself through the whole fight. Her speed increases as the battle rages, likely due to her muscles loosening up and her mind becoming more capable of following the movements of all five of Valac's bodies.

Suddenly, one of Valac's copies zips away. It flies into the air, motions with its hands, and the ground trembles beneath Uriel's feet. A torrent of souls rushes toward her from all directions. The Archangel gasps as a hundred of them explode at the same time. The horrible black cloud of gas ejects in all directions, rushing toward Gabriel and me, as well as the nearby forest. Before Catherine can react, Gabriel grabs her by the back of her armor and violently flings us backward. His incredible strength accelerates us from a standstill to hundreds of miles an hour in the blink of an eye, rocking my stomach with nausea.

Catherine opens her mouth to yelp in surprise, but only a whisper of air escapes. She flaps her wings in midair and struggles to decelerate, but by the time she manages to spin around in midair and right herself, we've already traveled two miles. The cloud of gas engulfs an area the size of a football stadium.

Catherine shakes the disorientation from her head. *Uriel! Gabriel!*

I don't know what happened to them. Neither does Catherine. The Saint quickly flies back, but warily keeps her distance as she eyeballs the acrid black smoke from high above.

If I had to guess, I'd assume the humans have perished. There's no way they could outrun Valac's attack.

"Catherine!" A male voice yells out. I turn to spot Raphael flying toward me. The old man stops to hover a few feet away and gazes in horror at the smoke. "What happened down there?"

Before I can answer, something surges from inside the black smog; A massive tornado whirls into existence from where the souls detonated. The artificial cyclone rapidly sucks in the toxic haze and purifies the air, turning Valac's biological weapon inert. At its center stands Uriel, spinning her spear overhead to create the vortex of wind.

Raphael exhales. "Phew. As expected of our sister."

Gabriel stands in the same spot as before, unharmed. A faint holy aura surrounds his body. It crackles and sputters as bits of the demonic gas brush him, but he pays them no mind.

Raphael and I swoop toward the two remaining Archangels. Coming to a stop, we land beside Gabriel.

"Brother, what happened after I left?" Raphael asks.

Gabriel stares at Uriel. His eyes rove her body, looking for injuries as she blows the toxic gas upward to disperse harmlessly into the atmosphere.

"I am not certain. Valac attacked Uriel with his black smoke. Then, he vanished."

Uriel lowers her spear. She glances around and crinkles her nose. "The rat-bastard hasn't left. He's still here, watching us. I feel his aura touching me."

"His aura?" Raphael asks. "I don't understand."

"The Grim Reaper is projecting his spiritual energy in a wide field. It allows him to follow our movements, among other things. I don't know what he's doing with his souls, but I know he can copy himself."

Raphael's expression turns grave. "I see. His manipulation of souls has gone this far, then? That means Valac must have summoned Corrosive Miasma."

Uriel raises an eyebrow. "Corrosive Miasma? Dost thee knoweth the origin of this infernal gas, brother?"

"Aye," Raphael says. "Tis a terrible plague, one I last witnessed during the Primordial Era which devours both flesh and bone. I find myself surprised Gabriel and thee were unharmed after encountering it. Perhaps the Reaper's Miasma is much less potent than that which I encountered in our ancient past."

Uriel narrows her gaze. "How dost thou knoweth the origin of this... this toxic gas, brother?"

"A terrible Titan once wielded it, one we called Morva," The Archangel of Wisdom replies. "I shan't say anything else. This old man must keep knowledge of the primordial era a secret, for the sake of the

treaty."

Uriel shakes her fist at Raphael. "Were I not here, that Miasma could have choked the life from everything in the area. Now is no time for riddles."

Raphael shakes his head. "No riddles. Only the truth. There is no need for me to explain anything. Usage of Corrosive Miasma is as dangerous to the caster as it is to his enemies."

Catherine quickly writes words in the air. *The Reaper, no flesh. Miasma won't hurt him.*

"Perhaps," The old man replies cryptically. He doesn't elaborate.

Uriel's eyes scan the surrounding area. Valac doesn't reappear.

"Tch. I barely got to enjoy myself. What a coward. Why would he show himself, only to flee after hitting me with a surprise attack?"

Raphael rubs his chin thoughtfully. "I do not know. In the meantime, Uzziel and I have managed to evacuate her pet 'humans.' I summoned a portal to send them elsewhere. They are safe, for now."

"Hah!" Uriel laughs. She walks over and snatches Gungnir from the spot she embedded it. "Safe. That is a riot, Raphael. Thy jokes are a great source of merriment, as always. I believe the Reaper's aura might wrap around the entirety of Earth, allowing him to see everything happening throughout the entire world. He will find Uriel's 'humans' and kill them."

Raphael balks. "Unlikely! Nobody can stretch their aura in such a way! 'Tis an absurd notion. Perish the thought."

"I am certain of my intuition," Uriel says. "It explains how he can keep disappearing and reforming his body. His aura is in all places. That must mean he can instantly travel anywhere on Earth. All of our troops are in danger until they know this fact."

The old man nods, accepting her premise. "Very well. If that is the case, then there must be a way we can counter it. Perhaps-"

"Speak no more," Uriel says, holding a finger to her lips. *"He hears everything you say."*

Raphael pales. He flicks his eyes around, uncertain what to do. "I... I... if we cannot discuss this matter... then..."

"Heaven is still safe," Uriel says with a smile. "Valac's presence does not reach our dimension. Rather, it *cannot*. Heaven's Holy Energy is far too mighty for Valac to breach. Come. Let us return home. We will discuss counter-measures there."

Catherine nods.

However, as my host sheathes her sword, suspicion bubbles in her mind. *No. There's something else. We don't have all the pieces to the puzzle. There must be more to Valac's magic than meets the eye. What, I wonder, is the secret to his power? Surely, he isn't unkillable. Michael taught me that every enemy has a weak point. Even Valac.*

Catherine bites her lips as the four angels take off and return to Mount Sinai.

He must have a weakness!

"Curses. CURSES!!"

Valac screeches angrily. I appear inside his mind and arrive in a scene of chaos. The Reaper storms back and forth inside a cave littered with thousands of bones. The only source of light is Valac's lantern, sitting atop a circular altar in the center of the room. The Grim Reaper violently kicks his foot out and sends the remains of creatures clattering across the stony ground.

"That little angel WHORE! How... how DARE she pry into my abilities! Who gave that wench the *right*?!"

The confident facade of the Reaper shatters in my mind as he stomps around and throws a tantrum like an angry toddler.

"I've never been so *humiliated* in all my life. And by a wretched *woman* at that! Uriel thinks she's unstoppable, eh?! I'll show her! I'll show all of them!"

Valac wraps his bony fingers around a rock and squeezes with all his strength. It explodes into dust and falls through the cracks in his bones.

"I've given up so much to earn this power, and what do I have to show for it? Worthless grunts who follow my every command! That's all! I didn't even get the satisfaction of killing Satan myself!"

Valac slams his fist against the stone altar. Dried blood from several ritual sacrifices scrapes off and sticks to our bony hands.

Doesn't Valac know Satan is alive? He told Camael he could see into the future. Why wouldn't he know Satan survived?

The answer comes to me after a few moments of introspection.

Valac isn't omniscient. He's only putting on a facade to fool others. If he can see into the future, that doesn't mean he knows what will happen, just as Camael doesn't know, either. Uriel caught him off-guard today, as well. He isn't the demon he pretends to be. He's powerful, certainly, but insecure as well. His knowledge of the future is colored by his own misgivings and flaws.

The Reaper grabs a small boulder and drags it to the altar. He sits atop it and reaches out to touch his lantern.

"I won't let that Archangel shame me. Uriel thinks herself mightier than the Grim Reaper? What a farce. Perhaps I ought to sow some discord among their ranks... show the angels who rules them. Uriel might be able to combat me, but the others can't- gah!"

Sharp pain rings out among the dullness of Valac's senses. His ribs bend and flex, causing the Reaper to double over. He leans against the altar and clenches his teeth together for several moments.

"Bloody- not this again! Raphael, you bastard. How could you possibly know... know about my pain? How many soul manipulators have you met, you senile old bat?!"

Valac doesn't breathe, nor does he have any internal organs to clutch. However, it still takes him a full minute to right himself before returning to his lantern.

"Anyone who insults me will receive a thousand deaths, each worse than the last. I won't forgive them. I won't forget!"

Part 125: Return of the King

The warmth of the Cosmic Realm beats upon my back and front equally. Light penetrates my eyelids, preventing me from sleeping or dreaming. So bright is this place that it seems to pierce the fabric of my host's mind, turning his thoughts into a hopeless mess.

Satan opens his eyes.

"Samael."

No response.

"Samael. Wake up."

A sensation reminiscent of ice brushes against the top of my skull. Samael stirs within Satan's thoughts, his voice filled with annoyance.

"Hmph. What dost thou want? After staying silent for so long, I assumed thou hadst finally fallen to despair. How unfortunate that thou hath survived the anguish of losing all of thy kin."

"Shut up," Satan growls. "I'm not interested in hearing you blabber and bitch. I've come to a realization. I can free myself and escape the Cosmic Realm."

"Ah, so thy sanity has finally slipped away," Samael says mockingly. "My brother sealed thee here because he knew escape was impossible."

"It isn't," Satan says. "Several of the demon souls within me possess the ability to summon portals to other places. I can return to Earth if I use their magic."

The Archangel spreads his arms out in my mind's eye. "Is that so? Thou shalt summon forth magic without being able to perform the signs? I was right. Thy judgment has fallen to pieces."

"Obviously I need hands, dumbass," Satan replies. "That much is a given. Since I can't perform healing magic on myself and Belial ain't here, the only solution left is to kill myself."

Samael covers his mouth and chortles. "Oh, is that all?! How many times didst thee gnaw thy tongue to shreds in hopes the blood loss would end thy miserable existence? 'Tis futile, demon. Thy regenerative powers only activate when thy body perishes, and no method of killing thyself is available for thee. Thou art trapped. Accept defeat, and allow me to sleep."

Satan smiles. "That's why I called you, chum. I've got it all figured out. I'm going to blow myself up."

The Archangel falters. "H-hmm? How?"

"If I build up enough mana in one spot, I can turn myself into a volcano. I'll detonate, spewing my entrails everywhere and dying in the process. A few moments later, I'll become whole again."

Samael's expression darkens. His smile vanishes. When he replies, his voice turns hoarse. "That won't work. Thou shalt fail."

"It will work. It has to! My people need me!"

The Archangel scowls. "Give up, demon. Nothing thou shalt attempt will succeed. Thy struggle has been for nothing. I... I am going to sleep again. I don't want to hear another word out of thee."

Satan lifts his head and grins. "What's the matter, Samael? You aren't afraid of the big, bad demon, are ya? Let's face it. When I bust outta this shithole, I'm coming for Raphael, and Mother, and all your other ugly brothers and sisters. I'll tear 'em apart. You know that. You're terrified, ain'tcha?"

"I'm not!" Samael bellows. The Archangel's eyes rage with fire. "'Tis hopeless! Even supposing escape was possible, my family would slaughter thee again and again until nothing remained of thy body! They would scatter thy ashes among the stars and scrub thy name from the scrolls of history."

Satan turns deadly serious. "They'd try, chum. They'd fail. I'm unkillable. Unstoppable. Sealing me in the Cosmic Realm was the only way Raphael could stop me. Luckily, grandpa can't beat me. I've got a brain bigger'n his."

The Devil closes his eyes. "And now it's time to use it."

"What art thou doing?" Samael asks. A hint of concern enters his voice as Satan begins to take long, deep breaths.

"Samael. You're going to help me, boy. I need you to concentrate all of my mana inside my stomach."

Satan continues to inhale and exhale. Samael's eyes widen. "Stop it, Satan! This is a complete waste of time!"

"Is it?" Satan asks between breaths. "Then why do you look like you're about to shit yourself?"

Samael goes silent. The Archangel stares at me, wide-eyed, shaking his head. His body trembles slightly, though he tries to suppress it.

Satan resumes his breathing. A burning sensation begins to boil in his stomach, then cool and reheat itself. The temperature in his belly never becomes uncomfortable, but the burning is unmistakable.

"Help me out, bird-brain," Satan says. "You don't have a choice. Gather my mana into my gut. Now!"

Samael closes his eyes. "Damn, damn! A thousand damnations upon thee."

Satan scowls. "Hurry up. Stop stalling!"

The Devil's orders make Samael flinch each time. Eventually, the Archangel begins to motion with his hands. I watch his figure in my mind's eye as he weaves a series of intricate signs.

"An eternity of anguish awaits thee, demon."

"Like you haven't said that a thousand times," Satan grumbles.

Satan's temperature elevates several degrees, causing him to sweat profusely. Within moments, the flame concentrates in his gut.

"Shit... holy fuck... that's hot..." Satan says, gasping for breath. He inhales, and his breath catches. "Ah, shit! Shit! SHIT! It fuckin' burns!"

The Devil's head lolls around as all of his mana continues to build up. Delirium takes him. His muscles expand and constrict on their own, ignoring his mental commands. His body shivers and trembles as all

its heat travels to his stomach.

Like a lighter tossed into a barrel of gasoline, something snaps inside of Satan's gut. The Devil loses himself. His head falls forward and slaps against the glowing ground. Everything turns to white as a shrill whine erupts in his ears.

Time passes. It feels instantaneous to me, yet I get the impression several minutes have passed.

Satan opens his eyes.

His breathing evens out.

The Devil reaches up to wipe away his accumulated sweat. The sensation of his hand touching his face startles him. Satan jerks back in surprise...

...And smiles.

"I... I did it?!"

Using all the strength in his body, Satan shoves himself off the ground. He lands on his feet in a crouch, but after a moment, his legs give out. He falls backward and splashes into a sopping wet puddle of blood from his exploded corpse.

"Uh... shit. Can't walk. Head hurts."

Samael bubbles up in my thoughts. "Satisfied?"

His tone is that of disappointment, anger, and acceptance. He did what he could, but his attempts to stop Satan failed.

The Devil takes a few seconds to gather his bearings before rising to his feet, but slower this time. His legs, while shaky due to lack of use, allow him to walk with relative ease. More importantly, they feel *powerful*. His muscles remain neither atrophied nor useless. I can only assume it's due to the power of the Titans coursing through him.

Satan flexes his arms, clenches his fists a few times, and stretches his whole body.

"I feel alive again. Bloody devils. I thought I'd be stuck here yappin' at you for the rest of eternity."

"If only that had been the case," Samael replies. "Then, perhaps, the universe might have ended up a safer place."

"Yeah, yeah."

Satan ignores Samael's passive-aggressiveness. Given the Archangel poses no threat to him, Samael's words prove little more than a minor annoyance. The Devil continues stretching and eventually stops to crack his knuckles.

"Alright. Now I need to figure out how Portal magic works."

Samael fidgets nervously. "'Tis quite complex. Even among the Archangels, only Raphael can use Portal magic effectively."

"I know. You think I wasn't listening when the old man explained everything?"

Samael clams up. The Archangel turns away, unwilling to meet my gaze.

With a shrug, Satan begins forming hand signs.

"For my first attempt, I'll try using a trigram-eagle formation. I'll tweak my magic based on the results, and eventually, break free."

"Thou shalt fail," Samael says.

His response is anything but confident.

Time passes.

Satan gasps and flops on his ass. Before him, an opaque white portal hums silently in midair. The Devil mops his forehead and clutches his chest.

"Hellspawn. That took forever."

Samael crosses his arms. A sour look crosses his face. "Aye. One hundred and twelve hours, by my account. Six hundred and sixty-six attempts."

Satan closes his eyes. "All that work, but at least I finally opened the damn thing. Why can't I see the other side?"

Samael shrugs. "Most portals are opaque; even Raphael's. Thy portal might have appeared inside a volcano. Or, it could lead straight to the heart of a star."

Satan frowns. "You're fuckin' with me."

"Nay."

"Up yours, liar," Satan mutters. The Devil clambers to his feet and slaps his naked chest. "I've waited long enough. I don't give a shit where this leads. As long as I arrive somewhere on Earth, that'll be good enough for me."

Samael rubs his arm. The Archangel of Change appears disturbed. He wants to try and convince Satan not to step through, but nothing he says will dissuade the Devil.

Eventually, he gives up. Samael flops onto his back and sighs. "A thousand curses upon thee."

Satan ignores him. He steps toward the portal and scrunches up his face. His nerves make him pause for a moment, but he shrugs them off and leaps through with all his strength.

Whoomph.

The air pressure instantly shifts. A high-pitched whine squeals in Satan's ear, deafening him as he flops on our stomach. The Devil violently yawns to pop his ears. Within a few seconds, the irritating sensation vanishes, and he opens his eyes.

Above us, the Sun beats down upon Earth's surface. Compared to the blinding splendor of the Cosmic Realm, it seems more like a faint lightbulb viewed across a great chasm of darkness.

Satan blinks to adjust his eyes. He sweeps his gaze in a 180-degree arc — confusion sprouts in his mind.

"Wha... is this Earth? Where in the name of...?"

Smoothly rolling hills spread out into the distance. They rise into mountains, but what stuns me is the complete lack of color. The entire planet appears to be dead. As if a massive forest fire had ravaged the region an hour before, everything has ended up lifeless and broken. The grass crunches beneath Satan's feet, while black ash lines the terrain for miles and miles in every direction.

A shiver goes down Satan's back. "Somethin' ain't right here, Sammy-boy. I'm getting the heebie-jeebies."

Behind us, a sudden *crash* kicks Satan's heart into high gear. The Devil spins around and stares dumbfoundedly at a crystal blue ocean. The waves splash against the shore, but where the blackened sand meets the water, the stagnant Earth meets a living, breathing sea. Far in the distance, a giant whale spurts water into the sky, then dives back underwater.

Satan rubs his chin. "This... this place is Earth after all. But what happened? Why is everything all fucked up?"

Samael shrugs. "Thou hath been gone a while, demon. Mere months passed in the Cosmic Realm, but far more time has passed in the mortal realm."

Satan goes silent. His thoughts turn inward. *Are any demons still alive? What about the angels? The Titans? What is even happening here? It looks like something came through and sucked the life out of every inch of the land.*

Shaking his head in disbelief, the Devil turns away from the sealine and begins walking inland. Every step, the brittle grass crunches under our feet, grinding painfully and hitting us in our sensitive spots.

"This shit hurts to walk across. I hope the whole planet ain't dead. That'd be a damned shame."

Samael, still laying on his back, tilts his head sideways to follow my gaze. "Were Uzziel to see this barren wasteland, she would be terribly displeased. Whatever did this; she has yet to repair the damage."

Satan purses his lips. "Maybe Mother's gone."

"I hope not," Samael whispers.

Minutes pass. Satan's Vectors tear out the ground in front of him as he walks, exposing softer dirt, so he doesn't hurt his bare feet. The temperature outside is neither too hot, nor too cold. I can only assume we've arrived at some point during Spring or Autumn.

As Satan starts to climb a hill, a random deer charges over from the other side. Startled, Satan reacts in self-defense. One of his Vectors lashes out and smashes the stag's head, crushing its antlers into powder and snapping its neck. The buck flops sideways and dies instantly, crashing into our feet and tripping us.

Satan lands on his back. "Gah! Fucking- what was that for?! Damned buck scared the shit out of-"

Halting mid-sentence, Satan quickly raises his head to the top of the hill. A human male wearing a leather deerskin coat and moccasins points a makeshift wooden spear at us. His eyes widen in fear. "Ahh! Dum-mun! Dum-mun!"

Behind him, on the other side of the hill, several voices echo his words. "Dum-mun? Dum-mun! Grooka!"

Satan leaps to his feet. He scans the human warily. "What... what is this creature? It resembles a demon, but its skin is black, not red. Not only that, but it has no horns..."

Samael squints at the human. "I... I haven't a clue."

The human takes a step back but continues to hold his spear with both hands and aim it at us defensively. Within seconds, three others appear at the top of the hill, each one wielding a spear of their own. "Dum-mun! Dok-dok mun?!"

Satan frowns. "What are they saying?"

"Don't ask me," Samael says with a roll of his eyes. "I'm surprised thou hath held back on slaying them."

Satan cocks his head. "Their weapons won't hurt me. I can't sense a lick of spiritual energy in 'em either. Did these ugly creatures cause all this destruction?"

While Satan ponders several questions, the four primitive warriors fan out to surround us. The Devil glances around and follows them with his eyes. "Oh, come on. You guys can't seriously be thinking of fighting me. Can't you tell when they're outmatched?"

In the blink of an eye, the warrior behind me leaps and stabs his spear toward my spine. On cue, the other three charge as well, each one aiming for a different vital organ at my front and sides.

Satan frowns. To him, their movements slow to a crawl as he takes a moment to debate his next move. *Decent teamwork. They don't appear to be afraid of me. I might be the first demon they've seen in millennia.*

Before their spears come anywhere close to Satan's body, the Devil's Vectors lash out. He shatters their weapons ten times over and pounds each human in the chest with the flats of his invisible palms.

The humans go silent as they fly away and slam into the crumbled, dead Earth. Their bodies jerk to a sudden stop and go still.

Satan scratches the top of his head. "Was... was that it? They're dead! I barely did anything."

Samael stares at the human on top of the hill before us. He, somehow, continues to breathe. Based on the positions of his broken arms and legs, he's suffering unimaginably. Death will soon come for him as well.

"I've never seen these bipedal creatures," The Archangel mutters. "They resemble wingless angels."

"Weird," Satan says. Shrugging, the Devil climbs the rest of the hill. He shoves the dead buck aside, leans forward, and crushes the head of the human, giving him a quick death. "Thank me later, chum. No sense in making a tiny little runt suffer more than necessary."

"A moment of compassion," Samael says wryly. "I didn't expect that from thee."

"I'm in a good mood," Satan says. "Frankly, escaping that Cosmic Shithole is enough to lighten my spirits to a point where nothing's gonna get me down."

The Devil takes a few more steps and climbs the mountain the rest of the way. Thanks to his elevated position, he's finally able to see much more of the land.

Far in the distance, at the edge of the horizon, a forest of dead, blackened trees sits between two small mountains.

Between us and the forest, a small army of humans charges toward our hill.

Satan blinks. "Oh. More wingless angels."

Several hundred humans stomp forward; spears raised to turn us into a shish-kebab. Satan crosses his arms. "What's the definition of stupidity? Doing the same thing over and over again, hoping for a different result."

Before the humans start climbing Satan's hill, they pause. A single man steps forward. He holds a brass horn in his hands. Given their technology level, it seems out of place, as if he didn't make it himself.

He blows on the horn. A surprisingly loud *bwaaaaaaa* erupts throughout the air, echoing into the hills and across the ocean for miles in every direction.

Satan pokes his finger into his ear and itches it. "Well. That was rude."

"I believe they're calling for backup," Samael says. Perhaps ye might be able to handle two hundred of these creatures... but what if thousands come?"

Satan rolls his eyes. "Oh, *no*, anything but that. I'm quaking in terror."

Behind us, the distant sound of the ocean grows silent. The waves cease their crashing against the shore.

Pins and needles tingle crawl down Satan's spine. Ignoring the primitives, the Devil turns to stare out at the ocean.

Samael narrows his eyes. "Oh."

"What's going on?" Satan asks. "The waves stopped. That shouldn't happen."

The humans chatter to each other behind me. The sound of their footsteps going in the opposite direction makes Satan pivot on his heel to stare at them. All of the primitives turn tail and flee toward the black forest, leaving me behind to stand alone atop my hill.

Satan resumes his gazing at the ocean. The water sucks away from the coastline, exposing bleached dirt mixed in with the blackened sand. Once the waves retreat half a mile, Satan shivers.

"I don't like this. Not one bit."

Samael smirks. "Ho? Now I understand. Satan, thou have yet to meet a Titan aside from Hercules, isn't that right?"

Satan shakes his head. "Yeah? So what?"

Far in the distance, miles offshore, something the size of a small whale bursts out of the water and begins riding atop the waves. The humanoid figure stands thirty-feet tall. As he surfs, he rises higher and higher. A wall of water fifty-feet tall rushes inland, threatening Satan's life.

The Devil slams his Vectors into the ground and braces for impact as the wall of water roars toward us.

Samael's smirk stretches across his entire face. "Meet Poseidon, King of the Seven Seas."

The Titan's majestic beard stretches down to his knees. His golden Trident points at my chest. "Foul demon! Your end is nigh!"

Ten thousand tons of water slam into me at three hundred miles an hour. Satan's preparations fall apart as it rips him from the ground and flings us backward. Our body spins and careens wildly. We lose our spatial orientation amidst the spiraling, muddy sea.

Satan opens his eyes. The last thing he sees is a naked man swimming toward him at a ludicrous speed. Poseidon's trident impales our heart, causing the world to fade to black.

Part 126: King of the Seas

"Oh? Still alive? I could have sworn I finished you."

"GRRL-BLUK!"

Satan opens his mouth and spews saltwater from his mouth and nose. The Devil hacks and coughs for a few seconds before blinking his eyes open.

Poseidon towers 30 feet above us. Wearing a golden crown and green fish-scale armor, the Titan stands like a god against the shadow of the midday sun.

"Your people aren't usually this resilient," Poseidon mutters. The Ocean King raises his trident and prepares to lance it into my heart again. "But no matter. Stepping foot within a mile of my waters will prove to be your undoing."

His weapon rushes toward me. Satan's eyes bolt open. Our Vectors kick into overdrive, yanking us to the left with astounding force. The twenty-five-foot tall trident impales the spot we were laying in and rattles the Earth, sending a tremor deep into the continental plates.

Poseidon's eyes follow us. "Hm? You dodged?"

Satan slams onto his left arm and rolls a few times before his Vectors stop his momentum. The Devil blinks the dizziness from his head, jumps to his feet, and strikes a defensive pose.

"Damn right, I did. Who the fuck are you, lanky-legs?"

The world around us, while still black and dead, is noticeably less ashen and prickly compared to before the tsunami. The sand and dirt, now waterlogged from Poseidon's attack, splashes beneath our feet. Several inches of water slowly retreat to the ocean as the remnants of his tsunami drains away.

Poseidon chuckles. "Heh. You're a funny little demon. Why pretend you don't know me? I've dragged enough of your kind to a watery grave. Surely, you understand you'll be shark-food by daybreak."

Satan's eyes flick over Poseidon's shoulder. The sun appears to be in the same spot as before. Hardly any time has passed since the tsunami struck us.

Damn, Satan thinks to himself. That Titan's attack was brutal. Felt like it crushed every bone in my body. The fact I regenerated at the cost of only one soul is remarkable.

Satan glowers at the armored giant. "First time I've met one of you. Well, I spanked Hercules' ass real good once, crushed a few lady Titan heads too, but you're the first *big* one I've seen in the flesh. Do all Titans look as ugly as you, or are you special?"

Poseidon narrows his gaze. He yanks his trident up, spins it in his grasp, and plants its butt in the sand. "You're lucky I've let you live this long, demon. Don't test my patience. Tell me, how did you survive my attack? I skewered you right through the heart."

Satan grins. "My heart? You must be mistaken. I ain't got one, big boy."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

Poseidon remains motionless for two seconds. In the blink of an eye, he cocks his head, and a tendril of water jumps up from our feet. The hyper-compressed beam of water smashes into my face, catching Satan off-guard as it drills out his eye and sends us flying.

"Gahk! Shit!"

Satan utters a curse before he splashes face-first into the flooded plain. Sand and seawater rush into our nose. Satan recoils and grabs his left eye.

"Bloody sin! Spawn of a broodmother! Gahhh!"

Spitting the sand from his mouth, Satan whirls to face Poseidon. Our chest heaves with rage. Blood trickles from our gouged-out eyeball and drips down the left side of our face. Despite the searing fire burning in our eye socket, Satan somehow manages to open his other eye.

"Oh, you're gonna regret that, fish-boy," Satan hisses. "I thought we were having a polite conversation, but it seems you've got a death wish!"

Poseidon grins from ear to ear. "Still kicking? I'm surprised. That attack should have turned your head into meat-paste. Aren't you just a hardy little guy?"

Little guy, Satan thinks to himself. Poseidon's words ring in his ear. *You know what they say, chump. The bigger they are...*

Poseidon cocks his head again, this time firing a bolt of water at us from behind.

Satan doesn't react. One of his Vectors sweeps back and bats the compressed water aside, transforming it into a harmless mist upon our back.

"The same trick won't work on me twice, you floppy little tuna-fish."

Poseidon's smile slips. "How did you block that? I didn't see you move."

This time, it's Satan who grins. He pulls his hand away from his face, revealing our gouged-out left eye. The Devil balls his hand into a fist. It trembles as he tries to control his rage.

"I have a question for ya, chump. Since I'm a dead demon anyway, it shouldn't hurt ya to answer."

Poseidon rests his free hand on his hip. "Oh? What would that be?"

"How many demons currently walk the Earth?"

The Titan frowns. "What sort of question is that? Are you mocking me?"

Satan shakes his head. "Nope. Call it a dead man's final request. I'd like to know since you've fought my people in the past."

The Titan purses his lips. "I see. So that's what you mean. Mmm. Too many. A few million, perhaps. My brother, Zeus, has been far too lax in eliminating them."

Satan's jaw slackens.

A few million? I thought Raphael said they all died!

Samael speaks inside my mind. "Oho. It seems my brother may have fibbed."

"Yeah," Satan mutters. "But that means we're still in this fight. Hoho. That might mean... Nerissa..."

Satan clutches his chest for a moment.

I thought they all died. Raphael, ever the crafty fox, told me lies to try and break my spirit. Unfortunately for that old bastard, his words solidified my resolve. Now I'm back, and nobody can stop me.

Satan flashes a grin at Poseidon. "Thank you for the info, pal. I appreciate it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to kill myself."

The Titan falters. "What?"

"Don't worry. This won't take long."

Satan holds up two fingers in a peace sign. An instant later, his Vectors rush toward our head from both sides. My stomach clenches as our vision turns to rainbows and sunshine. With our head crushed, we lose consciousness and fall into blackness.

Recommended Listening

Satan's eyes bolt open. Our vision returns in full force, now that his left eye has regenerated.

He pounces to his feet to see Poseidon much closer than before. The Titan retreats two steps in shock. "What?! Impossible! What sort of trickery was that?! Your head burst like a watermelon! I've never, in all my years-"

Satan holds up a hand. "I've heard enough from you, waterboy. It's time to teach you a little respect."

Poseidon flinches. Before Satan even attacks, the Titan reacts as if he knows we're coming.

Satan slams all his vectors into the ground, leaving eight handprints in the sand. An instant later, we rush at the Titan's chest and rear our fist back. The impact of Satan's punch transforms Poseidon's bones into jelly. His massive body flings backward violently. He spins, twists, and careens across the beach, before eventually skidding to a stop.

Satan lands in a crouch.

"Nobody likes a wiseass."

The Titan coughs. It takes him a moment to pull himself together. He eventually stands up, but his body trembles as pain courses through him.

"Y-you... hoo... wheeze..."

Poseidon gingerly touches his chest with a trembling hand. After regaining his balance, he summons healing water to coat his palm, and rubs his ribs carefully. It only takes a few seconds for him to repair the damage from Satan's ridiculously powerful punch.

A minute later, the Titan shakes the stars out of his head.

"You surprised me... d-demon... to think such unimaginable strength could exist in a tiny body like yours..."

"Yeah," Satan replies. "That's me. Full of surprises."

Poseidon's eyes narrow. "That attack just now... there was something *familiar* about it."

Satan smirks. "What, are you a masochist or something? To each his own. I wouldn't want to get in the way of your fetish."

"That's not what I-!"

Poseidon halts midsentence as Satan pounces at him. The Devil clears the three-hundred foot gap nearly as quickly as he did the shorter one a minute earlier. In the blink of an eye, we race at Poseidon's chest. At the last second, one of Satan's vectors grabs the Titan's shoulder, flips us into the air, and yanks us toward Poseidon's head.

Danger!

Satan's mind screams a warning. Before he can crush Poseidon's head as part of his grand finale, he yanks himself to the left instead. I don't understand why, until I spot a compressed stream of water shoot at our previous position. Our chest would likely have been vaporized had we not dodged.

The Devil slams his feet into the ground and dives to the side. Right on cue, several beams of water smash into the sand behind us, drilling holes the size of fists in our wake.

Satan uses his vectors to yank himself out of Poseidon's attack range. We land in a crouch atop a boulder planted in the sand, and Satan spins on his heel to face Poseidon.

The Titan turns to face us. A look of awe mixed with fear crosses his face. "If I hadn't witnessed it myself, I wouldn't have believed it."

Satan raises an eyebrow. His tone turns incredulous. "Huh? What are you on about, whale-breath?"

Poseidon gestures to the sand. The handprints of several vectors stand out among the otherwise smooth surface. Within seconds, the continuously retreating floodwaters begin to wash them away.

"Do you think me daft, demon? Who are you? How did you obtain the same ability as Samael, the Archangel of Change?"

Satan's jovial spirit disappears. Samael appears in our mind's eye and smirks. "Oh, did I forget to tell thee? Poseidon was one of the Titans I used to spar against during the few hundred years before Raphael created Heaven. He knows the reach and strength of my Vectors better than many others."

Satan squeezes his fist tighter. *Damn you, ugly-ass bat. You knew that and didn't tell me?! Fucking asshole. Now I'm at a disadvantage!*

Samael can't hear our thoughts. However, the Archangel's grin widens further. "I see the look on thy face, Satan. Thou art scared. Poseidon is one of the five mightiest Titans still walking the cosmos. Thou hath encountered quite the misfortune to meet him here."

"Shut up," Satan mutters. "I'm thinkin'."

The Demon and Titan eye each other warily. Poseidon's question hangs in the air like a corpse's stench, causing him greater and greater concern for each passing second Satan doesn't respond.

Finally, Satan nods. "You wanna know, Mister Po-po? I'll tell ya... but only when one of us wins this battle."

"As if you ever had a chance," Poseidon replies through gritted teeth. "Since you've somehow come into possession of the Eight Vectors, it's only fair I unleash my counter-measure."

Satan tenses up. *What's he talkin' about?*

To my surprise, Poseidon rears his arm back, spins to face the ocean, and flings his trident with all his strength. The weapon races out to sea and pierces the frothing waves with scarcely a sound.

Now barehanded, the Titan weaves several magic signs. Saltwater leaps from the ocean nearby, splashes against his back, and transforms into eight octopus-style appendages. Each liquid tentacle moves independently in a similar manner to Satan's invisible limbs.

Poseidon smiles. "Right now, you're thinking to yourself that you still have an advantage. You can follow the movements of my octopus-style water-magic... but I can't do the same for your Vectors. Isn't that right?"

Satan shifts his feet slightly. "Maybe."

"I bet you also think that fighting on land puts me at a disadvantage compared to you."

The Devil's discomfort intensifies. "Anything's possible, pal."

A terrifying grin spreads across the Titan's face. "Well... you're correct! And you're *still going to lose!*"

One moment, the Titan stands before me.

In the next, he transforms into liquid and splashes into the receding floodwaters.

Satan flinches. A hand as big as a boulder bursts out of the water behind us, forcing us to leap aside. Before our feet hit the sopping wet sand, a cackle erupts from beneath us. "Ahahaha! Wrong move, little demon! Now you've entered *my* domain!"

Our foot hits the water with a splash.

Out of nowhere, a tsunami springs up behind us. The roar of saltwater rips forward, clearing the gap in the blink of an eye. We can't dodge.

FWOOSH!

One hundred tons of seawater yank us out into the ocean. Our Vectors try to anchor us to the shore, but all we manage to grab are clumps of sand.

Satan screams internally. *SHIT! Not this again!!*

[Recommended Listening](#)

Our body careens uncontrollably deeper and deeper into the sea. Satan spins violently, unable to control his movements. Like a washing machine set to max speed or a toilet flushing us down an endless drain, we spiral further into the depths of Poseidon's realm, unable to stop our momentum.

Can't breathe! Water! Nose! Mouth!

Satan gurgles and gargles as mounting pressure continually compresses his body from seemingly all directions. Even with his insane strength, the Devil's thoughts become sluggish.

Hahaha! Look at you now, foolish demon!

Poseidon's voice booms in our ears. It comes from everywhere around us, amplified by the properties of the water pressing against our ears.

What's wrong? Kraken got your tongue? Where are your witty one-liners now?

Satan frantically scans the area, searching for the Titan. Our eyes prove useless in the murky depths, especially since we can't control our spinning.

What do I do?!

Satan's panic becomes overwhelming. I can barely think with all the horrible things happening to our body, and I'm only experiencing a vision of the past!

The Devil tucks his arms and legs in. He forces himself to consider his options, even as something unseen slams against our back, nearly shattering our spine. Poseidon begins striking us from all angles, using his incredible aquatic agility to outmaneuver us.

I understand how your powers work, foul bloodskin! You regenerate your body after death, don't you? That means even if you drown, you'll revive a minute later. No matter! I'll trap you at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, where you'll perish over and over for all eternity! A fitting end for a monster like you!

Satan winces as something batters his legs.

Gotta... gotta breathe. Powers... powers... one of the demons... had to have... underwater breathing...

To my surprise, a series of faces begin to appear in Satan's memories. It takes me a moment to understand their significance. They represent the souls of all the demons who died that were bound to Satan's Soul Contracts.

Satan's mind frantically scans the faces of each demon. *Not him, not him, not her... shit! Shit!*

Suddenly, one woman's face freezes in his mind.

In the blink of an eye, Satan begins motioning with his hands. Despite being unable to speak any magical incantations, he manages to summon the innermost parts of his mana.

Satan's feet shift. Web-like padding sprouts between his fingers and toes, giving him the ability to swim like a fish. Gills sprout beside his voice-box. Satan exhales, ejecting the toxins from his lungs.

The demoness's powers not only transform his hands and feet, but his mind, too. Satan expertly swats out his right arm and left leg, bringing his endless spiral to a sudden stop. Hardly has he finished before Poseidon, back in his Titan form, rushes toward us through the muddy seawater.

Finally stopped spinning?! Let's start again, child!

The Titan batters us with enough force to shatter our skeleton into fragments. However, Satan's vectors lash out and deflect the hit at the last instant, narrowly saving Satan's life.

Poseidon swims past us and disappears into the cloud of mud surrounding us. **Oh? Your body has changed. I didn't know you possessed aquatic attributes. You're a fascinating bloodskin. Can't say I've fought someone like you in all my life.**

Satan narrows his eyes as he searches for his attacker. *I can't talk underwater. Wish I could. I'd let him know just how disappointed I am.*

Eight tendrils of water burst through the mud. Poseidon's Octopus Form strikes us from all directions, forcing Satan's vectors to knock them away. However, while underwater, each one becomes visible. Their speed decreases noticeably, hampered by the ocean as it slows their movements.

As a result, Satan proves unable to deflect Poseidon's attacks. Each tendril evades our Vectors with deadly precision and knocks us for a loop. They slap us around like a pinball wizard at the top of his game.

Satan uses his newly-acquired fins to dodge some of Poseidon's attacks, but others land despite his best effort. Our struggles turn into a game of catch-up wherein we never quite match Poseidon's proficiency at underwater combat, but the Titan can't land a killing blow, either.

Stay still, you little runt! I'm trying to make your death quick and painless!

Poseidon continues to taunt us. Satan ignores the Titan's words to focus on defense.

Alright. I've had enough of this guy's shit. How can I turn the tables?

A minute passes. Poseidon's attacks slow down somewhat. Either that, or Satan grows better at following the movements of the Titan's tendrils. I'm not certain which. At some point, Satan begins easily dodging and deflecting the Titan's incoming barrage.

By the ancestral spirits! You're a hardy fellow; I'll give you that much.

The Devil flinches, expecting another attack. Instead, Poseidon's tendrils dissipate into the water around us.

Silence.

Several seconds pass. The Titan doesn't attack us.

Satan's eyes scan his surroundings. *What the heck is Flipper-Flopper doing? Tch. It doesn't matter. I need to get out of this mud-cloud before he hits me again.*

Using his flippers and Vectors to augment his swimming, the devil rapidly ascends toward the surface. The only evidence we're heading in the right direction is the faintest glint of sunlight above, as well as Satan's demonic intuition.

C'mon, c'mon... almost there!

Poseidon's voice booms, startling us. **I don't remember saying you could leave! Get back down here!**

Out of nowhere, an underwater whirlpool begins spinning all around us — Satan's upward momentum halts. His movements slow, then reverse.

No! Bloody devils!!

Satan screams internally as the Titan's magic yanks us toward a deep, watery grave once again.

Satan's rage begins to build.

This son of a walrus! Nobody treats me like a chew toy! NOBODY!!

Even as Satan falls further toward the depths of the bright blue sea, options and strategies bubble in his mind.

Can't outswim the little rat-bastard, can't manipulate water like him...

Samael appears in our mind. "Having fun, Satan? It seems that Poseidon has placed thee between a rock and a hard place. Soon, he will entrap thee and bind thy putrid flesh at the bottom of the sea. Thou may have escaped the Cosmic Realm, but a far worse fate awaits thee."

Shut up, Samael! I don't have time for your shit!

Satan ignores the Archangel taunting him. Every second, his rage builds further and further.

Suddenly, a solution presents itself. Satan tucks his body in again, spreads his arms apart, and claps with all his strength.

WHOOMPH.

A shockwave ripples outward, rattling our teeth in the process. The Whirlpool slows dramatically, allowing us to get our bearings.

Satan grins.

Being underwater has some advantages, eh?

Once more, he spreads his arms apart, then slams his palms together with all his strength.

WHOOMPH!

An even bigger shockwave blasts outward, making all of our internal organs shiver and tremble. Wrenching pain burns in our stomach, but Satan forces himself to ignore it.

Stop that! Poseidon yells. **I didn't permit you to move, bloodskin!**

Satan's grin widens until it stretches across his whole face.

Oh, Poseidon... I'm gonna tear you a new blowhole.

The Devil's hands turn into a blur. He performs one magical sign after another, forcing mana to bubble in his stomach. The sensation reminds me of how he killed himself in the Cosmic Realm, but this time, the kinetic energy potential inside of himself dwarfs that which he used before.

Samael's eyes widen. "What art thou doing? Satan? Satan?!"

The Devil cackles evilly, though his voice turns into little more than gurgled croaking. *Hahaha! You shouldn't have brought me here, Poseidon! Say goodbye to all your little fishy friends!*

From the deepest, darkest part of the ocean, I spot a shimmer of green. Poseidon swims toward me at top speeds, his trident held at the ready.

He aims for my chest.

Don't you dare!

Satan finishes his last sign right as Poseidon impales his weapon through our chest.

That was the wrong move, dolphin-tickler.

As if the Titan had popped a bubble, something inside my body bursts. A light as bright as the sun erupts underwater. The last thing I see is a look of terror on Poseidon's face as Satan's body transforms into a living bomb.

NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!

I awaken underwater again. This time, I float amongst a field of blood and body parts.

Not far from me, Poseidon's massive form floats, inert, his right arm and much of his chest missing. The Titan's eyes blink weakly. Unable to move, his body likely suffers from dozens of ruptured internal organs.

Satan swims over, grabs the Titan by his hair, and begins swimming toward the surface.

Let... let me... go....

Poseidon croaks out a few words of protest. The Titan King tries to swat the tiny demon, but Satan merely rolls his eyes and ignores him.

It only takes us a few minutes to reach the surface. Along the way, we spot thousands of dead fish, several jellyfish, and even a shark. They all float belly-up and slowly sink toward the bottom of the ocean.

Satan shakes his head. *Too bad about the fishies. I ain't got nothin' against 'em. Blame this guy. He brought me down here.*

We burst onto the surface and swim toward the coastline only a couple of miles away. At some point, Poseidon tries to fight back by flailing his left arm at us, but his strength is so feeble that he barely manages to touch our feet before the current pulls his arm back to his side.

When we reach the shoreline, Satan plants his feet on the beach and flings the Titan further inland. Poseidon slams into the sand with a tremendous *whump!* Blood pours from his open wounds. Poseidon wheezes over and over.

"Buh... bastard... you won't... get away with thuh... this..."

Satan replaces his gills with lungs. He reverts to his demon form and nods along to the Titan's words. "Uh huh. Sure."

"My... my brother... Zeus... he will..."

The Devil strides up to the giant. We stare at him silently for a few moments. "He ain't gonna do shit. Y'know why? Because I'm Satan the fuckin' Devil. Nobody can beat me. You had all the advantages, and

now look at'cha. You're a beached whale. You're out of your element. Pickin' on me was the biggest mistake of your life."

The Titan lolls his head toward us. A look of determination enters his eyes. "You think I'll... beg for my life? Never... never... you can take my life... but you'll never take my pride. I'm the... the King... of the Seas..."

Satan grins. "More like... the *King of Deceased*. Hah! Aw, man. That was a good one."

Samael sighs. "Thy wit is truly incredible, Satan."

"Shut the fuck up, Samael."

My words ring in the air. Poseidon's eyes widen. "Sam... Samael? Is he here? Where? How?"

"I ate him," Satan replies. "Sucked up his soul. Got all of his powers. Good call on figuring us out, whale-caller, but it wasn't enough. I possess the powers of thousands of demons, a few Titans, and an Archangel too! Every being I devour only makes me stronger. Pretty good deal, innit?"

"You've... you've beaten... Titans... before?"

Satan shrugs. "A few. Anyway, enough chit-chat. I've got shit to do, and places to be. Any last words?"

Poseidon goes silent. The massive giant stares at us for several seconds as he digests the realization he's about to die.

Finally, he closes his eyes.

"I was... wrong about you, demon. You're not like... like the other trash... you're different... a warrior... a kindred spirit..."

The Titan coughs weakly. He puts his last drops of strength into one final proclamation.

"If you... are the one... to defeat me... you are a... a... a worthy..."

Poseidon exhales. His body goes limp as the last bits of his spirit vanish from this world.

Satan scratches his head. "Ahh, shit. He died. Oh well. Head time!"

With a merry whistle, the Devil saunters over, lashes out his vectors, and severs Poseidon's massive head. Nearly the size of our body, it takes all of Satan's power to crush. He puts every drop of his strength into smashing Poseidon's head like a ripe watermelon, spilling the Titan's brains and cerebral fluid everywhere.

Pausing, Satan takes several seconds to blink as a tremendous amount of mana floods into his body.

"Whoa. Damn. That Titan was no joke."

Turning to face the ocean, Satan motions with his hands, and a small wave splashes against the shore.

"Nice."

Samael shakes his head. "Another friend, lost to the brutality and machinations of the Devil. Why am I not surprised?"

"Oh, please," Satan says, rolling his eyes. "Not five minutes ago, you proclaimed that Poseidon was going to bury me under the coral reef for all eternity. Don't pretend like you saw my victory coming."

Samael nods. "Fair enough. Thou hath surprised me, Satan. Thy ingenuity surpasses many beings I've met during my lifetime."

"What can I say? I'm a smart guy."

Satan snaps his fingers.

"Welp, now that that's over, time to start looking. If Poseidon told the truth, there're millions of demons alive on Earth. I need to find 'em and figure out what's happened while I was gone."

"Poseidon was never one to lie," Samael says. His voice softens. "I always considered him a truthful person."

"Stop with the sappy bullshit," Satan groans. "You're gonna make me vomit."

The Devil turns away from the ocean and starts to take a step forward.

Suddenly, he stops.

Before us, perhaps a hundred feet away, a horned figure peeps out from behind a piece of large driftwood on the beach. When he notices I've spotted him, he jumps up and runs toward me. "Holy shit! Satan?! Izzat you?!"

The young demon stomps across the sand, leaving footprints in his wake. A stupid grin spreads across his face as he draws near.

Satan raises an eyebrow. "Do I know you?"

"Yeah, duh! It's me, Barbatos! I'm one of your top generals! Your best guy! Your number one, biggest fan!"

Satan scrunches up his face. "I'd remember you if that were the case, kid."

Barbatos claps his hands eagerly. "Ah! I knew you were alive! Everyone said you were dead, but I always believed in you! You're like, the toughest demon ever!"

Satan frowns. "Ah, yeah. Good to see you too, twerp. Look, uh, why are you here? How did you find me?"

Barbatos claps his hands. "That's easy! I'm your number one fan! I'll always find you! Ehehehe! Come on, you gotta follow me! I'll take you to the others."

"The other demons?"

Barbatos nods eagerly. "Yup! Everyone's hiding in underground caves, but I know where to find the entrances. C'mon, let's go!"

Satan exhales. *Devils. This runt has the shrillest voice I've heard in my entire life. I can't stand listening to him. There isn't a chance I'd forget someone as miserable as him, not even after tens of thousands of years.*

Despite his misgivings, Satan falls into step beside Barbatos. The grunt glances at Poseidon's body.
"You killed the King of the Seas?"

"Mhm."

"Holy crap! I knew you were awesome!"

The corner of Satan's lip tugs into a smile. "Yeah. He's the *King of Deceased*, now."

Barbatos's smile widens. "Bahaha! That's hilarious! Great joke!"

"Thanks, kid. I'm glad *someone* around here knows good humor."

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

The Devil and Grunt continue walking toward the black forest, leaving Poseidon's headless body to cook under the light of the sun.

Part 127: A Brave New World

"So, uh, why ain't you wearing any pants?"

"It's a long story."

"Aw, c'mon! Don't be like that. Just tell me why you don't got no pants on!"

"I blew myself up. No more pants after that."

"You did WHAT?! How didja manage that?"

Satan sighs. He and Barbatos stomp through the barren remains of a forest, now colored black due to its lack of life energy. The Devil uses his Vectors to hover half an inch above the prickly undergrowth, saving his feet from getting poked and pierced, but he pretends to move his feet so that Barbatos is none the wiser. Given Satan's astounding ability to regenerate from death, it surprises me he has such sensitive feet. I can't help but wonder why he's going to such great lengths to hide the existence of his Vectors, given how many demons surely know about his powers.

"It's a long story, runt. More importantly, I have a few questions for *you*."

Barbatos's eyes light up like the fourth of July. "Ooh, ooh, you do? You do?! I know everything, Satan! I'm the smartest demon alive today! Fire away, big boss!"

Satan groans. *Don't call me that...*

"This forest. The grass. The beach. Everything's all black and dead. What happened while I was gone? Why is Earth such a shithole now?"

Barbatos's excitement vanishes. "Ohh, that. Yeah. Angels call it the Blight. We demons've been out killing everything we can to take their souls. It makes us stronger. I'm almost a Lord, ya know!"

Satan raises an eyebrow. "A Lord? I don't follow."

"Man, you've been outta the loop. Yeah, there's a whole ranking system now. The top demon leaders call themselves Emperors; then there are Dukes, Barons, Lords, and Grunts."

"Yeah? So you're not even a Lord yet, pipsqueak?"

Steam pours from Barbatos's ears. "Tch! Give it time, nyeh! I've killed so many humans; you wouldn't even believe it! The little shits spit out so many spawnlings that we can't keep up! It won't take long before I gain enough souls to become a Lord! Just you wait and see!"

Satan nods along. "Humans, you said? What do they look like?"

"Like us, but with dark skin, no horns, and they talk like idiots. Total morons!"

Satan's thoughts turn inward. *Those primitives I met before fighting Poseidon... they must be the humans Barbatos is referring to. Hmm.*

Out loud, Satan says, "I've met them already. They seemed incredibly weak."

"Oh yeah, totally," Barbatos replies, nodding along like he owns the conversation. "They're total pushovers. Even Agares can take them out, and that guy's in bad shape. The stupid fleshbags practically kill themselves if you look at 'em the wrong-"

Satan interrupts Barbatos. "Hold on; you said 'Agares?' He's alive?"

Barbatos frowns. "Hm? Yeah. Why? Did you think he died?"

"No... but I wasn't sure. Raphael told me he killed all of the demons. Is Nerissa alive? Did she make it out of Heaven?!" Satan's eyes turn frantic. He turns to face Barbatos and grabs the little guy by his shoulders. "Is she safe?!"

The demon looks at me in surprise. "Well, yeah. She, Belial, 'n Lucifer saved Bael and Diablo. Everyone thought *you* died. Oh man, the looks on their faces are going to be so hilarious when you come strolling in!"

Barbatos pulls away from me and continues walking. He starts spouting off about how everyone will praise him for finding Satan and helping us kill the mighty Poseidon, but Satan's eyes lose focus, and he stops listening. Several sensations of joy and relief wash over him as Satan takes a few moments to thank whatever dark gods might exist for Nerissa's safety.

His feelings for Nerissa surprise me. Satan never seemed especially close to her, but then again, perhaps lying limbleless in purgatory gave him a moment of respite to think about his priorities and who mattered most to him.

Satan rubs his face. *Nerissa... Diablo... Agares... everyone's alive! All of them! I... I can't believe it.*

"Yo, Satan!" Barbatos pipes up, drawing Satan's attention from his thoughts. "What're you doin' just standing around! C'mooooon already!"

Barbatos's shrill voice makes Satan clench his teeth. *Well, there's at least one little demon bastard I wish had died.*

With a shake of his head, Satan floats over and walks beside Barbatos once again.

"Sorry. I got lost in thought. Let's go back to that Blight thing you mentioned before. What is it?"

Barbatos shrugs. "I dunno. We killed the animals and took their souls. Soon, the forests started dying."

Satan's gaze turns skeptical. "You killed the animals? Which ones?"

"All of 'em! Birds, wolves, deer, cave bears, anything in our path! That's why demons are so strong, now!"

"You're kidding. Is the entire Earth dead? All of it?!"

Barbatos shakes his head. "Nah, but it might be, soon. I dunno. There are still lots of animals in the areas the angels and Titans protect."

Satan breathes a sigh of relief. *Bloody devils. I left for a couple of millennia, and the demons turned into crazed planet-devouring gluttons. Don't these idiots realize that if Earth dies, we will, too? Who wants to live on a hunk of black dirt?!*

Several minutes pass as Satan silently grumbles to himself about the stupidity of demonkind. He and Barbatos push further into the dead forest, and eventually, Barbatos stops before a humongous boulder, easily ten times the size of both of us.

"Oy! We're here, big boss! Looky, look!"

Satan crosses his arms. "Huh? What's so important about this bigass rock?"

Barbatos smirks. "It's hiding the entrance to our lair. Watch! Nyehehe!"

With a cringy cackle, the little demon throws his weight against the rock and pushes. Despite his tiny size, he surprises me by easily shoving the one-ton stone a few feet forward, exposing a hole underneath it. The shaft extends five-feet down and ends in a sloped pathway which heads deeper underground.

Barbatos gestures to me. "C'mon, big boss! I'll take you to the others."

Satan nods. "Not bad. Angels would never think to look here. Alright, let's head inside."

We hop into the opening and pull the rock back into its original position. Darkness engulfs us, but demons possess incredible night vision, allowing them to see without any trouble. Satan creates a ball of flame in his palm to light the way, making Barbatos look at us in astonishment. "Oh, wow! You're a fire-manipulator?"

Satan shrugs. "In a way, sure."

Barbatos nods. "Fire-types are super cool! Other than the Sunshine Brothers, we've only got a bunch of Burner grunts working for us. We need some better fire-types to cook those chickens alive!"

Satan purses his lips. "I'm not opposed."

"Yeah, yeah! Wow, it's so awesome to have you back, Satan! I bet you're gonna shake things up! We need a guy like you to straighten shit out."

Satan rolls his eyes as we descend further into the underground tunnel systems. "You talk a lot, squirt."

"What can I say, big boss? I've got tons of wisdom to share!"

"Wisdom. Mmm. Yes, that's it, for sure."

"I knew you'd understand! Nyehehe!"

* * *

Several minutes pass. Soon, we arrive in what I assume are the main levels of the demon's underground lair. Dozens of grunts, scythers, and other variant demons pass us. What surprises me most is that the majority of the demons I see are female. Very few males roam the halls. Given Satan's nudity and his surprisingly well-endowed status, most of the women do a double-take before continuing on their merry way, a slight pep in their step.

"What's with all the broads?" Satan asks. "Not that I'm complaining, but there are an awful lot of tits shakin' down here. What, are all the guys fighting the angels up top or somethin'?"

For once, Barbatos's expression shifts to something more akin to worry. "Well, err... not quite. There've ah, been some changes while you were gone."

"Uh-huh. Like what?"

Barbatos reaches back and scratches his hair. "Uh. Things and stuff. Lucifer will tell ya."

"Lucifer? Why her?"

Hardly has Satan asked the question before a demoness with three eyes rounds the corner. Lucifer, as out of the ordinary as ever, aims her forehead's eye at Barbatos. "I knew I detected filth entering my lair. What are *you* doing here? I told you never to come back."

Satan's eyes widen. *Holy shit! Did Lucifer's tits double in size since I last saw her?!*

Barbatos flinches, unaware of the thoughts running through Satan's mind. "Aw, c'mon! I brought a friend, lady! Ain'tcha glad to see your old buddy old pal alive?"

He gestures to me. Lucifer's third eye swivels to my face before the other two. Her breath catches. "Bloody hell, Belial! That isn't funny. Stop messing with this pathetic grunt and get back to work."

Satan frowns. "Belial? What are you on about, Lucy? Don't you recognize me?"

Lucifer's expression darkens. "You're not funny, succubus. Get Barbatos out of my lair and send him back to Valac where he belongs."

Satan's annoyance rises. "I ain't Belial, you daft cunt! I'm- hold on, Valac? He's alive, too?!"

Several seconds pass. Lucifer doesn't reply.

When she does, her voice cracks. "For the last... the last time, Belial. Knock it off. Even for you, such dark humor isn't-"

"Fucking devils, woman!" Satan bellows at her, startling the other demonesses nearby. "It's me, Satan! Do I need to beat some bloody sense into you?!"

One of our Vectors lashes out at Lucifer. Before it can make contact, her third eye swivels to face it. She vanishes, and it smashes into the wall behind where she was standing.

Lucifer reappears behind me. "Impossible! You can't be Satan! He died two thousand years ago! What sort of trickery is this?!"

Satan spins to face her. *When did Lucy become so fast? I barely managed to follow her with my eyes.*

Out loud, he says, "I didn't die, you fat sow. Raphael cut off my limbs and trapped me in another dimension. I only escaped a few hours ago."

Lucifer's third eye scans us from top to bottom, over and over. "Everything is the same. Every inch of you. Unbelievable. If you're a fake, you're the best I've ever seen. An angel spy? A Titan? No. They wouldn't take such a risk, even if it meant the possibility of eliminating me. But... if you're the real deal... the real Satan..."

Barbatos nods excitedly. "Lucifer! It's Satan! I swear! Me'n him took out Poseidon all by ourselves! You should've seen it! I was all like, *wham*, and then Satan crushed his head like *whatchaaaw!* It was sick!"

"Quiet, you," Lucifer hisses at Barbatos. "I don't want to hear a word from one of Valac's lackeys. Your lies burn like poison."

Confusion spills out of Satan's mind and across his face. The Devil scratches his head and gazes at Lucifer with a perplexed expression. "Huh? You and Valac ain't talking to each other? Devils. A fella leaves for a few months, and everything turns upside-down."

Lucifer's lip twitches. "Everyone knows you died. Your story is the least believable tall tale I've heard in centuries. Can you prove your identity?"

Satan jerks his thumb back toward his Vectors. "You can see these, can't you?"

"I can," Lucifer replies. "What are they?"

"Haven't you seen 'em before? I used 'em to fight that Titan pup and his lady while you fought Uriel. Maybe you weren't paying attention."

Lucifer furrows her brow. She concentrates and forces herself to dig up ancient memories from thousands of years before. "Mmm. Possibly. My third eye's perception has grown ten times more acute over the last several centuries, the result of my ascension to the rank of Emperor. I don't recall Satan having eight aetherial limbs, but my memory might be failing me."

"Devils. Stop talkin' about me in the third-person, dingus," Satan says. "I *am* Satan, whether your empty head wants to believe it or not. I ain't much for hittin' a broad, but if I need to knock a little sense into ya..."

Lucifer's expression darkens. "One thing is for sure. You talk like Satan. You have the same, crass attitude. Continue badmouthing me at your peril. I am the mightiest demoness on Earth. If you insult me again, I'll rip your head off and shove it where the sun doesn't shine."

Satan and Lucifer stare each other down. The Devil crosses his arms and stands relaxed, confident. The triple-eyed demoness holds both hands at her side loosely, but her body language reveals tense shoulders and a clenched gut.

She's afraid. Satan isn't.

Satan smirks. "You haven't changed a bit, Lucy. And, now that I think about it, I've just remembered the best way to confirm my identity."

"Oh?" Lucifer replies, her voice a whisper. "And what might *that* be?"

The corners of Satan's mouth tighten. He points at his feet. "Kneel."

"I beg your par-? Guh?!"

The demoness suddenly lurches forward. Compelled by the binding power of Satan's Soul Contract, she falls to her knees and prostrates herself before him.

"W-what?! No! I refuse! Stop! Why can't I control my body?!"

Satan chuckles. "Because, sweetie. You signed your soul away to the Devil. Don't worry. I ain't gonna abuse you or anything like that. You can stand, now."

As if an anvil had fallen off her back, the demoness lurches up and jumps to her feet. The shakiness in her legs turns into frantic trembling.

"S-Satan? It's really... it's really you?!"

"Damn straight it is."

Barbatos claps his hands eagerly. "Nyehehe! Incredible, big boss! You made Lucifer obey you! That's amazing! You're the best!!"

Satan flicks his gaze to the little runt. "Shut up. That's an order."

Satan's words activate the soul contract binding Barbatos as well, causing the young Grunt's body to seize up. Barbatos opens his mouth to protest, but it slams shut, biting his tongue in the process. The grunt gurgles in surprise and grabs his face, barely managing to pull his tongue back in his mouth. He tries to force his jaw open, but nothing he does works.

Lucifer, still shaken, forces a smile. "A-at least your contract has... some practical use."

She glares at Barbatos. "Leave, or I'll tell your brother you decided to visit. I'm sure he'd be *delighted* to see you."

Barbatos goes pale. He glances at me with a guilty expression, then turns around and shuffles back the way we came.

Lucifer stares at me with her two lower eyes, but her third follows Barbatos for a while before it flicks back to me. "I can't say I'm happy to see you, Satan. I've had things running smoothly for the last several centuries. If you're planning to take over, you'd damn well better not ruin my operation."

Satan rests his hands on his hips. "Are you responsible for that Blight on the surface?"

"No. That is Valac's doing. His voracious appetite for souls... his transformation of the male demons into crazed, bloodthirsty killers... I opposed him and eventually splintered off into a separate demon faction with most of the women and some of the men. Even so, Valac's might substantially overshadows ours. I've had to try some... *unconventional* tactics to put us on equal footing with him."

"How so?"

The demoness glances at my exposed waist, then back to my face. "Before that, let's get you some pants. Come with me. We can chat in my throne room."

Lucifer turns and struts away. Satan follows after her. "Throne room? Damn. Someone's been getting big in the britches."

"Hardly," Lucifer mutters as she sucks air through her teeth. "You haven't a clue how dire our situation is. Soon, you'll understand."

It takes us a half-hour of walking through various tunnels and passages before we arrive at Lucifer's throne room. Along the way, we pass goblins, orcs, and a wide variety of other monsters. Having never seen them before, Satan fires off various questions, and Lucifer tells him about the expansion of her territory and the existence of Valac's worms.

"Valac gives his minions the ability to take the souls of any being they kill. That, in turn, empowers them far beyond the limits of their starting abilities. Several of Valac's top generals hold impressive strength, enabling them to fight on par with the angels."

We round a corner and head toward one particularly bright room, where dozens of torches illuminate its interior.

A drop of sweat runs down Satan's back. "So, Valac's demons can take the souls of those they kill. Can they use their victim's abilities?"

Lucifer frowns. "No. Why?"

Satan shrugs. "Just asking."

Samael appears in my thoughts. "Fascinating. Valac seems to have spread abilities similar to thine among all thy fellow demons. However, thy abilities still eclipse theirs."

Satan ignores the Archangel. "Lucy, you mentioned creating goblins and orcs. Why bother? What use do you have for such weak creatures?"

We enter Lucifer's throne room. The walls, barren and hastily dug out perhaps a year before, offer little for our eyes to examine. It seems built for utility, not for looks. Even the so-called 'throne' is little more than a block of dirt for someone to sit on.

Before Lucifer can answer our question, Satan's eyes swivel to face a dozen terrifying wolf-like creatures laying together in a semi-circle. Each one, black as the night, possesses fifty reptilian eyes, a mouth filled with steak knives for teeth, and claws big enough to rip bears in half. Their hairy bodies stand out from the brown walls like shadows splotched against the floor.

I recognize them immediately, but only thanks to Phoebe's descriptions from the bestiaries she read to me many years ago.

"What the fuck are those?!" Satan yelps. "Lucy, are you SEEING these things?!"

She nods. "Don't mind my little puppies. They won't hurt a fly... unless I *ask* them to."

Satan's face pales. "They're horrifying. Why would you create such disgusting-"

"Don't talk about my Hellhounds in such a manner," Lucifer says, giving me the stink-eye. She walks over to one and pets its head. The hound growls softly at her, but its tone is that of a child greeting its mother. Lucifer takes several seconds to stroke two long, black horns growing out of its skull before walking over and giving the same affection to each of the other Hellhounds. "As to your first question, I created the goblins to dig burrows for our people, while I created the orcs to fight humans."

Satan keeps his distance from the pack of Hellhounds. They, in turn, lay lazily on their sides and flop around, but never take their eyes off us. "Yeah? Why make orcs to fight humans? Can't you kill 'em yourself?"

"Of course," Lucifer replies. She struts across the room, grabs a leathery hide hanging on the wall, and tosses it to me. "Cover yourself with this. The humans are a minor nuisance. Unlike Valac's troops, mine cannot grow stronger by killing humans. However, we mustn't allow humans to grow in number. They

offer their spiritual energy to the angels, empowering them further and making our struggle that much harder."

"Pft," Satan scoffs and wraps the hide around his waist, covering his exposed demonhood. "What energy? The ones I met were weak enough that I killed 'em by accident."

"Aye. The humans lack any magical ability, but en-masse, their minuscule energy reserves can add up to tremendous amounts of mana for the angels. Already, tens of millions of the fleshbags roam Earth's surface. They reproduce at alarming rates, and their intelligence appears to be rising over time. Before, they would merely scream and run when we attacked them. Now, several humans can work together to take out a demon grunt. They might not be a problem in the present, but in time..."

The demoness trails off. Satan watches as her three eyes gloss over. Her focus shifts internally to some unknown memories, leaving us to stand and twiddle our thumbs.

"Uh huh? So, what, are the humans a threat to us?"

"I don't know," Lucifer mutters. "Perhaps not now. But, combined with the power of the Titans and the slowly-ramping power of the angels, we might face extinction, despite all our struggles."

Satan's expression darkens. "I see. So there's a time limit hanging over our people's heads. If we allow humans to continue whelping spawnlings, the angels will grow unstoppable over time. What is Valac doing about them?"

Lucifer crosses her arms, smushing them between both sets of her breasts. "He's thinning the herd. I don't know how many humans his forces have killed, but they number in the millions. The problem is that he isn't making a dent. He's allowing them to breed."

"Huh? How so?" Satan asks.

"Simple. Valac has his demons target the men, not the women. The women continue producing offspring while Valac's grunts reap the souls of the males. This empowers him, but it doesn't slow their birthrates in the slightest. We're dealing with creatures that whelp four and five spawnlings at the same time per female. Their increases are exponential. They're keeping up with my Broodmothers."

Satan nods. He glances at the Hellhounds for a moment, but his fear lessens noticeably after they close their eyes and fall asleep. "Damn. A lot changed while I was gone. Who are Valac's generals?"

"He has several. Most noteworthy among them is someone I'm certain you'll be familiar with. Nerissa. Your former lover."

Satan's jaw drops. "What?! She's working with Valac?! No way! She knows I hate him!"

"Aye. However, I'm not certain she has a choice. I believe Valac implanted one of his worms inside of her. He did so for me as well... but I burned it out."

"You can do that?"

Lucifer nods. "I scorch them from the bodies of any demons who join. Valac has a tight hold on his servants, but some break the conditioning and convert to my way of thinking. So far, Nerissa has not demonstrated any interest in joining us."

Satan furrows his brow. "Our situation seems worse than I imagined. We need to hit the humans hard and take 'em out before the angels become unstoppable."

Lucifer shakes her head. "It isn't that simple, Satan. The situation is infinitely more complex than you can imagine. Titans protect humanity while the angels seek out our burrows. The reason I have goblins hollowing out my lair is because I can't spare the demonpower otherwise. In the last hundred years, Uriel has found us three times and hit our dens with earthquakes. More importantly, her powers continue to increase. The last one nearly leveled a mountain. I believe she is using her seismic powers to detect our tunnels. Our current lair is the deepest one yet, but if our bad luck continues, she will find us again."

"Devils," Satan groans. "You're giving me nothing but bad news, Lucy. How's a guy supposed to plan the destruction of his enemies when things look this bad?"

Lucifer purses her lips. She flashes a grin at me, one comprised of hundreds of serrated shark-teeth. "Oh, Satan. After everything I've told you, I *do* have some good news. You haven't heard from Diablo and Bael yet, have you?"

My eyes widen. "Aw, shit! Deebs! I forgot about him! Where is that little bastard?"

Turning away, Lucifer's eye swivels to stare at the side of the room. Slowly, it scans the surface, and I realize she's looking not at the wall, but *through* it. She examines the entirety of her underground lair before settling on one specific point. Lucifer narrows her third eye for a moment, then returns her gaze to me.

"Give him a few minutes. Try not to gawk. Diablo and Bael aren't the same demons they once were."

"You called them over?"

"I did. My eye sees all and tells all."

With a satisfied smirk, Lucifer wanders over to her 'throne' and plops down. She leans against the wall and pets a hellhound laying beside her.

* * *

Ten minutes pass. Satan leans against the entryway, allowing his thoughts to bounce around in his head.

Valac leads an army of demons. Somehow, that little bag of bones has become so powerful that even Lucy is afraid of him. The last time I fought Valac, I wiped the floor with him. However, while I got stuck in the Cosmic Realm, he worked himself to the bone gaining power over our people.

Unacceptable. I'm the top dog, the alpha wolf. No way am I gonna let some creepy skeleton take over. He's even got Nerissa working for him. Gah! I can't believe Lucy got her ass whipped by that one-trick pony. Like I always say, I can't let some broad take charge, or half the world will end up dead and black.

Satan shakes his head. *Devil's sake. I've got a giant mess to clean up.*

Heavy footsteps in the hall catch Satan's attention. He raises his gaze and drops his jaw as two massive, muscled demons saunter toward us. "What the-?! Bael? Deebs?! What happened to you two?!"

Diablo, now a foot taller than when I last saw him, sports flowing black robes, a red and yellow cape, and two small piercings through the sides of his nostrils. His hairy arms and sharp fingernails give him an animalistic look, like a cross between a gorilla and a wolverine. He widens his eyes as he spots me. "Seven Devils! Satan? Is that you?!"

Bael, the same height as when I last saw him, has put on even more muscle than last time. His meaty fists and thick biceps, combined with wearing only underwear and nothing else, give him the appearance of a professional wrestler. Several skulls rest on his waist, along with bones of small animals carved into shoulder-pads. I get the impression they're meant more to give him an intimidating aura than for his protection.

"Well, shit. Ain't that a treat? Satan the Devil, back from the dead! Haw!" Bael walks over and slaps Satan on the back, nearly knocking the wind out of him. "When Lucy told us to pop over, I thought it was gonna be another boring job, but lookit this! It's our lucky day!"

Satan grins from ear to ear. "How've you losers been? I went to all that trouble to save your sorry asses, only to get trapped by Raphael in some alternate dimension. You'd better've made the most of my sacrifice, chums."

Diablo's expression sobers up. "Yes. We did what we could. It's been rough without you, but my girl has worked hard to build a better future for our people."

Pushing past me, Diablo walks over to Lucifer's side and rests a hand on her shoulder. "You found Satan, eh? That eye came in handy once again. Where was he?"

To my surprise, Lucifer doesn't push Diablo's hand away. Instead, she flicks her eyes up to meet his. "I didn't find him. Barbatos did. Led him to us, as well."

Diablo's expression sours. "What? You mean... Valac ordered him to take Satan here?"

"Most likely," Lucifer says. She rests her hand on Diablo's in a sickeningly romantic gesture that sends pins and needles down my arms. I don't know when, but at some point, it seems she stopped rebuffing Diablo and fell for his advances. "I have to wonder what Valac was hoping to accomplish."

Diablo leans down and kisses Lucifer's hair, then turns to me. "So, Satan, what happened? Where've you been all this time?"

Satan clears his throat. "Ahm, well, it's a long story."

He spends the next fifteen minutes explaining what happened during the attack on Heaven. Raphael's portal magic, the Cosmic Realm, and severing his limbs. Interestingly, Satan doesn't mention regenerating from death. He instead states that he healed himself by regrowing his limbs once he discovered healing magic inside himself.

Lucifer raises an eyebrow. "So you only spent one month inside the Cosmic Realm, yet well over two thousand years passed for us, here?"

"Bit longer than a month," Satan says. "If Raphael hadn't told me he killed all the demons, I might have escaped sooner. You've gotta understand, Raphael dumped ashes in front of me and said they were

all that was left of Valac. What was I supposed to think?"

Lucifer stands up and walks over to me. "You should have known he was lying. How could you fall for such obvious deceit? The old man is nothing if not a slippery snake."

Satan crosses his arms. "Maybe. He sounded sincere at the time. I think he believed the demons were all dead."

Bael punches his palm. "Bahaha! He probably did! Don't you guys 'member? Valac faked his death! I bet Raphael took the bait. So much for being the 'wisest' angel!"

"That's a possibility too," Diablo says. He stands beside Lucifer and wraps one arm around her shoulder. "All that matters is you're back, Satan. We missed you. With you here, we might be able to break Valac's stranglehold of power. It's high time we saved Earth from his Blight."

Lucifer taps her lip. "Satan. There's something you should know. Valac has a... special ability. An aura. It encompasses the entire Earth. Most likely, he detected your arrival and sent Barbatos to find you. I'm curious as to why he would have Barbatos bring you here, though."

Bael reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. "Ain't it obvious? That boney-bitch is scared! Satan's the only demon who's ever slapped him around like a wet rag! Valac is probably quakin' in his boots. He wanted to make sure Satan didn't come to his den!"

Satan narrows his eyes. "You know what, Bael? I think you're right. Valac is scared of me. He should be. He's ruining Earth. I never did like his attitude... maybe I should pay him a visit."

"Ooh," Bael says with a smile. "I've gotta see this. Why don't all of us go? I'd like to see what Agares is up to."

"Agares?" Satan asks. "Aw, c'mon. Don't tell me he's working for Valac, too."

Lucifer's eyes tilt to the right, avoiding my gaze. She shifts her feet guiltily. "That *might* be my fault. It isn't that Agares sympathizes with Valac, but rather, that he cannot stand me."

Diablo sucks air through his teeth. "Sss... oh, boy. Not this again."

"What? Did something happen?" Satan asks.

"I'd rather not go into the details," Lucifer mutters. "I wanted to heal Diablo. I was, perhaps, slightly too over-zealous. I tried to copy Agares' regenerative reptilian abilities. My experiment succeeded, but..."

Diablo's hand falls away from Lucifer's shoulder. He shakes his head and averts his gaze. "Poor Agares... he wasn't the same after... after the..."

Even Bael's enthusiasm wanes. "Don't beat yourself up over it, boss. Look at all the good Lucy's done with Agares' powers. At least we didn't hurt him for no reason, right? All that shit's in the past."

Satan pauses to examine each of the three demons. His eyes flick from one to the next.

Whatever happened, it must have pissed Agares off. I always thought we'd be good friends. Maybe I can talk to him... see what's up.

Satan shakes the worries from his head. "Hey, hey, cheer up, guys. Cripes. Nothin' worse than a bunch of mooney dopes. I'm going to have a little chat with Valac. If you wanna come, get your shit in gear."

Lucifer shakes her head. "I'll stay. I have my lair to run."

"Diablo pats her shoulder. "I'll stay, too. Bael, you go and be Satan's bodyguard. Show him your skills."

Bael's distant expression vanishes. He claps his hands together, sending a shockwave through the air that rattles our teeth. "Hoho, damn right! Aw, devils, Satan! You don't know how powerful I am, do ya? Have I got a show for you!"

Satan rolls his eyes. "Aye. Show me your moves, big guy. Lucy, Deebs, I'll be back soon. Hold down the fort while I'm gone."

Lucifer scowls. "I've been doing just fine without your orders."

"Atta girl, haha," Satan replies with a chuckle. "Let's go kick some ass, Bael."

"Hell yeah!"

The two of us turn and leave, heading toward the surface world. As we do, Satan frowns.

Hell?

Part 128: Prepare for Trouble

My next host is a massive Titan, one who, while seated on a throne, towers over the rest of his species. My host sits in a vast, underground cavern lit by thousands of torches and decorated with lavish tapestries and finely-crafted statues. To my right sits a Titaness dressed in plain grey robes, one only slightly shorter than me, while a twenty-foot-tall Titan bows at my feet.

"It is with great displeasure, King Zeus, that I bring news of my father's passing. I, Prince Neptune of the Atlanteans, have arrived to tell you that Poseidon fell in battle against an unknown adversary. We found his corpse on the shores of the western sea, nearby a field of blood swirling in the ocean's waters."

My host, Zeus, squeezes his marble throne with incredible force, shattering the beautiful stonework on its arms. The minerals compressed in his palm release a violent *crack* in the air that makes everyone present wince.

"My brother... dead? Who. Who killed him?"

Zeus's voice rumbles around the room like thunder, bouncing off the reinforced granite walls ten times before fading. Despite forcing calmness into his voice, every word boils with fire and brimstone.

Neptune rises to his full height of twenty feet. He stands barely at my chest's level and puts on an apologetic expression. "I am sorry, uncle. We do not know. We suspect his murderer was a demon, but..."

"A demon."

Zeus narrows his eyes. Ice creeps into his voice.

"You expect me to believe... my little brother... fell at the hands of a *filthy bloodskin*?"

Neptune pales. He glances to my left, where Hercules leans against the side of my throne. The last time I saw Hercules, he stood a few feet shorter than Gabriel, but even after two thousand years of growth and advancing to a height of fifteen feet, the young Titan still appears minuscule compared to Zeus.

He barely reaches the top of his father's knee.

"We are doing our best to find my father's killer. However, no Titans witnessed his death, nor did any angels. His head was... it was... crushed into pulp. We could scarcely identify him. Were it not for his Atlantean armor, we might have assumed he was one of the surface-dwelling Titans."

Zeus inhales sharply. "The only demon who could kill my brother would be Valac. However... never in all the years since his arrival has he done performed an act as barbaric as crushing a Titan's head. No... such an action..."

Zeus turns his gaze toward Hercules. The young Titan stares at us. A look of smoldering anger burns beneath his surface.

"Aye, father. How could we forget? Megara perished similarly. I thought I had moved past her death... but now..."

Zeus reaches down and lays a hand on his diminutive son's shoulder. Only three of his fingers manage to rest comfortably. "Satan the Devil. Raphael told us that bastard died, long ago. He must have returned from the Great Beyond."

Hercules balls his hands into fists. "That *red rat*. First, my wife. Now, my uncle. I... I wish... to tear him limb from limb..."

Zeus nods. He pulls away from his son, pushes against the arms of his throne, and lifts himself into a standing position. Even at his full height of forty feet, his head comes nowhere close to touching the ceiling. It appears to have been carved out by and for even bigger ancient beings.

Behind me, Zeus's wife touches our left hand. "My love. Don't be brash. Our numbers are insufficient to mount an attack against demonkind."

"I know, Hera," Zeus mutters. He sweeps his gaze across the fifty other warriors in the room, each one wearing little more than rags to cover their private bits, be they male or female. "We've suffered too many losses since the demons first appeared. Now, of those among my generation, only you and I remain. Poseidon was my last remaining brother. Demeter, Dionysius, Chiron... all of them, dead. All fell at the hands of the Grim Reaper and his minions."

Slowly, deliberately, Zeus turns and reaches toward two straight, narrow poles resting against his throne. Each iron implement bears no distinctive markings. They are weapons crafted entirely for function, without any aesthetic value. Taking one in each hand, Zeus exhales. A sensation of energy courses from the tips of his ears down to his weapons. Sparks of electricity crackle against the rods, warming them to the touch.

"We cannot live in fear of these bloodskins anymore. We cannot hide in our halls of dirt and stone. We must take the battle to them. We must remind them why the angels once feared us more than death itself. Valac thinks himself an unstoppable killing machine. His forces choke the Earth and wipe out all life in their path. If we do not mount a full resistance now, we may not manage such a feat in the future."

Hera pulls away. She maintains a calm expression, but beneath the surface, I notice twinges of emotion threatening to bubble up. "If we attack the demons, Valac may claim more lives than ever before. We won't be able to protect ourselves in an open battlefield. You know as well as I the long reach of his scythe."

Zeus's expression darkens. He lowers his eyes to the rod in his right hand. "I will not put my people's lives in danger. No, instead, I will face the demons alone. I will test their strength myself. Long has it been since I battled on the frontlines. Long have I ached to correct the sins of the bloodskins."

Hercules balks. The young Titan tugs at my robe. "Father! You cannot go out there alone. If you fall, who will lead us? I am too young. The battle for the throne will devastate our ranks."

"If I fall..." Zeus mutters. He chuckles wryly. "Have you forgotten, boy? I slew Cronus and earned the title of Titan Feller. I wiped his laziness from our ranks. It is my power that secured the right to his domain for all of us. Among the Titans living today, none are my equal. Valac knows this. That is why he has never once dared to step foot inside my domain. Even now, the Reaper listens. His presence ripples

through this chamber. He senses my anger, my rage. He hears my words, and deep inside those cracked bones... he trembles."

Zeus raises his eyes to look at the doorway.

"Valac. Satan. I owe both of you a blood debt. You've killed my brothers, my sisters, my children, and their children as well. Your terror will not bind us any longer. I will come for you... and you will fall. Do you hear me, Grim Reaper?"

Zeus falls silent. Nobody in the room responds. However, the faintest shift in the air makes Zeus raise his chin.

"Did you feel it? Valac's presence stirred for but a moment. He heard my words."

"My love, don't go," Hera whispers. "I know you're a proud man, but even for you, this is reckless."

"I will come with you, father," Hercules says. "My strength may not equal yours, but I owe Satan in the same way you owe Valac. He murdered my wife. His harlot killed my sisters. Please, allow me to follow you into battle."

Zeus flicks his eyes down to his son. Despite Hercules' tiny stature compared to his father, he appears to have grown substantially since the last time I saw him. He now stands slightly taller than the Archangel of Power, at fifteen feet in height.

It takes several seconds of internal debate before Zeus finally nods. "Very well. You are the mightiest among your generation. I am proud to call you my son. Make sure to stand strong and show no fear in the face of death."

Hera jumps to her feet. "Zeus, no! Do not bring our son with you! Please, I beg you! I cannot stand the thought of losing my husband and son on the same day!"

Zeus turns to her. His expression softens. "Hera, do you believe in your heart of hearts the demons stand a chance... against my power? My speed?"

The Titaness frowns. "...No."

"Then there is little reason to worry. No matter how numerous the enemy legions, their strength means nothing in the face of an adversary they cannot strike. Not only will I prevail, but so, too, shall our son. Come, boy!"

Zeus turns away from Hera and saunters toward the door. Neptune, the son of Poseidon, steps aside and wrings his hands. "Uncle, what am I to do? Satan killed my father. Should I not come along as well to avenge his death?"

Zeus smiles. "You have a stout heart, nephew. Leave the Devil and his cohorts to me. I want you to return to Atlantis and take over as their king. Your people need a ruler now more than ever. It was Poseidon's trident that prevented Valac from attacking my seafaring cousins. Do not allow the Reaper to strike, now that your father has fallen."

A look of recognition appears on the young Titan's face. Neptune bows stiffly toward his uncle, indicating his overwhelming respect for the reigning Titan King. "Thank you, uncle. I will do as you say!"

The Atlanteans give thanks to your display of courage and might."

As Hercules falls into step behind me, Zeus smirks.

"Heh. It takes little courage for a giant to crush an ant beneath his thumb."

Satan and Bael stomp through the labyrinthine catacombs of Lucifer's lair. As they near the surface, Satan nudges Bael. "So, uh, I noticed you and a few other demons dropping the word 'hell' a bunch. What's up with that?"

Bael reaches up to shift aside the huge boulder leading to the lair. "Damn. You're more outta the loop than I thought. You don't know?"

"Nuh-uh," Satan replies. He watches as Bael lightly presses a finger to the boulder and flicks it aside, sending the one-ton rock skidding several dozen feet away. "Sounds like everyone's using it, though."

"Mhm. It's the name of Lucifer's Lair. We call this place Hell. It's a, uh... an aknuh... aknur..."

Bael pauses for several seconds. He stares at me, eyes glazed over.

"Akruh... fuck it. It's a word where the letters mean something else."

"An acronym?" Satan offers.

"Yeah, yeah! That!" Bael nods as relief washes over his face. "Stupid, bigass fuckin' words. Anyway, it means 'Hugely Evil Lucifer's Lair.' Pretty cool, right?"

Satan raises an eyebrow. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Who came up with it?"

Bael falters. "Err... well, I mean, uh..."

"Don't tell me it was you."

"Y-yeah... I thought it was good..."

Satan mentally facepalms. "No, no, it's better than I thought. I, err, had to think about it for a moment. Let's get moving, already."

Bael's stupid grin comes roaring back. "Awesome! You had me worried for a second! It's good ta' have someone around who understands my genius."

The big demon jumps up to the surface, and Satan follows by using his vectors to climb the five-foot wall. A minute later, Bael shoves the boulder back into place and leans against it. His eyes swivel to stare out into the forest.

"What's the holdup?" Satan asks. "Let's get a move on."

"Gimme a minute," Bael mutters. "I hafta remember which way Valac's den is. That way? Nah... I don't remember a funny lookin' black tree..."

Satan's eyes glaze over. "Bael. All the trees are black."

"Uh-huh. Duh. What, do you think I'm stupid or somethin'?"

Satan purses his lips. "Perish the thought."

The Devil taps his feet as he waits for his eight-foot-tall cohort to slowly scan the forest, looking for some landmark to identify the path to Valac's den.

"If you'd like, we can ask Lucifer for directions. I'm sure she'd know."

"Nah, nah, screw that," Bael says, waving my concerns away. "Pft. Askin' some broad for help. That'd be pathetic."

"I don't have all day," Satan replies. "If you don't know, I'd rather not waste time heading in the wrong direction."

"Just gimme a minute," Bael grunts. "It'll come to me. I bet it was northeast. That feels right."

"You're facing south."

"That's what I said."

"No. No, it isn't."

Satan groans internally. *Devil's sake. I love you, Bael. You're a great guy... but for the love of all that is unholy, you're the thickest demon I know.*

A twig snaps in the distance. Satan's heart skips a beat. He whirls to face the noise. Bael doesn't bother.

"Who's there?"

From the shadows of the forest, where sunlight trickles through the canopy, several demonesses creep into view. A familiar woman leads the group, one I know well.

The raven-haired lady blinks in surprise when she sees me. "What? Satan?! Is that you?"

Satan's jaw drops. "Belial! Wow! You're alive, toots! How about that?"

The succubus, dressed in a tigerskin bra and panties, skips over to me. She wraps her arms around Satan and squeals. "Oh my goodness! I can't believe it!! We thought you died! How are you here now?!"

The dozen or so other female demons behind stare at us curiously, apparently unaware of Satan's identity. They probably weren't alive two thousand years ago.

Satan grins and squeezes Belial's ass. "Hot damn. You filled out while I was gone. Me'n Bael are trying to get to Valac's lair. I've been hoping to see Nerissa since I broke out of the Cosmic Realm."

Belial ignores Satan playing grabass. She seems used to random demon guys getting hands-on. After pulling away, her smile turns somber. "Oh, Nerissa? Ahh... my little sister..."

"Something the matter?" Satan asks. "You 'n her not on speaking terms?"

"No... it's not that," Belial says. Her smile flattens out as she plays with a strand of long, black hair. "Well, maybe you haven't heard. Valac's leadership *changed* a lot of the demon men. Lucifer created a branch sect of demonesses, along with a few of the guys. The males started acting violently under Valac's direction. They got pushy, and rude, and um... well, I don't like to talk about it."

Belial fidgets noticeably.

"Ahm. I haven't seen Nerissa in several years. I don't like entering Valac's den. I don't even know if she's still alive."

Satan's jaw drops. "What?! No way. Even for Valac, that's low. Why don't you come with me 'n Bael? We'll protect ya. It ain't right that you haven't seen Nerissa in so long."

"I'm not *afraid* of the men, Satan," Belial says, flashing a shy smile. "I can beat them up pretty easily. I just don't like the way they look at me. Well, I suppose if they gang up on me like they did... erm..."

A pulse of red shoots through Satan's vision. "What happened? Tell me."

"It was a long time ago," Belial says. She glances at Bael.

I follow her gaze, and Bael nods. "I knocked some heads. That was back when Lucy broke off and made her new group."

"If you're both tryin' to piss me off," Satan mutters, "then you're doin' a damn good job. I didn't know things were that bad. Devils. What happened while I was gone?"

"A lot," Belial murmurs. She doesn't elaborate.

Satan sucks air through his teeth. "Kss. Fine. You stay here, then. Mind at least pointing me 'n Bael in the right direction? This guy doesn't know his head from his ass."

Belial bites her lip. "You shouldn't go, Satan. Even if it's *you*, Valac's minions are incredibly powerful, and he hates you with a burning passion. Everyone knows how angry he was that he didn't get to kill you himself. He always said the angels robbed him."

"Great. Looks like Valac's gonna get his chance. Which way is his den?"

Satan's curt reply catches Belial off-guard. She wrings her hands together. "Well, it's south of here... much closer to Mount Olympus than it ought to be. You aren't seriously going there, are you? It's dangerous."

Satan reaches over and squeezes Belial's shoulder. "Don't worry about me, toots. Worry about Valac. That poor guy's days are numbered. Hehe."

Bael punches his palm. "Ohhh, right! South! I knew it was that way!"

"No, you didn't."

Bael shakes his head. "Nope. You got me."

Belial smiles sweetly. "Well, um, take care of yourself, Satan. I'm glad you're back! We need someone to take Valac down a peg or two."

Satan flashes a grin at the succubus. "Damn straight. We'll be back later. Thanks for the directions."

"Mhm!" Belial beams sunshine at me. Before we can turn away, the demoness leans forward and pecks Satan on the cheek. "Pass that on to Nerissa for me, will you?"

"I'll pass on a lot more than that," Satan says, licking his lips. "More than you'd expect."

* * *

Bael and I head out in the direction Belial indicated. As we walk, Bael nudges me. "Hey bub, Belial's lookin' pretty fine. If you become the leader of demonkind, why limit yourself to one broad? Get one for each arm. They're sisters, ya know."

Satan raises an eyebrow. "Not a bad idea. Dunno. I like to think of myself as a one-girl-at-a-time kind of guy, though."

"Pft," Bael snorts. "Bitches can't keep their hands off me. I nail 'em five at a time. You oughta work harder on your sex drive."

"I'm too busy for that," Satan says with a shrug. His eyes darken. "Besides. I have bigger priorities. I owe a certain old man the beating of a lifetime."

Bael nods. "Raphael?"

"Yup. When I'm through with that flappy cunt, he'll beg for a dirt nap."

"Nice. I'll hold him down for ya. You give him the ol' one-two."

Satan slugs Bael in the shoulder. "You always know how to make me smile."

Bael and Satan stomp through the blackened forest for hours on end. The dreary color scheme of the undergrowth, the barren treetops, and the incessant crunching of dead foliage beneath their feet combine to suck the life out of both demons the further they travel from Lucifer's Lair.

"Cripes. How much further?" Satan asks. Neither he nor Bael has said a word in over an hour.

"I dunno," Bael mutters. He pauses to take a long breath. "I don't remember it bein' this far before. Does it feel like there's a fuckin anvil sittin' on your skull, or izzat just me? I've got one hell of a headache."

Satan sticks his pinkie in his ear and wriggles, then yawns to try and pop his eardrums. "I *have* noticed this awful sensation pressing against my sinuses. I feel like my senses dulled somewhat after we left the lair. Bloody sin. I'll need a nap if we don't make it to Valac's hideout soon."

Both demons fall silent for a minute before continuing to trudge toward an unknown destination.

Bael clears his throat. "Say, uh, Satan?"

"What?"

"You don't really intend ta' fight Valac, do ya?"

"I haven't made up my mind about that," Satan replies. "On the one hand, he kept demonkind going while I was gone. On the other hand, he turned the men into animals. If he hurt my girl, things are gonna turn pretty dicey."

The Devil snuffles. "Though, if I'm being honest, I don't hold any particular grudge against the skinny skeleton. Compared to how pissed I am at Raphael, my feelings toward Valac are like those of a best friend."

"Shit. You hate the old man that much?"

Satan sucks air through his teeth. "Kss... *ohhh, yeah*. If only you knew."

Several seconds of silence fill the space between the two demons. Satan flares his nostrils. "Everyone says Valac hates me. Compared to what Raphael did to me, how he left me laying limbless in the dirt... my anger toward Valac is like that of two imps fighting over a bit of grub. It's a bunch of petty crap."

Bael claps his hands together. "Well, shit! Easy peasy! Forgive and forget! Shake his hand and agree to bury the ol' hatchet."

"It isn't that simple. I don't care about old grievances. I have a problem with the actions Valac took while I was gone. This!" Satan sweeps his arms out, gesturing to the blighted forest surrounding us. "This crap. He ruined a perfectly good planet. Fucking idiot. What good is ruling a world of rocks and rust?"

Bael scratches his chin. "It *does* look pretty nasty."

"No kidding. Anyway, if I see him, I'll try and talk things out. I'm not here to start a civil war."

Satan hesitates. He pauses walking for a moment to stare at Bael meaningfully.

"But. *But*. If Valac tries anything... if I find out he pulled some shifty shit while I wasn't here... I will shit fire and fury all over him. Understand?"

"Roger," Bael says with a nod. "I'll back you up."

Satan rolls his eyes. "Glad to have you, Bael, but that won't be necessary. No matter how powerful you've become, you can't compare to me."

Bael crosses his arms. "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

Both demons eyeball each other. Satan smirks. "Are you challenging me, boy? You think you can beat me?"

The Devil releases a bit of his aura. Blood-red energy begins to drip from his body. It spills into the air and slowly builds into a flood of mana rushing in all directions.

Bael doesn't flinch. "I probably could, yeah. Lucky for you, I ain't smart enough ta' lead. No *way* do I wanna be king. Only a dumbass tries to lead a bunch of demons. It's like tryin' ta' corral a buncha kitty-cats with twigs. Impossible."

Satan smirks. He lowers his energy output. "Smart move. Maybe you could beat me. Anything's possible. Unfortunately for you, I'd win eventually, no matter how many times I died."

Bael raises an eyebrow. "Uhh... huh? How would you win if you... died?"

"Let's hope you don't ever find out," Satan says, waving the big guy's concerns away. "We're wasting time. Any idea if we're close yet?"

Bael shrugs. "Dunno. If Artorias had come along, we could use his dirt magic to find Valac's tunnels. I bet we're close, but this whole fuckin' forest looks the same to me."

"Oh? Are you referring to Seismic Sense, perhaps?"

Satan frowns. He furrows his brow deeper after a few moments and stops to ponder something.

Seismic Sense. As I recall, that's a power burrower demons have. Hm. If any of the demons inside me were earth-types, I might have access to their abilities.

The Devil closes his eyes and concentrates. Faces of various demons trapped inside his body appear in his mind's eye. He peruses them, one-by-one, as though he were shopping for clothing at a department store.

Samael bubbles inside our mind, interrupting Satan's thoughts. "Tired, Satan? Need a nap already?"

I'm not napping, dumbass, Satan thinks to himself. Shut up, will ya? Tryin' to think here.

Samael doesn't hear his host's thoughts. "Giving me the silent treatment, eh? Or, perhaps thou art worried thy friend would hear thee speaking to me and think thee insane? In truth, perhaps thou art. My brother's punishment may have been too much for thy mind to bear."

Satan rolls his eyes under his eyelids. *What a fuckin' blabbermouth. I'd tell him to shut up, but then I'd have to explain to Bael I wasn't talking to him... that'd be annoying.*

The Archangel pesters Satan for another minute or so, but eventually gives up and retreats into his shell. It takes all of Satan's self-control not to breathe a sigh of relief at the blissful silence.

Finally, the Devil opens his eyes. "Found it."

Bael, now slumped forward, also has his eyes closed. He wheezes quietly, inhaling and exhaling in a steady rhythm.

Satan's jaw drops. "Bael! Are- are you asleep?! Wake up!"

"Huh?! Wha-?" Bael jerks his head up and blinks. "Me? Sleep? Nah, no way, haha. That would be, uh, totally uncool. Aw, shit, where'd Belial go?"

"Belial?"

"Yeah! She was just here, pulling down my-"

"Gah! Shut it! I don't want to hear about your indecent dreams!" Satan flails one hand in disgust, forming a tiny physical barrier between himself and the taller demon. "Broodmothers, guide me! Give me a rag to scrub that image from my memories!"

Bael wipes his nose. "Uhh... so what'd you want?"

Satan rubs his face. "Seismic Sense... right! Before I forget; I possess the power of Earth Magic. Give me a moment, and I'll locate Valac's Den."

"Oh, damn. Serious?" Bael's eyes widen. "Is there anything you *can't* do?"

"Possibly. I'm still figuring out my powers."

With a shrug, Satan performs several hand signs and slaps his palm against the dirt.

Whoomph.

The ground rumbles ever so slightly. The trees closest to us rattle, sending dirt and dust cascading down from their dead branches.

Satan's mind temporarily expands downward. It travels in a spherical pattern, expanding a mile per second until it hits a hollowed-out tunnel amidst the packed dirt. Satan's mind traces it upward until it reaches an opening on Earth's surface.

"There."

The Devil stands and points in a slightly different direction than we were headed before. "A little over three miles that way."

Bael's jaw drops. "Bloody hell! You're awesome! Wow, I can't believe you can do that!"

"Eh, it's a gift," Satan mutters.

From a dragon, he finishes in his thoughts.

* * *

We continue walking, but this time with a pep in our step. As the entrance to Valac's den draws nearer, a sense of ominous foreboding begins to swirl in the air. Bael rubs his arm and looks at me. "Eugh. This place gives me the creeps. Feels like someone's watchin' us."

"They probably are," Satan says. His eyes flick from left to right as he scans for the Grim Reaper. I half-expect Valac to materialize out of thin air and impale Satan when he least expects it.

That doesn't happen.

The two demons arrive in a clearing where the absence of trees appears noticeably different compared to the forest's density from earlier. In the center sits a stump cut cleanly across the top, almost as if someone had chainsawed it and then smoothed its surface down with a sander.

Bael smiles. "Phew. Finally, we're here. It's right under that stump."

"The entrance?"

"Mhm."

Bael and I step into the clearing.

From our left and right, an odd sound, like a mixture between humming and whistling, echoes through the forest.

"♪Ahoo-ahoo, hoho, hoho!♪"

Bael freezes. His eyes widen in terror.

"No... no, it can't be..."

A voice speaks on our right from someone hidden behind a tree. "♪Look who's here, who's come out to play...♪"

From our left, another hidden figure speaks. "♪Someone's come to see master Valac. It must be his birthday!♪"

Bael clutches his head. Cold sweat drips down the back of his neck as he slumps to his knees. "Please, please no... not... not *them*...!"

From my right, a demon male dressed in a flamingo-pink dress struts out from behind his tree. His poofy fur collar, long black boots, and confident stride instantly wrench Satan's stomach. He twirls his eye-bleedingly bright mink-fur in one hand, almost as though he's trying to seduce us.

"♪I don't know you, mister intruder McGee, but you look like a yummy little morsel, hee-hee-hee!♪"

Satan violently jerks his head to the left. His jaw drops as an equally flamboyant male demon, one dressed in sky blue but wearing an identical getup, steps out from the other tree.

"♪We're not Nerissa; we aren't Valac's little whore. We're the next best thing, his numbers three and four!♪"

Tears fall down Bael's face. "Of... of all the demons Valac could've sent... he had to send... Azazel and Azog... NOOOOOOOO!!!"

The big guy's wail rips through the forest like a freighter's bullhorn booming across the seven seas.

Both of the newcomers hold up their hands and juggle fireballs around, echoing memories of circus acts I saw during my youth.

The pink one bats his eyes at me. "♪Ohoho, I may not recognize you, but I know Bael's cute little face! He's one of my favorite big boys, someone I'd like to embrace!♪"

The other one smiles so hard that sunshine and rainbows shoot out his ass. "♪I know what you mean, little brother, I like him too! He's our favorite visitor, a real cutie poo-poo!♪"

Bael's choked sobs stab me in the heart, over and over.

"Not them... not the Sunshine Brothers... anyone but them!!"

As Azazel and Azog begin to circle us, Satan takes a step back.

Who the devil are these guys?!

Part 129: Make it Double

Recommended Listening

Azazel and Azog dance around us on opposite sides. They clap their hands rhythmically to some inaudible song, hopping and skipping as they summon and disperse fire within their grasp.

"♪C'mon, little cutie, there's no need to cry!♪" The pink one says.

"♪We're not mean; we're a couple of nice guys!♪" The blue one says, adding onto his brother's rhyme.

"♪Dance and clap, sing and play!♪"

"♪Have fun! We'll be here all day!♪"

"♪Hee-hee!♪"

"♪Ho-ho!♪"

The Sunshine Brothers clap their hands together and disperse sparkly fire throughout the air, allowing it to cascade upon the dead grass, where it fizzles into ash.

Satan's jaw slackens as he stands idly and watches them dance around us. "Who *are* these numbskulls? Bael! Get your ass up."

The big guy chokes back sobs and forces himself to his feet. He bites his lip and suppresses his inner turmoil as best as he can. "It's hopeless. They're... the most annoying demons ever. Shut 'em up, please!"

Satan's eyes flick to the demon dressed in pink. It's now that he notices the name *Azazel* embroidered in fancy gold lettering across his chest. However, someone has sewn the middle 'a' into the shape of a heart.

That one's probably the older brother Satan thinks to himself.

"Hey, clowns! Knock it off with all that singing and dancing! You're gonna make me throw up!"

From behind us, Azog, the blue demon, stomps his foot. Fire erupts from his boot and launches him over our heads. He pirouettes in midair, lands delicately on his upraised hands, and cartwheels into a standing position beside Azazel. The two of them begin dancing in sync, kicking their legs up, twirling around, and unleashing all sorts of fabulous dance moves. I can't help but be impressed by their movements, even if Satan isn't.

"♪Come on, new guy! You know you love us!♪"

"♪After we take you down, Valac will promote us!♪"

"♪We've got one job, and that's to beat your behind!♪"

"♪It seems that our fates are intertwined!♪"

Their brilliant, sparkling smiles threaten to stop Satan's heart from sheer fabulousness. The poor guy hasn't a clue how to react. "I don't want to beat up a couple of fellas just for dancing. Get out of my way, kids. You don't know who you're messin' with."

Azazel spreads his fingers out in a V-sign. "♪ Nope! But it doesn't matter! Once we finish our verses, we'll begin in earnest!♪"

Azog presses his back against his brother's and links their hand together. "♪ Our moves are too hot! You're like a frog, boiled in a thermos!♪"

Satan squeezes the bridge of his nose. *I can't take this shit — Bael's right. These guys make me want to drill holes in my skull. Everything about them hurts my very being. They're just not right in the head!*

Stepping forward, the self-proclaimed King of all Demons takes a menacing stance. "Last warning. Get out of my way, pups. You're starting to piss me off."

"♪ Ooh, so scary!~ Look at how his eyes fill with blood!♪"

Azog winks. "♪ How about you take a nap in the mud?♪"

Azog, the blue-wearing demon, suddenly pounces at us. Satan's heart skips a beat. Using fire from his boots to boost his speed, Azog clears the ten-foot gap instantly and slaps his palm against our chest.

"Poof! Now we can play with Bael! He's fun to tease!"

"Wh-"

The Devil doesn't get a chance to respond. His eyes slam shut, and his vision turns black.

Our soul flees the realm of the living.

Darkness takes us.

We awaken somewhere between a second and five minutes later to see Bael cowering on the ground, each brother trying to pull him to his feet.

"♪ -that he's gone, it's just the three of us!♪"

"♪ That's right! We'll dress you real cute; no need to be a wuss!♪"

Satan doesn't move. He closes his eyes and pretends to be dead, even as his mind races.

What the fuck just happened? Azog killed me with a single touch? Impossible. He palmed my chest. That's all! Compared to when Poseidon and Raphael hit me, Azog's attack had no strength behind it whatsoever!

It's... it's as if my soul simply evaporated.

A shudder goes down the Devil's body.

That little blue bitch took me out in one hit. I've got tons of souls to spare, but I can't let attacks like that land anymore.

Satan slams his Vectors into the ground. His eyes bolt open as he pounces to his feet. "Alright. I'm finished playing games, cloud-boys. What did you do to me?"

Azog whirls to face us. His playful smile vanishes as he stares at us in shock. "What? You're alive?"

Azazel, likewise, stops harassing Bael to gaze at us. The pink demon narrows his eyes. "That shouldn't be possible. Nobody can survive a hit from Soulfire."

When they stop rhyming, a chill goes down Satan's spine.

"Yeah? I just did, you stupid cunts," Satan says. The blood vessels in our neck tighten as the Devil sets his jaw and clenches his fists. "I don't know what you did, and I ain't amused."

Satan's thoughts race. *Soulfire? What the fuck is that? I've never heard of such a technique. Don't tell me it kills the victim instantly. That would be too convenient.*

Azog frowns. He forces a smile, but something about it feels off. "♪Hm. I felt my power increase, and his soul became mine. Why's he still walking, though? That's not sublime!♪"

"Ugh," Satan grunts. "It's been so long since I heard Valac's shitty rhymes, but you've reminded me how much I hate 'em. If you don't stop talking, I'm gonna have to shut you up."

The Sunshine Brothers walk past Bael, ignoring the slobbering, blubbering mess of a future Demon Duke. Their eyes lock onto me.

Azazel hisses through his teeth. "Hit him again."

As if someone had pulled the trigger on a pistol, Azog bolts forward. He blasts off from a standstill and rushes toward Satan with frightening speed.

This time, Satan is ready. One of our Vectors sits embedded in the ground before us. It tears up dirt and flings it at Azog's face while the other invisible limbs yank us backward. Our hail of debris catches the blue demon off-guard. Rainbow-colored flames fire from his palm, but he only manages to hit our afterimage.

Satan narrows his gaze. *What the hell was that? Luckily, I dodged. These guys are total amateurs. I can take 'em.*

The flames from Azog's palm surge outward and disperse harmlessly into the air. Satan comes to a stop and holds his Vectors out to protect himself. However, from Azog's initial attack, a single wisp of rainbow-flames breezes through the air toward us. Satan's eyes follow it.

Hm?

The tiny, insignificant bit of fire brushes against our arm.

Satan's heart stops.

"Hurk-?!"

Our vision darkens, and another of Satan's souls fizzles into nothingness.

Darkness takes us.

We awaken, only to spot Azazel and Azog standing over us. Their eyes widen. They leap backward and take a defensive stance.

Azog's face pales. "I knew it! My Soulfire connected! How is he still alive?!"

Azazel grits his teeth. "I... I don't know. No demon has ever... ah... ruined our jive..."

The older brother's forced rhyme betrays his inner turmoil. He can't think straight, since neither of the brothers has seen someone endure their Soulfire before. It must be quite a surprise.

I've never battled a demon who wielded Soulfire. However, several years ago, I learned from Phoebe the specifics of how it worked. She and the military forces inside the Labyrinth Core battled against Beelzebub. Using the power of his rainbow flames, he killed thousands of humans and monsters when the faintest traces of his magic touched any part of their bodies.

More importantly, his rank grew after absorbing all of those souls. He empowered himself from a Lord to a Baron effortlessly. Soulfire isn't only a deadly attack that can kill someone instantly, but it transfers their soul into the demon's body, empowering the attacker further.

In my opinion, it's the most dangerous attack any demon can possess. It's the lethality of Valac's scythe combined with the range of a projectile.

Satan leaps to his feet. "Oh? Didn't Valac tell you? I'm immortal, you stupid peacocks. You can't kill me, no matter how you try."

"L-lies!" Azog yells. "All lies! Nobody lives forever! Let's get him, big brother!"

Azazel motions to summon his Soulfire, but Satan is too fast. He charges at the older brother and swings a Vector down to shatter his arm.

From behind us, a wave of heat strikes our back. Satan's vision darkens.

Shit! My blind sp-

When we wake up, Satan's heart skips a beat as he spots Azazel above us, palm held at the ready. Before Satan can move a muscle, rainbow-colored flames splash against our chest.

"You little bast-!"

Satan's voice falters as he falls into the void once again, only to reawaken in time for Azog to attack next.

I can't counter fast enough! They keep-

* * *

Time after time, Satan opens his eyes and tries to attack the two demons, but they take turns hitting us with their Soulfire.

"Keep it up, Azog! He can't regenerate forev-"

Satan's vision turns black as he fails to catch Azazel's last words.

* * *

Ten times. A hundred. Satan loses count, as do I. The Sunshine Brothers hit us with Soulfire again and again.

Suddenly, Satan's eyes open. Azazel and Azog fall back, sweat pouring off their faces. They swallow air in great gulps as they gasp for breath.

"I... I can't... keep it... going!" Azog wheezes. "Nuh... no... no energy..."

Satan's Vectors activate, yanking him out of the range of the pyromancers. He skitters away on his eight limbs like a spider fleeing a predator. Only when Satan has put the length of half a football field

between him and the Sunshine Brothers does he slow down to examine them.

The two fire-barfers stopped attacking. What's going on? Are they trying to trick me?

Azazel clutches his heart. Veins bulge in his forehead as he slumps to his knees. "Yuh-you... blasted... what is he? He's not... not a demon... he's a monster..."

Despite Azazel and Azog's sudden weakness, Satan doesn't move to attack. He's grown wary of their powers.

I underestimated those runts. Now I need to play it smart and hit 'em from a distance. I've gotta avoid their Soulfire at all costs!

Satan's eye twitches. He glances past Azazel and Azog to Bael, who has been reduced to a state of clinging to his knees and rocking back and forth. He looks at me guiltily, as if to say, *sorry I didn't help, but these guys are too much for me!*

"Fucking Bael," Satan mutters. "Big bunch of help *you* are."

The Devil weaves a dozen signs with his hands. Summoning the power of Earth manipulation from earlier, he slaps his palm against the dirt.

Earthquake!

* * *

Nothing happens.

Satan frowns. "What?"

As Azazel and Azog lean against each other and wipe sweat from their foreheads, Satan opens and closes his fist repeatedly. He stares at his palm, trying to figure out why the spell didn't work.

Did I screw up? Those should have been the correct signs to summon an earthquake.

Once again, Satan recreates the formations to activate his seismic sense instead of an earthquake. When he slaps his palm against the ground, several seconds pass.

Nothing happens.

The Devil gazes at the dead, blackened earth. His stomach clenches as several possibilities swirl in his mind.

What the fuck?! My earth manipulation... it's gone! I used it earlier. How could it have vanished? Impossible!

His blood turns ice-cold.

Seven Devils. Those fire-flinging BASTARDS! My earth manipulation must have been tied to one of the souls in my body. Azog and Azazel's damned Soulfire probably burned it out! If that's the case, then... my Vectors. Samael. If I let them keep attacking me, I could lose the Archangel's power. This fight isn't a joke anymore. My body might grow stronger with each soul expended, but I can't afford to lose the versatility my souls provide me. I need to end this, quickly.

A voice whispers in the air, its words inaudible. Satan jerks his head left and right, trying to find the speaker, but whoever they are, they don't present themselves.

Suddenly, Azog leaps to his feet. His exhaustion disappears, and the sweat on his skin dries up. "♪Ho?! Look at that! I've got a second wind! Now I need not feel any chagrin!♪"

Azazel follows. He takes a deep breath. "♪It's not you, little brother, but Valac instead. He spared some mana to restore us, for we're no good to him dead!♪"

Bloody devils... Satan thinks to himself as the Sunshine Brothers take a menacing step toward us. *Now Valac is interfering. What a goddamned chicken-shit. If he were a real man, he'd come out here and fight me himself. How little does he think of me to send out a couple of goons instead of facing me head-on?*

Satan frowns. *No. If anything, these two are insane. I can't see any ordinary demon standing a chance against them. It's no wonder Lucifer hasn't tried to beat Valac's ass into bonemeal if these two are his mightiest warriors. I haven't found a way to defend against their Soulfire. If they're like any other Fire-type, they can probably expel it from their body in all directions. I can't even hit 'em from their blind spots.*

Dread trickles down Satan's back as the brothers pounce at us. *If Valac keeps restoring their energy; I'm going to run out of souls and lose my Vectors. I need to avoid them, no matter what!*

Azog rushes us from the front. He forms signs with his hands and shoots a concentrated beam of Soulfire at our chest. "♪Stand still, little one, and I'll make this painless. Cruelty is ugly, and excessively tasteless!♪"

Before the Soulfire hits us, Satan's Vectors pound the dirt and send him flying above the tree canopy. In the blink of an eye, he flips through the souls still in his body.

One demon's ability catches his eye. *Air manipulation. That'll have to do!*

Satan summons wind behind himself and uses it to propel us forward. He rockets into the forest below and smashes into the Earth beside Bael. "Get up, big guy! We're retreating!"

Bael stares at me. "They're too fast! We can't run, boss. Uwaaa!"

"Stop bawling, dumbass! If they hit you with their Soulfire, you're a goner! C'mon!!"

One of Satan's Vectors grabs Bael by his arm and flings him into the sky. Satan leaps after him, just in time to avoid a Soulfire attack from Azazel, who has pivoted to chase us.

"♪Come back here; I'm not done with you yet! Valac wants you dead, and that's what he'll get!♪"

Bloody hell! The Devil yells in his mind. *I need to get Bael outta here and find another avenue of attack!*

Azog soars into the air between Bael and us, propelled by flames rushing from his boots. He cuts off our escape route and throws a wall of Soulfire at us.

Satan slaps the wind, using his low-level air manipulation to stop his forward momentum and fling himself backward.

Unfortunately, we sail toward Azazel, waiting below.

"♪That's the spirit, little brother! Let's stop him here! After today, we'll forever stay in Valac's sphere!
♪"

Shit!

Satan can't dodge in time. As Bael's flailing body lands somewhere in the forest behind Azog, Satan falls into Azazel's grasp, including the Soulfire he holds at the ready.

Azazel's eyes widen into a crazed, maniacal expression. "Now I've got you!!"

His palm pounds our back. Satan's vision goes dark as the ground rushes at us.

Whump!

* * *

Once again, we awaken just in time for the warmth of the rainbow flames to splash against our shoulders. This time, we've ended up face-down while the Sunshine Brothers unleash an onslaught of Soulfire against our defenseless body.

"Keep it up! Don't let him!"

I don't catch the rest of Azog's words. My mind falls into darkness.

"Hit him again! This time, we'll!"

Darkness.

"We can do this all day! He'll perish eventually!"

Darkness.

Satan's mind slips in and out of consciousness. Over and over, the two firebenders pour their energy into each attack, burning out Satan's souls one by one. His muscles thicken as the power of the Titans strengthens him after each death. His mind sharpens. His jaw sets.

Eventually, Satan learns the timing of their attacks. When his senses return, he pounds his Vectors into the ground to fling himself somewhere- anywhere. He hasn't a clue where to dodge.

He fails. The edge of one flame nicks us. We grind into the dirt and fall into darkness again.

When we awaken, he tries to dodge once more. He pushes against the blackened Earth, using his full strength to launch himself straight up.

He succeeds.

Satan's strength is so incredible that even when Azog's Soulfire barely nicks us and another of our souls fizzles away, we continue blasting off into the sky above.

We awaken to find ourselves still rising. Satan's eyes snap open. Clouds grow distant beneath us. The atmosphere turns from blue to black.

Satan tries to inhale, but he can barely take the tiniest of breaths. This high above Earth, there's almost no oxygen at all, and we're still ascending.

We're nearly in space.

The Devil flails wildly, trying to figure out what the hell happened.

Our ascent slows to a crawl.

Then, we begin to fall.

Earth's Gravity gives us a gentle tug. Softly at first, like a mother placing her baby in a cradle. We pick up speed within seconds and hurtle toward the clouds below. Stray pockets of turbulence batter us back and forth, turning our free-fall into a careening plummet to the Earth. Satan spins and twists, unable to control his angle as he falls.

"Fuuuuuuuuck!!!!!"

Satan howls in terror as we pierce the cloud cover. Suddenly, as if a switch has flipped in his mind, Satan regains his composure, holds his arms out, and reorients his form. He rotates and spins to make his head face our final destination.

When he does, the sight takes our breath away.

From an aerial perspective, we can finally see Mother Earth in all her splendor. To the north and west, unending blackness from Valac's Blight stretches as far as our gaze can reach. To the south and east, green, red, and the rest of the rainbow's colors mark a hard line where nature's beauty meets the Blight's chaos.

The Blight has a limit. Valac's hand might reach far and wide, but he has not yet brought ruin upon the entire Earth.

Satan inhales sharply. As a minute ticks down, his eyes fixate on our destination. A sizable crater sits where we pushed off. Satan's strength was so incredible that when he launched himself into the atmosphere, he did so with nearly the force of a tactical nuke. A gaping hole sits in the middle of the blackened forest. Even as we rush toward the crater, trees continue to crackle and fall into the sloped abyss.

Superheated air from our rapid descent whistles against our back. Satan curls up his body and wraps his Vectors around himself as he braces for impact.

We smash into the ground at terminal velocity, sending a shockwave in all directions. Trees fall, the crater trembles, but we survive.

Satan blinks, surprised by how little he felt from his collision with the planet. Immediately, he stretches his Vectors out and levitates eight feet in the air, holding himself up so that he isn't a target for the Sunshine Brothers to attack.

Sweeping his vision across the battlefield, Satan spots Azazel and Azog standing atop the edge of the crater. Both of them stare at us, mouths agape. They appear awed by our durability, as if they aren't sure they can ever defeat us.

Something catches their attention. The brothers jerk their heads back to gaze into the forest right as Bael crashes into them, sending all three demons plummeting into the crater. They hit the ground with a

sickening *crunch*, spiraling and rolling until they reach the bottom, where they come to a stop.

"Oy, Bael! Get out of there, idiot!" Satan cries out in alarm. "What are you thinking?!"

Bael jerks his head up. "Satan? Oh, shit! I thought they killed you! Aw, fuck, I didn't mean-"

Before Bael can finish his sentence, Azog leaps to his feet. Fire burns in his eyes as he scowls at Bael. "♪Damn you! That wasn't cute at all! Now it's your turn to take a fall!♪"

Azog summons Soulfire in his palm and prepares to blast Bael with all his might. Realizing his friend is about to die, Satan yanks himself to the ground. He barrels into Bael with the force of a freight train, smashing the massive demon with enough power to plunge us several feet underground.

Azog's Soulfire proves impossible to dodge. It tears into our makeshift burrow, splashes against Satan's back, and scorches our soul, sending us to purgatory for what must be the thousandth time today.

* * *

Satan jolts awake, only to find himself lying on his back at the base of the crater once again. Bael stands in the center, each of his hands wrapped around the Sunshine Brother's throats. He holds them above his head and squeezes with enough force to make their bones pop. "Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shutupshutupSHUTUP!! You cunts never stop running your fucking mouths!"

Azog kicks and wriggles as he tries to escape Bael's grasp. He turns blue in the face and resorts to flinging rainbow fireballs against Bael's chest. To Satan's astonishment, as well as mine, they don't even tickle the future Duke. He ignores the Soulfire completely.

"L-luh! Let us... guh! Go!"

"I told you to shut your fucking mouths! GAHH!" Bael swings his arm down and smashes Azog into the dirt. Satan stumbles as the continental plates rattle beneath him, but his Vectors manage to hold us upright.

Azog goes limp in Bael's grasp. Within seconds, the big guy goes berserk, smashing both of them down, over and over, releasing thunderous *booms* throughout the forest, echoing for miles in every direction. "Die! Die! Die! DIE!! DIE!!!"

"Bael! Stop! STOP!" Satan yells. He lashes four of his vectors out, grabs Bael's arms and legs, and tries desperately to immobilize the eight-foot-tall demon. "Knock it off! Don't blow your stack!"

Bael struggles in our grip. He jerks his head back to shoot a death stare at me. "Lemme go! Get your fuckin' paws off me!"

Three of Satan's vectors grab the Earth to try and give us leverage as Bael yanks his arms and legs around. He puts a monumental effort into attempting to break free, but we manage to hold him steady and use our eighth Vector to pry his thumbs off each of the Sunshine Brother's throats. They flop to the ground, unconscious, perhaps even dead.

"Focus! If you keep making all that racket, every angel and Titan across the globe is going to find us!"

"Like I give a shit!" Bael snarls. Using every ounce of strength in his body, he digs his feet into the ground and slowly pivots to face us. Bael begins pressing against our Vectors with terrific force, making

each of the invisible limbs tremble as they strain to hold him back. "I said... get... your paws... off me!"

Satan's breathing comes in short gasps. His eyes widen as he fights the big guy with every bit of power in his body.

Incredible! Even after all the strength those souls gave me, I can barely hold Bael back! Hell, he's winning! I can't keep this up!

Bael draws nearer. Five feet. Four. Three.

Soon, he comes within arms reach. At that moment, Satan seems to remember he has limbs other than his Vectors. Namely, his fleshy hands.

The Devil rears back and punches Bael's stomach with every drop of strength left in his body. His fist splashes against Bael's stomach like water against a rock. All of our fingers instantly fracture a thousand times. Electric pain like nothing I've felt before rockets up our arm, short-circuits our brain, and makes Satan howl in pain. "Fuuuuck!!!"

Our Vectors lose control. They release their hold on Bael, and the giant rushes forward, no longer restrained by our puny strength. His body hits us like an avalanche of stone and steel, demolishing what's left of our reserves.

"Puny demon! Puny! You no tell me what to do! You no tell me-"

Our vision goes black as he grabs us by the leg and pounds us into the dirt.

"Satan? Satan! Aw, hell! You're alive! Thank the devils!"

Bael's voice rouses us from a deep sleep. His worried tone tells me he's returned to normal, at the least.

Satan groans. "Ugh. Fucker. You went crazy again. Just... just like old times. Ahh, my chest is killing me."

"Oops," Bael mutters. "I, uh, kept hitting you to try'n wake you up."

"Thanks..."

Satan stands up and dusts himself off. His gaze travels to Azazel and Azog's bodies, where they lay unmoving a few hundred feet away. It looks like Bael piled them atop one another.

"Cripes. Are those two dead?" Satan asks.

Bael turns his head to look at the Sunshine Brothers. "Huh? Nah. I broke a few bones. Nothin' too serious. A few centuries in the Blood Pits'll take care of 'em."

"I'm sorry, the *what*?"

"The Blood Pits. You ain't heard of 'em?"

Satan raises an eyebrow. "I haven't. Never mind that. My brain's still spinning. I must have lost around 30% of my reserves. What a mess."

Bael cocks his head. "Ruh-surves?"

"My, uh... it's complicated. Where's the entrance to Valac's den?"

Bael stares at me questioningly, but his short attention span beats out his curiosity. He gestures toward the other side of the crater. "Dunno. I think it was over there somewhere. Pretty sure you buried the entrance."

"Wonderful. Let's start digging, then," Satan replies. He starts walking toward the other side of the pit, not bothering with his Vectors for once. Bael falls into step beside us, and Satan turns to look at him. "Hey, Bael. Didn't those two hit you with Soulfire? Why didn't it hurt you?"

"Soulfire - what now?" Bael asks. "What're you talkin' about?"

"Those rainbow flames. They sear a demon's soul to ash and kill him instantly. I saw them hit you. Why are you still standing?"

Bael shrugs. "No clue. I didn't even feel em. I don't think a fire demon has ever hurt me before."

Satan appears unconvinced. "Maybe so, but you ought to be more careful. You might have survived by a fluke, but don't just count on your durability to save you."

"Aww," Bael says. His mouth spreads into a shit-eating grin. "Are you worried about me?"

Satan rolls his eyes. "Yes. Help me start digging. Let's uncover the entrance again."

Bael returns his gaze forward and starts pawing at the ground. "What a pal."

"Oh, shut up."

Part 130: Emperor of the Damned

"Oy! I found it! Over here."

Satan pauses his digging to follow Bael's voice. The big demon slaps several rocks aside to reveal a small opening in the ground. Behind him, a five-foot heap of dirt sits in a giant pile.

"Nice work, Bael. Let's get in there. I'd hate to keep Valac waiting."

Satan stretches his arms and pops his spine. A spasm of pain rips through our chest from all the bones Bael broke when he tried to 'wake us up.'

Damn. Usually, I might kill myself to regenerate, but now that I know death means losing a soul, I'd rather not take a chance. Better to grin and bear the pain than potentially lose my Vectors.

Samael's body forms in our mind's eye. "So, thou art going to battle Valac in his domain. I'm surprised. I assumed thou would'st think more carefully about the threat he poses, given he might be capable of reaping all thy souls with a single attack."

"Doubtful," Satan murmurs, keeping his voice low as he strides across the crater to Bael's side. "Maybe Valac can reap all of my souls at once, or maybe he can only take 'em one at a time. Either way, I don't intend to die even once to his pathetic little-"

"Satan! Stop talking to yourself, weirdo!" Bael says, interrupting us as we draw near. "That shit's creepy."

"Sorry," Satan says, raising his voice. "Just thinking out loud."

Bael sticks his thumb over his shoulder and points toward the still-unconscious Sunshine Brothers. "You gonna leave 'em alive?"

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of killing a fellow demon. They've only inconvenienced me in the long run."

"Mmm..." Bael grunts. "I guess that makes sense. What about Valac?"

"He hasn't welcomed me with open arms... so I can't say I won't break a few bones. But, all things considered, I don't want to *kill* him. We'll see what happens."

"You're the boss."

Satan uses his Vectors to widen the entrance to Valac's den. He and the big guy step inside. Bael kneels slightly to fit through the opening, but once we enter, the tunnel widens noticeably, allowing him to stand at his full height with room to spare.

Torches illuminate the caverns. A few lie scattered on the ground, their wall sconces destroyed and fires snuffed out from Satan's thunderous attack half an hour previously, but the rest stand at attention, lighting the path forward. The Devil gently kicks one aside and frowns.

"Hm. I'm surprised Valac didn't send anyone else to greet us."

"We already beat Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee," Bael replies. "Ain't nobody left for him to send. Nobody stronger'n them, that's f'sure. Well... *almost* nobody."

Both demons begin walking down the corridor. Our footsteps punctuate the still air, echoing far into the distance ahead.

Soon, we arrive at a junction where the hall splits off into three directions. Similar to the Labyrinth, which I've traversed several times, none of the paths give any indication of their final destination. If Satan intends to find Valac, it seems he will have to choose a direction randomly.

Satan closes his eyes. "Hmm. Left, right, or straight ahead. Which way do you think we should go, Bael?"

The big guy shrugs. He points to the right. "Smells like meat that way. Up ahead smells like fresh cunt. The other way smells like dirt."

"I didn't know you had such a sensitive nose."

"Yeah. It's one of the top three things bitches love about me."

"What are the other two?"

Bael rubs his chin. "Take a guess, smartass."

"Pass."

Satan opens his eyes. "We'll go left."

"Aww, I wanna get my screw on."

"There will be plenty of time for that later. Focus. Don't forget why we came here."

Bael scrunches up his face. "Uh, shit... now that you mention it..."

"Devils. Follow me, numbskull."

Satan turns and marches left. Bael follows us. "I said it smelled like dirt. Why would ya wanna go this way?"

"Because. Something tells me Valac doesn't want our encounter to become public. I bet he told all his minions to avoid us. We'll go where the deafening silence calls out."

Bael seems unconvinced. "'Izzat an edumacated guess?"

"Based on what I know of Captain Ivory, yes."

* * *

Minutes tick past. Satan and Bael slowly pace down the hallways, turning left, right, sometimes going straight ahead as they follow Bael's nose.

"I'm lost," Bael mutters. "Satan, are we even going the right way? Everything looks the same. Swear I've seen that bloody speck on the wall three or forty times."

"You can't even count to four," Satan says, rolling his eyes. "Yes, I'm certain. I sensed a faint trickle of demonic energy when we entered Valac's den. Every turn we've taken has made that sensation increase."

We're close, now."

"Ain't seen a single demon, male or female, since we got here," Bael murmurs. "Quieter than a graveyard down here."

Satan purses his lips. "A graveyard. Hmm."

We round a few more corners. Every muscle in Satan's body tightens as we enter a large, domed room, carved into the underground catacombs.

A single, iron throne sits against the furthest wall. It stands fifteen feet tall and five feet wide, as if someone constructed it for a gigantic being to sit in; someone nearly Gabriel's size. Above it, two chandeliers hang from the ceiling, each lined with a dozen candles. Only half the wicks have been lit, barely illuminating the room. Bones litter the floor, both animal and demon alike.

In the center of the chamber, a single demoness in a blue dress stands alone, waiting for us. Scratches, cuts, and bruises line her face, chest, and arms. Under normal circumstances, I might call her beautiful, but right now, she appears small, pitiful, and afraid, as though she were a victim of domestic abuse.

Satan and Bael stop just inside the entrance. The Devil's voice catches. "N... Nerissa?"

Nerissa stares at me. Several emotions flick across her face, but it takes several seconds before she says anything. "Satan. I... I didn't know it was going to be you. Master Valac told me... a great enemy would appear. I thought he meant Uriel."

"Great enemy?" Satan echoes the succubus and takes a few steps toward her. "What are you on about? Where's Valac?"

As if in response to our question, an eleven-foot tall figure materializes out of thin air behind Nerissa. The Grim Reaper, even taller than when I last saw him, dwarfs the six-foot succubus with his shadow. His ragged black robes spill to the ground, enveloping her feet in darkness. The newcomer gently rests a bony hand on Nerissa's shoulder, sending a shiver down her back.

I can't see Valac's skull beneath his hood. Only two pinpricks of red light reveal his eyes. The Reaper stares at us for a few moments before speaking. "Welcome back, Satan, my long lost friend. You vanished ages ago; I thought you'd met your end."

Nerissa bows her head, unable to meet our gaze. Satan searches her face for a moment before stepping closer to her and the Reaper. "I didn't come here to fight, Valac. I came to make peace. I don't care what grudge you've got against me, Nerissa has nothing to do with it. Let her go."

Valac retracts his hand from Nerissa's shoulder and allows it to hang at his side. "You want to settle our dispute? I doubt that is your intention. More likely, you've come to stage an intervention. You think yourself the king of all demons, noble and wise, but I see only a fellow soul manipulator, one whom I despise."

The Reaper slaps one of his other palms against Nerissa's back and shoves her forward. The succubus stumbles slightly, but reorients herself without complaining.

"You know what to do," Valac murmurs. "Eliminating unwanted vermin is up to you."

Nerissa stiffens. "Master Valac... you want me to... to kill..."

Valac doesn't respond. Instead, he takes a few steps back and sits on his throne.

His eyes meet mine.

"I understand," Nerissa whispers. After closing her eyes, the succubus summons an ice-sword in each hand. "I cannot disobey Master Valac's commands. Prepare yourself, Satan."

"What?! You're gonna fight me? Nerissa? Nerissa!"

Satan jerks back in surprise as the succubus plants her foot in the ground and rockets toward us. Before Satan can react, Bael jumps forward. The big guy holds up his palms, allowing Nerissa's swords to explode into fragments against his hardened skin.

"She ain't herself!" Bael yells. "I'll hold her off! You take out the Reaper."

Hardly have the words left Bael's mouth before Nerissa ducks his grasp, slides under his legs, and kicks him in the back. Her impressive strength, easily on par with Belial's, sends Bael flying forward. He hits the ground with a *whump* and slides on his face.

By the time Bael has jumped to his feet, uninjured, Nerissa has already summoned a two-handed warhammer of ice. She swings it at Satan's back, but the Devil reacts much faster this time. Three of our Vectors fan their palms out and catch the hammer before it hits us. The other invisible limbs plant themselves in the ground to brace us, and a single one lashes out to trip Nerissa.

"Ah!" She yelps in surprise and falls on her side, bashing her ribs against the ground.

Satan winces. "Get ahold of yourself! What's wrong with you? I thought we were-"

"We are!" Nerissa yells as she jumps to her feet. She claps her hands together, summoning a wall of ice, and sends it flying at me with a powerful shove. "But, I have to obey Master Valac!"

All our Vectors come together to block the half-ton block of frozen water as it slides toward us. Satan winces as its full weight hits us like a meteor, tears us from the ground, and slams us into one of the walls.

Satan's mind races. *I don't get it! Why is my girl working for Valac? What slimy, skeezy shit is he pulling?!*

Angered, the Devil uses one of his Vectors to karate-chop the ice-wall in front of us. We slice it like a hot knife through butter, then fling both halves aside...

...Just in time to see Nerissa rushing us with a sharpened polearm.

Crap!

Satan starts to block her with his Vectors, but Bael comes to the rescue. He tackles the succubus and smashes her against the wall, then grabs her by the neck to hold her in place. "Come on, Satan, I've got her pinned! Get Valac!"

Bael puts all his strength into pressing Nerissa against the wall, but she resists mightily. Within seconds, the succubus wraps one of her hands around his thumb, while using the other for the rest of his

palm. She inhales after giving herself breathing room, and spits wads of ice at Bael, smacking him in the face.

"Gah! Stop it!" Bael yells, using his free hand to wipe his face. "Save the kinky shit for the relief chambers!"

Luckily, Nerissa's attacks only serve to annoy Bael. They don't injure him at all.

Satan flicks his eyes to Valac. The Grim Reaper leans against the arm of his throne casually, as if he hasn't the slightest concern for his life.

"*Bastard*," Satan snarls. Using our Vectors, we fling ourselves across the room to pounce at Valac. "I don't know what you did to my girl, but I'm gonna pay you back a hundred-fold!"

Satan rears back his fist, aiming to crush Valac's skull into dust.

Suddenly, the Grim Reaper vanishes. Nerissa appears in his place, a look of confusion on her face.

"Shit!" Satan yells as he tries to pull his punch.

Unable to stop our momentum, we plow into the succubus with enough force to shatter the iron throne and embed two feet into the wall behind it. The chamber shakes from our impact.

Satan gasps for breath. "Ahh... Nerissa... where..."

We open our eyes to see Nerissa inside the wall, crushed between us and the rocks. She blinks. "That hurt. Ass!"

"Don't blame me," Satan grunts. "Blame Valac. It's his fault-"

We don't get to finish our sentence. Nerissa summons ice from every pore of her body and sends it rushing at us. She flings us from the crater even more violently than before. Satan hits the floor, rolls several times, and skids to a stop.

The Devil clutches his broken ribs, the ones injured during Bael's 'resuscitation' when he tried to wake us up earlier. Those, combined with the light wounds he's suffered during this quick but savage battle against Nerissa, slow his movements dramatically.

Satan climbs to his feet. He gasps and wheezes as he watches Nerissa jump out of the hole. She breathes evenly, apparently unhurt from our accidental assault.

"Why... why are you fighting me?" Satan asks. "I don't get it. Is it my fault? Valac's? Did he do somethin' to you?"

Nerissa's eye twitches. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does!" Satan yells. We take a step toward her, but dizziness catches us off-guard. Satan seems to have suffered a concussion. "I... I love you, baby. I spent all my time in the Cosmic Realm thinking about you. We don't have to fight. We don't!"

"Cosmic Realm?" Nerissa asks. "I don't know what you mean. All I know is... if... if I don't kill you.... then..."

Satan nods. He waits for her to elaborate, but she doesn't. "Then what? What happens?"

Nerissa purses her lips. A look of anxiety crosses her face. "You're a strong demon, Satan. But... Valac... you can't beat him. Nobody can. He's immortal. I've watched him die a thousand times, only to revive seconds later."

Satan's eyes flick to Bael. The muscled behemoth takes a step toward the succubus, but Satan shakes his head. *No. Don't. This is between my girl and me.*

Bael catches the look in our eyes. With a shrug, he retreats a step. *Suit yourself.*

We return our gaze to Nerissa. "Baby, I don't know what Valac has told you, but... I'm immortal too. I can protect you. No matter how much that bastard's hurt you, or threatened you-"

"You can't!" Nerissa yells. Her lower lip trembles as tears well in her eyes. "Valac is everywhere, Satan! He can appear anywhere on Earth in the blink of an eye! Nowhere is safe from him! Nowhere!!"

Blind rage and anguish spread across the succubi's face. She summons two more ice-swords and coils her legs to jump at me. "You weren't there for us, Satan! You don't know what we've been through!"

Like an enraged tigress, Nerissa pounces.

She clears the fifteen-foot gap in a split second and swings her swords to decapitate us.

Satan winces. *Might as well use this chance to regenerate. I won't hurt Nerissa, no matter how badly she wants to kill me, even if Valac is pulling her strings like a puppet.*

The swords rush at our neck. Satan doesn't move to block them.

At the last instant, Nerissa falters. She turns the weapons sideways and hits the left side of my head with the flats of the blades, shattering them against my cheekbone and ear. Her stupendous strength batters Satan aside, sending us careening to the right.

Whump, whump, THUD!

We smash into the wall headfirst.

Satan's eyes darken. The world spins and stars dance in our eyes.

"Aaaaa... guh..."

Blood spills down our face. Despite the lack of pain, I instantly realize Nerissa's attack shattered our skull.

Darkness takes us.

We awaken a short few moments later. Satan's head and body regenerate as he heals from death. We jump to our feet to see Valac once again standing behind Nerissa. She bows her head contritely as shame passes over her face.

Valac reaches his hand out and strokes Nerissa's long, blue hair, making her tremble in fright. "Oh, dear, how little surprises me anymore. I ordered you to kill Satan, but you've proven to be a worthless whore. I will give you one final order, and you had *better* comply. Kill Satan to prove your loyalty, or your sister will *die*."

Nerissa clutches her hands to her chest. She never raises her eyes from the floor. "B-but, Master Valac... surely... surely there's another way we could... ahh!"

Her words cut off, and she whimpers as Valac wraps his fingers around her ponytail and tugs hard, yanking her head back to gaze into his eyes.

The Reaper uses one of his arms to caress her neck. "Are you questioning me? Have you forgotten your loyalty?"

"No... no... I... I didn't... hnn..."

Puzzle pieces click in Satan's mind. *That sick, twisted bastard... he's using Belial to control Nerissa! Gah! I'm a moron! I should have realized!*

Satan stomps toward Valac. Our feet impact the ground with enough force to leave footprints in the hardened tiles. "You fucking coward. I always knew you were pure slime, but this is the lowest of the low. How dare you manipulate my girl using her sister!"

Valac's fingers tighten around Nerissa's neck. He raises his lower and upper left arms, summons his scythe in his grasp, and holds its tip to Nerissa's heart. "Don't take another step, or Nerissa will breathe no more. I hoped you might return, so I could make you grovel on the floor."

Satan stops. Our eyes flick from Nerissa's terrified face to the figure towering above her. "Is that what this is all about? Revenge? Are you still pissy because I kicked your ass one time? That was practically an eternity ago, Valac. Get over it. You're... you're acting pathetic!"

Valac's fingers tighten around his scythe. "Do not mock me. Her life is in your hands."

The Devil flinches. Sweat drips down the back of his neck. "What do you want? You want me to bow? Is that it?"

Valac pulls his scythe an inch away from Nerissa's heart. "Hmm. I wonder."

Satan grinds his teeth together. "You sicken me. No honor. No respect. Why don't we settle this the right way? You and me... mano-a-mano. If you win, I'll bow. I'll admit your superiority."

Slowly, Valac shakes his head. He brings the scythe closer and nearly touches Nerissa's skin. "That won't do."

Our fists squeeze together hard enough to pulverize concrete. "Goddamnit! Fuck you! You dickless piece of shit!"

Bael appears at my side. "Don't do anything stupid, boss. If that scythe touches your girl..."

Tears flow down Nerissa's face as she stares up at Valac, unable to tear her eyes off his. She stays silent, hoping, pleading in her mind that we can somehow save her.

Valac loosens his hand from around the succubi's neck. Slowly, deliberately, he slides it up past Nerissa's chin to cover her mouth and nose.

"I have an idea. Ooh, this will be **fun**! I'll stimulate Nerissa's worm, and bring this battle to completion. Unable to resist, she will plead and beg... but you will kill her yourself, or allow her mind to

break."

Satan's eyes widen. He stares in horror as dark energy pours from Valac's palm into Nerissa's mouth and nose. The succubus squirms and wriggles as she tries to yank Valac's hand off her face. She fails. His vice-grip proves too strong to remove.

"Motherf-" Satan barks out a single word, slams his Vectors into the ground, and charges at Valac. "Bael! Get him! Stop the bastard!"

Bael doesn't hesitate. He launches at Valac right as I do, as if he's been ready for action the whole time.

"Boss! He's gonna turn on the worm! Stop 'im!"

Satan nods. His vision turns to red as he performs several intricate signs and conjures forth fire from one of the many souls within himself.

We aim our palm at Valac and unleash a massive fireball; one fueled by our incredible inner mana reserves. It flies at Valac's head and detonates on the Reaper's skull, blasting his bones to smithereens. Valac tears away from Nerissa and smashes against the wall.

Satan grabs his girl and bats the scythe away with one of our vectors. Bael continues onward to the Reaper and pounds Valac's body. He punches the rags with all his strength, but he's too late.

The Reaper has vanished.

"Ahh... nnn..." Nerissa writhes in our arms. She clutches her head and winces. Specks of blood drip from her nose. "No... no... I can't... I mustn't..."

"Nerissa!" Satan's face pales. "What's wrong, baby? How can I help?"

The succubi's palm lashes out. She pounds me in the ribs, knocking me back. Satan's Vectors jump out and grab the ground, stopping us after only a few feet.

Satan advances toward Nerissa. He lands half a foot away and kneels to rest a hand on her shoulder. "What's the matter? Why'd you hit me?"

"Nnn..." Nerissa squeezes her eyes shut. "Valac's worm... it tells me... I have to kill... to kill... no! I won't! I... I can't!"

"NYEHEHE!" Valac's cackle bounces around the room. His voice comes from everywhere at once. "What's wrong, Nerissa?! You need to get a grip! If you can't resist my worm, your sanity will slip!!"

"No!" Satan yells. Shock races through his body. He grabs Nerissa's shoulders. "I've gotta get you back to Lucy! She can burn that worm out! Come on, baby!"

The Devil starts to pull Nerissa to her feet, but she shoves away from us. Her eyes bolt open to reveal darkness expanding from all corners of her cornea. "S-stay away! I can't stop myself!"

She summons an ice spear in both hands, jumps to her feet, and rears back as she prepares to thrust it into our neck.

Satan copies her. He jumps up, moves his Vectors before him to block, and narrows his gaze. "Fight it! You're better than Valac! You're the strongest girl I know! Don't you give up now!"

Nerissa falters, but only for a moment. She lunges at Satan and stabs her spear at us, over and over. Satan reverts to Ultimate Defense mode and uses his Vectors purely for protection. All eight of them bat away her attacks with expert precision.

Blood trickles from Nerissa's eyes, ears, and nose. Her attacks intensify as Valac's worm battles her willpower. When we shatter her spear, she summons a battleaxe, or two swords, or a warhammer. Sometimes she shoots concentrated ice to freeze us, while other times, she creates a massive ice cube above our heads to crush us.

Satan's heart drums in his chest. *Nerissa's ferocious! I have to get her to stop! I need to take her to Lucifer to burn out that fucking worm!*

Nerissa's attack patterns change. She unleashes her speed to dash around us. She summons ice clones to attack from all sides, but never once does Satan feel genuinely threatened. With his Vectors reacting to every attack independently, it frees him up for a minute to think of counters.

Gotta slow her down. Slow... slow... ah!

A lightbulb activates in Satan's head. "Nerissa! You signed my Blood Contract! That means you have to obey me! Stop fighting, now!"

Two seconds pass.

Nerissa's movements don't slow. She continues to attack us from all angles.

Valac's voice booms inside the chamber. "There's no use trying to order her around. My worms suppress your contracts, proving I deserve the crown!"

Satan's mind goes into overdrive. *Damn you, Valac! Arghhh! He thought of everything! I only have one chance to stop Nerissa now.*

"Bael! Get over here! Grab Nerissa! We're taking her to Lucifer!"

The big guy has stayed out of the fight, having assumed I had it under control. However, as soon as I deliver the order, he nods. "You got it!"

He jumps into the fray and lashes his hand out. Despite the four ice-clones of Nerissa jumping and firing icicles at me, Bael somehow picks out the original from her copies. He lunges forward and grabs her by the waist, startling her. His giant hands wrap around her slim body. He easily shrugs off her frigid counter-barrage as she tries to escape his grasp.

The ice clones stop moving and fall apart as Nerissa turns all her attention to Bael. He slams her into the ground and holds her steady, while I jump over and grab her arms and legs with my Vectors.

"Don't let me go!" Nerissa shouts. "I... I can't control my body. It's fighting you on its own!"

"I know, toots," Satan says. He levitates her in the air, performing a maneuver I saw him use on Phoebe and Belial during my battle against Amelia. With her arms and legs immobilized, Nerissa can only summon tiny shards of ice in her fingers and fling them at me, or spit iceballs from her mouth.

Satan pulls her in close and muzzles her with a fifth Vector. "Sorry, babe. I hope this doesn't hurt. We've gotta get outta here. Come on, Bael. Get us to the surface!"

A flash of movement. Satan turns his head in time to see Valac materialize behind us, scythe held at the ready.

"Oh, no, you don't," Valac whispers. "She's mine."

His weapon rushes at our back. Satan tries to block it, but with five Vectors holding Nerissa back, he has to use the remaining ones to counterbalance her weight. He can't protect himself in time!

Shik!

Valac's scythe impales our spine. Satan's eyes bulge in horror as our energy instantly drains into Valac's reserves.

The Reaper chuckles. "Hehehe. *I win.*"

Satan falls into an infinite black voice. Like a whirlpool sucking us to the bottom of the ocean, we tumble, turn, and spin into the eternal darkness...

...And awaken!

Satan's eyes bolt open. He turns his head to the left, only to see Bael and the Reaper locked in combat. Bael swats Valac's scythe away with surprising agility, while three of Valac's clones attack the giant demon from all sides.

"Accursed-"

Valac hisses furiously while he battles the big guy. His scythe materializes in one of the other clones' hands, and it swings at Bael's back, just as it did mine.

Ting!

As though he had struck a solid sheet of metal, Valac's scythe glances off Bael's back and slips out of the Reaper's grasp. Bael backhands the clone, pulverizing its head into dust.

"Bahaha! Stop tryin' ta' tickle me and fight like a real man!"

"Impossible!" Valac howls. "You should be dead!!"

"It ain't my fault you hit like a pansy!" Bael laughs, taunting the Grim Reaper.

* * *

Satan's gaze, however, shifts to our right. Nerissa stands above us, an icicle hovering in midair as she prepares to fire at our heart.

Her hands tremble.

"I... I can't... I can't do it..."

Her face is the stuff of horrors. Dark veins stretch from her eyes across her cheeks and down her jaw. Her lips, once a soft pink, have turned as black as tar.

Satan doesn't move. "Nerissa... you have to fight it."

"I can't," The succubus whispers. "It's too powerful. Valac is... too powerful..."

She grits her teeth and closes her eyes. "Every... fiber... of my being... tells me to kill you... but I won't..."

Cautiously, Satan reaches toward her foot. He gently touches her ice-cold skin and shivers. "I'm here for you. Don't let Valac win. Don't. You survived all this time without me. Now, I'm here. We'll fight him together!"

"I'm not strong," Nerissa whispers. "I'm weak. Valac only... he only kept me alive to torture me. That's all. He threw me to the men. He forced me to... to endure endless humiliation. Ahh... it won't be long, now."

A tear glides down Nerissa's cheek.

"My sanity is slipping. I see... three of you. Four. The voices are saying something. I... I don't want to listen. Aaoo... you're... you're right, Satan. I-I can't let Valac win."

Nerissa rotates her hand. The sharpened icicle turns away from me, only to aim at her heart.

Satan gasps. "No... no! Don't do it! Lucifer can burn out that worm! Don't give up! She can-"

"It will be too late, by then," Nerissa whispers. "I've seen what Valac's worms do once they've awakened. Not even Lucifer can restore my mind once it's gone. I... I don't want you to see me like that. I'm sorry, Satan... but... this is goodbye. I... I love you."

"Nerissa? Nerissa! Don't-"

Satan's Vectors lash out. He grabs her wrist to try and stop her, but at that moment, Nerissa closes her eyes.

Her icicle fires.

It travels at the speed of sound, tears through her heart, and rips through the back of her chest.

"Ahh..." Nerissa whimpers.

A massive, gaping hole appears.

"Huhk-"

Agony spreads across Nerissa's face. She stumbles forward and falls into our arms.

"H-hurts... hurts..."

Satan stares ahead blankly as the succubus sags against our chest. Her blood, still warm, spills across our body. She convulses uncontrollably for a moment before finally going still.

Nerissa exhales for the last time in her life.

Reflexively, Satan wraps his arms around her.

"N.... Nuh... Ner...."

Our eyes lose focus. Anguish, unlike anything we've ever felt in our entire life, floods into our minds.

A thousand thoughts enter Satan's subconscious. A million questions.

Why? Why? Why? Why? Whywhywhywhywhy?!

Satan's eyes lower to stare at Nerissa's bloodied back. Her entrails spill out and wash over our hands, soaking us in her blood. Satan grits his teeth. His shoulders shake as he tries first to suppress, then release the agony in his heart. He closes his eyes and tries to remember the last time he saw her smile.

As for me, I feel almost nothing. Nerissa wasn't my lover. I don't have a connection to her like he does. I can't understand what he's going through. All I can do is imagine how I might feel if I were in his shoes; if it were Phoebe dying in my arms. That thought is not something I want to picture.

"N... Nerissa... baby... w-wake up..." Satan mumbles. He squeezes her tighter as tears boil in his eyes. "Come on, baby... this isn't f-funny... hnn..."

He buries his face in her hair.

I only wanted to see her again. I wanted to love her. I wanted to be with her, and tell her how badly I'd missed her...

The memory of Valac and Bael's battle seems a distant, ancient thing. Satan spares no thoughts for them. Even if I concentrate, I can't make out the sounds of their fight, barely thirty feet away. Every part of Satan focuses entirely on Nerissa and the sensation of her cold skin against his.

Valac took her from me. Why? For... for petty revenge? How could he do that to me? I thought... I thought... we were...

Satan's pain slowly fades away. His denial morphs into something else. Something hot, fiery, like a man who has stepped foot into a desert wasteland.

He took her from me. He took her from me. He took her from me. HE TOOK HER FROM ME.

Satan opens his eyes. The world, blurry thanks to his tears, crystallizes into reality when he wipes them away with his blood-stained hand.

We gently lay Nerissa on the ground and take the time to place her hands across her chest. Satan folds her hands together and closes her eyes.

He stares at her for several moments. Her face, contorted into a look of agony, is the last thing Satan ever wanted to see. His body aches from the deepest, darkest parts of his heart and soul.

"Valac... Valac... Valac... you..."

We inhale and rise to our feet. Satan turns to gaze his cold, lifeless eyes on Valac. The Reaper continues to battle Bael using his five clones. He hasn't noticed us, yet.

Satan wets his lips.

"Now... now you die."

Part 131: Soul Controller

Recommended Listening

"Ta think I believed all that crap people said about you bein' the strongest demon!" Bael guffaws. He reaches up and backhands one of Valac's five clones right in the face, smashing the Reaper's bones to dust and sending his rags scattering. "I was all scared you could kill me in one hit, but you can't do shit. Maybe I'm the strongest demon, after all! Bahaha!"

Each of Valac's clones towers three feet over the seven-foot Bael, yet despite their ghoulish rags and frightening appearance, he seems to cut a far more intimidating figure. Valac's scythe jumps from one clone's hand to another's as they attack the big guy with crazed fury, but Bael ignores the soul-reaping weapon, choosing instead to slap any clone that gets too close.

The Grim Reaper howls angrily. "Chrrr!!! How dare you mock me! I am the Emperor of the Damned! I will make you KNEEL!"

His scythe lashes out again. This time, instead of aiming for Bael's spine, Valac aims for his head.

Tink!

The weapon's tip stabs at Bael's skull, only to glance off. Bael winces and rubs his scalp. "Gah! That hurt! You little piss-fucker! Stop poking me!!" He crushes the clone who attacked him with a quick spin on his heel and a jab to the solar plexus.

The clone explodes into fragments. Another one screeches at Bael. "How? How?! Nobody has ever countered my scythe! What makes you different?!"

Bael laughs. "What can I say?! I'm twice the demon you'll ever be!"

* * *

Satan takes a step forward. Another. Another.

His guts writhe and churn. Everything hurts, on the inside and out. Satan clutches his stomach as he stares up at the Grim Reaper.

Valac killed my girl. All I ever wanted was to see her smile one more time. He murdered her to hurt me. That was his only goal.

Well. I can't feel anything but rage, now. My heart is empty. There's nothing left inside.

If he wanted to piss me off, he succeeded. I'm going to kill this bastard... even if it's the last thing I do!!

Satan lunges. His movements, aided by the loss of over a thousand souls, have sped up to ludicrous levels. Valac barely turns his head in time to see the Devil coming, but he hasn't a chance of matching Satan's speed.

KSHAK! CRUNCH!

Satan's Vectors batter and bash the Grim Reaper's five clones like a hurricane. They crush his bones, shred his ragged robes, fling him against the walls, and smash against his skull with the force of a meteor. The Reaper barely manages to let out a squeak of surprise before we mangle him into dust.

Satan's jaw clenches hard enough to chew steel. Within five seconds, he slaughters Valac's clones mercilessly, only to land on his feet, breathing evenly.

"That wasn't all of 'em. Where are you?! Bastard!"

Valac's voice comes to us in a whisper from the ceiling, walls, and floor. "You seem angry, Satan. How about taking a nap? Allow me to assist!"

Bael slides in to protect our flank as one of Valac's souls jumps from the ground toward our back. It smashes against his demonic aura and detonates like a grenade.

Kaboom!

Bael doesn't even wince. He scratches the spot where Valac's soul tickled him. "Shithead. I hate sneaky cunts. They never fight head-on. Oy, Satan! Why ain't you taking your girl and getting to Lucifer? Didn't I tell you... to..."

The big guy trails off. I turn around to look at him, only to see his eyes fixated on Nerissa's unmoving body.

"Oh, no he *didn't*."

Satan's hands ball into fists. Rage boils in his blood again. "Yeah. He *did*."

From the walls, ten of Valac's clones charge at us. Their aetherial bodies turn corporeal as his scythe skips around, teleporting from one's grasp to another's. "Sorry about your harlot, but now she's in a better place! I gave her a chance to follow my orders, but she couldn't save any face! Nyehehe!!"

Bael and I press our backs together. Valac attacks us from all angles, sometimes summoning explosive souls beneath our feet, but usually focusing on striking us with his scythe. Satan barely moves at all, opting to allow his Vectors to do all the heavy lifting. He watches intently to observe the Reaper's attack patterns, all while preventing Valac's scythe from so much as grazing our skin.

For each of Valac's clones we kill, two more show up. Soon, thirty of the giant demons soar in the air and dive at us like Eagles hunting for prey. Satan starts to sweat under the Reaper's relentless assault.

"Fucking die already, you skeletal bitch!"

All of Valac's clones cackle at the same time. They speak simultaneously as one. "Feeling tired, Satan? Care to take me up on that nap offer? I can do this all day! Not even Bael can protect you forever!"

Bael bats away Valac's scythe for the umpteenth time. "I ain't even breaking a sweat. Don't listen to 'im, boss. If he could fight like this from the start, he'd have done it sooner. He's bluffing."

Satan narrows his eyes. He jerks his head to the side, barely avoiding Valac's scythe before crushing the clone that got too close with our bare fists.

Bael's right. Valac should've done this from the very beginning, unless he was only toying with us. I'm not so certain of that, though. I bet he's going all-out, but he can't land a hit. It must take a lot of energy to maintain so many clones, not to mention splitting his mind among them.

Suddenly Valac cackles. "Ehehehe! Hey, Satan, I have a great idea! While you're busy fighting my clones, how about I peel apart this juicy cadaver you've left to rot? It'd be a shame to leave Nerissa lying here when she'd be so *useful* for my experiments, don't you think?!"

Satan's heart stops. Instantly, he flicks his eyes to Nerissa's body. Valac hovers above her, a bony knife held in his grasp. The Reaper's glowing eyes stare at me from beneath his hood as he slowly presses the weapon to her arm and deftly slices her flesh.

Satan's vision turns blood red as he smashes through the clones surrounding us, pounds two Vectors into the ground, and leaps at Valac. "Get your hands off my girl!! You worthless sack of SHIT!!"

We race toward Valac, clearing the thirty-foot gap in an instant.

"Boss! Watch out!" Bael yells.

Satan flicks his eyes behind himself just in time to see another clone materialize in midair. The scythe appears in its hands.

Shit! A trap!

Valac swings his weapon down.

"That will be your last mistake, Satan the Devil."

Shik!

His weapon pierces our back. Satan gasps, and the world goes still.

We freeze in midair.

Time stops, and Satan trembles.

W-what? Why am I not dying? What's happening?!

A sensation of burning spreads from the point where Valac's scythe has embedded in our back. It spreads like wildfire and travels across our shoulders, hips, arms, and legs. The inferno swallows our head, and Valac's voice appears in my mind.

Ohoho. What's this? So many juicy souls. I tasted them when I killed you earlier. I couldn't help but notice that one burned hotter than the rest.

Satan's heart trembles.

Get... get out of my head! Coward!

Samael bubbles up in our thoughts. He stands amidst the pitch-black void inside Satan's mind, a being of spiritual energy alone against the infinite blackness. "Satan. Valac's influence is spreading throughout thy body at the speed of thought. I am attempting to stop him, but he has already taken control of thy mana reserves. If he continues-"

OOOOH, there you are!

Valac appears in my mind's eye a short distance from the Archangel of Change. His mental apparition pounces at Samael's. The Archangel tries to grab Valac, but the Reaper phases through Samael's body, spins on his heel, and latches onto Samael's back. His four arms wrap around the Archangel's chest, and he links his hands together, turning himself into a set of powerful bone shackles. He stands several feet taller than the Archangel, overpowering him thanks to their size difference.

Satan! You've been a naughty boy! Since when did you get hold of the soul of an Archangel, hmm?! You've been holding out on me!

Satan's eyes widen. *Samael! Fight him! Don't let Valac take you!*

One of Valac's four arms uncoils from the Archangel's chest. He raises it to seize hold of the Archangel's face. Much like when he used a similar technique on Nerissa, Valac's palm surges with energy. This time, instead of pouring dark energy into Samael's mind, the Reaper siphons energy from Samael's soul.

Tasty! TASTY! I've consumed many an angel, but you will be the first Archangel to merge with my perfection! Samael, I remember how you used to kick me around, all those millennia ago. How does it feel, knowing you'll soon be my slave?! Nyehehe!!

Samael grunts angrily. The Archangel struggles with all his might to break free of Valac's grip. He throws himself down and rolls around on the unseen floor. The infinite black void, though formless, appears to have physical properties, much like the Cosmic Realm.

The Archangel slams his face repeatedly against the ground as he tries to break free of Valac's grip. The Reaper cackles evilly. **Ohhh, look at this! How precious! Do you think you have a chance? You're but one soul among many! After I add your power to mine, I'll become unstoppable! You're the morsel I've been looking for!**

Samael writhes and wriggles. He flings himself onto his back, but the Reaper's inability to feel pain only makes him laugh at the Archangel's feeble attempts to break free.

Give up, Samael. You can't hurt me! The sooner you bow to your new master, the sooner you can go to rest among your brethren in my lantern! Seconds remain. Your servitude is nigh!

Satan watches helplessly as the Archangel's energy reserves dwindle. We can't tell how much time has passed in reality, since time slows when moving at the speed of thought, but it feels like several minutes.

Samael changes tactics. He begins pulling his hands together to form a magical sign. Using all the strength left in his body, the Archangel summons his last vestiges of stamina to wriggle his arms loose, even just a little bit. Valac continues cackling, oblivious of the Archangel's intentions.

At the last second, Samael's palms make contact with each other. Instantly, he forms a dozen magical signs. His body begins to surge with light.

Valac stops laughing. **Haha- what? What are you doing? What is this? Ahh! It burns! IT BURNS!!**

The Reaper releases his grip on Samael and shoves himself free right as the Archangel ejects a coronal mass of light from every pore on his body. Satan winces as the light of the sun sprouts in his mind. The Reaper holds up his hand to protect himself, only for it to vaporize and scatter to ash under the power of Samael's divine magic.

Ahh! What- gahhhh! You little, wretched... what did you do?! You're only a soul! How can you summon holy energy within a demon's body?!

Samael inhales. He turns to face Valac, who now only has three arms. He steps toward his foe, and the Grim Reaper begins dragging himself across the ground to try and escape.

"Foolish demon. I am an Archangel! My powers exceed that of any pathetic being such as thyself! While thou may bendeth the souls of other beings to thy will, my power was granted to me by the Creator himself! Even trapped in this accursed mental prison, thou shalt never compare to me! Behold! This is the power of the Divine Originator!"

What follows next stuns me. Samael's hands transform into a blur of motion - reminiscent of when Raphael battled Satan in the Cosmic Realm. With the speed of thought being his only constraint, Samael's magic-casting rate becomes that of lightning.

Waves of lava materialize behind the Archangel. They leap over his head and rush at the Grim Reaper, splashing against his bones like waves against the seashore. Valac screams in pain and tries to tear the thousand-degree molten rock off his body, but within seconds, his bones melt to slag.

Valac's soul turns aetherial. He starts to fly away, but Samael flaps his wings and rushes at the speck of light.

Samael motions with his hands and radiates holy energy from his chest. "Nay! I shan't permit thee to flee! Thou shalt stay here... and reform!"

Valac's soul, little more than a shimmer of light hovering in the air, transforms into his skeletal body once again. This time, his raggedy robes are nowhere to be seen. The Reaper hits the ground, *hard*. His bones clatter against the formless void with several rapid *tinks* and *clinks*.

Gah! Valac coughs. He turns to stare at the Archangel in horror. **What are you?! You're not an Archangel! You're... you're a monster! A monster!!**

A wicked grin spreads across Samael's face. "Aye! A monster! That is who I have become! That is who I am! Stay awhile and keep me company, pathetic demon! I have more in store for thee!"

Samael's eyes glow pure white as he summons holy energy from the deepest parts of his soul. With a start, Satan realizes something important. Samael isn't using his own energy, but converting the Devil's demonic mana to holy mana. The Archangel aims his palm at Valac and unleashes a torrent of flames upon the cowering Reaper.

Geyaaaugh! Valac screams again as the flames cook him alive. **Mercy! Have mercy!!**

"Hahahaha!" Samael cackles gleefully. "Ohh, thou wouldn't believe how much fun I'm having! Dids't thee assume I would be helpless inside of Satan's body? Quite the contrary! His contract gave me access to

all of the souls he consumes! While I cannot harm him, those who attempt to infiltrate his mind or soul will find me ready and waiting! Long have I wished for a chance to unleash my rage, and now is as perfect a time as ever! Hahahaha!"

Tears of joy stream down Samael's face as he summons flames, holy energy, boulders, and any number of other magical attacks to bombard the Grim Reaper. His laughter turns maniacal as he destroys Valac's body over and over, only to force the Reaper back into a corporeal form so he can do it again.

"Such joy! Such pleasure! Thy screams fill me with glee! Beg for forgiveness, foul demon! Perhaps, if the Creator takes pity upon thee, he may smite me where I stand! Bahahaha!"

Valac loses his ability to scream. His voice turns hoarse. Soon, he can barely release shrill shrieks as he rolls on the ground, unable to retaliate.

After what feels like years of torture, Samael finally slows his onslaught. His smile fades away as he stands above the Reaper's shriveled bones. Valac writhes on the ground, unable to control himself. His jaw opens and closes as if to beg for forgiveness, but no words come out.

"Thou art nothing but a speck of a speck, compared to the Creator's grand plans. I feel nothing but contempt for the evil coursing through thy bones. Worry not, little one, for I have already tired of our battle. Were I in my physical body, thou would have perished ages ago. Sadly, all I can do is batter thy soul around. Now, I bestow upon thee a quick, merciful death. Let the world be free of thy corruption."

Closing his eyes, Samael performs a dozen hand signs. His body morphs and shifts. First, he grows taller. Ten feet. Twenty. Thirty. His head morphs into that of a lion. His body sprouts thick, matted-down hair, as he transforms into a cave bear. The tail of a wolf sprouts on his rump, and within seconds his transformation concludes.

Like a god preparing to annihilate an ant, Samael raises one of his massive paws above his head. "Farewell, Valac. I will rest easy knowing I saved my family from thy wretchedness."

He swings his paw down.

Kaboom!

He smashes the last vestiges of the Reaper's bones into dust. Holy light builds inside his body. When Valac's soul tries to flee again, Samael opens his mouth to reveal a condensed ball of Holy Energy.

FWOOOSH!

Like an energy cannon destroying a mountain, Samael fires the holy energy at Valac's fleeing soul. The focused mana rips Valac to shreds and scatters his soul to the furthest corners of the void, erasing him from existence.

Samael purrs contentedly. "It is done. The Reaper... is dead."

* * *

A moment later, time returns to normal. Satan continues flying forward, but the sudden acceleration catches us off-balance. We stumble awkwardly and hit the deck with our jaw, nearly biting our tongue off.

Satan yelps. "Fuhk- gah!"

"Boss! Boss?! You okay?!"

Bael's voice makes us turn around. When we do, our eyes widen. All of Valac's clones freeze mid-attack. They hover above Bael and tremble silently. After a few seconds, Valac gasps repeatedly.

"Hah... hah.... hnn... b-burns... hurts... nnnghh..."

His clones slowly lower their arms to clutch their chests. They shiver uncontrollably. Their blood-red eyes fade away. White light appears instead as they try to grab their chests and stop the buildup of some unseen force within their bodies.

"S-Samael... you b-bas... bas... hnnn... gahhh!!!"

Valac shrieks in terror. At that moment, his skeleton explodes like a grenade, sending fragments of bone in every direction. The eruption of light after makes Satan wince. We shield our eyes, only to lower them a moment later and stare in awe.

Valac, the Grim Reaper, has vanished. All that is left are fragments of his bones, scattered around the chamber in every direction.

Bael blinks. He stares at me in confusion for a moment.

"Uh. Boss? What just... happened?"

Satan stares at him blankly.

"I... I don't know."

Satan dusts himself off. Thanks to Valac's final detonation, white powder floats in the air, coats the ground, and lines our clothing. Bael sneezes.

"Gah-choo! Bah! Cripes. How am I gonna get a lady if I smell like burned bones? That's nasty."

Satan smacks his lips. A taste like chalk sits in our mouth. "Tell her you're good at boning, I suppose."

"Hah! Boning! That's a good one, boss!" Bael slaps his knee and guffaws, only to start violently hacking and choking as he swallows dust. He stumbles over to the entrance of Valac's lair so he can get some fresh air, leaving us alone.

Satan doesn't smile. Instead, he shakes his head and lifts Nerissa's body into his arms. It's only been fifteen minutes since she died, but already her skin is starting to warm now that her ice magic is wearing off. Satan caresses her cheek for a moment as he stares at the face of the woman he loved.

"You didn't deserve this..." Satan murmurs. "But perhaps I did. I went too easy on everyone. I let a guy like Valac live when he should've died ages ago. I knew he was trouble from the beginning. If I'd killed him sooner... maybe... maybe you'd still be..."

He trails off.

Samael surfaces in our mind. Having reverted to his base form, the Archangel no longer appears as a giant chimera mesh of three animals. His expression is different from usual, in that he doesn't appear dismissive or rude.

"Satan. I am... sorry for thy loss."

Satan gazes at Nerissa's face. "Huh? You are? That's surprising. I can't believe you'd feel anything for me."

Samael purses his lips. "Once, I thought thee a monster. Unfeeling, uncaring. I... I have begun to rethink a great many of my actions while I was alive. While I battled Valac, I was able to connect to his soul. His memories. The things I saw... they made thee appear a pure-hearted saint in comparison. The actions he took to advance his amusement... those he hurt to gain petty revenge... thou art nothing like him."

Satan closes his eyes. "You saw Valac's memories?"

"I did."

"So... that means..."

Satan hesitates. His stomach churns for a moment as he thinks about what he's going to say.

"You... you saw... the demons Valac ordered to... to hurt Nerissa."

Samael crosses his arms. The Archangel of Change looks away for several seconds. A look of disgust spreads across his face.

"I did."

For a split second, all of Satan's muscles tense up. A flash of rage boils his blood, only to vanish a moment later.

"...Good. Before I merge the two demon colonies, I think I'll do a little housecleaning."

Samael purses his lips. "Thou intendeth to slay the ones who harmed thy mate?"

"Slay? Not quite. I'll drag it out a bit. I've been too easy on everyone. I'll... I'll make an example of them. I'll teach everyone what happens when they turn against me."

Samael lowers his gaze. "They believed thou had perished."

"Excuses won't save them," Satan murmurs. "Nerissa's dead. Nothing can bring her back, now. The least I can do is avenge her."

"And what, then?" Samael asks. "Art thou planning to battle against my people in perpetuity? How many must die before ye honestly make amends for thy deceit? There is still hope for thy redemption, Satan."

Satan shakes his head and opens his eyes to gaze at Nerissa's face once again. "Redemption. Cheh. Do you think I care about something like that? Raphael took Nerissa from me. I couldn't be there for her because of him. He trapped me in the Cosmic Realm. He prevented me from protecting her."

"Because thou attempted to deceive him. Are we to pretend ye didn't lie and open a portal in the middle of Heaven? Thy imprisonment was thy fault. Do not blame my brother for what happened."

"I'll blame him if I damn well want," Satan grumbles. He rises to his feet and lifts Nerissa in both arms. "This conversation is over."

As we walk toward the exit, Satan pauses for a moment.

"You know, Samael, I'm glad you chose to stay with me."

The Archangel rolls his eyes. "Spare me. I chose the lesser of two evils."

"Sure. But you fought with all your heart to make that choice."

Samael curls his lip in disgust. "Please, stop. I'll wretch if thy speech continues."

Satan shrugs. "Sure. Suit yourself. Though, I've gotta ask... how can you vomit? I thought angels couldn't... err..."

Samael facepalms. "Maybe I should have chosen Valac after all."

"Fine! Fine! Sorry I asked. Sheesh."

Satan exits the room to find Bael standing outside, shaking bone-dust out of his hair. He turns to us. "Geez, took ya long enough. I'm all for last words, boss, but having a whole conversation with your girl is a little..."

"I had a lot to say," Satan says, dismissing Bael's concerns. He doesn't bother correcting Bael about who he was chatting with. "Let's head out. I'm going to bury Nerissa somewhere she'd like. Maybe in a field of flowers."

Bael nudges me. "Heh, or in the Arctic? Like a popsicle. Eh? Eh?"

Satan stares at Bael. "I'd rather you didn't joke around, right now."

"Oh. Sorry."

Bael scratches his head sheepishly. Both of us begin shuffling the way we came.

As we head down the hall, Barbatos peeks his head out from around a corner. The twerp scampers up to us, and his eyes go wide as saucers. He stares at Nerissa in shock. "Mmmgm! Hm hm gmm!"

Satan raises an eyebrow. Barbatos continues making guttural sounds in his throat until a lightbulb appears over Satan's head. "Ah. Right. I shut your mouth with my contract. Go ahead. Speak your mind."

Barbatos opens his mouth and gasps. "Oh, jeez! I can talk again! Thank you, Satan, you wonderful, wonderful guy! You're the best! Hey, what's wrong with Nerissa? Why's she taking a nap? What happened with you'n Valac? Did he kick your ass?"

Satan's narrows his eyes as Barbatos bombards us with questions. "Don't make me regret allowing you to speak. Since you're here, you might as well make yourself useful. Gather all the demons and tell them Valac is dead. I want them to march to Lucifer's Lair. I'll be changing things up and retaking control of demonkind."

Barbatos's jaw drops. "You WHAT?! Holy crap! I knew you were the best! You beat him easily, just like I predicted! Oh, boy, everyone is gonna flip their shit when they hear how you and me worked together to bring Valac down! This is the best comeback story ever!"

Satan sighs. "Just do what I told you, alright? I'm not in the mood to chat. Begone."

Barbatos nods eagerly. "Yeah, yeah, I'm on it, Emperor Satan! You can count on me, your right-hand man! What a boss!"

The little grunt turns and tears ass in the opposite direction. He scampers away, leaving Bael and me alone.

Bael scratches his chin. "You gonna let 'im take credit for killing Valac?"

Satan shrugs. "Does it matter? It's not like anyone will believe him."

"Mmm. Fair point. Say, how *did* you beat Valac? He hit you with his scythe and then exploded. It was bizarre."

"Valac messed with the wrong Devil. That's all I can say."

"Psh. Be like that, then."

The two of us head toward the surface. Soon, the corridors blend together. As Barbatos scurries around, telling the demons of our feats, various male and female demons appear in the hallways, each one staring at Satan inquisitively. Some have hope in their eyes. Others; fear.

Samael murmurs in my mind. "That male, there. He's one of the ones who... with Nerissa..."

Satan's eyes lock-on to the scrawny little grunt; someone far too weak to have overpowered her by himself.

"Mmm," Satan murmurs under his breath. "One of many."

He doesn't say anything else.

The floor begins sloping upward. After several minutes of walking, Bael and I arrive at the collapsed crater. We step through the narrow opening and arrive at the surface to find the pit much darker than when we first entered.

Bael scratches his head. "Damn. Night-time already?"

Satan squeezes Nerissa's arm gently. "Dunno. Didn't feel like we were underground for that long."

As we enter the crater, a chill goes down Satan's back. He turns around, and his heart catches.

Above us, blotting out the sun, a massive, hundred-foot-tall Titan male stands. In each hand, he holds two metal poles. His beard, long and white, flows down his chest. His clothes shine with regality.

"It isn't night yet, Satan the Devil. But worry not, for soon, you will enter the eternal darkness."

The Titan stabs each pole into the ground on each side of himself. Satan's eyes widen. "Poseidon?! But... but... I killed you!"

"Oh? How gracious of you to admit to the act," The Titan says. His eyes smolder like coals in a fireplace. "You've saved me the trouble of beating a confession out of you. As repayment, here's a piece of information. My name is Zeus. The Titan you killed was my brother. And now, young one, I will repay you in full for his murder."

Satan scowls. "He attacked me first!"

"Tell that to someone who cares."

Zeus raises his palm to his mouth. He places the side of his thumb between his teeth, and bites down.
Hard.

Then, he vanishes.

Part 132: Clash of the Titans

Recommended Listening

Zeus vanishes after biting his thumb.

Something pounds Satan's skull with such speed and strength that our vision instantly goes white. A high-pitched whine erupts in our ears. The white fades to black, and our mind disappears into the endless void.

We awaken on the ground, disoriented. The sounds of the world around us creep back into our ears like water trickling off a glacier. Satan blinks away nausea and slowly pushes himself into a sitting position.

"-tch out!"

Bael's voice catches our attention. Satan tries to focus his eyes, but a stinging, electrical pain prevents them from refocusing properly.

Out of nowhere, something hits us again.

A flash of motion strikes the side of our head with tremendous force. For a split second, I can almost make out the sensation of our brains discharging from our ears. The feeling passes, as white light takes us to the afterlife for the second time in a minute.

* * *

We awaken.

The world appears even blurrier than before. A hazy figure towers over us, its shadow darkening our vision.

"-survived? No matter. You can't even stand. Your spiritual energy will run out soon."

Satan stares at the person speaking. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he recognizes the speaker as Zeus, but his thoughts seem to trudge through molasses. His mind takes several agonizing seconds to try and fit puzzle pieces together.

Before Satan can figure out what struck us, Zeus disappears, and our chest shatters into a thousand fragments of bone and skin.

For the third time in under a minute, we plummet headfirst into the endless abyss.

* * *

We awaken. Satan doesn't bother to move this time. His entire body aches despite regenerating. His vision is so hazy that he can scarcely make out the shapes of the world around us.

Our hearing returns in stages. First, a sound like drums pounding a hundred miles away reaches our ears. Then, aggravating chimes ring out. By the time our vision and hearing clear up, twenty seconds have already passed.

Bael stands with his back to us, shielding us from our assailant. He breathes heavily and seems to be winded.

Bael stares forward intently, unwilling to take his eyes off his adversary. "Boss. You okay?"

Satan shakes off his disorientation and slowly pulls himself into a sitting position. "Ugh. Maybe. Head's killing me."

"No kiddin'. You got the fuckin' shit kicked out of you. Ain't never seen anything like it in my life. Can you stand?"

Satan nods, but Bael can't see the motion. "Yeah. One sec."

We clamber shakily to our feet and wince as the sun, no longer obscured by Bael's body, beats against our face. Taking a step forward, we arrive at Bael's side...

...Only to see Zeus towering over us, arms crossed. The forty-foot-tall Titan pants lightly and moderates his breathing so as not to appear weak. "Incredible. Three times, I have killed you. Three times, you returned to life. The first time, I assumed I made a mistake. The second, that you must have tricked me. Now, I've confirmed your uncanny regenerative abilities. I'm beginning to understand how you defeated my brother."

"And I'm beginning to see the resemblance between the two of you," Satan mutters. "You're both butt-ugly."

"Nice one, boss," Bael says. He doesn't smile. Instead, a look of worry crosses his face. "Where's your gal?"

"Huh? What do you-"

Satan pauses. His eyes widen as memories come rushing back.

"Nerissa! She was in my arms! What- where-?!"

Instantly, our eyes lock onto Zeus. "Bastard! Where is she?! What did you do with her?!"

Zeus smiles. "Ah. You must be referring to the corpse you were holding. Worry not. I would never desecrate the dead, unlike you. I put her somewhere... safe."

Satan balls his hands into fists. "You... spawn of a... give her back. Give her back NOW!"

"She must mean a lot to you," Zeus says, as he puts on a mock expression of pity. "Of course, so did my children, grandchildren, and in-laws your people have killed. Most notably, the *wife* of my offspring."

Zeus turns his head to the left. The edge of the crater, just above his eye level, conceals something from our vision. We discover what it is when his son, Hercules, appears atop the rim. The young Titan wraps one arm brutishly around Nerissa's waist, leaving her corpse to hang awkwardly at his side.

"Hello, Satan. Long time, no see. I've been looking forward to a rematch with you."

Flames ignite in Satan's chest. "Get your hands off my girl! You worthless piece of trash!!"

Satan coils his legs and readies himself to pounce at the Titan, but Hercules smirks. "Not so fast. This ugly sow must be someone special to you. Make one wrong move, and I'll crush her head, just like you did

to my dear Megara."

Satan pauses. His legs shake as he instantly starts weighing whether he should attack or wait. "Cowards! How dare you use a hostage to stay my hand?!"

"Ahaha," Zeus chuckles. "You've got it all wrong, putrid bloodskin. This encounter is all about our revenge. Nothing more. Nothing less. I wish for you to suffer the same anguish my son did when you stole his beloved wife from this world. However, we are honorable, unlike your kind. If you can defeat us, we'll give you this female's body back. How does that sound to you?"

Veins bulge in Satan's arms. He trembles as he tries to swallow his temper. "You'll regret crossing me."

Hercules drops Nerissa atop the crater. Her body hits the ground like a sack of potatoes. "I doubt that, red rat. I nearly killed you with my bare hands, last time, but this whore's surprise attack caught me off-guard. Without her to protect you, you've only a few breaths left to take in this world. Enjoy them while you can."

Bael rolls his eyes. "Fucking hell! All you cunts do is talk, talk, talk! Eat shit and die!"

The big brute lunges toward the two Titans, sacrificing our chance at forming a strategy. Satan scowls. "I'll cover you!"

"I got this! Bahaha!"

Bael cackles as he runs toward the Titans. It's only once he arrives within striking distance of Zeus's legs that I get a good sense of the Titan's scale. Bael doesn't even reach the bottom of Zeus's knee. Meanwhile, Hercules stands fifteen-feet-tall, nearly twice Bael's size. The last time I saw the two of them was from Zeus's point of view, where his son appeared the size of a dog. But, from the perspective of the demons...

Bael swings his fist at Zeus's tibia bone, aiming to cripple the Titan from the start of the battle. Instead, Zeus dodges left, his body transforming into a blur as he moves far too quickly for Bael to keep up. Bael stumbles awkwardly and falls on his gut. "Gah!"

At that moment, Zeus performs a few quick magical signs. The sky turns overcast, and thunderclouds appear out of nowhere. One second later, a bolt of lightning races from above and strikes the Duke where he stands.

CRACK!

The flash of light stuns Satan, blinding us temporarily. Thunder explodes from the impact point, rattles our teeth, and shatters our eardrums.

With his vision and hearing obliterated, Satan stumbles and falls on his ass. He tries to rub his eyes and ignore the high-pitched ringing in his ears but never gets a chance to recover. Satan's Vectors spot Hercules as he appears and rears back for a punch, but the Devil proves too disoriented to dodge in time. Hercules' fist smashes Satan's skull and sends him flying.

Satan topples end over end and slides to a stop. Our vision darkens, and we fall into the infinite abyss for the fourth time since the battle began.

* * *

We awaken.

Satan jumps to his feet and quickly spins around to search for Bael. Bael yelps in surprise as he lands on his back a few feet away, evidently battered by one of Hercules's punches.

"Stop stinging me, ya zappy cunt!" Bael bellows at Zeus. "That shit hurts!"

The Titan King doesn't reply. He begins to weave several signs with his hands, and Bael moans. "Aw, hell. Not this again!"

The hairs stand up on the back of Satan's neck. He shoves his Vectors against the ground and flings himself to the side, just in time to dodge a lightning bolt aimed at our position. The thunderous *boom* doesn't destroy our eardrums, possibly because Satan's already built up some resistance from the last time it hit us. It still rattles our teeth, though.

Satan's Vectors cocoon around himself, allowing him to roll into a crouch and jump to his feet. He turns to Zeus, only to see the Titan king become a blur as he zips from his former position to tower over us. Too late, Satan looks up to see the Titan's massive foot hovering over our head. He stomps down, intending to grind us into a puddle of gore.

Satan quickly presses four Vectors against the ground and raises the other four above his head. We barely manage to catch the Titan's foot and save our life, but Zeus's strength is unthinkable! Satan's body trembles as he puts all his power into suppressing the Titan King's immense weight.

Footsteps stomp toward us from behind. Satan jerks his head back to see Hercules swinging his fist at our skull.

Shit!

Satan curses internally and tries to turn and block the punch, but with Zeus crushing us from above, we're caught between a foot and a hard place. At the last second, Bael rushes at Hercules and tackles him to the ground, saving us by the skin of our teeth. Satan spares only a moment to watch Bael start punching Hercules in the gut repeatedly before we return our attention to the Titan above. With a motion from his hands, Satan summons forth fire magic and blasts the flat of Zeus's foot with all the firepower he can manage.

Zeus zips away, his giant body once again moving far faster than seems possible. He appears at the top of the crater while breathing hard. Immediately, the hairs on the back of Satan's neck stand on end as Zeus weaves more signs to summon forth lightning.

Satan dives to the right, but this time, Zeus anticipates our movement. He aims at where we land instead of where we stood, and a bolt of lightning *cracks* from the sky.

Kzzat!

One million volts of electricity strikes our spine. Thunder BOOMS in our ears, shatters our vision, and sends Satan plummeting into the great abyss for the fifth time.

* * *

We awaken.

Satan jumps to his feet and crouches low as he scans for the Titan King.

"You are a troublesome opponent," Zeus says from atop the crater to our left. We follow his voice and gawk when we see him tear a tree out of the ground with his bare hands. "It seems that no matter how many times I kill you, your body always reanimates."

"That's because I'm immortal," Satan says with a grin. "When it comes to endurance, I always win."

"Unlikely," Zeus replies. His expression darkens. "Even for the greatest Soul Manipulators of all time, immortality wasn't possible. Everyone dies, eventually."

"Not me. I'm on a whole other tier. No matter how many times you land the killing blow, I'll always come back."

Zeus's eye twitches. "I've heard tales of Valac's immortality. Rumor has it the Angels and Titans have killed him a thousand times in a thousand different ways, yet he always returns to haunt them another day. For there to be *two* such immortal beings living in the same era... it defies credibility. You may attempt to deceive me, but I will uncover your weakness."

Zeus's body becomes a blur once again as he rushes toward me, the tree held high over his head. This time, Satan's eyes manage to follow his movements somewhat. We summon forth the element of wind to accelerate and dodge to the left, narrowly avoiding the *crash* of a massive oak hitting the Earth. Zeus bashes it against the ground over and over. He aims for us as we continue jumping to the left and right, using the element of wind to hasten our movements when needed.

"Hey, ugly! You forgot about me!"

Bael leaps from the rim of the crater and throws his entire body's weight against the Titan King's backside. His fingers grab hold of Zeus's skin and clamp like a vice, allowing Bael to use his feet to kick the Titan's shoulder over and over.

Wham wham wham!

Bael uses his incredible strength to batter Zeus relentlessly. The Titan King howls in pain, drops the tree, and tries to reach around to grab the tumor attacking his flank.

"Get off me, you insipid little-!"

When Zeus tries to seize Bael, the Duke of Pain releases his hold, slides down Zeus's back, and latches onto the robe wrapped around his body. "Looks like you won't be needing this anymore!"

Bael grabs for the Titan's spine, intending to tear it from Zeus's back. Instead, the instant Bael's fingers make contact with Zeus's skin, the Titan King grins. "It's your funeral."

KZZAT!

A blast of lightning surges out of Zeus's body and flood into Bael's hand, knocking the Duke for a loop and flinging him from Zeus's back. Bael plummets thirty feet to the ground below and hits it with a *whump!*

Zeus spins to face him. "Foolish bloodskin! My bones contain more electrical power than the sun itself! You have paid for your overconfidence with your life, and now I shall-"

The Titan King falters. He blinks in surprise as Bael, lying at his feet, winces and shakes some numbness out of his hand. "Damn, that stung like a bitch. My whole hand has the tingles, now."

Zeus's eyes widen. "You should have died from that."

"Died? Pft, shit. Do you think I'm some basic-bitch imp? You'll need to do better than that to put me in the ground, ugly."

"Noted," Zeus replies coldly. "I've yet to unleash the mightiest of my abilities. I didn't intend to go all-out against tiny little creatures like you, but both of your defenses are extraordinary. Satan regenerates from death, while you resist the afterlife with every fiber of your being. If that is the case, then it appears I have no choice."

Zeus raises both of his hands. He opens his palms, closes his eyes, and at the top of the crater, the two poles he thrust into the ground begin to rattle and shake. They tear from the dirt and fly into his grasp, hitting his palms with a satisfying *whap!*

Once Zeus obtains his poles, he grins. "It has been several ages since I last released all of my power. Thankfully, my son is not here to see his father's unrelenting fury. I would hate to diminish his spirits by witnessing the vast chasm between him and me."

Satan's eyes flick around. *Now that Zeus mentions it, where did Hercules go? Wasn't he fighting Bael before? Did he disappear when his father killed me last time?*

Bael snorts. "Pff, so what? Do you think whacking us with a couple of sticks is gonna do anything? And I thought I was the dumb one here."

"Believe whatever you like. Only three times have I wielded Aram and Maltet to annihilate my enemies, including when I smote my father and took his title as King of all Titans. None who witness their power will ever live to see another day."

Zeus's grin widens to encompass half of his face. It distorts into something sadistic and evil, as his Titan battle instincts awaken.

"This is going to be so, so very... **FUN!**"

The Titan King slides his hands down to grip both poles from their bottoms. He raises the right pole over his head while holding the left pole horizontally in front of himself.

Bael stares at him. "Okay. What next?"

The instant the words leave Bael's mouth, Zeus swings his right arm down. He clangs the pole in his right hand against the pole in his left.

A destructive blast of thunder explodes from the impact point. The soundwave sends a visible surge of air at us, obliterates Satan's eardrums, and sends us flying backward. We tumble end over end, flip and roll against the canyon, and pound against the crater's sidewall violently.

Hardly have we and Bael come to a stop before Zeus begins smashing the rods together, over and over.

WHAMWHAMWHAMWHAM!!

With our eardrums destroyed, we're unable to hear anything, but the onslaught of soundwaves presses us against the crater as if it were a barrage of fifty-ton wrecking balls. Our innards quiver and rattle under the relentless pressure, and blood begins to discharge from every pore in our body.

All at once, our chest collapses, sending our innards spraying in every direction.

Satan falls into the infinite abyss yet again.

* * *

We awaken to the same relentless pressure. Our eardrums shatter instantly as before, and no matter how we try, we can't lift a muscle to pry ourselves from the bloodstained wall behind us.

Satan's mind becomes unable to form intelligent thoughts as Zeus batters us with his unstoppable soundwaves. Just before we fall unconscious, the pressure stops. Satan slumps forward and flops to the ground, his body having melted into the consistency of Jello. We raise our eyes to see Bael running around Zeus's feet as he tries to punch the Titan's legs.

Bael yells something, but he is as silent as the rest of the world to us. Satan lowers his head, succumbs to internal hemorrhaging, and slumps into the endless abyss yet again.

* * *

"Confound you!"

Zeus howls angrily at Bael as we awaken. Satan shakes off his disorientation and jumps to his feet. This time, the Titan King dodges Bael with his superior agility and speed. He shifts from place to place, moving so fast that he appears to slide in place without moving his legs. His body becomes a blur as he evades Bael, travels behind the demon, and clangs his poles together to batter Bael into the dirt.

"How are you so resilient?! No matter what I do, you never take the slightest damage! That's impossible!"

Bael rights himself and jumps toward Zeus's chest. "I told you, dumbass! I ain't some little wimpy-ass imp! Eat my lumpy red fist!"

Bael swings and misses. Zeus shimmers to the side yet again, evading the Duke with ease. However, when he comes to a stop, I notice that Zeus appears significantly more fatigued than before he picked up his poles. He sucks in several shallow breaths and takes up a defensive stance as he eyes the Duke warily.

Satan licks his lips. *It's only been fifteen minutes since our battle began, but already Zeus is wearing down. As I thought; when it comes to a battle of attrition, I always come out on top.*

"Nyeh! Satan! Big boss! Over here!"

An annoying shrill voice hisses at me from a few feet away. Satan spins to face it, only to see Barbatos poking out of the entrance to Valac's lair, which is now half-buried under debris sent flying by Zeus's attacks. Barbatos keeps his voice low and beckons to me.

"Ugh. What is it?" Satan groans. "I'm busy, dammit."

"Backup's on the way, big boss! I'm here to help!"

"Just you?"

Bael manages to grab onto Zeus's clothing again, only for the Titan to batter him into the ground with a lightning bolt. Satan ignores their battle, knowing Bael will survive.

"Yeah, for now," Barbatos replies. "Others are coming soon! Grigori's gonna open a portal down below in the next few minutes. Just hold the big guy off a little longer."

Satan rolls his eyes. "I was already doing that. Get back underground. You're useless to me out here—no, wait. Hold on."

Satan pauses. A thought suddenly crosses his mind.

"Scratch that. Barbatos, I need you to do me a favor. It's a top-secret mission. Only you can do it, understand?"

Barbatos's eyes widen with glee. "Top secret?! Oh, boy! What is it, big boss? Tell me!"

"Zeus snatched my girl out of my arms and dropped her off along the crater rim. She isn't there anymore. Must have gotten blown away by his attack earlier. Search the area. I need to back Bael up so we can take this Titan down."

"Your girl? Nerissa?"

"Yeah. And don't try anything funny. If you fuck with her body, I'll break your back and shove you up this Titan's ass, I swear to the devils..."

Barbatos's face turns pale. "N-no problem! I'm on it! I won't touch her, I swear! Anything for you, big boss!"

"Get on it, then. Don't test my patience."

Satan returns his attention to Zeus and flexes his muscles. *Bael's distracted Zeus for long enough. I need to do something to take him out. Most of the magic in my body is that of Grunts and Lords. My fireballs are weak. My earth manipulation isn't all that strong, either. Only my Vectors and physical body are worth bragging about, and they pale in comparison to Bael and the two Titans. What can I do that Bael can't?*

Zeus lashes out his foot and kicks Bael, sending the Duke sprawling onto his back. Bael tumbles head over heels for a few dozen feet before grinding to a halt.

"How much abuse can you take?!" Zeus screams. "I've crushed mountains less resilient than you!"

Bael hops to a standing position, apparently unharmed. "Yeah? Well, I can't land a punch on your ugly face. You're a zippy-zappy little cunt! Every time I think I've gotcha, you zoom away! How the hell do you move that fat ass so fast?"

Looks like they're in a bit of a stalemate, Satan thinks to himself. There has to be something I can do to help. I can't take hits like Bael, but I have magical abilities he does. He's all muscle, while I'm the brains. Maybe if we combine our strengths...

A lightbulb goes off in Satan's head. He summons the element of wind to accelerate us from a standstill to nearly one hundred miles an hour in the blink of an eye. Satan bolts over to Bael and stops on a dime, startling the big guy. He jerks his fists up and prepares to punch us, only to halt mid-swing. "Bloody devils, Satan! You scared the shit outta me! Where've you been?"

"There's no time to explain," Satan replies. "I'm going to use my magic to increase your speed. You need to put this Titan down. Think you can do it?"

"Pft. I don't need no stinkin' magic to help me. I got this guy on the ropes!"

Satan nods. "I'll take that as a yes. Go!"

Satan summons forth the element of wind to fling Bael at the Titan. Bael yelps in surprise as Satan's typhoon yanks him off his feet and throws him toward Zeus.

Still, Bael gets his bearings. He pivots mid-flight and swings his fist to batter Zeus with all his strength, but the Titan shimmers to the side, evading the attack with ease.

"Tricks won't work on me, bloodskins!"

Satan smirks. "We'll see about that."

He rotates his hands, and a gust of wind yanks Bael in midair toward Zeus's new position. Bael grunts as he gets yanked back and forth, left and right, to chase after Zeus. The Titan King continues shimmering around, easily evading the tag-team attack by the demons.

"Pathetic. Is this the best you gnats can muster? You'll never be able to outspeed me."

Satan's smile widens. *That was never my goal.*

Zeus focuses his attention on Bael, flying around after him, but forgets about Satan for a moment. Zeus shimmers away from Bael once again, only to draw within a few feet of Satan as he carefully lures the Titan King closer.

Satan's smile expands across his whole face. *Gotcha!*

We lunge our Vectors out and grab Zeus's leg. The Titan King jerks his head down and spots us. "What?! When did you-?"

Satan drops Bael and immediately begins using his Vectors to climb Zeus's body. "You let yourself get distracted, boy! Here I come to snap that ugly neck!"

Zeus shimmers again, yanking us along with him, but Satan's Vectors clamp onto the Titan's skin like a vice. The Titan jumps to the nearby ridge and stomps his feet as he tries to knock us off, but Satan doesn't let go. We scale him within seconds and grab onto his head, readying ourselves to tear it off in one smooth motion.

Suddenly, a *whiff* of movement rushes at Satan's back. The Devil's battle instincts warn him of the incoming attack, but he's too focused on Zeus to avoid it in time.

Shik!

Something rips through our chest like a cannonball, tears out our ribs, and sprays our innards all over Zeus's neck.

Satan's gasps. "Huhk! Wh-what? Who...?"

Our Vectors lose their strength. We fall backward and plummet from Zeus's back.

As darkness takes us, I catch a glimpse of Hercules, his arm extended, smiling as he rolls a rock around in his palm.

He... he threw... a...?

Satan hits the ground and falls into a not-so-eternal slumber yet again.

My mind travels to Zeus. The Titan King follows Satan's body with his eyes as the Devil hits the ground with a *whump!*

Excellent work, Hercules. Zeus thinks to himself. Using your superior strength to hurl a projectile. Even I didn't expect you to use such a tactic. I'm proud to call you my son.

The world shifts around us. Bael lifts his middle finger to yell an obscenity, only to freeze in place. Hercules, the creatures of the forest, and even the wind itself slows to a crawl.

Zeus begins walking toward his son, and as he does, a sensation like wading through quicksand swallows our body. As if the air itself has turned to thick, viscous mud, Zeus forces himself to press through the invisible barrier, but winces as he does.

This battle has worn me down. I've always prided myself on knowing which opponents I could defeat in less than a minute. Using my Hypertime power at the start was supposed to kill the demons instantly, saving my energy. Instead, it proved to be a costly mistake. I exhausted myself while they endured my mightiest ability. Not even my father could defend against it, yet these demons can.

Something has changed. I don't know what, but it makes little sense for these tiny, insignificant creatures, once the lowly servants of the Angels, to become so powerful. Power is not something one can merely develop. It is a birthright; proof of one's divine right to rule.

Zeus arrives at his son's side. He stares at the unmoving youth for a moment and shakes his head.

My son, alone, should have been enough to crush these demons. Had I not come, I might have had to attend his funeral shortly after. Fate still favors us, in the end.

Time returns to normal. Hercules' eyes immediately lock onto my new position. "Father! You're lucky that I returned. I saw the demon climbing your back, and thought-

"You assessed the situation correctly," Zeus says, cutting his son off. "I might have died, were it not for you. Satan will regenerate within half a minute. We must leave to fight another day."

Hercules shakes his head. "No, father. I refuse. I won't back down, no matter how powerful the demons might seem. Did you think I left for no reason? I knew you could handle the bloodskins alone. In the meantime, I went out and... and... what's that?"

Hercules pauses. He cocks his head, as if listening for something. Zeus opens his mouth to ask what caught his son's attention, only to detect a faint rumbling beneath our feet.

In the blink of an eye, Zeus swipes his hand down, grabs his son, and lightly tosses him toward the other side of the crater. "Burrowers! Be on your guard!"

The dirt erupts beneath me. Artorias pounces out of the depths of the Earth and swings his hand toward Zeus's ankles, summoning an earthen spike to skewer and cripple the Titan King.

He fails.

Zeus slows time once again and jumps aside, pressing through the thickened air to put distance between himself and the demons crawling out of Artorias's burrow.

Damn. Using my Thunderstep is exhausting me further. I can't keep it up for much longer, Zeus thinks to himself. Since demon reinforcements have arrived, I might be able to wipe them all out if I activate my Hypertime again, but if they can regenerate in the same way Satan can, I'll end up at death's door without a method of escape. Using such a mana-intensive ability twice will tear my body apart.

After putting a decent amount of distance between himself and the demon newcomers, Zeus slows to normal speed and watches as Artorias's earthen spike flies into the distance, merely striking our afterimage.

Barbatos jumps out of the pit and grabs his brother's arm. "See? I told you, bro! He's fast as fuck!"

Artorias wrenches his arm out of Barbatos's grasp. "Don't pretend we're on speaking terms. I won't forgive you for siding with Valac."

"That's old news!" Barbatos yells, waving his brother's concerns away. "Anyway, just be glad I'm here! With me helping you, we can easily trash this Titan! You know how strong I am!!"

Artorias narrows his eyes. "I do. That's why I know you'll be useless."

"Nyehehe! What a joker! I always said you were a bag of laughs, but nobody believed me!"

Hercules lands on his feet, and slides to a stop, unharmed. "More bloodskins. *Perfect.*"

Dozens of demons crawl out of Artorias's burrow. They spread around the rim of the crater opposite us, hesitating to enter the pit due to the tactical disadvantage it will put them in.

Satan's body rapidly regenerates, and soon the Devil jumps to his feet. He turns to the demons atop the crater. "We don't need any small fry here! Leave!"

"Thank us later," Artorias replies. "Lucifer sent us to help you when she noticed the Titans arriving. After your battle with Valac, it's a miracle you have any energy to spare."

Satan scowls as even more demons appear at the crater's rim. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. You guys are in danger. These Titans are too much for Grunts and Lords to handle."

Barbatos gives Satan a thumbs-up. "Nyehehehe! There's no problem at all, boss! I'm here, now, so leave the Titans to me!"

"I'm not a Lord, but a Baron," Artorias replies. "Worry not. Everyone here is willing to put their lives on the line if it means killing the Titan King and his son. If we kill them, the rest of the Titans will fall soon after."

The demons continue to converse with each other. Zeus narrows his eyes. Slowly, he taps Aram and Maltet together as he ponders what to do next.

It seems that in addition to the demon leaders, thousands of mid and low-level bloodskins have shown up, too. I cannot ignore this opportunity to wipe out a sizable portion of the enemy forces. The demons may intend to cut off my head, but they will find their strength lacking when compared to mine.

Bael walks over to Satan's side and points at the demons above. "Hey! You heard the boss! Get the hell outta here! You idiots will only get in our way!"

Zeus watches.

While the demons squabble over whether they should leave or stay, Zeus raises his poles. He summons forth his inner mana to deliver-

"Father. No."

Hercules interrupts our preparation. I lower my gaze to look at the fifteen-foot-tall Titan.

"Hm? What's the matter?"

Hercules smiles. "I told you. I left for a purpose. Now that the weak trash has arrived, you should take a few minutes to rest. I'll finish them all off myself."

"This is no time to jest," Zeus says, keeping his voice low. "There are too many bloodskins. Groups of enemies are my specialty. You will focus on their leaders and leave the others to me."

Hercules shakes his head.

"I apologize for my impudence, Father, but I must insist. Today... today, I will make you proud. Leave this battle to me."

Hercules raises his hands to his chest. He looks away from me and begins weaving a series of intricate magical signs. Zeus watches his son silently for a few seconds, only for his eyes to widen.

What? Hercules is a physical fighter. Since when did he start practicing such complex spellmanship? I thought... he wasn't...

Hercules finishes. Much like when he fought Satan two thousand years prior, his eyes begin to glow pure white.

"To me, my army."

Behind us, the sound of a thousand footsteps marching in lockstep catches Zeus's attention. He turns back to look into the dead forest, only to see hundreds, possibly thousands of humans with spears marching toward us. Their eyes glow, in the same way that Hercules' do.

A sensation of nausea boils in Zeus's stomach.

No. By the forefathers... it can't be. My son... he's using mind control on the humans. But... for him to control so many of them at once... that can only mean...

Hercules speaks, his voice full of confidence. "I'm ready to make you proud, father. Watch and see... see how much I have grown!!"

The young Titan pumps his fist toward the sky. "Warriors, CHAAAARGE!"

Zeus's face turns ashen. Hercules leaps into the pit and rushes toward Satan and Bael, while his thousands of human followers flow around the sides of the crater to attack the demon newcomers in a pincer formation.

The Titan King clutches his stomach and falls to one knee.

*By the Ancestors! It can't be. My son... he... he has become... a **Soul Manipulator**.*

Part 133: LEGION

Recommended Listening

My mind leaves Zeus's, and for the first time since Solomon's visions began, I levitate into the sky, my astral body unbound to the soul of another being. I hover high above the battlefield and watch from a distance as chaos unfolds.

Satan and Bael stand against Hercules, his eyes glowing with righteous fury and vindictiveness, while his army of five thousand humans charges toward the demons bursting from the depths of the Earth. Zeus takes a few minutes to regain his stamina and watch as thoughts about his son's awakened abilities roil in his mind. Half a dozen of Hercules' mind-controlled barbarians stand beside Zeus as if to guard him, though I can't help but think the Titan King is more than capable of protecting himself.

The demon army members cackle evilly as the humans charge toward them. "Filthy fleshbags!" Barbatos yells. "Not even ten of you can kill the weakest among us! Run to your deaths, foolish muck-dwellers! Nyehehe!"

Artorias swings his palms out to face the humans encircling the demons from the right and left. "Scythers, Brutes, take to the front lines! Burners and Rumlbers, hit them before they get close! Don't underestimate them just because they're humans!"

The dark-skinned humans charge toward the demons silently, neither bellowing warcries nor howling like wolves ready to tear apart sheep. Their eerie silence sends tides of discomfort through the demon's ranks as they ready themselves for the first assault wave.

As the primitives draw within a hundred feet of the demons, the Burners shoot dozens of fireballs toward them, while the Rumlbers launch boulders into the air, intending to flatten the humans into bloody pancakes.

Just before the fireballs hit, something surprising happens.

The humans dodge.

Their eyes, unified by the power of Hercules' soul manipulation, give them spherical vision in every direction. The front ranks halt, split apart, and dash left and right, causing the fireballs to splash against the dirt harmlessly. A few seconds later, the hail of boulders smashes into the Earth, sending tremors several feet underground as the giant rocks crash into the soil and roll to a stop.

"W-what?!" Barbatos squeaks. "Nyh! They dodged?! That's impossible! We didn't hit even one!"

Artorias's eyes widen as the humans charge again, stomping through the tiny flames sputtering on the ground without a second thought. "Quickly! Fire another volley, Burners! Rumlbers, you must-"

The Baron of Earthquakes doesn't get to finish his sentence. Hercules' armies splash against the wall of blade-armed Scythers and thick-skinned Brutes like two tsunamis against an island of red flesh.

Instantly, the demon defenders scream in horror as the human's wooden spears find their marks, gouging out eyes, throats, and hearts with uncanny precision. The humans batter the frontlines aside and rush the second row where the Burners have almost finished casting their fireball spells. Before the demons can complete their incantations, the first row of glowing-eyed humans swing their spears down like clubs, break the wrists of the magi, and cut off their spellcasting abruptly. Howls of pain erupt amongst the demon flanks as the humans tear through demon flesh like hot knives through butter.

Artorias slaps his palm against the ground. "The humans are sharing their vision! Hold them down and kill them one by one!"

His Earth Manipulation, far more powerful and precise than other demons of the same type, affords him a level of control they can't dream of matching. Artorias transforms the ground beneath the feet of several dozen nearby humans into quicksand, snaring them in the muck and causing them to stumble. In the blink of an eye, Barbatos and a dozen other grunts rip apart the humans and cackle with glee.

"Nyehehe! You may have killed a few weaklings, but now you'll have to face me, Barbatos, the most powerful demon of all! Foolish little fleshbags, rue the day you crossed my-"

Barbatos's triumphant cackles turn upside-down as he lunges toward a human pinned in the mud, motions with his hands, and sends a dozen shards of metal toward his trapped opponent. The metal instantly kills Barbatos's enemy, but in his excitement, the young grunt neglects a single human behind him, one who swings his spear out and bashes the demon across the back of his neck, sending Barbatos sprawling across the ground.

"Gahk!"

Barbatos coughs in pain and grinds to a stop. He turns to stare in terror as the glowing-eyed human charges toward him, spear upraised to deliver a killing blow.

"Eeee!! B-big brother! Help me!!"

As if Barbatos had unwittingly cast a spell, Artorias explodes from the dirt and catches the human by surprise. He pounces at the barbarian from behind and slams the human against the soil, raises a fist, summons a rock, and smashes it against the man's skull, splattering the primitive's brains everywhere.

Barbatos gasps. "H-haa.... th-thanks, big brother! I... I could've taken him!"

Artorias backflips just in time to dodge another human's spear aimed at his neck. "Less talk! More fight! We have to hold out until the main force arrives!"

The Baron of Earthquakes, currently the highest-ranked member of the demon army, barks out orders as he darts around, firing pebbles like bullets into the brains of nearby humans. "Their eyesight doesn't pierce underground! Surprise them from below! You there, protect your weak points. You, assist that Burner!"

While the demons atop the crater's edge continually get reinforced by others emerging from Valac's Den, my eyes travel over to Satan. He and Bael engage in battle against Hercules, but to my surprise, the Titan easily holds his own.

Bael throws himself against Hercules and wraps his arms around the Titan's waist as he tries to grapple him to the ground. Satan leaps into the air and dives toward Hercules, Vectors extended, only for the Titan to swing his palm up and hit Satan with a telekinetic blast, tossing the Devil backward.

By the time Satan hits the ground, Hercules has already started battering Bael's exposed back. While the Demon Duke holds onto the giant with all his might, Hercules swings his fists down and smashes Bael's shoulders, spine, and head. Over and over, the Titan's fists become a blur as he savagely beats Bael with all his strength.

"Unhand me, you disgusting wretch!"

Bael grunts reflexively after taking each punch. "Guh! You can't- guh! You can't make me! I'm- guh! I can take anything you- guh! Anything you dish out!"

As the seconds pass and Satan lunges forward, I begin to notice that Hercules strength is increasing over time. His fists send out stronger shockwaves with each impact as his muscles increase in power. The Titan's glowing eyes intensify as he spots Satan skittering toward him, giant stones clutched in four of his Vector's claws.

"You want to hit me with some rocks, eh?! Give it your best shot, Devil!"

Hercules pauses his relentless assault on Bael's flank to swing his arm in a wide arc. Before Satan can close the distance, a telekinetic attack knocks him aside and throws off his balance, sending the Devil skidding across the crater to the left. "Shit! Bael, I can't get any closer!! This punk keeps hitting me with something!"

"Hahaha!" Hercules cackles and returns to punching Bael's head. "Your invisible arms nearly did me in, once! Now the shoe is on the other foot, little bloodskin!"

Bael winces as Hercules continues to smash his skull relentlessly. "Grgh! Forget me, boss! Help the others! I- gah! I can take this piece of- fuck!"

Satan pauses for a moment. He grimaces as he watches Bael taking unthinkable savage blows from Hercules, but turns his head toward the slaughter happening atop the crater.

"Damn," Satan mutters. "I can't just leave Bael behind... but my friends are getting murdered up there."

The Devil takes several agonizing seconds to consider his options. All of a sudden, Bael gets a second wind. He digs his feet into the dirt, uncoils his arms from Hercules' waist, and throws himself into a ridiculous uppercut, smashing the young Titan's jaw with all his strength. Hercules gets flung backward, several of his teeth shatter, and he hits the side of the crater with a deep *whump!*

Bael charges the Titan and yells at Satan. "Get going, dumbass! I told you I could take this clown!"

Satan nods. "Oh. That settles that."

With a weirdly calm shrug of his shoulders, Satan leaves Bael and Hercules behind. He coils his Vectors, pounces atop the crater, and lands amidst chaos as Hercules' forces continue tearing through the demons like a herd of buffalo stomping through a flock of geese. The only one capable of holding his own

is Artorias, and he's being pulled ten different directions trying to save his friends and eliminate as many humans as possible. Already, two thousand dead demons litter the ground, while only a few hundred humans have met similar fates.

Satan evaluates the scene of carnage for only a moment. He lunges toward the nearest humans and flings his Vectors forward, intending to catch them off-guard and crush their skulls before they can react. Instead, the humans spin to face him. Their glowing eyes lock onto Satan's Vectors, and they duck, dodge, and roll, avoiding them with ease.

The Devil's thoughts transmit to me, high in the sky. *Just like Hercules, these humans can see my Vectors. He must be sharing some of his power with them. No wonder the grunts were overwhelmed.*

Several dozen humans encircle Satan, leaving their comrades to battle the weaker demons. In the blink of an eye, they lunge toward Satan, spears upraised, intent on killing the demon leader. Satan uses his enhanced speed to instantly cast a wind spell. He rushes through the primitives, feints with his Vectors to make them dodge, but uses his fleshy arms to punch the heads of the nearest two clean off their shoulders. Before the others can recover, Satan dashes toward them. He transforms his body into a hurricane of destruction and crushes their heads faster than they can react.

As I thought, Satan thinks to himself with a satisfied smirk. *Their minds may be unified, and their eyes might be able to see my Vectors, but their bodies are still those of weaklings. I can easily outmatch them in both power and speed!*

Satan doesn't hesitate. He spends the next minute murdering dozens of humans, forcing the others to turn their attention on him. Unfortunately for them, Satan's Vectors pass through their defenses, turning corporeal only long enough to rip them in half or tear their spines out of their backs. Despite the barbarian's best efforts, Satan is simply too powerful for them to overcome.

Barbatos cackles. "Nyehehehe! With Satan and me here, these worthless fleshbags will fall! Come on, boys! Let's push them back!!"

* * *

Satan's appearance rallies the demons together. A surge of determination rushes through their ranks. It doesn't take long for a few Lords to emerge from underground, including Orias, Lord of the Moon. Hercules' barbarians lose their battle momentum and quickly get pushed back. Their numbers begin to dwindle. Soon, their numbers equalize with the demons, despite their superior teamwork and battle prowess.

"Dumbass, Hercules!" Satan yells. "You thought you could beat me with the combined power of a few measly primitives?! Get real! You could never hope to stop me or my loyal-"

Satan pauses mid-sentence. He stumbles slightly and clutches his chest.

"Wait. What... what is... this feeling...?"

The Devil lurches backward. A sickening sense of nausea overtakes him.

Samael appears in Satan's mind. "By the Creator! Satan, this isn't good. Those humans... thou hath absorbed their souls! Hercules... he still controls them!"

Satan blinks heavily. "No... no... it can't be... this is..."

The other demons continue battling the humans, oblivious to the battle happening inside Satan. The Devil's red eyes slowly lose their luster. Red fades to grey, then to white.

Suddenly, Satan howls in pain. "Ahhhhh!!! It burns! BURNS!!"

The Devil falls to his knees and clutches the sides of his head. His Vectors spasm uncontrollably. Several humans encircle him, but they don't move to attack.

One of us. One of us.

Satan leans forward and vomits bile all across the dirt in front of himself. "Guuaak!!"

The humans stare Satan down as he loses his last vestiges of resistance.

Obey. Obey. Rise. Join us.

After several seconds, the Devil stands. His eyes, like those of the humans around him, glow pure white.

In Satan's mind, a single phrase repeats, over and over.

We are one. We are Legion.

* * *

Meanwhile, down inside the crater, Bael stands atop Hercules and beats the Titan's face repeatedly, turning his fists into a storm of pain and suffering. His meaty hands batter Hercules over and over, sending blood spraying in every direction. "Bahahaha! You can't even move! You're dead meat, punk!!"

Hercules, despite having his face smashed from left to right, forces a smile.

You're wrong, dim-witted demon. I've already won.

Recommended Listening

With Satan under Hercules' mind-control, the battle outside the crater instantly and violently reverses momentum. Several demons scream in terror, their voices cutting off a split-second later as Satan rends their bodies in half with his Vectors.

"S-someone help! Satan's gone mad! He's working with the- AHCHK!"

One Burner tries to shout a warning to the others, only for Satan to rush him and crush his head. A moment later, Satan gains access to that demon's powers, and he begins summoning ten fireballs at once, using all of his Vectors and his non-Vector hands as well. One after the other, the Devil lobbs dozens of fireballs, combining his attacks with the humans to completely overpower his fellow demons.

Shrieks and cries mix with begging and pleading for mercy, only for those speakers to fall silent as their souls leave the world of the living. Any demon with a useful ability ends up having their skull

crushed by Satan, while the others turn to charred corpses in the wake of his onslaught.

Artorias, distracted by his battle with the humans, finally realizes what's happened. He gawks in horror at Satan, watching for only a few moments as Satan slaughters several grunts in the span of a few seconds. "Traitor!! How dare you kill your loyal followers! I won't forgive you!"

With a clap of his hands, Artorias dive-bombs onto the dirt, allowing the Earth to swallow him whole. Like a shark racing through the ocean, Artorias rapidly swims through the hardened rocky soil, stabs one hand through the surface, grabs Satan's leg, and yanks him into the dirt. Satan tries to attack Artorias, but the Baron of Earthquakes proves far too agile. Artorias swims underground in an instant, avoiding Satan's Vectors as the Devil tears apart the soil trying to get to him.

A moment later, the terrain wrapped around Satan's legs suddenly compresses, crushing his bones and spraying blood in every direction. Eerily, Satan doesn't yell or cry out in pain. The mind-controlled Demon Emperor merely uses his Vectors to tear himself out of Artorias's makeshift trap, ripping away skin and bone from his legs as he does. Thick, viscous blood gushes from Satan's leg-stumps, but the Devil ignores his pain.

As Satan swivels his glowing eyes around to scan the battlefield, Artorias bursts out of the ground, makes a sweeping gesture with both arms, and summons a massive cloud of dust. The wall of crushed stone and soot detonates like a bomb, instantly shrouding the battlefield in a dense, smog-like substance.

From my vantage point high above, my vision pierces the powder-cloud easily, allowing me to follow Artorias's movements. He dashes around to Satan's front, attacking the Demon Emperor head-on. At the last second, before Artorias can deliver a gut-busting punch to Satan's ribs, the Devil's Vectors dart toward the Baron, intending to tear him in half. Artorias's eyes spot the disturbance in the air, and he kicks to the side, avoiding Satan's counter.

An instant later, Artorias smashes his foot into the ground, sending a spray of dirt-bullets rushing toward Satan. The Devil can't react in time, and the pebbles tear through his body, ripping skin and bone out to spray against the humans and demons nearby. They, in turn, ignore the battle between the strongest fighters, focusing instead on combatting those on the same tier as themselves.

Artorias's thoughts beam to me. *Satan isn't acting like himself. From what I've heard, he's an extraordinary battle tactician. There's no way a cloud of dust would catch him off-guard under normal circumstances. If that's the case, then that must mean... those glowing eyes...*

The Baron dives underground, narrowly avoiding six fireballs hurled from Satan's hands and Vectors. For every second that passes, the Baron manages to piece together more of the puzzle surrounding Satan's mind-control.

Hercules must have taken control of Satan. But... why didn't he do so sooner? There must be some way to break the spell vexing our commander!

Swimming underground, Artorias begins hurling stone-spikes toward Satan. They burst out of the soil and rip through the Devil's defenses, tearing out Satan's stomach, liver, and lungs. The Demon Emperor

stumbles awkwardly, clutches his wounds, and falls to the ground. His Vectors go limp as he swallows his final breath.

Artorias pounces out of the dirt to land beside Satan as his body flops to the ground. "Shit. I didn't mean to hit Satan's vital organs. Lucifer is going to ream me if I make it out of here alive."

Turning his attention away from the fallen Devil, Artorias jumps back into the battle and begins quickly eliminating several humans nearby. He smiles as he realizes that the dust cloud removes their ability to coordinate their vision properly. "Everyone! The fleshbags can't see! Hit them while they're blind!"

Having turned away from Satan, the Baron doesn't notice as the Devil's body begins to regenerate. After twenty seconds, Satan jumps to his feet. His glowing eyes lock onto Artorias.

Powerful soul. Must take. Ours. We are Legion.

Artorias senses something is wrong. He turns around just in time for Satan to grab his throat with a Vector. "Gahk! What?! You-"

The Devil doesn't allow his former subject to reply. Satan smashes Artorias against the ground savagely, battering him into the dirt over and over. *Wham! Wham! Wham!*

Artorias howls in pain. "Gaaaaugh! Shit!!"

He tries to cast a spell, but Satan's other Vectors dart toward him, grab his arms and legs, and pin him against the dirt. With the Baron restrained, Satan clenches his Vectors together, snapping each of Artorias's limbs like twigs. *Kshhk!*

"AAAAHH!! EEEEEAAUGH!"

Artorias screams, wails, and cries, as his life nears its end. He forces his eyes open just in time to see Satan's fleshy hand reaching forward to crush his head.

Before Satan can finish the job, several shards of metal fly through the smoke and slice his arm off, tearing through skin and bone as if they were wet paper. Barbatos jumps toward Satan, dancing and spinning as his shards of metal turn into a whirlwind around him. The young demon snarls viciously. "Get your fuckin' mitts off my big brother, scumbag!! I knew you couldn't be trusted, nyeh!"

Satan turns to face the new attacker, but he's too slow. Barbatos uses the element of surprise to his advantage, sending razor-sharp shards of metal to tear through Satan's limbs one after the other. Satan releases Artorias to focus on defense, but he can't dodge the tiny little blades dancing to and fro, dicing him apart like an onion. Barbatos severs Satan's other arm, gashes open his arteries, and eventually drains rivers of blood from the Demon Emperor before Satan can react.

Satan stumbles awkwardly, unable to control his movements. The Devil's legs give out beneath him, and he falls onto his back, as blood pools beneath him.

Barbatos doesn't hesitate. He sends three blades toward Satan and decapitates the Devil, killing him instantly. "Eat shit! I knew we couldn't trust you!"

After a quick confirmation of Satan's death, Barbatos darts into the fog to search for his brother.

"Bro! Bro! Where are you?" Barbatos calls out.

"O... over here..." Artorias coughs.

Barbatos follows the sound of his brother's voice, set against the backdrop of demons howling, weapons clanking, and feet stomping. Barbatos stumbles toward Artorias, only to find him laying on his back. "Aw, shit! What happened?! Are you okay?!"

Artorias blinks heavily. "F-forget... forget about me... Satan... he isn't dead. He comes back... get out while you can."

Barbatos flicks his eyes in the direction Satan perished, but he can't make out anything in the smog. "Nyeh! I cut his head off. No worries! C'mon, bro, I've gotta get you to the healers! You're in bad shape!"

Artorias's eyes widen. "The ground... it's trembling. He's already reviving. You... you have to go... you're too weak, Barbatos..."

"No! I'm not weak!" Barbatos says, tears in his eyes. "I won't leave you to die! Look, bro! I'm a Lord now! I gutted a bunch of fleshbags! I can protect you!"

Indeed, it's only now that I realize Barbatos's horns appear more prominent than before, standing nearly an inch tall on the sides of his head. It also explains why his metal manipulation seemed much faster and more precise than the last time I saw it.

Artorias turns delirious. His head lolls to the side. "Go... go... too weak... go..."

Barbatos gnashes his teeth. "I won't! I'm not a weakling! I'm big and strong, just like you! We have to stick together! That's what brothers do!"

Satan finishes reviving. He rises to his feet and sweeps his gaze through the smog, turning his head towards Barbatos's sobbing voice.

"I hate this!" Barbatos screams. "I hate people calling me weak!! I'm not weak! I'm strong! I'm awesome, like you!!"

Satan jumps toward Barbatos. His Vectors dart into the smoke and laser toward the crying little Lord.

Barbatos senses the danger incoming, but he can't react in time. Satan grabs the young demon by the back of the neck and yanks him toward the Devil.

"Uwaaah! Bro!!"

Barbatos shrieks in terror. His face spins around and sails toward Satan's outstretched hand as the Devil prepares to crush his head.

With death only an instant away, Barbatos's resolve suddenly hardens.

"NO!! I WON'T DIE HERE! YOU WILL DIE!!"

Rage swallows the Lord's mind. The instant his face presses against Satan's palm, dark energy erupts from every pore on Barbatos's body. The little guy shrieks a bloody warcry, his voice deepened by several octaves. His muscles explode with power.

"YOU HURT MY BROTHER!! I'LL KILL YOU!!"

Satan tries to crush Barbatos's head, but the dark energy around Barbatos's skin transforms into an iron-like barrier. Barbatos grabs Satan's hand and yanks it off his face. His strength increases by a factor of twenty as he tears the Devil's arm from his shoulder. A shower of blood explodes from Satan's stump, but he doesn't get much time to process the pain. Immediately, Barbatos plants a foot in the ground and throws himself at the Devil, summoning shards of metal to cover his hands and turn them into lethally sharp claws.

The newly arisen Lord swings his claws in huge, sweeping arcs, tearing out Satan's ribs and sending chunks of skin and bone flying in every direction. Satan flings Barbatos away with the combined strength of all eight Vectors, but the instant the berserked Lord touches the ground, he charges at Satan again, snarling like a wolverine.

"BETRAYER! DOUBLE-CROSSER!! YOU AIN'T HALF THE DEMON VALAC WAS!!"

Barbatos dashes to Satan's left. He swings his claws down, tears up the ground, and flings a hail of dirt and rocks at the Devil. They sail through Artorias's smog and smack Satan, but only distract him for a split-second. Satan counters by clapping his hands together and summoning the power of wind to blow away the remainder of the smoke and debris.

Instantly, Satan's demeanor changes. With the smoke no longer clouding the human's shared vision, Satan jerks to the side, not bothering to look directly at Barbatos. He snaps his Vectors toward the Lord of Iron, but one only manages to grab the side of Barbatos's arm. It squeezes, hard, and tears off a chunk of skin, but Barbatos dives into a roll and pounces at Satan. His arm heals instantly, aided by some supernatural regeneration ability.

Barbatos and Satan engage in a high-speed battle. The Lord of Iron gashes out parts of Satan's body, but the Devil retaliates in kind, ripping out chunks of skin and muscle whenever he manages to land a lucky hit on Barbatos. Both of them face each other head-on, attacking with brutal savagery. Their blood and sinew coat the battlefield in the smell of death. Whenever Barbatos gets injured, he heals instantly, but Satan ignores any damage he takes entirely.

Eventually, after a minute of fighting to keep the enraged Lord from ripping him apart, Satan succumbs to his wounds. With his right arm missing, lacerations severing his tendons and muscles, and dozens of internal organs ruptured, agonizing pain punctuates the Devil's final gasp of breath as Barbatos slaps Satan's head clean off his shoulders, sending it flying into the crowd of humans like a cannonball. It pulverizes three primitives who were unable to dodge in time, and shatters into a mass of blood and bone when it strikes the dirt.

Barbatos doesn't let up. Even as Satan's body slumps over, Barbatos grabs him and begins tearing what's left of Satan to pieces.

"FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!! I WON'T LET YOU COME BACK, YOU WORTHLESS PIECE OF SHIT!!"

The Lord of Iron's razor-sharp claws tear Satan's limbs off, flinging them into the crater behind him. He crushes bones, dices and slices muscles, and flays Satan's skin to nothing.

Suddenly, Satan begins to regenerate. Barbatos grins excitedly. **"HAHAHA!! YOU THINK I'LL JUST LET YOU HEAL?! NOT ON MY WATCH!!"**

Despite Satan's incredibly fast regeneration, Barbatos goes into overdrive. He uses his metal manipulation, huge muscles, and insane speed to batter Satan's corpse with all his might. For over two minutes, Barbatos prevents the First Emperor's return from death.

Barbatos begins to pant. He rears back to smash Satan's regenerating arm, only to swivel his head to the side. Five humans dash toward him, equipped with little more than rocks and their bare fists. Their spears, destroyed or lost during the battle against the demons, would prove to be of little use against the Lord infused with Herculean strength.

Each human begins flinging their rocks at Barbatos. Barbatos stares at them silently as the rocks smack against his body, barely bruising him before he regenerates.

"Hahaha... what is this? Some kind of joke?! Are you MOCKING ME?!"

Barbatos leaps away from Satan and cackles maniacally as he rips the primitives to shreds, killing them before they can react. **"Bahahaha!! WHAT A JOKE!! NOBODY CAN STAND UP TO ME, NOW! I AM BARBATOS THE ALMIGHTY, THE INVINCIBLE! NYEHEHE!!"**

It only takes Barbatos a few seconds to kill Hercules' primitive humans, but that proves an adequate amount of time for Satan to finish regenerating. His glowing eyes bolt open, and he slams his Vectors against the ground, launching himself fifty feet into the sky.

Barbatos whirls around. "Aw, shit! I got tricked!"

The young demon starts to jump into the air after Satan, but the Devil's mind is already five steps ahead. His thoughts, as well as those of Hercules and all the other humans, merge into a unified hivemind.

The demons will win, soon. Drastic measures required. Adjusting priorities.

The Devil begins motioning with his hands. As Barbatos rushes toward him from the ground below, Satan summons the power of wind and launches himself straight down like a railgun.

"What the-?!"

Barbatos yelps in surprise as Satan flies past him and smashes his fist against the planet, using Earth Manipulation to send a shockwave deep into the tectonic plates. A moment later, Satan yanks his fist up, combining his Earth Manipulation with Poseidon's Water Manipulation to summon the water from a vast, underground lake. A chasm three-feet-wide and miles deep opens up beneath him. Before Satan can fall inside, a violent ejection of freezing-cold liquid rushes up, flooding the underground caves Valac's cronies dug. It tears through anything in its path and slams against Satan's back, firing him into the sky like a shotgun.

The Devil spins around, lands on his feet, and creates a mana barrier to stand atop the plume of liquid like a surfer. Satan's eyes glow more intensely. With a flurry of motion, he begins using his hands and Vectors to fire ultra-compressed shots of water at his enemies below. Dozens of demons dive to their right

and left, avoiding some attacks, only to end up gored to death by the humans. As its pressure lessens, Satan's wall of water crashes against the ground and sweeps everyone off their feet.

Artorias, still broken and dying from his battle, spirals away helplessly as the current yanks him into the distance. Barbatos lands in the river with a *splash*. "Bro! BRO!!" His body begins to lose its strength as his will to fight fades.

The Lord of Iron rides the current and swims after his brother, leaving Satan's onslaught uncontested as he fires compressed water at any demon in his path.

We are Legion. We follow our leader to the end.

* * *

Bael and Hercules, still locked in a stalemate of a battle, jump away from each other as the newly uncovered river begins rapidly flooding the crater and flowing back underground. Bael's eyes flick toward the crater rim. *Damn! I'm still stuck here, fighting this useless piece of shit by myself! The boss should've killed all the fleshbags and told everyone to skedaddle by now!*

Hercules laughs triumphantly as the water rises to his knees. "Imbecilic demon! While you stayed here to fight me, I took control of your leader's mind! Satan is mine, now! He's killing demons, and there's nothing you can do to stop him!"

Bael narrows his eyes. "Bullshit! Satan would never work for the likes of you."

Screams of pain over the ridge reach Bael's ears. He tilts his head toward them, only to realize the ones howling in pain are demons, not humans.

"You underestimated me, little demon," Hercules says. "As did Satan and everyone else! They thought me a foolish meathead, someone incapable of forming coherent battle strategies. While that might be the case for you, it was never true for me!"

Hercules aims his palm at Bael and uses his telekinetic abilities to yank the Duke of Pain toward him. Bael grunts in annoyance and braces himself for a fist to the face, only to yelp in surprise as Hercules grabs him by the throat and plunges him into the rising waters inside the crater.

"You can take a beating, demon, but can you breathe underwater?! I think not!"

Bael's entire body submerges beneath the water, which has already risen to Hercules' waist. The Titan cackles as Bael struggles to free himself. He kicks his legs, grabs Hercules' arm and tries to pull it away, but the Titan only strengthens his grip.

"Gurgle, gurgle! Have you anything to say?! I can't hear you!!"

* * *

Atop the crater, Satan continues wiping out the last vestiges of his fellow demons. With the current slowing behind him, he simply uses the water already available to fire continuous concentrated bursts at anyone unlucky enough to stand in his range. The humans nearby combine their efforts to kill off the stragglers, but a lone Lord stands apart from the rest, still managing to hold his own despite desperate odds.

Orias, Lord of the Moon, wrapped in a brown cloak concealing his body, summons forth a wide variety of elemental powers. Fire and ice bend themselves to his will, as do the elements of Earth, lightning, and a dozen others. Despite being little more than a Lord, his powers seem far superior to those of other demons, allowing him to fend off dozens of humans at once.

After snapping his fingers, Orias fires several flame-bullets at two nearby barbarians, blowing out their chests and sending them sprawling.

"Tch. I'm running out. Not much longer, now."

Orias snaps his fingers again. A flash of light ignites in his palm, and he summons a wall of ice to block several of Satan's water-missiles.

"Everyone else is down. I'm the only one left. If I'd have known things would turn out this way, I'd have stayed underground. Fate bends me over, once again. The Creator is a bastard."

The Lord of the Moon grits his teeth in annoyance. Despite his dire situation, he seems more annoyed than desperate. I can only assume he's resigned himself to death.

Satan leaps into the sky, bringing gallons of water along for the ride. He motions with his hands, and the blob of water adheres to his back. Within seconds, he finishes summoning Poseidon's Octopus Form, which, in addition to his Vectors and Arms, gives him a total of eighteen limbs.

Orias flicks his eyes toward the incoming threat. "Oh, fuck my life."

The Lord of the Moon quickly thrusts his hand into his robe. When he pulls it back out, I catch a glimpse of a shiny white piece of metal, or perhaps something else. He immediately closes his palm, snaps his finger, and inhales.

"One minute. It'll have to do."

Satan falls from the sky, aims himself like a bullet, and smashes into Orias with all his strength. The Devil weaponizes his invincible body, using it like a cannonball to try and crush Orias with all his weight.

Instead, the opposite happens. Orias holds his ground and thrusts a palm out, shoving the Devil backward with surprising strength. Satan grabs the Earth with his Water Tentacles and uses his Vectors to smash and pound Orias. Each one balls into a fist and slugs Orias's body like a sledgehammer, battering him from eight directions at once. The poor Lord hasn't a chance of resisting. He gets knocked around, thrown into the receding waters, grabbed by the legs, and smashed into the mud over and over.

Orias doesn't yell or scream. He takes the abuse without complaint, and after several seconds, Satan drops his unmoving form into the ankle-deep water. The Devil grabs Orias's head and squeezes, intending to crush his skull.

Nothing happens.

Satan furrows his brow. He yanks Orias's hood off and lunges forward, only to stare in bewilderment.

Orias's body shines in the midday sun. Instead of blood-red skin like all the other demons, his is ghostly white, pockmarked with hundreds of strange, concave holes. Each one, barely the size of a marble,

is shaped slightly differently from the others around it. They appear to be sockets capable of fitting small, pebble-shaped objects.

After a moment, I suddenly realize a few of the holes are not, in fact, empty. Some of them have tiny little gems of varying colors embedded inside. Red, green, blue, purple... all the colors of the rainbow appear among them.

Orias jerks his head up to look at Satan. "Bastard. That was my last diamond. Now I'm pissed."

With a quick motion, Orias plucks a blue sapphire from the back of his head, clutches it in his palm, and snaps his fingers. His eyes shimmer, and all the water around him evaporates.

"I *hate* turncoats."

Water forms over Satan's head, solidifies into a one-ton block of ice, and slams down like a sledgehammer. At the last second, the Devil presses half his Vectors and Tentacles into the Earth, and uses the others to catch the incoming projectile.

However, this leaves his body exposed.

Before Satan can fling the giant ice-cube away, Orias springs into action. He leaps to his feet, plucks a ruby from his neck, and snaps his fingers.

Fwoosh!

A gout of fire bursts from Orias's mouth, blasts Satan's body, and scorches the Devil with several-thousand-degree flames. Satan loses control of his Vectors, his Tentacles fall apart, and the massive ice-cube collapses on top of him, flattening him like a pancake.

Orias wipes his forehead. His skin fades from white to red, and quickly regains its demonic coloring.

"If what I saw earlier was correct, this guy doesn't stay dead. Cripes. I'm nearly out of gems."

With the rest of the demons nearby falling one-by-one, the remainder of the humans turn their attention on Orias. They dash toward him, weapons raised, intent on his destruction.

Orias pulls his hood back to cover his face. "Miserable way to die."

"Garooo!"

A spine-tingling wolf howl erupts in the air. The ground explodes outward, and dozens of demons begin rushing to the surface, along with Hellhounds and Goblins.

The massive, fifty-eyed wolves snarl viciously and pounce at the primitives. Far faster and more powerful than any demon grunt, the monstrous animals begin tearing through the remainder of the barbarians like lions devouring mice. While none of the humans scream in terror, their final moments end with a rush of adrenaline as the monsters rend them limb from limb.

Lucifer hops out of the newly opened hole in the ground. "Orias! There you are! I'm sorry we're late. Where are the others?"

"Dead," He mumbles. "Only a few of us remain."

"Mmm."

Lucifer fixates her third eye on Satan's corpse. Already, dark energy is beginning to swirl around it as he regenerates. Diablo climbs out from behind her, along with Vepar and Belial. The newcomers gape at the bodies strewn in every direction.

"Lucy, baby, what did we just walk into?" Diablo asks.

"Hell," Lucifer replies, as Satan regrows skin and muscle. "Absolute Hell. I don't know how Hercules managed it, but he's taken control of Satan, just like all the rest of these humans."

Belial stares wide-eyed at Satan's reviving corpse. "I've... I've never seen anything like it..."

"Me neither. Get to work. There are dozens of injured demons around here. Tend to whomever you can. Vepar, Diablo, you're with me. We have to find a way to subdue Satan. Orias, can you still fight?"

The Lord of the Moon grimaces. "Not for much longer. I'm almost out of gems."

"Retreat. Bring the others with you. We'll take over from here."

Orias breathes a sigh of relief. "Hoo. That sounds like *not dying*. I'm in."

Satan finishes reviving and launches toward the newcomers, but Lucifer knocks him away with a concentrated kinetic blast from her third eye.

"Fucking men. They always leave me a mess to clean up."

Part 134: Master of all Elements

Satan, now controlled by Hercules, launches toward Vepar. His Vectors and wind magic augment his speed, allowing him to blow past Lucifer and Diablo in the blink of an eye. He targets the weakest of the three newcomers and smashes her in the face with his fist, sending her flying into the dirt. The instant Vepar hits the ground, her body pops like a bag of dry ice. She explodes into a gaseous green mist, saving herself from instant death.

While Satan stares at Vepar's mist-body form, trailing her movements for a moment, Lucifer goes on the offensive. Her third eye shifts to blue. An invisible wave of telekinetic energy grabs Satan, yanks him backward, and hurls him into the soggy dirt. Lucifer summons her inner mana and attacks Satan with her Demonic Trance, sending waves of mental pressure pouring into his mind.

YOU CANNOT RESIST. A FAILURE OF A LEADER! A COWARD WHO LEFT US BEHIND!

Lucifer keeps her third eye locked onto Satan as he lays motionless on the ground. "Diablo! I have him trapped in my trance! Hit him while he's- eeyaah!!"

The three-eyed demoness violently lurches backward mid-sentence. Lucifer recoils from her attack and clutches her face as waves of agony rip through her mind.

"Hnn! Ahhh! It hurts!!"

Having seen some unknown horror inside Satan's mind, the Emperor of Providence stumbles backward and falls on her ass. Diablo rushes over to block her as Satan jumps to his feet, unharmed.

"Baby. Baby! Are you okay?"

Lucifer squeezes both of her eyes shut and uses her hands to rub her forehead. "Mmm... I tried to attack his mind, but... there were... so many voices... so many thoughts..."

Diablo nods. "Stay behind me. I'll protect you!"

He motions with his hands and shifts all of his body's density to his feet and fists. Propelling himself from a standing position, Diablo leaps twenty feet forward and swings his right fist toward Satan's rising body. At the last second, Diablo makes a *peace* sign with his left hand and triples his kinetic force. His fist strikes Satan's body like a tactical missile, smashing the Demon Emperor several feet into the dirt and causing the Earth to shudder.

Satan, his body beaten and broken, expires a moment later. Diablo stares at him warily. "Lucy! Are you sure he'll revive?"

Lucifer clambers to her feet. Her forehead creases as she tries to rub away a splitting headache. "Of course. Be on your guard. It takes him roughly one minute to regenerate, from what I've seen."

Her third eye stares at Satan and follows a line of energy stretching from his body upward into the sky, where it joins a few other strands, then flies over the crater and enters Hercules' body.

Diablo can't see it, but I can, Lucifer thinks to herself. *Satan and the remaining humans have their minds and bodies linked to Hercules somehow. If that Titan can control souls, the rest of us might be in danger as well. I don't know what happened to make Satan fall under his control, but we're in great danger the longer this battle continues.*

Not far away, a few dozen humans group up together as they try desperately to stave off the hundreds of demons assaulting them from every direction. Surprisingly, thanks to their focus on defense over offense, the various Grunts can't land many killing blows on the unified humans. When the demons draw too close, they take wooden spears to the face and gut, forcing them to encircle their prey without actually killing them.

Lucifer eyes the situation with the humans for only a moment before returning her attention to Satan's regenerating corpse. *The low-ranked demons can handle those humans, so long as they don't blunder along like morons. The problem we face is how to either defeat Satan or free him from Hercules' clutches. Thousands of souls protect his mind. I can't attack him from the inside. Damn.*

Vepar reforms beside Lucifer. Her body appears unharmed, but she breathes a little harder than before. "How should we attack Satan? If he can come back from death, then..."

"Everyone has a limit," Lucifer murmurs. "We'll have to find his."

Diablo rubs his fist. "I've hit Bael before... it reminded me of punching a mountain. Compared to him, Satan lacks in defense."

"Don't underestimate the Devil," Lucifer says. She watches as Satan's skin finishes mending together, and he jumps to his feet. "His Vectors are particularly troublesome."

Satan doesn't move. He stares at the three demons for a moment, before his eyeballs suddenly triple in luminosity. They transform from glowing marbles into brilliant, sparkling diamonds. The Demon Emperor straightens his posture and looks around for a moment.

"Well, well. If it isn't Lucifer herself: Queen of the Bloodskins. It's been a while since we last spoke."

Satan's voice gurgles mechanically. It isn't him speaking, but someone unaccustomed to his manner of speech.

"Hercules," Lucifer murmurs. She tilts her head slightly toward the crater behind Satan, where the Titan's body resides. "You've... taken full control of Satan, then?"

Satan nods. **"I have. My limited control reduced his effectiveness dramatically. Now that I've taken out that troublesome Duke, I'll join the fray and crush you."**

Lucifer's heart skips a beat. "Troublesome Duke... ah! Bael! Did you kill him?!"

Diablo balls his hands into fists. "Vepar. Stay back. Look for an opening, but don't get too close. A Lord cannot compare to an Emperor."

Vepar shifts her feet uneasily. "It's two Emperors and a Lord against one Emperor. Shouldn't we have an advantage?"

"Doubtful," Lucifer replies. "I've watched both of Satan's battles since his return. Every time he dies, he comes back slightly stronger than before. His strength borders on the absurd."

Satan's eye twitches. **"Is that so? That sounds like a Titan ability."**

Hercules balls both of Satan's hands into fists. A vicious snarl crosses his face.

"Worthless bloodskin. Satan slew my wife and took her soul and powers for himself. I cannot detect her among all the other beings he's murdered, but I know she is inside him. Just one more reason for me to scorch your kind from this Earth."

Satan closes his eyes. He inhales sharply as a wave of emotion passes over his face. His breath catches, and he clutches his chest.

"I broke every rule of my forefathers for the sake of revenge. The only emotion I feel now is rage. All of your kind will perish today. Your lineage will end, and your blood will water the land. Today marks the end of your species!"

[Recommended Listening](#)

Satan's hands become a blur. Unlike his half-hearted magic-casting from earlier, with Hercules in control, the Devil's mental acuity jumps tenfold. Instantly, he summons Poseidon's water magic, the power of earth, wind, and fire, and unleashes a hail of missiles upon the three demons. Vepar pounces to the side, avoiding a gust of air-accelerated water bullets, while Diablo steels his body to block dozens of sharpened pebbles. Lucifer's eye ignites, sending a surge of telekinetic energy to bat away a dozen scorching-hot fireballs.

All of Satan's attacks fly off to the side harmlessly. However, the instant the other demons busy themselves blocking or avoiding his attacks, the Devil pounces at Lucifer, skittering toward her like a freakish spider. His Vectors lance toward the demoness, intent on tearing her limb from limb. Her third eye goes into overdrive, darting between each of the eight invisible arms to fire small telekinetic blasts. Each one bats a Vector aside, throwing Satan off-balance.

The Devil stumbles and lands on his feet. He summons water blades a moment later and fires the razor-sharp discs at Lucifer, intending to behead her.

Diablo pounces in between his girl and Satan. He activates his kinetic field and deflects the liquid blades, dissipating them into harmless water droplets. Diablo plants his foot in the dirt and jumps toward Satan, combining his kinetic energy with his body densification to deliver a mighty, bone-shattering punch to the Devil's ribs.

He fails.

Unlike before, now that Hercules is piloting Satan's body, the Devil swiftly knocks Diablo to the side, parrying his punch and sending him skidding into the dirt toward the crater's edge.

Diablo recovers instantly. He leaps to his feet and faces the Devil, pinning Hercules's stolen body between the Emperor of Annihilation and the Emperor of Providence. Diablo and Lucifer circle him like

tigers waiting to strike.

Vepar rights herself. Already winded, the Lord of Venom gasps as she sizes up the power levels of the three Demon Emperors.

Satan crosses his arms.

"What are you waiting for? There are two of you, and only one of me."

Lucifer's fist twitches. "Satan has the combined power of many demons, and Poseidon as well. If anything, Diablo and I are the ones at a disadvantage. If push comes to shove... I may have to use my trump card."

Diablo freezes. "Don't. We don't need to go that far, baby."

Lucifer nods. "You're right. Even if Satan is damn-near invincible, I don't need to resort to extremes. Come, my puppies! Come to me!"

The Emperor of Providence yells, startling me. Hercules appears unworried. A dozen Hellhounds spring over the heads of the huddled humans like wingless hawks. The ferocious animals snarl viciously and charge toward the three Emperors, dashing at speeds that would give a cheetah an inferiority complex.

Satan scowls as he watches the animals approach. **"Tch. I've heard of these creatures. Hellhounds. Each one possesses the strength of a cave bear and the ferocity of a pack of wolves. Claws that rend enchanted steel, jaws that crush boulders effortlessly... truly, your wretched pets are vile abominations."**

One of the Hellhounds runs over to Lucifer and nudges her arm with its nose. She absentmindedly pets it while keeping her eyes locked on Satan. "Don't you *dare* slander my beautiful puppies. I'll make you eat those words!"

All twelve Hellhounds pounce at Satan. The Devil leaps into the air to avoid them and summons a fireball in each hand. Despite his low affinity for fire magic, he augments their heat and power with wind magic cast by his Vectors.

Satan transforms the two little fireballs into massive globes of flame, each one the size of beach balls. He hurls them at the Hellhounds below, only for Lucifer to send telekinetic shockwaves at them in midair, blasting them to smithereens. Their fiery debris sprays out in a cone and rains down upon the Earth, scorching what little grass dots the ground here and there. The Hellhounds snarl and snap, biting at the bits of red-hot ash wherever it lands.

Hercules narrows his eyes. *Satan is a demon vastly superior to the others below. He wields a surprising number of elemental powers and affinities. If I combine them in different ways, crushing the rest should be a simple matter.*

Satan's body begins to fall toward the Hellhounds. Immediately, the Devil motions with his hands, yanking a pillar of stone from the ground below him. It erupts from beneath the monstrous wolves, flings

them aside, and rushes toward his feet. Satan perches atop the pillar with his Vectors, summons the power of fire, and unleashes all the heat he can muster upon the slender pillar of rock.

The heat from his attack scorches the stone pedestal from all directions. In only two seconds, the several-thousand-degree-flames melt the rock to slag, transforming it into magma. Satan fires a blast of air at the makeshift lava, spraying it in all directions. Molten chunks land on the backs and sides of the Hellhounds, making the animals screech in pain. They dive to their left and right, rolling on the ground in panic as they try to rub the lava off their backs.

Diablo jumps in front of Lucifer. He claps his hands and sends a wave of air upward, deflecting the magma rushing toward her. "Now!"

Lucifer motions with her hands. A sword made of pure demonic energy materializes before her, followed by another, and another. A hundred of them appear and hover in midair, then fly toward Satan like a hail of arrows.

"This is new," Hercules murmurs. He uses one Vector to hold himself above the half-melted pillar, and treats the other seven like invisible shields. They zip around, batting and deflecting Lucifer's projected swords at lightning speeds. While Satan's Vectors parry her hundred-weapon-assault, Hercules uses Satan's arms to attack with magic. He yanks what's left of the underground river to himself, creates a ball of water twice his body's size, and begins rapid-firing bolts of pressurized liquid at the demoness below.

Lucifer jumps around, backflips, and lands on one of her uninjured Hellhounds. She fixates her third eye on her projected swords, dancing them to and fro to keep Satan's Vectors busy. However, her other two eyes remain free to keep track of other threats. She uses them to watch out for Satan's magic and urges the Hellhound to start dodging and avoiding his attacks.

Satan flicks his gaze toward Diablo. The Emperor of Annihilation starts digging his hands into the dirt and yanking out rocks. Diablo inhales for a moment, concentrates, and lightly tosses a large stone into the air before himself. An instant later, he rears his fist back, multiplies his physical force by a factor of ten, and punches it with all his strength.

"Damn!"

Satan curses as a hail of shrapnel flies toward him at twice the speed of sound.

I can't avoid it!

Trapped in place by Lucifer's projected weapons, Satan can only watch helplessly as a thousand shards of stone races toward him. Each one tears through his body like bullets through a piece of paper.

Shik! Shik!

"Gahk!!"

Satan's body wrenches in agony. His tendons, muscles, and several vital organs fall apart under Diablo's surprise attack. For a split-second, Satan's mental control of his Vectors weakens.

Lucifer smiles greedily. "There!"

Her projected swords double their speed. Satan's Vectors move a half-second too slow. One sword slips through his defenses, impales his heart, and yanks him off the pillar. A moment later, ten more follow, severing his legs in the process.

Satan smashes into the ground below. The Hellhounds, injured but still able to move, leap toward him in rage.

"NO!!"

Satan ignores the pain wracking his body, and the mana-infused swords impaling him from several directions. As the Hellhounds pounce at him, Satan claps his hands, summons the power of wind in his grasp, and releases it in all directions, knocking the Hellhounds backward.

The massive wolves spin their bodies in midair and land on their paws with catlike agility. They rush toward Satan again, but their movements aren't quick enough. Satan's Vectors violently tear out Lucifer's swords, snap them in half, and send his blood spraying everywhere. Satan quickly repairs the damage to his body with Poseidon's water magic, then slaps the ground and sucks into it using his Earth manipulation.

Lucifer's Hellhounds land where he was just laying. They begin furiously digging at the dirt as they try to chase after him, but their efforts prove fruitless.

Satan bursts out of the soil from beneath Lucifer. He tries to grab her with his Vectors, but her third eye instantly fixates on him.

WHOOMPH!

A psionic blast of energy fires from her eye and smashes into Satan's face, pounding him backward as her Hellhound mount evades him.

Lucifer's Hellhound skids to a stop. "You'll have to do better than that, Titan! There is no barrier my third eye can't penetrate! Surprise attacks will always fail against me!"

Satan splashes water on his face, healing the damage Lucifer dealt. He jumps out of the ground and lands on his feet, eying her and Diablo warily.

Hercules thoughts bubble up, a hint of anxiety on the surface. *These Emperors have incredible teamwork. Were they not vile Bloodskins, I might even congratulate them on their skills. However! I cannot allow this vessel to perish. The twenty seconds it will take for him to regenerate will open my physical body up to attack. I don't think I can handle both of them and Bael as well.*

Hercules closes Satan's eyes. Beneath the Devil's eyelids, his glowing orbs flick around as Hercules scans Satan's mind.

Fire. Water. Wind. Earth. Vectors. This Devil has a surprising array of skills. Hmm. Oh? What is this?

Satan opens his eyes. He motions with his hands, and a Blood Contract appears in the air before him.

Hercules blinks. *A magical contract, bound by blood? He appears to possess thousands of them. The essence of various demons lines each one.*

At the sight of Satan's Blood Contracts hanging in midair, Diablo and Lucifer both turn pale as ghosts. Their eyes widen as they realize what is happening.

"No, no, no..." Lucifer murmurs.

Hercules' eyes flick across the text on the contract. He skims the thousands of finely-printed words in an instant, his reading ability far more agile than seems possible.

"Oho... what's this? You must obey Satan's orders, no matter what? You cannot harm him if he does not wish it? These conditions appear to last until death."

While distracted by the contract floating in front of himself, Hercules fails to notice a fine mist rippling against his Emperor servant's back. Suddenly, violent convulsions take him as he inhales acrid poison. **"Gah! Huwak!!"**

"You lowered your guard," Vepar says, her voice carried on the wind. "Now, I will rot your body from the inside out!"

Vepar's poisonous gas turns corrosive. Before Hercules can react, Satan's flesh begins to bubble and boil. He stumbles forward as his skin and nerves fizzle away. Electrical agony courses through his system as Vepar attacks his brain, heart, and lungs simultaneously.

Satan falls to his side. **"Geyough!! Aahhhh!!!"**

His body convulses. His limbs shiver and tremble. His glowing eyes dart around erratically.

Several seconds pass. Vepar rips apart his inner organs and liquefies the blood cells inside his body. Her voice yells on the wind, spoken via magic and not a physical form. "Lucifer, Diablo, you fools! Don't just stand there! Attack the Titan himself!"

Lucifer blinks. She flicks her third eye to Hercules' motionless body, where he continues to hold Bael underwater inside the crater. "Ah! Diablo, quickly, let's go!"

Diablo nods. "On it!"

Satan's eyes flick around. Hercules can't control their movements, but he hears the words of the demons.

Damn! They're coming! I didn't expect things to turn out like this. That damned backstabber caught me off-guard!

Hardly have Diablo and Lucifer taken two steps before a sudden flash of movement appears before them. Both Emperors stumble awkwardly and raise their eyes in horror as Zeus, King of the Titans, towers over them. His massive boots shake the Earth as his Thunderstep allows him to form a physical barrier between his son and the two Emperors.

"Oho. Do you intend to attack my son while he's defenseless? I'm afraid I can't allow that."

Diablo yelps in surprise. "The Titan King!"

Satan's eyes blink frantically as Hercules starts to panic. *No! I told my father I could handle these Bloodskins on my own! I don't need his help! I can't let him take my glory! The demons are MINE!!*

Despite the horrendous pain wracking Satan's body, Hercules powers through. He forces every ounce of willpower left to press the Devil's hands together. What follows is a several-second series of hand gestures as the Titan tries desperately to summon the remainder of Satan's magical reserves.

After ten seconds, he finishes. Every drop of oxygen in Satan's body erupts from his pores, ripping Vepar's poison out of his cells wherever she might be. Vepar gasps in surprise as her gaseous form ejects from Satan's body. "What? Impossible!"

Satan's eyes bolt open. An instant later, his hands turn into a blur of motion. Wind swirls around him, turns into a mini-tornado, and sucks Vepar's gaseous form up and away, tossing her into the sky. The Devil's boiled and battered body, despite being a misshapen lump of flesh, still possesses enough magic to perform magic spells. He pulls over the remainder of the water on the ground to cover himself like a blanket. As the liquid seeps into Satan's skin, Poseidon's curative abilities take hold, repairing his nerves and internal organs in seconds.

Lucifer flicks her gaze from Zeus to Satan. "No!"

Before she can fire a magical attack at him, Satan leaps to his feet. He aims his palm at her and Diablo.

"That's enough. Prostrate yourselves."

Lucifer's eyes widen. She stumbles forward, kneels, and flings her hands against the ground. Diablo follows a moment later. Both of them bow before Satan as though he were a king.

Zeus stares at them in confusion. "What? I don't understand. What is happening?"

Satan slaps his chest. He raises his eyes to the sky. **"You, there! Backstabber! Reform yourself and kneel before me!"**

Vepar rematerializes in midair. She screams in fright, plunges to the ground, and hits it like a sack of bricks. Her body slaps the dirt with a tremendous *crack*, snapping one of her arms in the process and causing her to scream in pain. "Eeeyahh!"

Still, Vepar's body moves of its own will. Despite the tears rolling down her face, she uses her other arm to shove herself to a kneeling position, where she bows before Satan.

Hercules claps his hands. **"Hahahaha... oh, the irony. Don't you see, father? By taking over the body of the demon leader, I also gained control of those he rules. What a fortuitous turn of events!"**

Zeus narrows his gaze. "My son. To become a soul manipulator... is..."

"The worst offense to our ancestors. I know, father. What does it matter, if these demons might kill us all, otherwise? Now, look at them! They are bowing before the one they mocked, not minutes earlier! Is this not the sweetest revenge one can dream up?"

Lucifer snarls, her eyes fixated on the ground before her. "You won't get away with this!"

"Of course I will, she-demon. I know not what purpose binding yourself to this one served, but it will prove your undoing. After I have the lot of you summon the other demons, I'll have you kill them yourselves. Won't that be amusing? Bloodskins killing

other bloodskins! I wonder who the last one standing will be? Aha! Satan, I'd wager! I'll kill him myself!"

Zeus clenches his fist. "My son. This path you have chosen is both dangerous and vile. It is not the Titan way. Defeating your enemies in fair combat is the only way to-"

"SILENCE!!"

Satan shakes his fist at the fifty-foot Titan King.

"I tire of your platitudes! How long have our people suffered because of your ineffective rule?! You slew Cronus, only to follow the same traditions and laws he did! You were supposed to crush the bloodskins, but instead, they grew in number under your reign! Now I hold them at death's door, and you dare question me?!"

Zeus turns his head slightly, averting his gaze from Satan's glowing eyes. "The traditions exist for a reason, my son. Soul manipulation is a cursed art. It breeds greed, violence, and slaughter among brothers and sisters. I learned of this the hard way... when other Titans gained such power and attempted to take territory that wasn't theirs. That is why I was able to slay my father. He sent me to crush those miscreants; to kill those who would murder wantonly. If you continue to adhere to this path... you too will fall."

A look of disbelief spreads across Satan's face. **"What? Are... are you threatening me, father? Do you intend to kill me as well? Your son; the one who is at the precipice of exterminating demonkind, forever?"**

Zeus shakes his head. "No. I could never bring myself to harm you. My beloved son. My last remaining child. I would sooner fling myself into the fires of a volcano than bring your mother more grief."

Satan nods. **"Then, if you are not willing to kill me, stand aside. I will not waver. The old traditions are dead. I will kill these bloodskins and accept whatever punishment you deem fit. However... until every last one has fallen into darkness, I will not waver! I will crush them all!!"**

Zeus turns away. A tear slides down his cheek.

"Do as you will. I... I only wish... I had not failed you... as a father."

With a motion of his hands, Zeus vanishes. His Thunderstep tears him away, allowing him to travel at the speed of sound.

Silence follows.

Hercules stares after his father's afterimage. He blinks for a moment, as thoughts bubble in his mind.

I will not concede. Even if my father is right, it doesn't matter. Satan took Megara from me. She was the one I loved most in this world... more than myself. I cannot go on without her. Before I pass to the Great Beyond, the least I can do is eliminate those who stole her away. I care not what my revenge costs... only that I succeed.

Hercules lowers his gaze to the two Demon Emperors and Lord prostrated before him. All three of them tremble in rage as they try to force their bodies to move, but nothing they try can free them from Satan's Blood Contract.

Hercules sighs. **"Arise. You will not attack me. You will not hurt me. Your only mission is to attack all other demons you see. You must tear them limb-from-limb and spread their blood from one corner of the Earth to the other. You must-"**

Hercules pauses. He cocks his head as the three demons rise to their feet, fury burning in their eyes.

"Hm? How strange. The large one is still resisting. He continues to draw breath, despite being submerged underwater for many minutes. I commanded him to stop, but he continues to oppose me. This is... troubling."

Lucifer grits her teeth. "What's the matter, Hercules? Is Bael too much for you to handle?"

Diablo flicks his gaze to Lucifer. A look of recognition appears in his eyes, but he hides it a moment later. "Haha, yeah. Bael's way too much for Hercules to handle. It would take the combined efforts of all of us to beat him."

Satan raises an eyebrow. **"He's only a Duke. Stop trying to act like he holds a candle to the three of you."**

Flicking his gaze toward the humans and grunts, Hercules frowns.

"All demons! Come to me! You no longer need to battle my warriors."

Dozens of the grunts turn to face Hercules. The looks on their faces turn to panic as they realize they can't control their bodies. However, many of the others stay in place and stare at their brethren in confusion.

So that's how it is, Hercules thinks. Satan hasn't made contracts with more than a small portion of the demons alive today. Luckily, the most powerful ones appear to be under his control. It will have to do.

"Kill those who do not obey me!" Satan yells, forcing the two Emperors, Vepar, and the other loyalist demons to act. **"Kill them all! Then, follow me. We have a Duke to kill."**

Aw, heck. What a bother.

Bael's thoughts bubble to the surface as Hercules holds him underneath the bone-chilling water. Naturally, the Duke of Pain's cold resistance prevents any adverse effects, but he still glowers through the ripples of the water's surface at Hercules in annoyance.

"-you squirm! Despite your ugly fish-face, it seems you can't breathe underwater! Too bad, because you're missing out on quite the show! Your friends continue to fall like flies!"

Bael listens to Hercules' triumphant laughter. The young Titan cackles madly as his fingers wrap around the Duke's neck.

Ugh. The punk's still blabbering. I'm hungry. My hair is ruined. This whole day has been a total drag. First, I had to fight the Sunshine Brothers... then Valac kept poking my head over and over. Now I'm fighting some snotty brat. This sucks. I just want to kick back, squeeze some tits, and eat a sandwich.

Hercules laughs even harder. His voice warbles through the water, reaching Bael's ears like a rumble in the distance. "Hahaha! Oh, if only you could see what I see, little bloodskin! While your breath shortens, your friends battle Satan with all their might! Look at them struggle!"

The Duke rolls his eyes. *Bloody hell. I hate the sound of this fucker's voice. All he does is blab all day long. I bet he looks in the mirror when he jerks off. What a loser.*

Bael tries squeezing Hercules' arm a bit harder to try and wriggle free, but the Titan's grip proves unbreakable.

I've gotta hand it to him, though... Hercules has me beat when it comes to strength. He hasn't done more than tickle me, yet, but his power keeps going up. If things continue on the same path, he might snap me in two. Hmm. What to do... what to do...

Through the rippling of the water covering his face, Bael watches as Hercules tilts his head toward the ridge above. The sounds of several massive shockwaves and the thundering of fists send rumbles through the water to Bael's ears.

Damn. Why's Big Boss fighting the other demons? Was he on Hercules' side after all? Nah. Get real. Satan is a lot of things, but he ain't a traitor. It's gotta be something else.

Hercules' hand shifts slightly on Bael's neck. A look of shock goes down the young Titan's face as he focuses much harder on mind-controlling Satan.

"I... I can't believe it! No way! Satan, you sly fox! To think, you were a Soul Manipulator, the same as me! Hahaha! I can wipe out all of the demons right here and now, thanks to you! Father, are you watching? I'm going to eliminate our greatest adversary all on my own! You needn't lift a single finger!"

Bael narrows his eyes. *Hmm? What happened? I can't see a damn thing! I wish this punk would loosen his grip, even if just for a second!*

Despite being held underwater for several minutes, Bael remains unharmed. It appears that a lack of oxygen isn't hurting him whatsoever.

Bael squirms and wriggles, kicks his feet, and shakes his head around as he tries to free himself, but Hercules' massive hands easily keep hold of the Duke. His complete control of Bael's movement reminds me of an adult stopping a child from attacking by placing a hand on their head. No matter how much Bael struggles, he simply can't overcome the body size and strength difference between himself and the Titan.

A flicker of movement at the top of the crater catches Bael's eye. Even while trapped inside muddy water, the appearance of several figures doesn't escape his attention. Bael raises an eyebrow as Satan, Lucifer, and dozens of other demons begin to line up at the crater's edge along with the few remaining primitives.

Huh? They ain't fightin' anymore? What the hell happened?

Suddenly, Hercules takes control of his body once again and yanks Bael out of the mud. He slams the Duke against the crater wall and grins like a madman. "I don't know why you continue to resist, but it's all over, Bael! Not only have I taken over Satan's mind, but his Blood Contracts have given me control of demonkind's mightiest warriors! Now, I'll force your former friends to rip you to shreds!"

Diablo stands at the crater's edge, unable to move. Still, he retains his ability to speak, as do the others controlled by Satan's Blood Contracts. "Bael! It's true! We can't fight back! We can only do as Hercules orders us!"

Bael spits water from his mouth and nose. "Ptuh. You've gotta be shittin' me. Ain't you cunts supposed to be Emperors? What's the point of a fancy title if you can't even beat one fuckin' Titan?"

Hercules grins from ear to ear. "They tried their best, but I have the blood of the Forefathers running through my veins. No demon can withstand my power. Not the Emperors, Not Satan, and certainly not *you*."

The young Titan's hand squeezes Bael's throat a little harder. Bael doesn't even notice. "Bring it on, pup. You beat the shit out of me for half an hour and didn't even scratch my skin. There ain't no way you can put me in the dirt."

Hercules's smile fades. "Impudent little worm. Even outnumbered a hundred to one, you still dare to laugh in my face? I'll make you regret being born."

Lucifer raises her voice. "Don't let him cow you, Bael. You and I both know the power you hold. Release everything. We need you now, more than ever."

Bael squirms. He squeezes Hercules' arms and tries to pry the Titan off his neck, but fails. "Easier said than done, woman! This whole day's just a giant fuckin' hassle if you ask me!"

Lucifer's third eye twitches. "I wasn't asking politely. Release everything, Bael. If you don't, I'll tell everyone your *secret*."

Bael's look of annoyance vanishes. In its place, an expression of disgust and anger appears. "You... you dirty whore... you wouldn't! You wouldn't dare!"

Lucifer's third eye flicks to Diablo. Unable to turn his head to look at her, Diablo instead narrows his eyes. "Lucy. What are you talking about?"

A maniacal grin spreads from one corner of Lucifer's mouth to the other. "Oh, nothing much. It's just that, ever since our dear Bael rose to the rank of Duke, there's a little something he's been hiding from the rest of us."

Bael's eyes widen. He snarls angrily and starts writhing around to escape Hercules' grip. "You shut your mouth! Shut it! Not another word, you fuckin' cunt!!"

Hercules glances back at Lucifer in confusion. "What is she talking about? What secret?"

"When demons rise to the rank of Duke, they have to give up something important," Lucifer replies, her smile widening further. "Valac lost his body. I lost my compassion. Bael... well... he lost..."

"SHUT YOUR WHORE MOUTH!!"

Bael plants his feet against the crater. Bloody red energy begins to bubble on his skin as he thrashes around ten times harder than before. Hercules' confusion turns to surprise as he tries to hold the Duke back. "By the forefathers! Gah! How are you-?!"

Lucifer continues. "Bael has... a teeny... tiny... little..."

"GRAAAAAH!! YOU FUCKING BITCH!!"

Fire belches from Bael's mouth. His body begins to increase in size. His horns curve and bend forward like two spears of bone. His eyes turn molten-red, and his skin cracks apart, releasing infernal flames through every pore on his skin.

"YOU NO TALK ANYMORE!! ME CRUSH YOU!! ME SMASH!!"

Hercules' eyes widen as Bael yanks the Titan's arm off his throat and delivers a gut-busting punch to his stomach. Hercules flies backward, spins and flips, and smashes against the opposite crater wall, just below the demons.

Lucifer sighs. "Well, that did it. Now he's pissed."

Diablo stares in shock as his friend's body nearly doubles in size. Bael, now in his Balrog form, pounces at the demons on the crater's edge.

"We're... so... dead."

"You have *no* idea," Lucifer replies.

Part 135: Balrog's Folly

Recommended Listening

Lucifer stands perfectly still, unable to move her body, as the Balrog leaps at her. Bael's fist smashes her chest and sends her flying backward. She tumbles end over end, careens across the ground, breaks several limbs, and lands like a pile of rags several hundred feet away. Upon seeing their mother get flattened, her Hellhounds whimper in fear. They stare at the Balrog for a few moments, then turn tail and flee into the treeline, leaving her behind.

Bael punches his palm. "STUPID BITCH!!! ME TOLD YOU NO TALK! YOU NO LISTEN!!!"

The Balrog howls in rage and charges after her. Diablo stares straight ahead into the crater, terror coursing through his veins. He tries desperately to turn his head, but he can't move his body without Hercules' permission. Behind him, the Balrog grabs Lucifer and begins smashing her into the ground over and over.

The sounds of his mate being repeatedly pummeled sends waves of nausea down Diablo's throat. "Bael! Get ahold of yourself! Stop this! You're killing my girl!!!"

Lucifer falls unconscious and goes limp as Bael beats her face to a pulp.

Suddenly, a long, slender arm smashes Bael in the chin, causing very little damage but annoying him enough to distract him. Belial, Artorias, and Barbatos leap out of the treeline and charge the Balrog.

"Let our leader go!" Belial yells, retracting her arm. "You crazy monster!"

"W-what the hell is that thing?" Barbatos squeaks. He stares at the Balrog with a mixture of awe and terror as Bael pauses his assault on Lucifer's battered form to stare at the newcomers. "It's freaking HUGE!"

At fifteen feet, Bael's Balrog form is twice as tall as all the other demons, and the same height as Hercules. Barbatos, a Lord, stands only five feet tall, shorter than Artorias and Belial both. He cowers and shivers as the unstoppable monster turns its gaze on him.

"HEY!! WHO HIT ME? ME BUSY! ME NO HAVE TIME FOR WEAK LOSERS!"

Belial retracts her long, stretchy limbs back to her body. She trembles slightly at the sight of the behemoth towering before her. "Devils. I hit that creature with everything I had. Artorias, try to pin him from below! I'll launch a frontal assault. Barbatos, you try and grab Lucifer when you have a chance!"

Barbatos flicks his gaze toward the scantily-clad Succubus. "Nyeh... I don't wanna... I don't care about Lucifer even a little-"

Belial jerks her head in his direction. Her eyes turn blood red as she glares fire and brimstone at him. "*I wasn't asking.*"

Barbatos swallows a lump in his throat. "H-hey! No problem! Grab a bitch, easy peasy! I-I got this!"

Belial doesn't reply. She returns her attention to Bael, plants her feet into the ground, and uses her super-strength and stretchy limbs to leap into the air. At the same time, Artorias dives underground and begins swimming toward Bael.

Bael blinks for a moment and stares at Belial, ignoring the burrower tunneling beneath him. "HEY! STUPID WUH-MUNN! COME CLOSER! ME FLATTEN YOU GOOD!" He shakes Lucifer's body violently to prove his point.

Artorias bursts out of the mud, grabs the Balrog's legs, and yanks the Duke of Pain several feet into the dirt. Bael yelps in surprise. "HUH?! WHAT THIS?!"

The Balrog stares at the ground in confusion for a moment, giving Belial a chance to attack. She falls from the sky and smashes her fists against Bael's skull. *WHAM WHAM WHAM!*

Over and over, the Baron of Passion batters the Balrog with everything she has. As she rears back for her tenth punch, Bael drops Lucifer, swings the flat of his hand at Belial, and backhands her.

Belial screams in surprise and goes flying. Her stretchy, bendy body slaps against the ground like a rock skipping across a lake. She tumbles and twists, flies past Barbatos, and slams against one of the dead trees at the forest's edge. Her body rips the tree's roots halfway out of the ground and knocks it over, but it holds enough to stop her momentum.

"Kuu... kuhhh..."

Belial moans for a moment before sliding off the tree. She falls onto the dead, black grass, and shifts around for a few moments, trying to reorient herself.

Despite the hardened mud tightly wrapping around Bael's waist and legs, it provides little resistance to the Balrog's overwhelming power. He bursts out and flicks his gaze toward Barbatos. "HEY! PUNY BRAT! YOU WANT PAIN, TOO?!"

Barbatos pales. He shrinks back slightly as the Balrog takes a menacing step toward him. "I don't! N-no trouble at all!"

"IT HURT TIME! C'MERE!!"

Bael charges toward Barbatos. The scrawny little Lord screams like a little girl and pisses himself, releasing an embarrassingly high-pitched wail as the massive behemoth rushes him. "Eeeeeee!!!"

Artorias swims underground beneath the Balrog. Artorias punches upward right as Bael plants a foot on the ground. A massive pillar erupts under his right foot, knocks him off-balance, and flings him to the side. Bael stumbles awkwardly and slams onto his arm, but reorients himself a moment later. "ME VERY ANGRY!!"

The Baron of Earthquakes jumps out of the dirt beside Lucifer, grabs her, and dives underground again. A half-minute later, he emerges next to Belial and drops Lucifer at her feet. "Hey! Belial! Are you okay? Can you walk?"

While Bael chases a squealing Barbatos in the background, Belial blinks heavily and shakes her head. "Ohhh... I feel awful. He... that thing... hit me..."

"I saw," Artorias says, flicking his gaze to his brother. Barbatos rolls under the Balrog's legs and shrieks in terror as he continues running away, barely evading a tail swipe in the process. "Heal yourself and Lucifer. I'll try to distract that monster. Why are the other demons just standing around? They haven't moved a muscle!"

Belial motions with her hands. She heals herself with a dose of magic, then starts working on Lucifer's horribly broken and battered body. "I... I don't know. We all got here at the same time. Is that giant creature Hercules? Why has he transformed into a monster?"

"Beats me," Artorias replies. "I'm going to get some answers."

"What about your brother?"

Artorias pauses. He watches as Barbatos summons a metal platform, jumps atop it, and flies into the air. Bael jumps at him, but the little Lord levitates higher, dodging like a seasoned professional.

"Barbatos is good at avoiding work and pain. He'll be fine. I'll return in a minute."

Artorias burrows into the Earth and swims toward the other demons.

* * *

Inside the crater, Hercules rubs his chest.

"Guh... huh..."

Bael's attack shattered my ribs. I'm lucky I survived. If it weren't for my regenerative abilities, this fight would already be over. What in the Forefather's names happened to that Duke?

Hercules climbs to his feet. The sounds of Bael rampaging after Barbatos catch his ears. His eyes glow for a moment as he transfers his consciousness to Satan, turns around, and watches the battle.

Hmm. Bael has become an unstoppable, raging monster. To think the bloodskins had such a potent trump card. Well, if I can't control him, then killing him before the others is my best option. If anyone but my father or me were to fight this behemoth, they would surely perish. We can't leave such a threat to walk among our enemies.

Hercules returns to his body. He pounces to the top of the crater, only to pause in surprise as Artorias erupts from underground directly in front of Diablo. "Emperor Diablo! Why is everyone standing around twiddling their thumbs?! We have to stop the Titan-"

Artorias freezes mid-sentence. His eyes swivel to face Hercules, towering above the demons. "What? You're here?! Then, that means... that monster isn't..."

Hercules shifts his mind back to Satan. The Devil aims his palm at Artorias. **"Quiet. Obey. You and everyone else here will follow Hercules' orders. We must kill Bael, no matter the cost. Our lives do not matter. Throw them away if necessary."**

Artorias stumbles back. "M-my body! It... it won't..."

"Dumbass!" Diablo says, still staring forward into the crater. "Artorias, the Titan mind-controlled Satan! He's using Satan's Blood Contracts to keep the rest of us in check! We can't disobey his orders!"

Artorias groans. "Fantastic. Now you tell me!"

Bael roars like a lion. He inhales for a moment, then unleashes a massive torrent of infernal flames, firing it toward Barbatos as the little Lord zips through the air above him. Barbatos screeches in terror and dives to the ground, singing his butt-hairs in the process. The tiny Lord runs in a circle as Bael spins around, blasting waves of fire at him.

"Bro!! Bro!! HELP ME!"

Hercules cracks his neck. "That runt wants some help, eh? Very well. Everyone! Attack that monster! Give it your all, and don't hold back! I expect all of you to die, but only after *it* perishes, first. Go!"

Recommended Listening

Two thousand demons pivot on their heels. They move in lockstep, unable to ignore the commands their Emperor has given them. Terror engulfs their hearts as they begin charging toward the unstoppable Balrog. The Grunts and Lords sweat profusely, while the Barons and above wonder how in the hell they will survive this encounter.

Bael's aura bathes the top of the crater in a faint, red mist. His energy pours from his body like a sprinkler, ringing alarm bells in the minds of all those present.

Diablo jumps into the lead. He charges the Balrog, using his body to shield the other demons. "Everyone, stay back! Leave Bael to me!"

"I don't think so," Satan says, his body puppeteered by Hercules. **"Everyone must join their strength together. The more demons who die today, the better."**

Diablo scowls. "Bastard."

The Emperor of Annihilation travels side-by-side with Satan, while the other demons follow close behind. Bael turns around just in time to spot Diablo rearing back for a ten-times-multiplied kinetic punch. Diablo's fist impacts the Balrog like a meteor.

Katam!

Bael staggers backward, but his spiny toes dig into the dirt, preventing him from getting knocked more than a foot away. "BAH! WHAT THAT? WEAK PUNCH!! YOU HIT LIKE LITTLE GIRL!!"

Bael's counter-attack comes instantly. He swings his fist at Diablo. The Emperor flashes a sign at the last second, inverting his kinetic energy. Bael's attack bounces off Diablo's head as if he had tried to punch a trampoline. Bael staggers once again, giving Satan a chance to close the distance.

The Devil motions with his hands. A wind-boosted fireball summons in his palm. He takes an extra second to build it up, then pounces at Bael and throws it against the Balrog's chest, using his Vectors to augment his forward momentum. The fireball, already half the size of Bael's entire body, detonates like a box of dynamite.

Batoom!

Bael stumbles and falls on his ass. He catches himself with his tail and bounces back at Satan, a look of excitement in his eyes. "YOU ALL WEAK! ME CRUSH! ME SMASH!"

Hercules growls. *Curses!*

Black wings sprout from Bael's back, flap hard, and triple his acceleration speed. The Balrog swipes at Satan with a single palm. Satan tries to deflect the Balrog's claws with his Vectors, but Bael bats them away effortlessly, as though they were pool noodles. He eviscerates Satan's body and rips the Emperor in half, sending him splattering across the ground. Satan expires instantly; far faster than Hercules can use water magic to heal him.

While Satan perishes, the other demons move to attack. Artorias rips a giant boulder twenty times his size out of the Earth and flings it into the sky. He launches himself into the air, rushes ahead of his thrown projectile, and strikes it with both fists.

The twenty-ton boulder instantly reverses direction. It sails toward the oblivious Balrog below, who has already returned his sights to Diablo.

"Diablo!" Artorias yells. "Watch out!!"

Diablo flicks his gaze upward. He stops himself from jumping toward Bael and instead roots himself in place. The boulder smashes into the Balrog at hundreds of miles per hour, battering his head with enough power to flatten a small mountain.

Bael gets pounded dozens of feet into the dirt, while the impact from the boulder sends everyone behind Diablo flying. The planet shakes. Somewhere, hundreds of miles away, tsunamis crash against the shoreline of a nearby coast.

The Emperor of Annihilation winces as the boulder's shockwave hits his body. *What?! I didn't know Artorias was this powerful! He's only a Baron!*

Several seconds pass. Artorias lands a few feet from Diablo and dashes over to him. "Is Bael dead?"

"Of course not," Diablo replies. "But, if we're lucky, maybe it injured him grievously."

"GRRROOOOARRR!!"

Bael screams in rage at the bottom of the pit. He bursts out of the newly formed crater and pounces toward those who injured his pride.

"Or, maybe it pissed him off! Dodge!"

Artorias dives underground. Diablo motions with his hands and forms a kinetic barrier around himself. He digs his feet into the mud as Bael's rears back for a colossal punch.

When Bael strikes me, he'll only hit himself fifteen times harder. Not even this insane monster will be able to take a punch like that without blinking.

Bael surges toward Diablo. Diablo winces as he waits for the incoming attack.

The Balrog swings his fist forward. At the last second, he pauses a millimeter before Diablo's body, lightly taps the Emperor's skin, and grabs him with his other hand.

Diablo's eyes bolt open. *WHAT?! How did he- uwahh!!*

Bael's massive palm wraps around the Demon Emperor. He crushes Diablo's arms instantly, raises him above his head, and flings the Emperor of Annihilation against the ground with all his strength.

KATHOOM!

Diablo hits the earth and shatters every bone in his body. His limbs turn to mush. He sails a hundred feet underground as though the dirt and rock before him doesn't exist at all. By the time he comes to a stop, crushed between hundreds of tons of earthen debris, he's already fallen unconscious.

The Grunts nearby stare in horror. Lucifer, beaten. Diablo, battered. Satan, eradicated.

"W-what do we do?!" A grunt yelps. He runs toward the Balrog, his body moving on its own. "No, no!! I don't wanna die! I don't wanna-"

Bael barely gives the grunt a passing glance. He backhands the tiny demon and sprays its body across the nearby grass. The grunt pops like a blood-filled balloon, scattering innards and bones in a wide arc.

Hercules stands behind all of the demons and observes the battle.

Bael's success against Diablo was no mere stroke of luck. He learned how Diablo's ability worked and countered it in an instant. Incredible. His speech is that of a dullard, but his battle sense is uncanny. Even a Dragon might have trouble fighting this Duke.

Other grunts charge Bael. The Balrog swiftly annihilates them one after the other. His hands become a blur of motion as he rips them limb from limb. In thirty seconds, he mercilessly slaughters over fifty of the low-level demons.

"PUNY! WEAK! STOMP AND SMASH! STOMP AND SMASH!!"

While Bael continues his rampage, Satan finishes reviving. Hercules switches control to the Demon Emperor and pauses for a moment while he evaluates his next move.

Vepar, missing until now, materializes behind Bael. She aims her palm at his back, and a wave of toxic gas spews from her hand. It engulfs Bael in a cloud of neurological poison, threatening to suffocate him with its debilitating effect.

The Balrog spins on his heel. He whirls to face the tiny, insignificant-looking Lord. "EW! GROSS! YOU MAKE STINKY! NO SHIT IN MY FACE!!"

Bael ignores the poison swirling around his eyes and nose. He inhales for a moment and unleashes a torrential blast of flames upon Vepar, but she transforms into gas and slips past him. She reappears behind Bael and slashes his back with her spindly nails, aiming to deliver a lethal dosage of poison to his spine. Instead, the moment her hand strikes his hardened scales, she screams in pain. "Eeeyaa!!"

Her hand bubbles and festers as the massive Balrog's molten body turns her fingers to mush. He swings his tail, intending to batter her into the dirt, but she transforms into a gas cloud and flees for her life.

Hercules watches.

Poison doesn't affect Bael. The mightiest of blows scarcely annoys him. He shrugs off all physical attacks with the barest of effort. Damn! This blasted monster must have a weakness!

Barbatos charges Bael. He motions with his hands and summons his Berserker form, transforming himself from a scrawny little Lord into a 5-foot mass of muscle and rage. Shards of metal coat his hands, giving him razor-sharp claws. "Screw you, Bael! You're not that tough!! Me and my brother will take you down a peg!!"

Bael turns to face him. Along with Barbatos, a dozen other grunts summons fireballs and rocks to pelt the Balrog, though their attacks do little more than annoy him. Bael howls in rage. "GAAARRR!!!"

The Balrog stomps toward Barbatos. He swipes at the ground and sends a hail of dirt and rocks flying at the Lord of Iron. Barbatos winces as the dirt pelts his eyes. He charges the Balrog, only for Bael to spin on his heel and punish Barbatos's blindness with a brutal tail swipe to the ribs. The Balrog's counter-attack takes Barbatos by surprise. He flies backward, skids across the ground, and digs his claws into the dirt to stop his momentum. The damage to Barbatos's body regenerates in a split-second. He immediately jumps to his feet and charges again.

"It'll take more than that to stop me! Nyehehe!!"

Barbatos zig-zags from left to right. He manipulates all of his metal shards into a makeshift helmet for his face, leaving only a small slit for his eyes. This time, when Bael roars at him, Barbatos dodges a series of swipes, ducks the Balrog's attacks, rolls under his legs, and pounces onto his back.

Bael's molten body, easily a thousand degrees, scorches the Lord's skin. Barbatos ignores the agony of his flesh melting and regenerating as he grabs the base of one of Bael's wings to hold on and begins slashing Bael's back with his claws.

"Take this! And this!! AND THIS!!"

Barbatos rips a few armored plates off the Balrog's back and gouges out the molten skin beneath, spraying thousand-degree blood all over himself. Bael roars again as he tries to grab the annoyance slashing him from behind, more in rage than in pain.

"GAARRR! LITTLE FUCK! ME SMASH YOU BIG BAD! GET OFF!!!"

* * *

Across the field, at the edge of the forest, Lucifer lays propped against a tree. Belial finishes healing her right as Artorias bursts from the mud, Diablo's unconscious body clutched in his arms. He lands next to Belial and quickly sets the Emperor of Annihilation at her feet. "Diablo needs your care. Have you enough energy to heal him?"

Despite fatigue wracking her body, Belial nods. "Haah... yes. I'll do what I can. I've nearly finished treating Lucifer, though she did receive a small skull fracture. I worry that Bael may have damaged her brain."

Lucifer opens her eyes and winces. "Don't... don't underestimate me. I'm the leader of our people. I'm not weak-willed like Satan. Tch. That idiot."

Artorias turns to watch as his little brother takes on the Balrog all by himself. "I must return. We're lucky that Hercules' orders offer much leniency in *how* we battle the Balrog, but I cannot stay away for long. Already, Satan's voice compels me to return."

Belial nods. "Emperor Lucifer explained the situation to me. Satan devoured several human souls under Hercules' control. When he did, the Titan took over his mind. After that, Hercules used Satan's contract to control us."

Artorias returns his gaze to Belial's. "Valac's grunts, including my little brother, devoured several of those humans' souls. Why didn't the same thing happen to them?"

Lucifer straightens her posture as Belial finishes healing her. "I don't know. Satan must be different from them in some manner. However, one thing is certain; if we wish to free ourselves, we must kill him."

"Who? Satan? You expect us to kill our leader?"

"I do," Lucifer replies. She flicks her third eye to Diablo, then to Belial, who nods. The succubus gets to work, healing his broken and battered body. "This is all Satan's fault. His damned contracts compel us to do his bidding. If we can kill him, we should be able to break free of the Titan's control."

"But... but that's..."

Artorias trails off. Hercules' orders begin to boom in his mind, forcing him to his feet. "There has to be another way."

Lucifer copies him. She stands and flicks her gaze toward the Balrog. "There isn't. If we kill Satan, we can eliminate the Titan. It's as simple as that."

A look of anxiety crosses Artorias's face, but he forces himself not to dwell on the doubts plaguing him. "Very well. We survived without Satan for two thousand years. It's only due to his return that so many terrible things have happened. If we must kill him, then so be it."

Lucifer rests a hand on Artorias's shoulder. "Worry not, young Baron. You won't be able to kill Satan, nor will I, with his control affecting us. However, I know someone who can."

"Who?"

Lucifer ignores his question. She flicks her eyes to Belial. "Heal Diablo as quickly as you can. We're going to need him for the counter-attack."

Belial continues motioning with her hands as she heals one part of Diablo's body, then moves to another. "What counter-attack?"

Pausing, Lucifer flicks her third eye to her feet. She kneels over, scrapes the still-wet dirt, and smiles.

"Once you finish with Diablo, plug your ears with some mud. You're the only one Hercules hasn't controlled yet. I'll be counting on you."

Belial's eyes widen. She nods.

"Ah, so that's what you mean! Lucifer, you're a genius!!"

The Emperor of Providence chuckles. "Hehehe. Of *course* I am."

Recommended Listening

"To me, my minions!" Satan bellows, his mouth controlled by Hercules. **"Unite your might! Do not attack the Balrog one and two at a time! Combine your strength! Come, now!"**

Barbatos continues slashing at the Titan, though his regeneration begins to slow dramatically. Sweat pours off the Lord of Iron's body as he tries to hold onto the thrashing Balrog's wing.

Bael screams in rage. "GET OFF GET OFF GET OFF!!!"

Bael's mana erupts from his pores in ever-thickening amounts, while his blood-red miasma expands throughout the air. Many of the closest demons scream in pain as their skin seems to catch on fire. The pain receptors of those present fester and boil, threatening to send their bodies into shock. Still, because of Satan's mental overrides, the grunts cannot flee. They charge at Bael, unable to stop their suicidal assault on the Balrog.

Barbatos's grip loosens. He tries to slash at Bael again, but his attack proves ineffective. His hand folds like a noodle against the Balrog's molten blood, and when Bael thrashes once more, Barbatos suddenly loses his grip. Bael spins on his heel and flings the Lord of Iron off his back with a burst of acceleration, making Barbatos yelp in surprise.

Whump!

Barbatos slams onto his shoulder and skids across the mud. The terrain vanishes as the second crater's rim appears before him. Barbatos plunges off the edge and rolls into it. "Oh, crap!"

As Barbatos unintentionally departs the battle, Diablo, Lucifer, and Artorias arrive at the scene, bursting out of the ground right in front of Bael. The two Emperors and the Baron fan out, their minds compelled by Satan's commands.

"Finally!" Satan yells. **"I thought you lot might have perished! Now that you're back, let us finish this!"**

Lucifer flicks her third eye toward Hercules' main body. "You'll regret ordering us around, Titan! I hate bossy little brats like you."

Satan laughs. **"Hahaha! Save your words for someone who cares, she-demon! Everyone, encircle the Duke! Suppress his movement with all your strength. We will kill him in one hit!"**

The Devil leaps toward Bael's back. His Vectors lash out and grab the Balrog's limbs, two for each arm and leg. He motions with his hands. "Earth-manipulators! Stop his legs from moving. She-demon, attack him with your swords!"

Bael snarls. "STUPID SQUID! LEMME GO! GAARGH!"

The Balrog uses all his strength to try and pull away, but Artorias and Satan, along with the few remaining Grunts who can manipulate dirt and stone, combine their powers to yank him into the ground. His legs embed in the mud, and the Grunts continue solidifying it, over and over, to try and hold him in

place. Still, with the immense heat pouring off his body, their efforts nearly aren't enough to hold him. Bael flaps his wings and yanks his arms around. He struggles and tries desperately to break free of Satan's Vectors, but Hercules' puppet digs his heels into the dirt to hold himself in place.

"You're not getting away this time!"

Lucifer gapes. *How is this possible?! Hercules is somehow suppressing Bael's strength!*

Compelled by the Titan's words, The Emperor uses her third eye to fire mental bombardments at Bael. Bael's movements slow as Lucifer assaults his mind.

"GUHH!! HEAD HURT... HEAD HURT!! STOP TALK IN HEAD!!"

Lucifer grits her teeth. *My plan hinges on Bael killing Satan. Nobody else can do it. If this keeps up, we might actually-*

"You, demon!" Satan yells. He points his finger at Diablo. **"I've seen the damage you can unleash. While we have that monster pinned, summon all of your power. Finish him in one blow!"**

Diablo glances back at Satan. A look of repugnance flashes across his face. "No! I can't! If I do that, Bael will-"

Before Diablo can finish his sentence, his body moves on its own. Satan's orders override Diablo's willpower and force the Emperor of Annihilation to form magic signs. He begins accumulating mana around his body and takes a stance several feet in front of the Balrog, wincing as Bael's miasma scorches his skin.

"LET GO!! WEAK LITTLE WIMPS!! ME CRUSH ALL OF YOU! ME SMASH!!"

Bael continues struggling with all his might against the demon's relentless assault, but he can't break free in time.

Diablo's kinetic energy multiplies as it gathers around his body. Ten times. Twenty times. Thirty times.

Hercules grins feverishly as he watches from the edge of the first crater, several hundred feet away. *Yes. Yes!! Look at the absurd energy that Emperor is generating! With this attack, I'll rid myself of that monstrous Duke, then kill all the other demons afterward. I'll avenge Megara and clear my name at the same time! All of my sacrifices were worth it for this moment!!*

As Hercules silently cheers his brilliant battle strategy, something shuffles into position in the crater behind him.

Belial, the final remaining demon uncontrolled by Satan's contracts, slinks around stealthily behind Hercules. She avoids splashing in the water and uses her knife-like fingers to scale the rim noiselessly. With his attention locked firmly onto the Balrog, Hercules fails to notice her approach.

The succubus pounces at Hercules like a lioness tackling an impala. Her limbs stretch out and wrap around him in the blink of an eye, catching Hercules completely off-guard. "W-what?! By the forefathers!!"

Hercules lurches forward as Belial's arms and legs twine around him from every direction. She transforms her hands into blades and begins stabbing him all over his body.

Shik, shik, shik!

"Gaaaugh!! Aaargh!! Get off me; you bedeviled whore!!"

Hercules spins on his heel and throws himself backward, intending to crush the succubus under his weight. Instead, she stretches out her elbow, catches both of them before they hit the ground, and flings Hercules forward. He cries out in surprise as his face splatters in the mud.

Hercules transfers his mind to Satan. **"Imbeciles!! Forget the Balrog! Forget him! Protect me! Save me from this damned creature! Gaaugh!!"**

Satan releases his grip on the Balrog and darts toward Hercules. The other demons release Bael as well, but Diablo can't stop. His kinetic potential releases its peak right as the new orders come.

Diablo's eyes widen. *Shit! I can't undo the spell! My body is-*

At the last second, Diablo swivels his fist to Bael's right. He lunges forward and attacks the air with the power of a punch multiplied by one hundred times its kinetic potential.

BATOOOM!!

The Emperor's strength, already that of an Archangel's, combines with his overwhelming energy to release a shockwave similar to a tactical nuke. Every demon in the area screams wordlessly as the sky catches fire. Five thousand degrees of flame erupts from Diablo's fist and blasts into the forest, obliterates every tree in its path, annihilates a mountain, and sends massive heaps of rock and stone firing into the atmosphere. All of the demons, including Bael, rocket toward Hercules, unable to control themselves. "Aahhh!!"

Diablo staggers forward. He collapses onto his belly, all of his mana exhausted. The Emperor of Annihilation lands inside the beginning of a trench that extends forward dozens of miles — one he created himself. Fatigue swallows him, and he falls unconscious.

Bael crashes into the Titan. His enormous body sends Hercules and Belial tumbling into the first crater, where they reel for several seconds as they land in the frigid, muddy water.

Atop the crater, the other demons grind into the dirt and land in heaps here and there. Several succumb to wounds sustained during the battle against the Balrog, but more than a few take their final breath thanks to Diablo's impossibly powerful attack.

Lucifer moans. "Ohh... nnn..."

Artorias coughs. "Kuh... head hurts... ringing... my ears..."

The remaining demons slowly pull themselves together. They stagger to their feet and dust themselves off, though several seem astonished they somehow survived Diablo's attack.

"The Titan..." Lucifer mutters. "Where is he? What happened?"

Lucifer swivels her third eye to the crater and answers her own question. "Tch. He survived."

Hercules blinks. He and Belial both awaken at the same time, but she quickly tenses up, wrapping him tightly before he can react.

"Gah! Damned bloodskin- release me at once!!"

Belial doesn't reply. She turns her hands into knives and resumes slicing apart each of Hercules' arteries. Even with his incredible regeneration, the Titan continues to weaken as she tears him to ribbons.

Hercules transfers his mind to Satan. The Demon Emperor, positioned atop the ridge, turns to face the succubus. **"Release Hercules, demoness! Release him, now!!"**

Lucifer smiles. *She isn't listening, fool. Satan's orders only work on those who can hear him speak. That's the weakness of his contracts.*

Indeed, thanks to Lucifer's planning, Belial clogged her ears to prevent herself from hearing anything. She mercilessly gouges out the Titan's eyes and heart, and continues dicing apart his biceps after that. All the while, she ignores Satan's orders, enraging the Titan further.

"Worthless, worthless, WORTHLESS SOW!!!"

* * *

Bael jumps to his feet a short distance from Satan. The Balrog looks around, dazed and confused. His rage wears off somewhat, thanks to Diablo's attack, but upon spotting the other demons, the gears click in his head.

"HURGH... WANT FIGHT... WANT FIGHT? WHO WANT FIGHT?!"

Lucifer swivels her eye toward the Balrog. She projects the sound of Satan's voice into Bael's mind.

Bahaha, that Bael is weak! He fights like a woman! I bet he has a tiny demonhood! I hope he hears me so I can kick his ass!

Bael grunts. "HUH? WHO SAY THAT?"

"Satan said it!" Lucifer yells. She snaps her fingers to get Bael's attention, then gestures to the Emperor standing at the crater's edge. "Are you going to let him stand there and mock you? I thought you were a real man!"

The Balrog follows her finger. He turns to look at Satan. "WHAT?! ME NOT WEAK, YOU WEAK! ME BREAK YOU IN HALF!!"

The Balrog charges Satan. With Hercules under duress, the Demon Emperor merely stands and waits for orders. He hasn't a chance of stopping the mountain of flesh tearing ass toward him.

Bael smashes into Satan with two tons of muscle and bone. A single punch sprays the Emperor all over the crater below, sending chunks of him raining upon Belial and Hercules.

Bael roars. "BAHAHA! HIM WEAK! ME STRONG!!"

Hercules continues to struggle futilely even as chunks and pieces of the Demon Emperor turn the mud red. "Let me go! Whore of the damned! Filthy... filthy little..."

* * *

Satan regenerates after twenty seconds. When his body reforms, Hercules immediately tries to jump into his mind. "Tear this creature off me, you dullard!!"

The Devil blinks. His eyes return to normal and cease their glowing.

"Uhh. Where am I? What's going on?"

Atop the crater's rim, Bael roars and jumps toward the other demons. He attacks them once again, tearing apart the ones that can't get out of his way fast enough. Their screams cause Satan's heart to skip a beat.

"What in blazes is that horrible noise?!"

Satan spots Belial and Hercules as they grapple with each other. He struggles to piece together the puzzle until Samael speaks in his mind.

"Satan. Thou hath fallen under Hercules' mind control for nearly half an hour. After thou didn't slay several of his human servants, their souls entered thy body, allowing him to take control of thy soul."

Satan stares at Belial and Hercules in horror. "What? The little bastard made me his slave?!"

"He did. While under his control, thou didn't slaughter hundreds of other demons. Hercules used thy Blood Contracts to turn everyone against each other. Even now, they continue to struggle desperately atop the crater."

"Devils," Satan whispers, his face ashen. He instantly coils his Vectors and pounces out of the mud, sending waves in every direction. When he lands atop the rim and spots Bael's Balrog form, his complexion weakens further. "What in the name of- Samael! What is that... that *thing*?!"

"'Tis Bael," Samael murmurs. "He has transformed into a monster. More importantly, thou must order everyone to flee this place. Free them from the shackles of thy contracts and focus on the Titan. He is still a threat."

Satan nods dumbly. He hasn't yet unraveled everything, but his leaderly instincts prevent him from dwelling on irrelevant questions. "Oy!! All you cunts, stop fighting! Get out of here! I'll take on Bael myself!"

"I would not advise that," Samael murmurs. "This creature of damnation is too much for anyone here to combat; including thee."

"No kidding. I can feel Bael's bloodlust from here. Still, this is my fault. I've gotta clean up this mess myself!"

Upon hearing Satan's voice, Bael pauses his punching of one screaming grunt to look in the Devil's direction. "YOU STILL WALK? ME BREAK LEGS! THEN BREAK FACE!!"

Bael releases the grunt and charges toward the Devil.

A second later, chaos erupts on the battlefield. Two massive metal poles fall from the sky on both sides of the Balrog. A hundred thunderbolts shoot down and electrify them, causing tens of millions of volts of electricity to surge through the Balrog's body.

KZZAT! KZZAT!

"GAARRRGH!"

Bael howls in rage. He flinches involuntarily and falls to the ground, losing his forward momentum. The lightning pummels his body like a concentrated thunderstorm, battering him over and over.

Behind Satan, another bolt of lightning slams into the crater and strikes Hercules. Belial screams in pain, as does the young Titan. Two more thunderbolts follow. Sonic booms erupt from the canyon and Bael's body, temporarily deafening Satan and everyone else nearby. Satan reels in pain and spins around, only to see Zeus kneel in the crater, grab his son, and shoot a glance toward the Devil.

The Titan King opens his mouth. He says something, motions with his hand, and vanishes.

Use thy water magic, Samael says inside Satan's mind. Heal thy ears.

Satan blinks as spots appear in his eyes. He nods dumbly, and motions with his hands, summoning a bit of water from the muddy terrain to splash against the sides of his head. After a moment, the world refocuses before the Devil. Satan stumbles to the crater's edge.

Belial lies in the pit, writhing around in agony. Her body, still stretched and twisted, resembles a mass of charred worms. She floats atop the muddy lake, hovering on the edge of consciousness.

"Son of a-! Belial! Hang in there!"

Satan considers jumping into the crater to heal the succubus, but pauses to flash a glance at the Balrog. Bael kneels in the dirt and grunts. Blood drips from his eyes as Zeus's continuous electric current pummels his body. The two metal poles suddenly yank from the ground and soar into the distance, manipulated by some unseen force. With them gone, the Balrog takes a moment to reorient himself, then roars once more. "GAAAH!! NOBODY HURTS ME! ME HURT THEM!!"

A sense of dread washes over the badly injured demons nearby. They stare at Bael in shock as the Balrog flaps his wings and charges the two nearest grunts. He grabs their heads, smashes their skulls together, and sprays their brains all over the mud.

Tch. Stay alive, Belial, Satan thinks. I can't leave everyone to die!

Hardly has Satan taken two steps toward the Balrog before Lucifer yells and grabs everyone's attention. "Minions, retreat! I will handle Bael on my own! Satan, save Belial. You there, grab Artorias. You, grab Diablo. Try to save who you can. I'll draw the Balrog's gaze!"

Lucifer fires a powerful mana beam from her third eye. It strikes Bael in the chest and knocks him back slightly. "Hey! Bael! You're a pathetic dickless imp who can't get a woman! Nobody likes you! I bet you can't land a single hit on me!"

Bael cocks his head questioningly. "WHAT YOU SAY?"

"You heard me, empty-brains! You're dumber than a rock!"

Lucifer whistles. A Hellhound appears from the treeline. It stares at her for a moment, then charges across the muddy ground, using its muscular body to jump the craters littering the area. Lucifer leaps atop it and starts to run away.

"Give up, Bael! You can't catch me!"

Bael's body trembles in anger. "NOBODY MAKE FUN OF ME!! COME HERE, LITTLE WOMAN!"

He flaps his wings, jumps into the sky, and chases after her at top speed.

Satan watches as Lucifer and the Balrog disappear into the treeline. He stares at them dumbly for a moment, then claps his hands. "You heard the woman! Make like a bat and get the flap out of here. Hurry! We don't know if those Titans will return or not!"

The other demons nod. Those who can walk quickly gather together and start picking up survivors to haul them toward the hole in the ground where Satan summoned his underground river earlier.

For his part, Satan jumps inside the crater and begins using his water magic to heal Belial.

"Hang in there, toots. Your sister would kick my ass if I let you die here."

As Satan treats the succubi's wounds, he flicks his eyes in all directions to gape at the scorched planet.

What crazy bullshit went down while I was out?

Author note: Due to slamming into the character limit, next part will be all about the aftermath of this conflict. Sorry the part ends a little abruptly!

Part 136: Newton's Third Law

Satan wraps one arm underneath Belial and uses the other to splash muddy water on her exposed skin. "Hey, hey, girl... come on, come on. Wake up! Shit."

His water magic goes to work healing her, but thanks to the blood and mud turning the water fetid, it doesn't have much effect. A few bits of melted flesh mend, while the rest of her body remains grievously injured.

Belial trembles and moans. Her chest shudders as she swallows painfully. "Gmm... hnn..."

Satan bites his lip. "Damn. Zeus hit Belial with everything he had. She's lucky to be alive. I need to find some clean water, pronto."

The Devil uses his Vectors to grab the succubi's still-stretched arms and legs lying in spools here and there. He coils them as gently as possible and rests the noodly appendages on her chest, then uses his Vectors to levitate Belial's body in front of himself, so her arms and legs don't drag across the ground. He stomps through the mud toward the hole in the Earth, where the Titans first attacked him and Bael.

Satan descends into the bowels of the planet. Belial shivers in his arms, not due to cold, but due to wrenching, electrical agony coursing through her nerves. As Satan heads underground, he summons a fireball to light the path ahead.

Minutes tick past. Satan's eyes flick to the walls, which glisten in the firelight thanks to the water that drained through earlier. Our feet slap against the damp floor and send splashing noises echoing ahead of us as we travel.

"Poseidon told me there were millions of demons living on Earth. If that's the case, why did only a few thousand show up to fight the Titans? Where are all these lazy fuckers hiding? What happened to discipline and bravery?"

"I don't know," Samael replies, despite the Devil not specifically addressing him. "We haven't any idea how deep these catacombs go. Traveling to the surface might be time-consuming. Perhaps thy people intended to arrive on the scene, but it took them half an hour to reach the surface, so they could not?"

"Yeah. Maybe..." Satan says, unconvinced. "Or, maybe they sat on their asses and ignored the chaos on the surface. Either way, I intend to get some answers."

Whispers tickle Satan's ears as he continues down the path. Having already passed dozens of tunnels on the left and right, he continues shambling deeper into Valac's Den, keeping an eye out for other demons as he travels.

The Devil narrows his eyes. *Hmm. Someone should have greeted me by now. It seems the grunts are keeping their distance. I wonder why?*

"Nyehehe! Emperor Satan has returned!"

Barbatos's shrill voice rings out in the darkness of the caves, making Satan flinch. The Lord of Iron scampers toward us, keeping low enough to the ground that his loincloth drags against the damp dirt.

With a throaty cackle, Barbatos rears his head back to laugh. "Eheheh! I'm surprised you have the balls to show your face around here after all the trouble you've caused!"

Satan frowns. "I killed several of Hercules' humans, and their souls temporarily took over my mind. I would never intentionally bring harm to my people otherwise. It was an accident."

Barbatos flicks his gaze in every direction. Several demons step toward us, their burning red eyes illuminated by Satan's fireball. When he returns to looking at us, Barbatos strikes a heroic pose, emboldened by the presence of other demons. "Nyeh! An accident?! Because of your shitty contracts, we lost control of ourselves! If it weren't for Bael going berserk, I might've used my overwhelming power to kill Goros over here, or maybe even Kilvik! What would you say if I'd killed my bestest best buddies, eh? Surely, you don't think an apology would be enough?!"

The nearest grunts nod approvingly to Barbatos's words. A few of them clap and yell things like, "Yeah, he's right!" and "You tell him!"

Satan lowers his gaze to Belial's shivering body. He pauses to dwell on his thoughts before replying. "You're right. I fucked up. I never considered the possibility someone might turn my contracts against the demons. The idea of losing control seemed unthinkable to me."

Barbatos sneers at Satan. "Nyeh, it must *really* suck not being able to control your body. If only we knew what that felt like!"

Another grunt shakes his fist at Satan. Cuts and gashes line his body, while burn marks dot his arms and legs. "I couldn't move a muscle! Bael's mana burned me and melted my skin, but I had to stand there and suffer! I couldn't run away! I was helpless because of you!!"

"Everything was going just great until you came crawling back," another grunt yells. "We got stronger whenever we killed something, there were whores aplenty, and Valac was crushing the angels and Titans like no tomorrow! Now he's dead, and we're all fucked!"

More grunts join in. They howl and berate Satan for several minutes, spinning tales of the woe they suffered because of his contracts. Satan stares at the ground, unable to offer an explanation capable of dampening their anger.

"I don't know what to say," Satan says, holding up a hand. His voice quiets the gaggle of grunts as they lean in to wait for his apology. "I screwed up. That's all there is to it. Maybe I shouldn't have killed Valac, but he didn't leave me much choice. I only came to talk, but he bared his fangs. He chose to hold a grudge against me for thousands of years, rather than let bygones be bygones. Considering how that bastard treated my girl... I think he deserved worse."

Before any of the demons can protest, Satan jabs a finger at Barbatos. "However! Don't pretend your authority overrides mine. I broke our people out of Heaven. I defeated an Archangel when nobody else could. I even ended up suffering in the Cosmic Realm, where I wasn't able to help my people while thousands of years passed! Despite the mistakes I've made, I had only the best intentions for demonkind.

I've lived longer and accomplished more than any of you losers. I made a few mistakes, but don't think you can point fingers when you wouldn't exist without me!"

Satan's words take Barbatos aback. The young Lord scoffs at him and pauses to look at his brothers lurking in the darkness. Their eyeballs glow softly as they try to come up with a counterpoint.

Finally, Barbatos speaks. "Of course we're grateful for you getting us out of Heaven. That much is obvious, nyeh! That doesn't give you the right to control us like puppets! We're supposed to all be one big happy stinkin' family, not slaves bound to a master!"

A voice roars from behind Satan. "Bahaha! Well said, runt!"

Satan turns around to search the darkness for the speaker. Lucifer and Bael stride toward us, and the latter puffs his chest out triumphantly.

"What've you got to say about that, Satan? Your dumb ass nearly got us all killed! If it wasn't for me being a total badass, Hercules might've won!"

As Bael stomps forward, several of the grunts shrink back in fear. Barbatos's voice shakes. "Y-you're back? B-but... weren't you a m-mon...ster?"

Lucifer holds up her hand. "I managed to soothe Bael's rage. If his anger subsides, or he becomes bored, he returns to normal. He's no threat to anyone now."

Bael flicks his gaze to Lucifer. "Yeah? Well, I've got a few choice words to spit at you later, ya damned cunt. Can't believe ya fired off your damn mouth like that."

"Desperate times; desperate measures," Lucifer replies. "You could have transformed without my assistance. Would have saved everyone a lot of trouble, including yourself."

Bael opens his mouth to retort, but Lucifer holds her hand up. "Let's move on. There are more important matters to attend to."

Bael rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Anyway... Satan! How about you get rid of those contracts now, eh?"

Satan blinks. "What? Why would I do that?"

Bael gestures toward the assembled grunts. "Do I hafta spell it out? You're 'sposed to be the smart one here."

Satan chews on his lip. He flicks his gaze toward the eyes glowing in the darkness, each pair representing a grunt afraid of his power.

"Thy comrades are correct," Samael says. The Archangel appears in Satan's thoughts and leans against some invisible object. "Thy Blood Contracts have caused thee much consternation. Mind Control is a difficult technique to perform, but supposing someone could manipulate thee in the future, they might permanently annihilate thy people. Is maintaining power via enslavement something thou intendeth to do, ever? Does it not go against the very principles thou didn't espouse when thy people fled Heaven, all those years ago?"

Satan lowers his eyes to the floor. Thoughts swirl in his mind.

Damn. How could I have been so blind? Samael is right, and so are the others. Not only are my Blood Contracts a double-edged weapon, but they go against everything I stand for. Why would I even consider forcing other demons to do something against their will? That isn't how I should operate.

Satan's voice cracks as he regains his composure. "Right... I... I didn't think of the consequences when I formed my Soul Contracts. Enslaving angels and Titans is one thing... but doing that to my brothers and sisters... there must have been a screw loose in my head."

Bael smacks Satan on the back and nearly knocks the Devil off his feet. "Bahaha! That's right! Now you're usin' your brain, dumbass! Get to tearin' them up! It's the only way we'll ever trust you again!"

Satan nods. With a flourish of his hands, he summons the first Blood Contract before himself; one with Lucifer's symbol drawn in blood on the byline.

"I think I've tormented you long enough, Lucy," Satan mutters. "I'll destroy yours first."

Lucifer breathes a sigh of relief. "Devils. I can't wait to live my life as a free woman."

With a nod, Satan grabs the contract floating before him. He pinches it at both top corners, pauses for dramatic effect, and rips it straight down the middle. The paper tears in half and turns to dust, sending magical particles all over the floor like a waterfall of confetti.

Several demons grin and nod at each other. "Now, that's good news!"

However, the grunts speak too soon. A few moments later, the contract reappears in midair, startling Satan. His eyes widen as it floats to the ground, no longer torn in half.

"What in the name of...?"

Satan grabs the contract, tears it in half again, and watches as it dissolves to dust, only to rematerialize once again.

Lucifer fidgets uncomfortably. "Please tell me those are different contracts you're tearing each time."

"No..." Satan murmurs. "It's your contract. No matter how many times I tear it up, it won't- gah!"

Satan's breath catches.

Son of a broodmother! I forgot!

Lucifer notices the astonishment in Satan's eyes. "What's wrong? I don't like surprises."

"I can't destroy the blood contract..." Satan whispers. "My contracts are unbreakable. Not even I can undo them."

"The only thing I like less than a surprise is a joke," Lucifer replies. "Now is no time for clowning around."

"I'm serious," Satan says. "I can't rip my contracts up, or burn them, or anything else. They're permanent until the day I die."

Groans rip through the ever-expanding crowd. Newly arrived demons get the story from those that have been here since Satan's arrival, only for dismay to cross their faces as well.

"Bloody hell, Satan!" Barbatos yells. "You roped us into some cursed eternal bondage?! What's up with that?!"

Satan furrows his brow. "No... no that can't be it... there has to be a way out... it's *my* power, for devil's sake. I'm sure there's a loophole."

The Devil grabs Lucifer's contract and carefully reads its words. As he does, Samael speaks once again.

"Satan, destroying a Blood Contract is impossible. However, thou can, at the least, annul its worst parts. A contract can be modified, so long as both parties agree to the newly defined terms."

Satan blinks. "I can do that?"

The other demons raise a few eyebrows when he talks to himself, but from their perspective, he only appears to be thinking out loud.

"I believe so. Out of sheer boredom, I have spent some time perusing thy abilities and studying their finer details to amuse myself. Rewriting the contracts will require plenty of time and effort, especially given how many of them thou possess. It will also require fresh blood from each being thou hath contracted with, but expunging the more troublesome clauses should require little more than time and patience."

Satan wipes his face. A cold sweat overtakes him.

Cripes. I can't just tear the damn contracts up. I have to rewrite each and every one, then get a blood signature from each demon. There are thousands of contracts still active. This is going to take forever.

Satan blinks. His gaze wanders to Belial, still breathing weakly in his Vector's grasp, then back to Lucifer.

"I have a solution. It's going to be a pain in the ass, but it will work. I'll erase my blood contracts one by one. If you could do me a favor and locate everyone who signed one, I'd appreciate it. In the meantime, I need to get some water and heal Belial. She's in bad shape."

Lucifer crosses her arms and looks at Bael. The two of them exchange a glance, pass a message between themselves wordlessly, and nod.

"Fine," Lucifer says. "I'll do that much. You'd better keep your word, though."

"Of course. The Devil always upholds his end of the deal."

With a nod, Satan turns away. His gaze flicks to Barbatos.

"Hey, brat. I ordered you to find Nerissa's body and put her somewhere safe. Where is she?"

Barbatos rolls his eyes. "Oh, don't you worry your tush. I put her somewhere nice and safe. Valac's throne room! I figured the Titans would never find her there."

Satan narrows his eyes. "Valac's throne room. Really. Are you *trying* to piss me off?"

Barbatos sticks out his tongue. "Nyeh! It's the least I can do after how you made my loyal minions suffer!"

"Whatever."

Satan shoves past Barbatos. With a motion of his hand, he activates an Aqua Sense ability, one of Poseidon's powers. An underground lake trembles half a mile away, telling him where to find salvation.

Belial is dying in my arms while these jackasses slow me down. Nobody has any sense of urgency around here.

Satan continues toward the underground water reservoir. After we walk a hundred feet or so, a demon grunt scurries over to Barbatos and whispers in his ear. Satan pauses to listen.

Barbatos howls in surprise. "What?! You imbecile! I told you to hunt them all down! How could you let one slip through your claws?!"

Satan tilts his head back to watch. The other grunt shrinks away from Barbatos. "I-it wasn't my fault! We had to get out of there because of Bael! It was only one fleshbag..."

Barbatos punches his palm. "It's about the principle, you freaking idiot! We *never* let a fleshbag escape our clutches, much less one of that Titan's thralls! Nyeh! What an embarrassment! He killed a bunch of my minions, and you let him get away!!"

The grunt wrings his hands apologetically. "S-sorry... I saw him running, but I didn't think-"

"Of course you didn't think! You never do! This is why I've gotta do everything around here, sheesh!"

Satan stares at the two of them for a moment, then shrugs and continues walking.

Cripes. Getting all up in arms over one human. Without that Titan's power, they wouldn't last two seconds against even the weakest of demons.

The sounds of Barbatos scolding the grunt fade into the distance behind us. As Satan walks, he mutters quietly. "Hey, Samael. I have a question."

Samael stirs. "Hm?"

Satan purses his lips. "You told me I absorbed a few dozen human souls, correct?"

"Aye," the Archangel replies. "What about them?"

"Well, until now, I was under the impression that when someone slew my body, I lost one of my souls randomly. The chances of losing those corrupted souls before all the others seem to be... remote."

Samael nods. "Naturally. While thy mind was under the Titan's power, I frantically searched for a way to manipulate the souls controlling thee. As I did, I discovered I could control the ordering of souls within thy body. Those I place at the top disappear first, while the ones at the bottom expire afterward."

Satan nods. "That's what I thought. The ordering isn't random, then?"

"Nay. 'Tis not."

"Finally. Some good fucking news."

* * *

Satan's feet splash into a shallow puddle, sending bits of water in every direction. The Devil pauses to use the liquid on Belial, healing a bit of her skin as best as he can.

"I'm surprised, Samael. Your actions lately have been... out of character."

Samael crosses his arms. "Perhaps."

"Don't play dumb. What's your goal? You complain all the time about me, the demons, and you always talk about how you'll someday take revenge for your people's sake. Why didn't you let the Titan possess me and finish off the rest of demonkind? Why not let my strongest powers get burned out of me?"

Samael lowers his eyes.

Several long, excruciating seconds pass.

"I... I know not. Thou art correct, Satan. My actions contradict my statements in the past. Perhaps I have gone mad. Perhaps I have grown complacent. However... as I watch thy struggles against the seemingly impossible... a strange feeling wells up inside of me. Perhaps 'tis pity? Guilt?"

Samael continues. "Spending a few years within thy mind has totaled naught but a sliver of my life; a sneeze lost in the wind. Still, I've had time to contemplate a great many things. As thou lay in the Cosmic Realm, all but dead, I realized an eternity of mundanity awaited me. I ignored the feelings in my heart, knowing that at the least, thou wouldn't receive the punishment ye rightly deserved."

Satan continues walking down the labyrinthine passageways toward the underground lake. His fingers tap together. "The feelings in your heart, huh? And what might those be?"

Samael pauses.

"I know not how to describe them. I've slowly started seeing the world in the way thou do. Despite the gruesome manner in which my brother left thee limbless and naked in the Cosmic Realm, the agony and helplessness did little to erode thy fighting spirit. As a soldier fighting for the Creator, I must begrudgingly admit my respect for thy pertinacity."

Satan sighs. "That can't be all of it. Since when did you start respecting me? You held my life in your grasp twice, yet you didn't kill me. Are you afraid of dying? Is that what's going on here?"

Samael rubs his chin. "Aye. I do fear death. I resigned myself to the eternal abyss at one point, but the thought of someday speaking to my brothers and sisters again... it... it fortifies my resolve. Tell me, Satan, what are thy intentions toward the angels? Dost thee plan to attack them and cause yet another bloody war with no victors? Can we not come to a resolution and put the bloody conflicts of our past behind us?"

"You tell me, chum. I don't know how angels think."

"Thy answer is inadequate. My brother once extended a cautious hand to thee. He offered a potential peace treaty! Hads't thou accepted his generous offer?"

"That proposal was garbage from the beginning," Satan retorts, cutting off the Archangel. "Perhaps you've forgotten, but I haven't. The angels killed all the imps in Heaven. I couldn't rescue more than a sliver of my people, and your family decided to execute the rest in response. How the hell could I trust a peace treaty extended after such a barbaric display of violence? Angels and demons hate each other. That's all there is to it."

Samael falls silent.

Several minutes pass as Satan draws nearer to the underground lake. Once it comes within view, the Archangel speaks again.

"Thou art correct, Satan. Thy views are among many reasons why I forced myself to re-evaluate my life's choices. My people committed many grave sins, as did I, personally. I cannot apologize enough on their behalf. I fear that neither side will be willing to set aside their differences in the pursuit of peace. Too many have fallen. Too much blood has watered the land. What good will words do, now?"

Satan kneels beside the lake. He splashes water on Belial's nude body and gets to work soaking her broken bones, lacerations, and scorched skin. The icy water causes her to shiver violently, but Satan summons fireballs with his Vectors to warm her up as he performs the healing magic.

"I don't know, Samael. Even if Raphael groveled on both knees and apologized for a hundred years... it wouldn't undo the time I lost in the Cosmic Realm. I let all the demons down, and it's all because of your brother."

Satan chuckles. "Heh. Words are cheap, indeed. You've got that right."

Belial coughs. Her arms slowly shrink and spool back together as she regains her stamina. She blinks her eyes open and winces at the light from the fireballs hovering around her.

"Ngh- where am I? What happened?"

Satan places his hand on the Succubi's back and helps her sit up. "Easy, toots. You took one hell of a beating. While you hacked and chopped at Hercules, his daddy came in and blasted you with lightning. You're lucky you survived."

Belial reaches up to rub her face. "Lightning...? Ah... I... I remember, now. The pain. The burning on my skin. Ohh... I tried to kill that Titan, but I didn't have enough power. He healed every wound within seconds. All I could do was slow him down."

"You did fine," Satan grunts. "Don't beat yourself up. I bet you'd have killed him if his father hadn't intervened. Considering you're only a Baron, that's incredible."

Belial nods. "I suppose you're right. It's not like I'd prefer to kill him. Violence isn't in my nature."

"You sure? I remember when we were imps, and you ate lots of bugs and birds. Killing animals is the same thing as killing an angel or a Titan; it's just a matter of degree. If you're willing to kill one..."

Belial pulls away from Satan. She summons magic from within herself to finish healing the last of her injuries. "I don't think those are the same at all. Anyway, I haven't been an imp since forever and a half ago. I've changed! And I certainly don't eat bugs anymore."

"I guess not. Heh. You've changed... everyone's changed."

Satan chuckles wryly. His expression darkens, and he averts his gaze.

"Say, Belial... uh... there's something I need to tell you."

Belial perks up. Her voice lilts with concern as she notices the sudden change in Satan's attitude. "Hm? Is something wrong?"

The moisture in Satan's mouth evaporates. He coughs and wets his lips. "Ahem. Ah, yeah. You could say that. It's... it's about your sister. Nerissa."

The blood drains from Belial's face. "What... what happened to her? Satan? Don't tell me... she's not..."

Satan closes his eyes. "I'm sorry. There's no easy way to say it. She died, Belial. She died. I battled Valac, and during our encounter-"

Tears well up in the succubi's eyes. Her breath catches, and she turns away. "Nnn... no... she can't be dead... that's impossible! She was an Emperor. She was stronger than me... she was... ngh..."

Belial clutches her chest. She goes silent for a moment, but her body shakes as she tries to suppress her anguish.

Satan balls his hands into fists. "Blame me. It's my fault she died. I wasn't here to protect her, or you, or anyone else. Valac used her, hurt her, and tossed her aside... all to take revenge on me. If it weren't for me, she'd never-"

"Don't speak!" Belial yells. She turns to face me, a flash of anger radiating from her eyes. "Nerissa loved you, Satan. I lost contact with her several hundred years ago, but before that, you were always on her mind. She never lost faith in you. She always said you'd return! Even when I infiltrated Heaven, searched every nook and cranny, and came up empty-handed, she didn't lose faith. She promised me you were alive, and never gave up hope!"

"Yeah. Your sister always was a stubborn one," Satan mutters. He doesn't meet Belial's gaze. "Even with Valac's mind control turning her into a puppet, she fought against him until the very end."

Belial wipes away her tears. "How did she... *go*? Was it quick?"

"Somewhat. Nerissa went out on her own terms, not Valac's. A warrior's death."

* * *

Belial stares into the lake for nearly a minute. Satan's fireballs illuminate the water, sending sparkles and shimmers rippling off its surface to the stalactites hanging above.

"I wonder if we could bring her back..." Belial murmurs.

Satan raises an eyebrow. "What?"

"Nerissa. Maybe we could bring her back. Valac was somehow able to raise the dead. Maybe another demon could... no... no, never mind. Forget it. That's too disturbing a thought."

Satan lunges his hand out and grabs Belial's shoulder. "What did you say? Valac could raise the dead?!"

Belial jumps in surprise at Satan's sudden enthusiasm, then shrugs. "W-well, yes. But... those he brought back couldn't control their bodies. They were his puppets. I wouldn't want my sister's peaceful slumber to shift in such a gruesome manner."

Satan's eyes widen. "Are you kidding?! This is great! I didn't know anyone could revive the dead! If I can bring Nerissa back, maybe I could do the same for the others! Maybe... maybe..."

If I can save Nerissa, my time in the Cosmic Realm wasn't a total waste! If I could at least save her, then that would mean I'm not a total failure! I could bring her back and undo some of the harm Valac caused!

Satan's mood turns positively giddy. He rubs his hands together and flicks his eyes around the cave. "Devils, the idea hadn't occurred to me until just now, but if what you're saying is true..."

Belial crosses her arms. "Drop it, Satan. Don't desecrate the dead. Such abominable acts belong with scum like Valac. I'm sorry I even thought of such a thing. Lucifer would have my head if she knew."

Satan ignores the succubus. He jumps to his feet and starts walking away, heading back the way he came. "You do you, toots. I'm a man on a mission. If I don't at least try, I won't be able to live with myself."

"Wait! Where are you going?"

Belial scrabbles to catch up to Satan. As she falls into step beside him, Satan smiles. "You may not like it, but I have to try and bring her back. If there's even a chance... I'll take it."

The succubus grits her teeth. "Satan, you're acting like a child. My sister is dead. Can't we bury her and go on with our lives? Don't let your emotions get the better of you. She wouldn't want that."

"Maybe, maybe not," Satan says. "We won't know unless we ask her. If I can't figure anything out, no harm done. But, if I can..."

Belial sighs. "There's no dissuading you. Do what you please, but I warn you, Satan... this path you're walking will only lead to heartbreak and agony."

Satan bites his lip.

"I have to try."

Samael watches silently. His eyes give only a hint of the disapproval simmering below the surface.

Part 137: Digging Up The Past

It takes me a moment to adjust to my surroundings as I appear before the bonfire once again. Michael is still gone, but Raphael and Gabriel are here, as is Solomon. Raphael runs his fingers through his beard while staring at the fire, but Gabriel gazes at me with a neutral expression, as if waiting for my verdict.

"How are you feeling?" Solomon asks. "You've been inside my visions for twenty-five real-time minutes. We've nearly reached Tarus III, and the conclusion of my history lesson."

"I'm fine," I mutter. "That battle against Hercules was a bit disorienting, though. Previously, the visions took place inside the mind of one of the demons, angels, or Titans, but you chose to hover me over the battlefield. Why?"

"War is a matter of perspective," Solomon replies. "From one side, a battle will appear like a victory, while the other might perceive it as a loss. Satan's memories fragmented for a while when Hercules took over his mind, and no other combatant was there for the entire battle, so I opted to create a composite view of the battlefield and levitate you above it. Frankly, it ended up being better for displaying a bigger-picture view."

"Why didn't you use that technique sooner?"

Solomon shrugs. "I did not feel it was necessary."

"What about when Satan ate those frigging bugs? Could have spared me, you know."

"Heh," Solomon chuckles. "A little extra protein never hurt anyone."

"Right..."

I pause to flick my eyes toward Raphael.

"Regarding Satan and Samael... in the last vision, your brother wondered if the blame for the angel-demon war might sit at the angels' feet. Do you have anything to say about that?"

Raphael meets my gaze. "I do not. Samael became entrapped by the Devil's black magic. It stands to reason that Satan must have manipulated my brothers' mind to further his ambitions. The brother that I knew would never compromise his principles, nor would he assign blame to his family."

"So... you're saying Satan brainwashed him?"

"'Tis the logical explanation," Raphael says, as he averts his eyes and returns to gazing into the fire. "I would be hard-pressed to call my people blameless, but 'twas the first nasty little demon imp who couldn't appreciate the gifts he'd received who caused all the misery that followed. Had Satan kept his head down and stayed thankful for Heaven's fruits, his people would have lived quite comfortably."

I stare at Raphael for several long moments. Crossing my arms, I groan under my breath. "Ugh. It's astounding you're still able to say stuff like that after everything you've seen. Satan and Samael both thought the angels might be at fault. Their logic is perfectly sound. Why must you adhere to the notion that your people were righteous and just while the demons were pure evil? I see fault on both sides, but

yours started the conflict. Angels are the oldest beings in the universe. You should have known better than to stomp on and alienate Uzziel's children."

Gabriel holds his palm up. "We had no way of knowing what might happen. Thou dost forget, young Hero, that thou hath the gift of hindsight. The knowledge of various slave trades and the effects they had on civilizations for millennia afterward was not available to my people as it is to thee. We lacked experience and historical context. Naturally, were we to redo events in the past, the course of history would have played out very differently."

"If you acknowledge that you'd have done things differently, that means you made a mistake the first time around. Why not just admit that much?"

Raphael furrows his brow. "Thy questions prove quite vexatious, Jason. With the knowledge I possessed back then, I guided my people along the path I thought would best preserve our livelihoods. Naturally, 'tis a simple matter to ascribe modern values and knowledge to past events, but hadst thou walked in our shoes, I suspect thou would have made similar choices."

"Raphael speaks the truth," Solomon says. He smiles at me, but for a moment, I detect a brief glimpse of animosity bubbling in his eyes. "You lived your life within the confines of 'modern' society. You read history books about the evils of slavery, the Holocaust, and many other such events. The angel and demon wars began before human civilizations rose. Trying to fit your narrow viewpoint in the past will only lead to... *misunderstandings*."

Solomon places his hand on my shoulder, but I pull away. "Even without knowledge of the evils of slavery, I think I could figure out a few things might go wrong with making a lesser species my chattel."

Raphael's eyes darken. "Oh? An interesting hypothesis. Let us test that statement out."

The eldest Archangel leans forward. A glimmer appears in his eyes. "Before thou entered the Cryopod, wouldst't ye say that never once did ye participate in the act of enslavement?"

"Of course not."

"Art thou certain?"

Raphael presses the point. I lean back and try to think of anything that comes to mind.

"Well, even in the era I left behind, there were still slave traders in third-world countries. They were all illegal, though. No government sponsored slavery at any official level, and mankind was taking steps to eradicate it permanently."

"Mmm." Raphael nods. A strange smile passes over his face. "I spoke not of enslaving thy fellow humans, but of lesser beings. For example... how about livestock? Dids't thee ever once consume the meat of an animal raised on a farm?"

Shit. So that's where the old man is going with this.

"Well, yes, but I had no control over how those animals were raised. There were factory farms, and there were free-range farms. Some were worse than others, and humans were working to eradicate the worst elements."

Gabriel interjects. "Does it matter what type of farm from which thou obtained meat? Slavery is slavery, Jason. A chicken raised in comfort would end up beheaded and cooked on thy plate, the same as one raised in misery. If thou consumed any form of meat taken from an animal in captivity, thou participated in an act of bondage far worse than my people imposed upon the demons. We did not slaughter the demons for food. We merely asked that they perform tasks for us, in exchange for food and shelter exceeding anything Earth offered."

"Demons were and are sentient. Cows and chickens aren't."

Solomon purses his lips. "You can rationalize these arguments however you like, Jason. The point is, the angels made a mistake, but you aren't blameless, either. Perhaps they could have treated the imps more nicely. Certainly, kicking them around and treating them as inferiors was a terrible sin, one they should never have committed. However, there is a vast historical context you're ignoring in favor of your argument. Were the angels somewhat responsible for the actions of the demons? Yes. Were they entirely to blame? No. The demons made choices, just as the angels did. Of course, we now have further context with regards to the actions of the dark dragon, Leviathan. He manipulated the situation to his advantage and escalated the conflict far beyond what was reasonable."

Solomon continues. "Further, saying that animals are not sentient is ignorance incarnate. I happen to know for a fact that animals have thoughts, feelings, and dreams. Animals are like any of the monsters you'll find in the Labyrinth. Pretending that killing them isn't morally equivalent to enslaving the imps is little more than a gross exercise in hypocrisy."

The ancient King leans back and crosses his arms. He nods, satisfied that he destroyed my argument.

I decide not to retort. Solomon made good points, and he is the Knowledge Seeker, after all. If there were an authority on the nature of the universe, it would be him.

Even so... I don't like this... this *feeling* in my gut. I don't like the way the angels behave now, nor their actions during the ancient times. Have their attitudes changed? Have they even once reflected on their history and felt contrite? Not over what fate befell them, but over their actions. I think not. I don't sense much regret in Raphael or Gabriel's words. Even after 100,000 years, they still blame the demons for all their woes.

And, of course... there's the matter of what 'Valac' told me. His shadow, the sliver of his soul which somehow overtook my mind for a brief moment.

They're lying to you, Jason. The angels wanted my power for themselves.

I'm certain Valac was the one lying. Raphael was the leader of the angels. There isn't a chance he'd desire Valac's power, nor would he use it if it fell into his hands by chance. Unthinkable.

But... there is the plural *they*. *They* wanted Valac's power. Perhaps, angels beyond Raphael? Michael, perhaps? Michael fits the bill. If anyone were to seek power at all costs, it would be him.

Maybe I'm overthinking things. Valac is a liar, through and through. Believing a demon over the Archangels is beyond stupid, especially when he's the King of All Evil who tortures and maims for fun.

Even if I have a few misgivings, at worst, the angels are the better of two evils. Hell, that's probably selling them short.

* * *

I turn to my right to see Solomon staring at me. His eyes search my face for a moment, and I suddenly remember he can read my thoughts. I can't read his, though. I wonder what's on his mind?

"Solomon."

Raphael speaks. He pulls the ancient King's gaze away from me.

Solomon turns to look at Raphael. "What is it, old friend?"

Raphael pauses. A look of concern crosses his face, and he hastily pulls out his pipe to smoke.

"Mmm. I have a question for thee. Something has concerned me for a while now... but these recent visions have solidified my thoughts. 'Tis with regards to the knowledge thou possess regarding the demons. Specifically... their memories."

Solomon cocks his head. "I don't follow."

"Understand that I am not accusing thee of anything. However... I must ask how ye came into possession of Satan's memories, Nerissa's, those Titan women, and so on. They died long before thy birth. My understanding was that thy crown took the knowledge and history locked within a person's brain and sealed them within itself... but many of the memories we've seen came from people who never wore thy crown. Therefore, I ask thee now... how did'st thee obtain their memories?"

"Ah," Solomon says. "So that's what you mean. The answer is quite simple. I possess the knowledge and memories of anyone whose body I have touched in some way. The crown is merely an infinite receptacle for all the information I've absorbed."

This time, it's Raphael who looks perplexed. "I... I still do not understand. Even if that were the case, how would'st thee have obtained Selene's memories? I doubt ye had a chance to touch her."

"I didn't. However, my ability allows me to obtain the memories of not just anyone I touch, but any of the souls they've absorbed. As you know, I once fought Satan and tens of thousands of his minions in Jerusalem. Satan crushed Selene's head, so when I touched him, I absorbed his memories, and those belonging to all the souls inside of him. That included hers."

"Mmm," Raphael murmurs with a nod. "I see. Then... Uzziel's memories...?"

"You brought me to Heaven at one point. I embraced many angels, including her."

Raphael's countenance darkens. Slowly, he pulls the pipe from his mouth. It shakes in his trembling hand.

"What of... what of *my* memories?"

Solomon purses his lips. "I possess those as well."

Raphael jumps to his feet. "No! Thou must erase them at once! My people's history must stay banished to the past, forever! None must know of it!!"

Once again, a chilling sense of dread bursts from the old man's body. Much like when he confronted Michael, a horrific sensation of fury explodes from all of his pores. I wince as Raphael stomps his foot, enraged. "If thou possesseth knowledge of my people's past, then ye know the dangers our memories hold! Remove them from thy crown at once, SOLOMON!!"

Solomon doesn't flinch. He stares at the old man silently for several long moments before closing his eyes.

"I apologize, Raphael, but I cannot do that. When I saw the primordial past you speak of, I tried with all my might to erase those memories. However, I cannot erase any information contained within my Crown. Instead, I locked them away and placed them behind a thousand mental barriers. Even if Jason's curiosity were to get the better of him, he would be unable to view them."

Solomon flicks a guilty look toward me. "I'm sorry, Jason, but I withhold the information from you out of affection, not malice. I know telling you not to ask questions is a raw deal, and it will only inflame your curiosity further, but believe me when I say that Raphael has every reason and right to seal the primordial era behind a wall. I regret seeing it. Raphael regrets living through it. No good can come of knowing the events that transpired."

After Solomon finishes his speech, Raphael's agitation decreases noticeably. The old man shakily sits on his log once again. "A-apologies, Solomon. I shouldn't... shouldn't have lost my temper. It's just... when I think of those dark days..."

"I know," Solomon says, his voice a whisper. "I know you wish to forget the past, but your sacrifice will not go unnoticed. Your vigilance to ensure such a catastrophe never happens again will, at the least, be appreciated by me. I will help you bear the load."

While Solomon and Raphael comfort each other, I watch their exchange silently. All of my misgivings come roaring back.

Raphael wants to hide his people's history. Solomon seems more than happy to help. Michael killed two fellow Archangels, *his sisters*. Might that have something to do with what Raphael is hiding?

And what of Valac's words?

Gah! I'm missing pieces of this puzzle. I can't solve it, and I'm not sure I even want to try. What awful thing could have happened that made Raphael erase everyone's memories?! Why, upon witnessing said event, would he choose to keep his? Why would Solomon stay complacent?!

Solomon is right when he says that telling me not to ask questions only makes more of them flare up in my mind. My curiosity is burning like the goddamned sun. All I can think about is what the hell happened that freaked Raphael and Solomon out so much. It's driving me crazy!

"Hrm."

Solomon clears his throat.

"Let us continue. Jason, the War in Heaven is the next event I plan to show you. I'd like to explain more regarding what happens afterward, but that can wait for another day. Your spaceship is nearing

Tarus II, and we're running out of time for stories."

I shove my misgivings deep into the pit of my stomach. Even if I ask, neither Solomon nor Raphael will give me the answers I seek. There's no point in wasting words. All I can do is try not to dwell on horrible secrets that may or may not undermine the very fabric of my reality. That's not a disturbing thought at all.

"Fine. Let's finish these visions up, already."

Solomon opens his mouth to speak, but pauses a moment before saying anything. "I understand you're unhappy, right now... all I can say is that I'm trying to protect not only you, but the rest of the galaxy as well. I won't apologize for upholding my convictions, and neither should you."

I nod. "Yeah. Sounds fine."

"Jason..."

"What? I'm agreeing with you."

"Yes, but the tone of your voice... never mind. Let's prepare the next batch of visions."

Solomon sighs.

"Regarding the second half of the battle against Hercules, I will continue to use such a perspective for the upcoming battles. However, I think it would be best if the Archangels and myself stood beside you and offered our thoughts. The War in Heaven was a massive, complex event. We would be happy to answer any questions you might have."

I retort immediately. "*Any* questions?"

"Bloody hell, Jason."

"I'm just kidding."

"No. You're not."

Solomon groans and looks away. The look on his face tells me everything I need to know. He's starting to get annoyed by my persistence.

Well, I can't help myself. When someone puts a big red button in front of me and tells me never to press it, my entire body screams that I absolutely *must* press it at all costs. I'm human. It's the way the Creator wired me. I can't help my stupid monkey instincts. Even now, I'm not so sure Solomon is doing the right thing by not letting me in on Raphael's secret.

Just tell me! Tell me what happened!!

Fuck it. Move on, Jason. Breathe. Inhale, exhale.

I sigh. "Let's get a move on."

Solomon nods. He forces a neutral expression, but I immediately detect dozens of emotions bubbling beneath his surface.

"Yes. *Let's.*"

Part 138: Game of Emperors

I materialize inside of a dingy room carved into the earth, its walls dimly lit by a few torches hanging from the ceiling. Several hundred demons gather around uprooted tree stumps to cast their lots as they play dozens of games of Sticks and Bones.

An underground gambling den. Literally.

For once, my mind does not appear inside someone else's, nor does it float in the sky with infinite vision. Instead, I coalesce as an incorporeal ghostly apparition; one nobody looks at or acknowledges, but where I can raise my hand, reach out, and touch things around me. I try to nudge the nearest gambler, only for my fingers to pass through him.

Solomon appears beside me, along with Raphael and Gabriel. The Archangel of Power stands so tall that his shoulders and head pass through the roof, obscuring his vision. He doesn't bother kneeling.

"Here we are," Solomon says, his voice impassive. The ancient King waves his hand at the demons present, then drops it to his side. He seems either bored or annoyed.

"Where is this place?" I ask.

"Lucifer's Lair. Hell. The place where demons breed like parasites. Call it *whatever* you like."

Solomon bites off the end of every sentence and avoids looking me in the eye. When he crosses his arms, I finally confirm his mood.

He's still angry.

I decide not to confront him. Instead, I stay silent and watch as Raphael hobbles toward the nearest table, where Bael, Barbatos, Smealum, and another wild-haired demon are all sitting together and playing two simultaneous matches of Sticks and Bones.

"Hm? Isn't this that game the Animus here invented?" Raphael asks.

"It is," Solomon replies. "After two thousand years, Smealum refined its rules substantially, and it became quite the popular pastime among demons."

Raphael nods, but his expression turns grim. "Mmm. Can't say I like the idea of defiling the dead for sport."

"That's what I'd expect you to say," Solomon mutters.

At the table, Bael and Barbatos sit beside each other, while Smealum and the other demon sit across from them. Bael plays against the newcomer, while Barbatos plays against Smealum.

The newcomer, a demon with frizzy white hair spiked in all directions, chews his thumb as he stares at the bones on the board. His clothes are little more than tattered rags, deliberately torn to reveal his pectorals, the sides of his legs, and his abs. He's a skinny, lanky looking guy, but he has a decent six-pack.

"Damn, bro. You got me good, here. Wassa score again?"

Bael shrugs. "I forgot. You know I ain't good with numbers."

"You're winning though, ain'tcha? I think you are. Hahaha! You're a sly hellhound, bruh. You act like a moron, but you're sharp like Belial's fingers."

Bael grins. "Bahaha! You got that right! Murmur, what're we sitting at? You're keeping count, right?"

Next to the table, several demons sit on chairs, smoking some unknown substance, while they watch the games unfold. A tiny demoness, barely three feet tall, wrapped in several layers of robes, peeps out from the hood shadowing her face. She blushes at Bael's words. "Um... I, um... three-hundred and... and fifteen for D-Duke Bael... Two hundred and fifty-five for-"

"I knew I was ahead!" Bael yells, cutting Murmur off mid-sentence. "Go on, kid. Throw your bones. Let's see how you do on the last toss!"

Murmur shrinks back in her seat. She melts into her robes, relieved not to be the focus of attention anymore. "G-good luck, Shax..."

Solomon coughs. "Mmm. Jason, here's a change to my visions. If you stare at someone and concentrate, you can make their name and other relevant information appear above their head. Give it a shot."

I raise an eyebrow. "Could I have done that from the beginning?"

"If I had allowed it."

"I see."

Shrugging, I focus my mind on the crazy-looking, white-haired demon. His name appears above his head.

Shax: Baron of Melody.

Faction: Formerly led by Valac. Currently led by Bael.

Likes: Music, drugs, gratuitous amounts of sex.

Dislikes: Work, authority, The Man.

My eyebrows raise further as his entire life biography follows. My eyes glaze over at the hundreds of thousands of words.

"That's not all," Solomon says. "If you focus a little harder, you can also read the thoughts of people in my visions."

I sigh. "That ability would have been nice to have earlier. Better late than never, I guess."

Shrugging, I aim my mind at Bael.

Bael: Duke of Pain.

Faction: Formally led by Lucifer, but does not follow his leader's orders.

Likes: Flowers, kittens, bunnies.

Dislikes: Punks, smart people, books.

I groan. "Are these descriptions a joke?"

Solomon shakes his head. "No. They're accurate."

"Bael likes kittens and bunnies. Really?"

Solomon forces a smile. "Who doesn't?"

"Right. Fair point."

I concentrate a little harder on Bael. Sweat drips down my forehead as I dial my concentration to eleven.

"Cripes, Solomon. I can't read Bael's thoughts at all. I think your Crown is malfunctioning."

Solomon sighs. "Haah... no... it's working. Try a different demon."

I nod and aim my mind at Shax. This time, with only the slightest effort, his thoughts appear above his head like a scrolling text feed.

Man. If I can finally beat Bael, maybe he'll accept my offer! I've gotta try, brah! No way I can let this chance slip through my fingers!

I aim my mind at Bael, but once again, no thoughts materialize above his head.

Ah. It appears he's an empty-headed idiot. Somehow, I'm not surprised.

Drool leaks from Bael's mouth as he waits for Shax to pick up the bones. Instead, Shax balls up his fist and aims it at Bael. "Hey! You gotta make me a promise, brah! A bet! A wager!!"

Bael blinks. "Huh? A bet? About what?"

"Don't play dumb! If I beat you here, you've gotta join my crew! We need your talents, my man!"

The Duke of Pain chortles. "Pft, what, singin' songs and shit? Why would I ever do that?"

"Don't laugh! Harmony and rhythm are the tickets to the soul! We ain't doin' this for fun, ya know! Music rouses a warrior's inner spirit, allowing their true power to materialize! It'll help us beat those stupid chickens once and for all!"

Shax headbangs to prove his point, sending his hair rattling forward and back. "Just like that! Feel the jive! Let it touch your soul, my dude!"

Bael appears skeptical. He nudges Barbatos. "You hearin' this shit?"

Barbatos, far gloomier than usual, nods. "Uh huh..."

Bael flicks his eyes at the Lord of Iron's Sticks and Stones board. "Bloody hell! Another Insect formation? Ain't that your sixth in a row? Bahaha! What rotten luck! Smealum, take it easy on this guy."

Smealum shrugs. "I cannot help Barbatos's misfortune. He is quite an unlucky fellow. This game involves very little skill, after all."

Shax's eyes brighten. "No way! When I throw the bones, I feel their aura speak to me! That's why I know... with this roll... I'll make Bael join my entourage! Fate guides me!"

Murmur tugs on her robes. "Y-you... you can do it... Shax..."

Her voice, barely a whisper, is all but ignored by the demons at the table. Shax flashes a brilliant smile at Murmur before focusing his attention on the dozen or so bones in his hand. "I only need... sixty points! If I beat you..."

Bael rolls his eyes. "Pfft. You ain't gonna win. I'm the luckiest demon here."

"We'll see about that!"

Shax throws the bones down. They clatter against the table.

"An Undead Monster formation. You have a chance," Smealum says. He and Barbatos pause their game to watch Bael and Shax's final match.

"You'll need an Undead Minotaur to break sixty points..." Barbatos mutters. "At least you're luckier than me. I ain't seen a good formation all day..."

Shax's nerves heighten. He grabs the sticks and prepares to toss them. "Tch. I'll need like, three flames to win. I can beat you, Bael! Believe in me, everyone! Gimme your energy!"

The demons surrounding the table begin stomping their feet in tandem. "Do, it! Do, it! Do, it!"

A few Goblins skulking around flash their toothy smirks. "Somebody's gotta beat Bael! Might as well be you!"

A massive grin spreads across Shax's face. "Yeah, yeah, yeah! That's the spirit!"

Shax throws his Mahja Sticks down. The four-sided rectangles *clink* against the table, and Bael's eyes follow them intently.

"Oho! Two flames, two eyes, and a fist! Not bad!"

Shax's excitement lessens. "No... it isn't good enough. I'll have to retry. I only have one discard and one re-roll left. Maybe I oughta re-roll the fist? Or maybe I should discard and hope my re-roll works better on the next pattern?"

Bael's excitement increases to match Shax's intensity. He opens his mouth to offer a recommendation, but at that moment, a demon grunt pushes through the crowd.

"Baeel! We need your heelp!"

His whiny voice rings out in the din, squeaking worse than Barbatos's.

Bael's smile evaporates. "What? Can't you see I'm busy?! This had better be important."

"There's a cave bear outside! It killed Korgo! We need you to take care of it!"

Bael rolls his eyes. "Any Lord can beat a Cave Bear. Stop wasting my damn time! I'm tryin' to play some games, dumbass!"

"B-but, if you transform, you can kill it in one blow!"

Bael punches his palm. "Don't piss me off, punk! You're about two seconds from joining Korgo!"

The grunt turns pale and takes a few steps back, but a moment later, someone else runs up behind him. "Bael! Oh, Bael! It's terrible! Come quickly; we need your help!"

"Fuck's sake," The Duke of Pain groans. "Now what? You want a knuckle sandwich, too?"

The second grunt ignores Bael's threat. "Jik-Jik and Puri were trapped in a cave-in! We need someone strong to dig them out of the rubble!!"

"So what?! I ain't the only bulky guy around here! Go bug Satan or Diablo!"

The grunt shakes his head. "They're not strong enough! Only your Balrog form can shove all those rocks aside!"

"Spawn of a broodmother!" Bael jumps out of his seat, annoyance etched into every inch of his face. "All of you! Stop bugging me with dumb crap! I'm trying to play Sticks and Bones! Can't a guy get five minutes of peace around here?!"

More grunts appear, and each of them waves their arms to get Bael's attention.

"Duke of Pain! We need your help!"

"There's an emergency! We need the Balrog to save lives!"

The first grunt seizes his chance. "The cave bear's still on the loose!"

Bael grinds his teeth together. Grunts and Lords around the room begin joining their voices together, demanding he turn into the Balrog for one reason or another. Some of them seem scared, but most of them have looks of hunger in their eyes.

Smealum stares at Barbatos. He shakes his head. "Fools. All these broodlings want is to witness Bael's full power in the flesh. They haven't the slightest grasp on how dangerous his Balrog Form is."

Barbatos crosses his arms. "Nyeh. He wasn't that scary. I nearly beat him myself. Hercules was just weak."

Shax leans back in his seat. He watches as Bael pumps his fists in the air and tries to get the other demons to shut up and let him play. His thoughts appear above his head. *Bummer. I thought my bro might get a day off, but even after five years, everyone keeps buggin' him. What a bunch of downers.*

Bael smashes his fist on the table, and the playing pieces go flying in every direction. "Everyone! Shut up! I'm sick of this shit! Every devil-damned day, you dingbats come and hound me like a bunch of blood-sucking parasites! For the thousandth time, I'm not transforming ever again! Never! Not even once! Understand?!"

Bael's voice booms around the room, silencing everyone present. As his nostrils flare and heat spews from his lungs, several grunts shrink away from him in surprise.

One Lord whispers to another. "Th-think he'll transform now? He looks angry."

Bael shoots a glare at the speaker. "Not a chance."

The noise in the room dies down enough that I can hear the sounds of individual demons breathing.

"M-mister Bael..."

Bael lowers his gaze to a short little female Lord poking his leg.

"What?"

The demoness twiddles her finger nervously. "I don't understand... why can't you transform? Everyone knows Valac's scythe couldn't kill you. You beat Lucifer, Satan, and Hercules all at the same time. Doesn't that make you the strongest demon here?"

Bael crosses his arms. "Obviously."

"Then... what's the problem? Why won't you transform? We all want to see!"

Several grunts nod along. Barbatos, however, averts his eyes.

"I don't need to become a Balrog to win a fight," Bael replies. "You dumbasses just don't understand. I ain't like Agares. I lose control when I transform. I'll tear apart my friends 'n enemies at the same time. Most of you wouldn't last five seconds against me... and that *ain't* a good thing."

The Lord shuffles nervously. "But... if you're so tough, why couldn't you beat Hercules without transforming? We heard all about it. Once you became the Balrog, you were unstoppable. Can't you kill all the angels by yourself? If you did that... then..."

Barbatos interrupts her. "Then we'd all be free, nyeh? That's what you're thinking. No more chickens oppressing us."

Several grunts nod.

The female Lord blushes. "With Valac gone... we have no hope. None of the other Emperors stood a chance against those two Titans. Only Bael can win the war! If he doesn't transform and storm into Heaven, we might all-"

"Bullshit!" Bael's roars angrily. "Listen to you whining like a weakling! Pathetic! And you call yourself a demon!"

The Duke of Pain grabs the table and crushes it in his hands, splintering the wood into a thousand pieces.

"I could squash every one of you without transforming! Not because I'm strong, but because you maggots are weak! WEAK! Listen to you, bitching and moaning! You make me sick!!"

Smealum shifts in his seat as he stares at the enraged Duke of Pain. "Bael..."

Bael ignores his warning tone. "I'm tired of everyone's shit!! Stop acting like I'm the only demon who can do anything around here! Work out! Improve yourselves! Get off your asses and become better warriors!!"

The Duke of Pain storms through the crowd of onlookers. He shoves aside several grunts standing in his path as he heads for the exit, but the rest quickly jump out of the way. Everyone watches in silence as he grumbles and gnashes his teeth.

Once Bael leaves the room, an awkward silence follows.

Shax slumps in his seat. "Tch. Thanks a lot, guys. Ya'll just *had* to push his buttons."

Barbatos nods. "There goes all the fun."

* * *

Solomon motions toward the exit. "Let's follow Bael."

I nod. "Sure."

Solomon closes his eyes, causing the four of us to float after the Duke of Pain. Soon, we fall into step behind him as he stomps through the Labyrinthine passageways of Lucifer's underground lair. Goblins spot him coming and jump into adjacent rooms. Several grunts and Lords pause to stare up at him in silent admiration.

Bael starts muttering to himself. "Fuckin' hell. Every damned day, someone bugs me about somethin'. *Transform, Bael! We need your help, Bael!* And if it ain't that, they call me a murderer, too. Like it was *my* fault all those demons died. It's Lucifer's fault. She made me transform. Fucking devil-damned whore."

He continues ranting. "Satan, too. He butted into our business without asking. Because of him, Valac's dead, and now I've gotta deal with a bunch of whining goobers. Dammit! If those two are the best demonkind's got to offer, we're all screwed. I ain't leader material."

Bael grumbles and groans as he walks down the hallways. Soon, voices from further ahead catch his attention. Various demons shout and yell phrases like, "Yeah, you tell him!" and "Kick her ass!"

Frowning, Bael continues walking until he arrives at a huge underground chamber with circular pillars that rise to the ceiling, and various crude drawings etched into the walls. Many of them appear provocative and unfit for polite company, but the demons don't care. Goblins scamper around on the ceiling, adhering to the relatively smooth dirt without a care in the world. They watch the chaos below with looks of interest, but also take care not to get involved.

Bael strides up to the grunts, Lords, and Barons gathered around the outskirts of the room. "What's everyone so excited about?"

Orias, Lord of the Moon, turns to look at Bael. He leans against the wall casually, but keeps as close to the exit as possible. "Satan and Lucifer are fighting again."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"I'm not. This time, he-"

Before Orias can finish his sentence, the demons around him whoop and holler. "Woo! Yeah! Give it to her!"

Bael's eyes flick to the center of the room. Satan and Lucifer lean toward each other with their metaphorical fangs bared. The Devil balls his hands into fists, while Lucifer's face appears contorted in an expression of rage.

Lucifer's fingers twitch as she takes a menacing step toward Satan. "You expect us to praise you for fixing a mistake you never should've made in the first place?!"

"Of course not!" Satan retorts. "But for once, maybe you could give me a little credit! Do you have any idea how much work fixing those contracts took?!"

"Oh, you poor thing. If only we could sympathize with all the *pain* and *suffering* you've had to endure!"

Bael rolls his eyes. "Oh, boy, don't tell me. Lucifer started it this time."

Orias nods. "Satan finally finished erasing the last contract, but she couldn't let him have a win."

Bael shoves aside an imp standing on the opposite side of the doorway from Orias. The poor fellow starts to protest, only to back down when he realizes who pushed him. Bael leans against the doorway and mirrors Orias as the two of them continue watching Satan and Lucifer's Battle of the Words.

Lucifer's third eye glows ruby-red. "I never liked you, Satan. You act like you're the alpha hellhound around here, but you're more bark than bite. Your power comes from lying and manipulating others around you. You cheated and deceived the angels, then did the same to your brothers and sisters as well! While you sat around in the Cosmic Realm like a useless lump of flesh, Valac and I built two equally powerful demon empires; backups in case one or the other should fall. I never liked him, but at least he knew how to get shit done. What have you accomplished since you came back? NOTHING!"

Satan matches Lucifer's nasty glare. "What did I accomplish? I killed Poseidon and Valac just hours apart! Oh, and don't pretend you were best friends with that grave-digging bastard. You hated him more than anyone else. As for your so-called 'empire,' what a laughable notion! Nobody here has any sense of duty. They sit around and play games, all while ignoring the Angels and Titans who want to kill us."

Bael winces. "Sheesh. That hit a little close ta' home."

Satan continues. "I screwed up, but as of today, I've finished fixing my mistakes. My soul contracts are all but nullified. Now, I'm going to take my place as First Emperor and lead our people to greatness. I won't stand for licking the scraps the angels leave us! I want them gone, and I want demons to rule the world!"

"I'll never let you be our leader!" Lucifer snaps. "The last thing we need is another deranged, power-hungry soul manipulator like Valac in charge! Especially you, a demon who spends more time playing with that... that *crystal* than doing anything else!"

Satan's eyes ignite with rage. "I'm trying to bring Nerissa back! That's my prerogative, not yours! Besides, you've no room to call me a villain for manipulating souls. Do you think I'm daft?! These monsters didn't materialize out of thin air. You made them! You're a soul manipulator too!!"

Lucifer takes a step back in surprise. "What? How could you possibly know that...?"

"Because I have eyeballs, *sweetheart*. Only Mother can create life from scratch. You ain't no Archangel. Your power comes from somewhere else. I'm loath to insult you for manipulating souls, given it would make me a hypocrite, but I won't stand for one-sided slander from the likes of you!"

* * *

Bael yawns. "Ugh. Same shit as always."

Satan and Lucifer deliver more verbal jabs to one another, but Bael ignores them. Instead, he pokes the nearest grunt.

"Hey, you. Pup."

The demon grunt turns to look at Bael. "Huh? Duke of Pain? Wassup?"

"What's your take? Which of these clowns should be the leader of demonkind?"

A massive grin spreads across the grunt's face. "Aw, that's easy, boss. You! You're like, the coolest demon ever!"

Bael sighs. "Yeaah... I get that a lot."

The Duke of Pain grumbles as he looks away.

"Ugh. Guess I have to break 'em up again."

The Duke of Pain belatedly pushes his way through the crowd. Before he makes it halfway to the two clashing Emperors, they both spot him coming and immediately take a few steps apart.

Satan crosses his arms. "Ah, Bael. How long have you been here?"

Bael licks his lips. "Long enough to get the gist of things. So, uh, you finished doing the thing? With the things?"

Satan nods. "I did. My soul contracts no longer pose a risk to demonkind. But this... this WHORE! She won't get off my damn back! Nothing satisfies her!"

Lucifer grinds her razor-sharp teeth together. "You strutted out here, acting like you'd done everyone a big favor! I merely put you in your place!"

"In my place?! My place is at the top of-"

Bael wipes his face. "Cripes. Both of you are pathetic."

His interruption halt's Satan's insult.

"What?!" Lucifer scoffs. "Don't lump me in with this cretin! I made demonkind strong! I gave you that Balrog transformation! If it weren't for me-"

Bael raises his palm to silence her.

"Shut up. Don't pretend you're our savior. Everyone did fine under Valac, and everyone did fine under you. The truth is that we're only alive because the angels haven't gotten serious. It's not because you're some smartass leader who predicted their every move. If you or Satan think the rest of us owe you any praise, you're wrong."

Bael shivers as anger courses through his body.

"Fucking Hell. Both of you piss me off. I'd like to squash your heads and spray your brains all over the ground. I came here because I decided we needed to pick our official leader, once and for all. I'm tired of pests buggin' me about this or that. One of you's gotta be the First Emperor, and I don't know if either of you is any good. At the rate we're going, I'd sooner stick Orias in charge. At least he won't bitch and whine like you two hags."

Lucifer rubs her arm. "Well, if you need a logical reason, then how about this? Satan deceived us. Shouldn't that be reason enough to exclude him from the running?"

Bael leans toward Lucifer. His massive body overshadows her like a dinosaur versus a lizard. "You nearly blabbed my secret. I don't trust you, either."

Lucifer's mouth turns to chalk. "Oh, right. I, err, did do that..."

Bael returns to staring at both of the Emperors as he tries to make a decision.

Suddenly, a blur of movement appears behind Bael. The Duke of Pain doesn't react as a figure, black as night, seemingly springs out of his shadow to wrap around him. The demoness, a shadow-walker with huge horns, reaches up and presses a knife to his throat.

"Bael. I hear you're looking for someone to be the new Emperor of demonkind. Why haven't you asked *me*?"

Bael blinks. He glances to the side, then seems to notice the knife pressed to his jugular. "Oh. Berith. Uhh... yeah..."

The Emperor of Backstabbing, Berith, lowers her weapon and slinks away from him. She melts into his shadow, only to reappear behind Lucifer. Lucifer jerks to the side and recoils from Berith's grasp. "Gah! Don't touch me! I'll not have my skin sullied by one of Valac's servants."

Berith's eyes, black as onyx, twinkle beneath her pitch-black hood. "Valac was a far greater ruler than you. I was the Third Emperor, placed only below his favorite little *doll*. Had Nerissa perished at any point, I would have been next in line to succeed Valac's throne."

Drool begins to leak from Bael's lips. "Uh... uh huh... right. So you wanna be First Emperor, now?"

Berith stays quiet for a moment. "...Tch. Of course. The problem is, it's become patently clear the demons respect *you* as the strongest. I won't earn my right to lead unless I defeat you in combat."

The Emperor of Backstabbing narrows her eyes. "How worthless the demons have become to look up to a *Duke*. I've seen the way you fight. Defeating you would be trivial. Yes, I see it now... Bael! I challenge you for the right to lead demonkind!"

Bael shrugs. "I mean, if you wanna be leader that badly, you can have it."

Berith balks. Her voice hisses through her teeth. "Don't you dare patronize me! I won't stand for mockery. Activate your Balrog Form... and prepare to withstand my full might."

The crowd of demons suddenly triples their excitement. Various grunts and Lords lean forward, their eyes bulging from their faces. "Oh, shit! He's gonna do it! Send word to the others!!"

Lucifer shifts her feet. She glances uneasily at the building enthusiasm among the lower-ranked demons. "Berith. Even for you, this is going too far. We cannot afford a catastrophe like five years--"

"Quiet, you!" Berith snaps and aims her knife at Lucifer. "I don't care how scared you are! I have the right to challenge Bael for the title of First Emperor!"

Bael rubs his chin. "Err, dumb question alert. Once you become our leader, what will you do?"

Berith returns her gaze to him. "I plan to defeat the angels and Titans, of course."

"Yeah? How?"

Berith takes a menacing step toward him. "Hehehe... simple. First, I will use our weakest demons as bait to draw out the Archangels one by one. We will ambush them and pick them off. Once we've

eliminated the Archangels, I can draw out the leaders of the Titans and finish them off as well. It will be a simple matter of overrunning the leftovers after that. A genius plan, guaranteeing our victory!"

Several grunts nod along to her words. A few whisper things like, "I guess that could work..." and "If it kills those chickens, it's worth a shot..."

"Hmm," Lucifer murmurs. "Your plan has *some* merit..."

However, Bael scowls at Berith. "Are you kiddin' me?! What kind of bullshit is that?! We're demons, not cowards who strike from the shadows! We're supposed to tackle our enemies head-on!!"

Satan nods. "Bael is right. What good is winning with such underhanded tactics? It would sour the taste of victory."

Bael's immediate scorn draws Berith's ire. "You have no right to insult my war strategy. Not only is it practical, it virtually assures our victory! You haven't done anything in five years. Everyone looks up to you, but all you do is sit around and play Sticks and Bones. Meanwhile, the Angels and Titans close in on us from every direction."

Bael's temper cools. "Yeah, you've got a point. I *do* like playing games."

"Precisely."

Berith hisses. She motions with her hands and summons a two-handed spear of shadow.

"That is why I must defeat you right here... and right now. I'll show everyone that I am the mightiest among us and that my methods are what will win this war."

Bael frowns. "I don't think sacrificing weaklings is the way we should do things. But hey, if you want the title so badly, you can have it. I don't really care who's the First Emperor."

"Stop stalling!" Berith yells. "Transform! NOW!!"

Bael scratches his head. "Nah. Too dangerous."

Berith falters. "S-stop mocking me! Transform, you worthless-"

Before Berith can finish her sentence, Bael lunges forward. He jabs his fist forward and strikes the shadow-demon in the chest. She yelps in surprise and flies into the crowd. Before she can hit anyone, she lands inside a shadow and melts into the ground.

Suddenly, the shadows in the room triple in length. Berith pounces from one stretching across the ceiling and dives toward Bael's head. "If you won't transform willingly, then I'll make you do it!!"

Bael doesn't react as her four-foot shadow spear rushes toward his skull. The moment it strikes his flesh and bone, Bael yelps. "Eeyow! Stop poking me! That shit hurts!!"

He reaches up to grab Berith, but she vanishes. Four shadow-lances, like those Amelia summoned in her battle against me, leap from the ground in every direction. They smash against Bael's body, intending to skewer each of his limbs. Instead, when they strike him, the lances bend awkwardly, like spaghetti trying to shatter iron.

Bael rubs his head. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!! I told you to knock it off, you dumb cunt!"

Berith jumps out from behind Bael. A razor-sharp shadow knife materializes in her grasp, and she plunges it into Bael's spine.

The knife shatters on impact. Berith's hand crumples against Bael's skin like a paper airplane striking a brick wall.

Bael swings his palm back like a bolt of lightning.

Wham!

He slaps the Emperor of Backstabbing lightly, sending her careening into the mass of spectators. The surprise attack knocks Berith for a loop. She lands on her ass and skids to a stop, only to jump to her feet a moment later.

"Grrrghh!! Stop fooling around!! This battle is no game! It's a matter of life and death, you little..."

Bael turns to face her. His face turns deathly calm. "You want me to get serious? I'm not even trying to fight you, right now. You're so weak it's pathetic. You can't handle my normal body, let alone my Balrog Form."

"The Hell I can't!"

Berith summons forth powerful magic. Shadows swirl beneath Bael's feet and wrap around him like angry squids. The shadows rapidly engulf Bael's body and pin his arms and legs in place.

Berith vanishes.

Five copies of her body appear in various shadows around the room. The demoness pounces toward Bael from every direction and summons warhammers in each clone's grasp.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

She brings the hammer down, literally, and batters Bael from every direction. Despite being a master of skullduggery, her incredible strength proves she hasn't slacked off. She hammers Bael with everything she's got, but all the while, Bael takes her attacks without complaint.

For over a minute, Bael stands idly as Berith unleashes her full fury upon him. "DIE! DIE! DIE DIE DIE DIEDIEDIE!!!"

Finally, Berith sags to her knees. Her clones disperse. Her shadow-bindings fall away. She gasps for breath, her strength spent. "Im... impossible... I hit you... with..."

"Good try," Bael mutters. "Damn. I thought about throwing the battle to give you a win. I thought you'd at least be able to hurt me..."

Satan shakes his head and chuckles. "Hehe... Bloody Hell, Bael, you're a fucking monster."

Lucifer stares at the Duke of Pain for a few moments, then turns away. "That, he is. I can't beat him, and I doubt you can either. I suppose it's our loss, then?"

Satan frowns. "Yes, I suppose so."

With a sigh, he turns and walks away, leaving the two female Emperors with Bael and the rest of the demons. Several grunts and Lords run over and whack Bael on the back. "Hahaha! You're the best, Bael!"

Nobody can stand up to you!!"

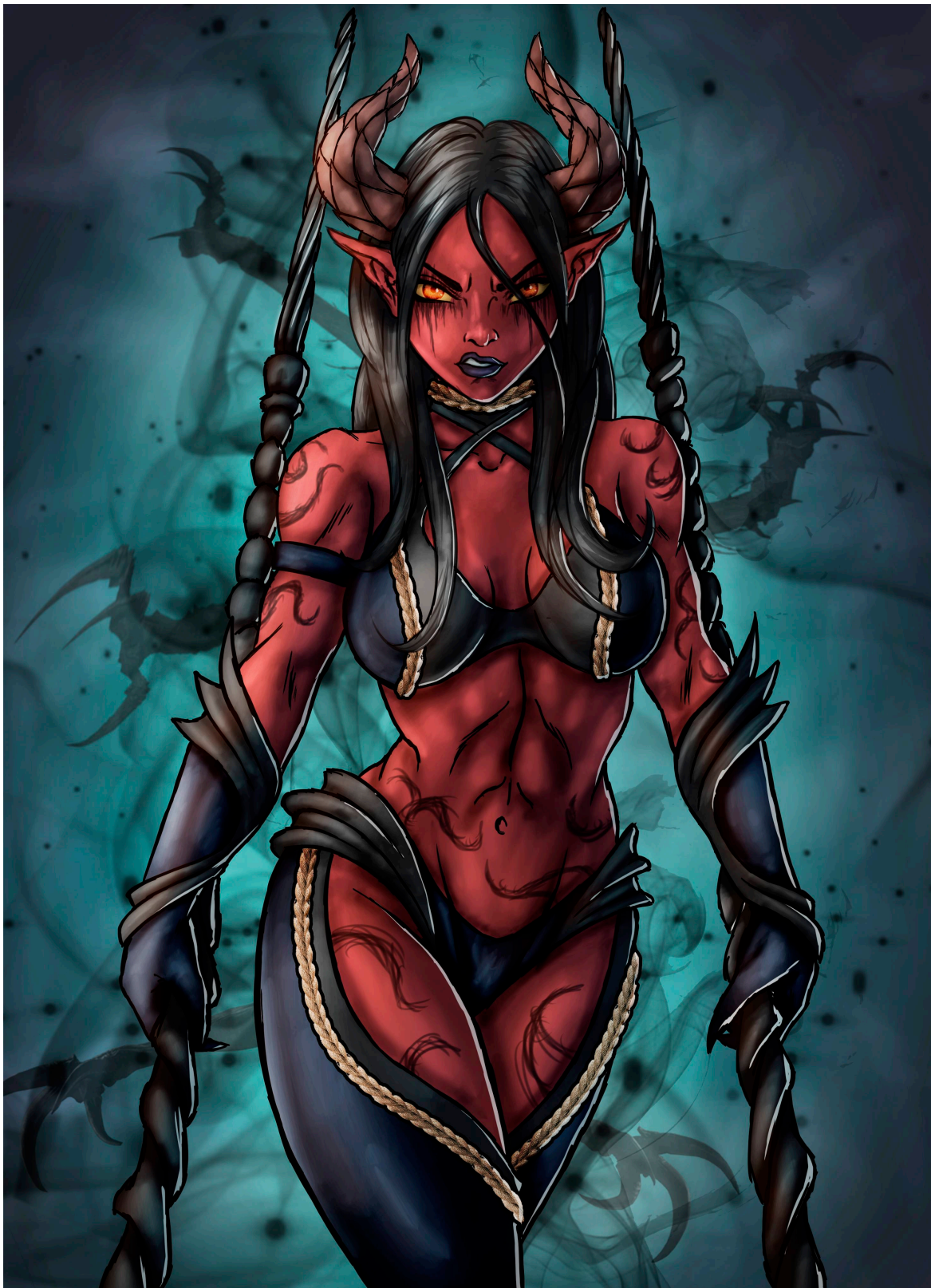
"Yup. That's the problem," Bael says. "Ugh. I have a headache."

Berith stares at Bael. After several long, drawn-out seconds, she clambers to her feet. "This isn't over, Duke of Pain. If you're unwilling to lead, someone has to step up. I don't care what your opinion is... the demons must survive. If we fall under the might of angelkind, I'll haunt you from the grave for all eternity."

Bael nods. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Author Note:

This is Berith.



This is Shax and Murmur.

THE
CRYOPOD
TO HELL



MURK
STUDIOS

Part 139: Crouching Artisan; Hidden Voyeur

After the messy confrontation with his fellow Emperors, Satan slips away to his private chambers. Solomon and I follow after him, and the Archangels come along for the ride as well.

"It seems Satan's having some issues," I say, as I try and make small talk.

"Indeed. The snake's greed returned to bite him in the heel," Solomon replies. "In the beginning, Satan wanted power at any cost. Only after losing two thousand years with his lover did the Devil realize such ways were self-destructive. In the end, one must reap what they've sown."

I shoot a glance at Solomon. His face betrays no emotion, but a question appears in my mind.

Wise words, or empty platitudes?

Solomon is the Knowledge-Seeker. However, that doesn't mean he's right about everything. What he sees as a greedy power-play by Satan could also be interpreted as his way of protecting his ass. After all, in the beginning, Satan possessed no special abilities, unlike Lucifer and the others. He was vulnerable to the machinations of his fellow demons.

Tricking the others might not have been the polite way to go about securing his safety, but he didn't use his power to hurt them, either. He only prevented them from spreading his guts all over the floor. Later, he found out about the side-effects of his Blood Contracts, and sought to have other demons sign his scrolls. But, despite that choice, he didn't murder them and take their abilities. If anything, I'd say Satan's use of his Blood Contracts was... resourceful? He turned dead demons into power for himself. He recycled their souls into magical abilities for himself. After all, if a demon died, their power would be lost forever, but inside of Satan, they would still be able to fight for their people. I'm sure there were many human generals who'd have offered their lives for the good of humanity if they could accomplish something similar.

Honestly, when I put Satan's actions in practical terms, it's hard to find fault with him. He may have been self-serving, but compared to what the angels did to the demons, he's a friggin' saint.

* * *

Satan enters his chamber. We follow behind him, and the first thing I notice is the lavish bed placed against the opposite wall. Tiger and bearskins line the floor and provide cover for the cozy-looking leather mattress. Their soft fur appears comfortable and inviting. A few candles in each of the corners light up the room, but what catches my attention next startles me.

Dozens of little wooden animals, carved with love and care, sit on pedestals, in holes cut into the walls, and atop the bed's headboard. The nearest one, a roaring tiger pawing at the sky, features etchings for the tiger's stripes, and each of his tiny little individual claws stands apart from the others. Even without any paint adding color to the five-inch animal, I can make out intricate details that would cause a seasoned artisan to blush.

My eyes flick to the bed. Belial, wearing as little as ever, sprawls out on the covers. Her knife-fingers rapidly whittle and cut apart a chunk of wood in her hand as she molds it into the shape of an eagle.

Satan barely acknowledges her presence. He sighs as he enters the room, walks over, and plunks his butt on the corner of the bed. "Haah..."

Belial pauses to stare at him. She smiles cheerfully, but a hint of worry creeps into her voice. "Welcome back, lover! How was your day?"

Satan shrugs. "The same as ever. Hey, I thought I told you not to trim your sticks on the bed. You're getting wood chips everywhere."

"...Yeah. Sorry. I was just so busy daydreaming about what it would be like to fly. I forgot what I was doing!"

Belial's voice perks up, but her tone sounds forced.

I watch Belial's luminous red eyes. She stares at Satan's back, only to follow his gaze behind me, to the corner at the right of the entrance. I mimic her and flinch in surprise as I spot a massive crystal resting against the wall. The transparent gemstone, with its appearance of a gigantic diamond, holds a curious sight.

Nerissa's body.

The succubus, still deceased, rests inside the crystal. Despite how she skewered herself with an icicle, her figure appears to be in perfect condition — Belial's handiwork, most likely. Based on the faded color of her skin, she's as lifeless as the last time I saw her.

Satan stares at Nerissa's pale, nude body for several long seconds.

"I..."

Belial perks up. "Hmm?"

Satan shakes his head. "Never mind."

An awkward silence follows.

Belial watches the back of Satan's head, then nods, almost as if she's made up her mind about something. She drops her carving on the bed, reverts her knife-fingers to normal, and slinks up behind Satan. The succubus wraps her arms around him and nibbles on his ear. "Heyyy, what's wrong, love? Did something happen?"

Satan exhales. "Well... yes and no. Some drama involving Lucifer. She won't get off my back again."

"Uh-huh. What else?"

Belial pokes Satan further. As she kneads his shoulders, Satan's hardened heart weakens.

"...I finished the last Blood Contract today."

"Ooh!" Belial's eyes sparkle with delight. "That's wonderful news!"

Satan licks his lips. "Right. I finally cleared the last Soul Contract. But... I... I didn't find another demon like Valac. Nobody else possessed similar abilities to him."

Belial's fingers slow to a crawl. "You mean... another Reanimator-type?"

"Mmm."

Belial sags against Satan's body. She rests her chin on his shoulder and stares ahead at her sister's body. A look of defeat passes over her face. "I told you it was pointless. You have to let go of the past, Satan. Nerissa died. She can't come back."

Satan's lip trembles. "But..."

"I know you loved her," Belial whispers. "I did, too. I still do. It doesn't matter. The past is the past. My sister would want you to move on. She'd want you to be happy."

Satan lowers his gaze to the floor. "But... without her..."

With an exasperated sigh, Belial pulls away from Satan and flops back on the bed. "...Satan, I don't know what to say. I'm trying my best, you know. I'm trying to carry out my sister's wishes... but you're making things hard on me."

Satan turns his head to stare at the succubus. "What do you want from me, Belial? Do you want me to give up on Nerissa? Would you prefer for me to stop looking for a way to save her? If Valac can bring back the dead, then that means it must be possible for someone else to do it, too. I can't give up until I've exhausted every possibility."

Belial purses her lips. "You checked the powers of everyone who signed your Blood Contracts. Even if you intend to continue searching for a reanimator.. you could look for centuries and still not find one as talented as Valac. What then? Will you continue chasing after a dream forever? Will you forsake the rest of us?"

Satan averts his gaze. He twiddles his thumbs for a moment before replying. "It's just... I screwed up everything, you know? Because of me, Valac enslaved and tortured Nerissa. She suffered because I wasn't there to protect her. Not only that, but I screwed things up when I returned. I killed Valac and upset the balance of power. Even if I don't regret killing him on principle, my actions screwed up the world again. My contracts nearly got everyone killed."

Satan hesitates for a moment.

"Everything I touch falls apart. I'm a failure as a demon... and as a leader, too. If I can bring Nerissa back... if I can fix one thing without ruining something else..."

Satan falls silent.

Belial mirrors him.

The succubus flops back on her pillow and stares up at the ceiling.

A minute passes. Two. Three.

"You're not a failure, Satan," Belial says. "Nerissa was nearly as powerful as Lucifer. She knew how to handle herself. You shouldn't place the onus on yourself, as if it were your job to protect her. Raphael tortured you in the Cosmic Realm. Should Nerissa have blamed herself for not saving you?"

Satan shifts his sitting position slightly. "Of course not. I was the pants in the relationship. It was *my* job to protect her."

Belial appears unconvinced. "I thought you said you didn't even know how Valac died? How could you have protected Nerissa if you weren't a match for the Grim Reaper? Bael did most of the heavy lifting during your battle, assuming you were telling the truth."

Sweat slides down Satan's neck. "Ah... yeah. I suppose you're right."

He swallows audibly. "Dwelling on my actions won't change anything. What matters is the future. I can't afford to lose focus."

The Devil's expression turns grim, but Belial licks her lips playfully.

While Satan broods in silence, Belial slowly stretches her arm across the bed and begins climbing his back with her fingers. "You've had a long day, love. Come to bed. Now that you've scrubbed all those pesky contracts, I think it's time for a celebration. Don't you?"

Satan flicks his gaze toward Belial. "Hm?"

The succubus nestles against the bed and presses her body against the tigerskin covers seductively. "Come on. I'm ready and waiting."

"I don't know what you see in me," Satan says with a sigh.

"A moderately attractive demon, one my sister loved deeply. If Nerissa cared about you as much as she said, then I'd like to pick up where she left off. Isn't that good enough?"

Satan raises an eyebrow. "What, so you only like me out of duty? Am I just an obligation for you?"

Belial wriggles uncomfortably. "Ohhh, you always do this to me! Stop asking questions, you turd. Get over here and treat me like a woman already. I'm a succubus. I need relief!"

For the first time since he arrived, Satan smiles. "Well, if it's like that... I wouldn't want to shirk my duty, either. If you need a good plowing..."

"Good grief," Belial replies, rolling her eyes. "You really know how to charm a lady."

"Sorry, sorry," Satan says, as his smile expands into a grin. He slides across the bed with his Vectors and plops beside Belial. "I'll stop moping around."

Satan leans forward to kiss Belial, but as he wraps his arms around her and pulls her close, she pulls away for a moment.

"Wait. Tell me you love me."

"Pardon?"

"You heard me. Do it."

Satan's expression turns to one of confusion. "I, err, why? I mean... you and I... we're only..."

"We sleep together every night," Belial says. "Do you want me around or not?"

"You're sending mixed signals," Satan says. "Weren't we just about to...?"

"We *are* still, but I want an answer first," Belial says. Her face turns stern. Despite Satan's arms pressing her soft, voluptuous body against his, she keeps her head several inches away so she can gaze into his eyes. "What am I to you?"

The Devil doesn't pull away. His eyes meet hers. They stare at each other in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable watching them as an outside observer. This moment is supposed to be private, something I shouldn't see. Nevertheless, I can't look away.

Satan's voice catches. "I... well... if something were to happen to you... I'd feel the same way I did when I lost Nerissa."

"So, you feel the same way about me as you did her?"

"No. Our relationship is... it's different. You've been there for me, despite everything that's happened. You and Nerissa couldn't be more different... but... at the same time..."

Belial bats her eyes.

"Alright. You don't have to say anything else. I know I'm acting difficult. Now that you've finished your work on the contracts... I wanted to gauge where our relationship was."

Belial leans her head forward and nestles it under Satan's chin.

"What if you... you do bring my sister back? Will you... leave me... for her?"

Satan chuckles wryly.

"Heh."

The Devil shakes his head.

"Not a chance. There's room in my heart for both of you. I'll never abandon anyone ever again. Not you, not Nerissa... nobody."

Like a dam bursting under pressure, Belial pulls her head back and beams sunshine at Satan. "Oh, gosh! You're making me blush!! Put out the lights already, you big dope."

Satan snorts. "I'm on it."

The Devil snaps his fingers, and the candles in the corners extinguish. The room turns pitch-black, and both of them begin to giggle like children. The serious mood melts away far faster than I expected, and within a minute or two, the sounds of grunting and moaning begin to fill the room.

I look away and nudge Solomon. "Alright. I think I've, err, seen enough."

Solomon turns and stares me right in the eye.

"No. Wait for it."

"Uhh... wait for... wait for what? I'm pretty sure I don't need to see what comes next."

Solomon nods. "Yes. You do."

He returns to gazing at the bed in the darkness. Belial's moans increase in intensity. "Oh, devils! Yes! I love your Vectors! Put one in my- ahhnn!"

Nervously, I flick my gaze between the bed and Solomon's glowing figure. As the two demons build to a crescendo, a jarring realization hits me like a bullet through the brain.

Solomon is a fucking voyeur.

Son of a bitch. All his past actions make sense now. He used to watch Phoebe and me from his Crown until I stuffed him in the magical drawer beside our bed. Thanks to the Crown's infinite storage capacity, Solomon can rewatch the hottest hits from anyone's memories over and over.

Not to mention even when I stuffed the Crown in a sealed dresser drawer, Solomon continued to download my private memories when I put the crown on the next day.

Solomon, you sick son of a-

"I'm not a voyeur," Solomon says, as he reads my thoughts. "Stop letting your imagination run wild. You're starting to creep me out."

"Me, creep YOU out?! We're literally watching two demons-"

"I'm not here to enjoy the show," Solomon says, cutting me off. "I'm here so we can observe a turning point in Satan's life. Ah, speaking of the devil. *She's here.*"

As Satan goes in for a particularly deep thrust, a female voice, one not belonging to Belial, speaks in the darkness.

"Am I interrupting anything?"

Satan and Belial stop mid-thrust and yelp in surprise.

"What the- who's peeping?! This room is private, you filthy-"

The Devil snaps his fingers to ignite the candles in the room, revealing himself and Belial buck-naked, both of them drenched in sweat and... *other fluids.*

At the foot of their bed, a familiar demoness, dressed all in black, stands quietly and stares at them. Her onyx-colored eyes gaze at the two lovers from beneath her hood. She rests her arms on her hips and stares at Satan and Belial with a judgmental attitude.

"I'm *sooo* sorry to interrupt," Berith says, sarcasm hissing through her teeth. "Something urgent came up. I need to speak to you."

Belial blushes. "If you wanted to join us, you could have just asked. I'm fine with threesomes."

Berith's expression flattens. "...I'd sooner cast myself into a roaring volcano."

Satan's jaw drops as he glares at the shadow-walker. "Cripes, Berith! You could have waited until the morning!"

Berith cocks her head. "Hm. Probably. Oh, well. I'm here now, so let's get right to the point. I wish to speak to you about becoming the First Emperor."

"Huh?" Satan blinks in surprise. "I'm not even interested. You can have the title if you want it."

Berith hisses. "I wasn't offering *you* the position, you damned dolt. I want it myself. I came here to ask for your support. I can muster the backing of many of Valac's former demons, but Lucifer's minions don't

respect me. However, a noteworthy portion of her followers admires you. If I were to receive your endorsement, I would have the backing needed to take control of demonkind."

Belial crosses her arms over her exposed breasts. "Sheesh. You could try asking a little nicer."

Berith snarls at her. "Quiet, succubus whore. The grown-ups are talking."

"Whoa! Whoa!" Satan pounces out of bed, aided by his Vectors. He lands on the floor and raises to his full height, two inches shorter than the Emperor of Backstabbing. "Don't you *dare* speak to my girl like that! First, you barged in on us, then you insulted us, and now you expect me to do you a solid? I'm not one to smack a bitch, but you're pushing your luck."

Berith's upper lip curls in disgust. "You worry too much about pretty words. That's what I hate about the people on Lucifer's side. You're all soft and weak, not like Valac."

Satan's temper starts to flare, but Berith holds up a finger.

"I didn't come here to ask without giving something of equal value in return. I need your endorsement to become First Emperor. Tell me what you want, and I will find some way to give you whatever you need. An equal trade."

Satan stares at Berith for several seconds. Then, he lowers his Vectors and begins to chuckle.

"Hehe... you... you want to... to *give me* something? Hehehe... that's funny. You're funny. I never took you for a jokester."

Berith doesn't smile. "I'm dead serious."

Satan snorts. He gestures toward Nerissa's crystal in the corner. "Fine. Fine. If you want my support, then help me bring Nerissa back. If you can do that, I'll vouch for you. If you can't, then piss off. I ain't giving you anything but a knuckle sandwich, otherwise."

Belial punches her palm. "Yeah! What he said!"

Berith lowers her pitch-black eyes. She stares at Satan contemplatively as she searches her mind for an answer.

"Mmm. I worked alongside Valac on many occasions. I know many of the intricacies of his powers. One thing is for certain; the only way to bring someone back from the dead is if you were to somehow come into possession of their soul. Valac's lantern served as his receptacle for souls. If, during Nerissa's death, you somehow happened to obtain her soul before it entered the Great Beyond..."

Berith trails off. She stares at Satan, as if waiting for an answer.

Satan returns her gaze. "Huh? So, are you saying I can't bring my girl back unless I have her soul? There's no other way?"

Berith shakes her head. "Valac was quite clear about that. He would often take the souls of those he disliked and place them in the bodies of their enemies. A peculiar past-time, but one of the few hobbies from which he drew pleasure. As long as you have a person's soul, you might be able to bring them back. Since you have Nerissa's body, you already have half of the components needed to return her to the realm of the living."

Berith splays her fingers out and makes a sweeping gesture with her hands. "However, based on your expression, I assume you've nothing left of her soul."

Satan shakes his head slowly. "No... I don't. Son of a... are you kidding? That's it? She's gone? For good?!"

Berith shrugs. "Most likely. In any case, since I cannot help you bring the ice queen back, perhaps there is something else I could do to obtain your support?"

Despite how effortlessly the shadow-walker switches topics back to herself and what she wants, Satan's eyes glaze over. He falls back onto the bed and stares at Nerissa's crystal numbly.

"Gone... for good..."

Belial stares at Satan's back.

"Lover..."

Satan's shoulders sag as thoughts run through his head. When Samael speaks inside the Devil's mind, I hear the Archangel's voice, projected via Solomon's Crown.

Satan. I'm sure thou knoweth this already, but it bears mentioning. Ye signed a Blood Contract with the ice succubus. I have seen its form in thy mind. However, when she died, her soul did not appear in thy grasp like the others who signed. I know not why this is the case, but some treachery was surely at work.

Satan nods, but he doesn't reply. Speaking to Samael in front of others must still be a no-no for him.

Samael continues. "However... perhaps, given how thou tooketh the souls of Titans after crushing their heads, such a brutal action might bear results. Shouldn't ye remove the crystal protecting her body, ye might be able to crush Nerissa's head and obtain her soul. I believe it is a course of action worth attempting."

Satan slides his hand up his chest and presses it against his heart. His eyes waver slightly.

"Yeah... that... that might work..."

Berith hisses at Satan. "Kss. What are you babbling about now? Are you going to answer my question, or am I wasting my time, here? Surely, there must be something I can do to-"

Suddenly, Satan jumps to his feet. His sudden movement surprises Berith and makes her pause.

"Quiet," Satan mutters. "Belial. I've... I've just thought of something. I can take the souls of anyone's head I crush. I'm going to... to try it on Nerissa."

His words, slow and measured, make Belial blink in surprise. "You're going to... TO *WHAT*?!"

"You heard me. I'm going to crush your sister's head. Once I have her soul, I can revive her."

Belial balks.

"No way! Satan, that's awful! What are you thinking?!"

Satan wets his lips. He flicks his gaze toward Berith for a moment, then turns to face Belial. "I would never consider it under any other circumstance. However, if Berith is right, then once we have her soul,

we can-"

"We can't do anything!" Belial yells. She jumps to her feet and stands in the middle of the bed. "Have you forgotten?? We don't have a way to revive my sister, even if you do obtain her soul! No, more importantly, if you take such an extreme measure, I can't heal her body afterward! My powers won't allow me to regenerate brain damage!"

Satan's jaw slackens. "They won't?"

"I've told you this before! Sweet mercy, I can't believe you'd even consider doing something so horrible to my sister! I'd rather bury and leave her to rest in peace than defile her in such a manner."

Satan's excitement disappears. "Oh. So... so it's like that, then."

The Devil sighs long and hard. His breath comes out in a drawn-out gasp for pity. "Aaaaa... *fuck*. I thought, for a moment, we might've had something... some way..."

* * *

Berith's gaze flicks between both demons. After several seconds, she crosses her arms. "I've played all my cards, and they weren't good enough. Well, don't say I never did anything for you. If you decide to support me, my offer still stands. I must become the First Emperor. Our people need to take decisive action against the angels, once and for all."

The demoness's words ring hollow in Satan's ears. He barely acknowledges anything she says. "Yeah... people... angels... uh-huh..."

With a groan, Berith turns on her heel. "Tch. Not even a word of thanks. Such is the way of pond-suckers and low-intellect louts."

She turns to walk toward the door, but Satan raises his head. "Wait. Hold on. Berith!"

Berith pauses. She doesn't turn to look at Satan. "*What*."

"There's... there's no other way? Nothing at all? Surely, there must be something we can do! There has to be a way to bring Nerissa back!"

Silence ensues.

Berith stares outside of the room for several, long, agonizing seconds.

"Devils. To think you're still this persistent. Calling you 'clingy' would hardly be the start of an adequate insult. Though... now that I think about it..."

Berith turns to look at Satan. She taps her finger against her lips, swirling the smoky dark energy surrounding her face in circles. "Hmm. Valac mentioned something, once. A theory. He told me it wasn't more than a hunch, and he never bothered to investigate it."

Satan leans forward. "What was it? What theory?"

His eyes widen as he breathlessly awaits Berith's next words.

"Hmm. Well, as I said before, Valac captured souls via his scythe and stored them inside his lantern. In your case, it seems crushing someone's head will give you their soul. However, if either of you should miss

your chance, the soul would travel to the Great Beyond. Once there, reclaiming it would be virtually impossible."

Belial, still standing on the bed, stiffens at Berith's words. "V-virtually? So... you're saying there's a chance...?"

"Possibly. However, Valac said it would take a monumental amount of mana to reclaim a lost soul from the Great Beyond. I believe the phrase he used was, 'More than all of demonkind, angelkind, and Titankind's collective mana reserves combined.' So, it would be essentially impossible."

Berith watches Satan's face as she speaks. When a look of realization and hopelessness hits him, the shadow-walker chuckles wryly.

"What's the matter? Not what you wanted to hear? Has reality set in, yet, or are you going to continue fantasizing about that succubus for the rest of eternity?"

Satan scowls at her. "That's my business, not yours. Shit. I still had a sliver of hope before... but now... you've taken even that away from me."

"Hahaha!" Berith cackles. "Well, you haven't done me any favors either, *Satan*. Let me know when you're ready to talk business. Otherwise, I'll pretend this embarrassing conversation never happened."

Berith's lips curl upward in disgust. After a moment, she spins on her heel and storms out of the room, leaving Satan and Belial alone with their thoughts.

* * *

Satan presses his face against his hands. "Dammit... damn. Damn, damn, damn. That fucking... stupid... shadow-walking piece of..."

Belial drops to her knees and slides across the bed. She wraps her arms around Satan and presses herself against his back. "...I'm sorry, love. I thought after our discussion earlier that things would improve, but now..."

Grief takes Satan. His chest shakes as he tries to stop himself from sobbing. He presses his hands against his eyes. "Chrrr... it's useless after all! I can't do anything!! I failed again... I failed her..."

Belial stays quiet. She gives Satan a minute to release his anger and sadness. He chokes and coughs as raw emotions come boiling to the surface.

"Not fair... not fair... it's just not..."

Satan pauses.

He sniffles for a moment, then wipes his arm across his face.

"No... wait... it can't be. Was this... what I needed?"

Satan raises his head. He stares at Nerissa's crystal for several seconds. His breath catches.

"Son of a broodmother. Why didn't I think of it sooner?"

Belial pulls away from him. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

Satan's lip trembles. He rises to his feet and turns to point at Belial. "Put your clothes on. We're going to take a long walk. I just remembered... there's someone who might be able to help us."

Belial cocks her head. "I... don't follow. Do you mean... Valac?"

The corners of Satan's mouth tighten. He forces a smile and shakes his head. "Haha... no. Someone far, *far* more powerful than that boney bastard. Our progenitor. The one who gave demons their power."

Belial's eyes widen. "But... but I thought you said-"

"We weren't supposed to return there? I wanted to keep his existence a secret? That was in the past. Times have changed. If there's even a sliver of hope he can help us..."

Samael speaks. "Satan. Who is this 'progenitor' you speak of?"

The Devil's grin widens. As the candlelight flickers against his face, his expression says it all.

"You'll find out, soon. I believe he's an acquaintance of yours."

Belial cocks her head. "Are you talking to your head-friend again?"

"I am," Satan replies. "He wants to know who our progenitor is. Let's keep it a secret, for now."

Belial nods. She slides off the bed and reaches for her tigerskin underwear. "Well, alright. If you insist."

Satan's Vectors snatch his deerskin pants and shirt off the floor.

"I do."

While the two demons dress themselves, a strange feeling boils in my stomach.

Worry.

Satan and Belial intend to visit Leviathan, the dark dragon who granted his power to their people. The last time they saw him, he incited an uprising and genocide.

Somehow, I think their second visit will turn out even worse than the first.

Solomon closes his eyes. He motions with his hands, and the world around us fades to black.

"We've almost arrived," the Ancient King murmurs.

He opens his eyes, and his hands tremble noticeably.

"The War in Heaven."

Part 140: Enter the Dragon (Part 1)

Solomon, the Archangels, and I, all appear behind Satan and Belial at the base of Leviathan's mountain, not far from the entrance to his cave. Satan uses four of his Vectors to levitate slightly off the ground, and the other four to suspend Nerissa's crystallized body a few feet in front of him.

The two demons trudge up the mountain across a trail worn down over time by various creatures. They stomp through or shove aside any debris and walk single-file along the narrow pathway. Neither of them says a word as they approach the entrance to Leviathan's cave.

When they arrive, Satan and Belial pause at the maw of the deep, dark grotto. The succubus shivers. "Ugh... do we *have* to go inside?"

Satan nods. "He's our best hope for bringing your sister back. We have to try."

Belial rubs her arm. "Lover... I don't think... I mean, don't you worry you've become obsessed? Bringing Nerissa back would be nice, but there are other important things in life, too."

"I'm not obsessed."

Satan's words ring hollow. Belial shakes her head. "You say that, but evidence points to the contrary..."

The Devil turns to smile at Belial. He reaches out and squeezes her shoulder. "Tell you what. If... if we go in there... and he can't bring Nerissa back... if nothing comes of today's events, then..."

"Then?"

Belial watches Satan expectantly. Her skeptical gaze makes him look away.

"Then... we'll bury her together. We'll give Nerissa a proper send-off."

Belial's jaw slackens. "Really? Do you mean that?"

Satan hesitates, but only for a moment.

"I... do."

The succubus smiles. She leans forward and gives him a peck on the cheek. "Alright! I know you'll keep your word."

Satan nods. "That's my demon creed, after all."

* * *

The two lovers enter the cave. Satan creates a fireball in his palm to light the path ahead. Solomon and I follow along behind them, and the angels behind us.

Raphael clears his throat. "Hrmph. The dragon's energy is quite foreboding. Watching the vision from a distance is quite different from participating in it personally."

I glance back at him. "You didn't see the same things I did during earlier visions?"

Solomon answers, instead of Raphael. "Not quite. The Archangels and I acted as passive observers until now. I didn't think Raphael would enjoy munching bugs as an imp, let alone slaughtering his fellow

angels in the body of a demon."

"What?!" I balk. "Do you think *I* enjoyed eating bugs? You jackass! I can still taste their wriggling feet on my tongue!"

Solomon smirks. "A young man like you should seek out new things to experience. They will expand your horizons."

I roll my eyes. "You just enjoy grossing me out."

"Yes, that was certainly a factor."

Solomon's smile turns smug. We continue following the demons, and Samael speaks in Satan's mind as well as mine.

"Satan. I feel uneasy. The energy radiating ahead of us is... ominous. I sense unbelievable levels of mana emitting from the depths of this chamber. Where are we going? Who is this 'progenitor' thou dost believe possesses answers for thy questions?"

Satan stays quiet for a moment.

"You will see. It's a surprise."

Belial flicks her eyes to Satan. "Hm? What did you say?"

"Nothing. I'm talking to my 'head-friend' again."

"Mmm. That errant soul?"

Satan nods. "Aye. I think he's starting to sweat."

Belial nods. "I am, too. You feel it, don't you? When we last visited, my senses weren't nearly as attuned to mana as they are now. The energy in this cave presses against my chest like a boulder."

I look at Solomon. "If the demons and Archangels can sense Leviathan's mana, why can't I?"

Solomon purses his lips. "Mana is a complex force in the universe, like that of gravity. The more mana you possess, the more sensitive you become to its permutations. You control a decent amount, Jason, but you've yet to attune yourself to its intricacies. Perhaps after the visions, we can work on some exercises to improve your sensitivity."

I crinkle my nose. "My... sensitivity?"

"Don't be vulgar."

"Hey, man. Your words, not mine."

Behind us, for the first time since he began following me around, Gabriel speaks to Raphael. "Brother, am I correct in assuming that, due to thy memory erasures, Samael was unable to deduce he was approaching a dragon?"

Raphael nods. "Aye. Had I ever approached this wretched cave, I would have sensed Leviathan's power instantly. Our brother did not know of the dragon's existence, so he was unable to identify its source."

I turn back to look at Gabriel and Raphael. Once again, Gabriel's head sticks up through the ceiling, preventing me from seeing the expression on his face. His shoulders sag slightly. "Unfortunate. Perhaps

'twas better he didn't know. The last dragon is a frightening specter of evil."

Raphael grits his teeth. "If only thou *fully* understood the truth of that statement."

Raphael and Solomon, the only beings who possess knowledge of the Primordial Era, wear looks of agitation on their faces. Raphael, especially, sweats bullets the closer we draw to Leviathan's inner chambers.

"Hey, lover," Belial says, speaking out of the blue. "You know, I've been thinking about something a lot recently. And, umm..."

She trails off, unsure how to phrase the issue on her mind.

Satan glances at her. "What's the matter, Belial?"

"Mmm. That. Right there. I hate my name."

Belial shakes her head disapprovingly.

"It's not cute. It's the name Mother gave me, and I think it's gross."

Satan raises an eyebrow. "Seems like a random thing for you to get all worked up over. It's just a name. I think it fits you well."

Belial glowers at him. She puffs her cheeks out in frustration. "No, it doesn't! It's guttural and icky! Besides, despite being together for a while, you never call me by a cute nickname. Why can't you warm up to me a little bit?"

"Huh? A nickname? What the Devil are you on about?"

Belial crosses her arms. "I call you 'lover,' but you still call me Belial. Don't you have a romantic bone in your body? You're supposed to think of something cute and flowery that represents me!"

A look of dumbfoundedness stretches across Satan's face. "Cute? Flowery? But you're stronger than Bael! How... how am I supposed to...?"

Belial's scowl deepens. "Okay, fine. I see how it is."

Her tone shift makes Satan's heart skip a beat. "Ah... alright, alright. Sheesh, woman. I'll, uh, think of something. Eventually. I guess?"

Belial's tail twitches around like a cat's. It jerks to the left and the right erratically, exposing her annoyance. She turns away from him and closes off her body language. "Do what you want."

As Satan stares at her, bewildered, Samael bubbles in his mind. "The ways of females are unpredictable. Do not worry thyself, Satan. She has laid bare her heart in the hopes that thou shalt listen. Dwell on her words, and an answer will form itself."

Satan rolls his eyes. "Helpful."

Belial ignores him talking to himself. She gazes ahead, preoccupied with some thoughts in her mind.

Samael speaks again, his words more measured. "Demonkind is a fascinating species. Once, I thought all of thy people were little more than animals incapable of rationality. When I look at specimens such as this succubus, I realize I was incorrect. Thy people are a complex, thoughtful species not unlike mine."

"Mmm."

Satan doesn't reply to Samael's words. He merely nods and continues walking toward the deepest parts of the cave.

"I do wonder, Satan, if lying to thy mate is the correct course of action. Telling her thou possessest an Archangel's soul is unlikely to cause the grief ye expect."

Satan squeezes his left hand into a fist. "You know why I can't do that."

"I do. However, Belial is not like the other demons. She will not judge thee in the way they might. She will not think thou art possessed. I believe she would even be willing to converse with my brethren."

Satan swallows saliva to wet his drying throat. "For the sake of peace?"

"Aye. Peace between angels and demons. 'Tis possible. I know thou hath considered it... even if only once or twice. Thou hath muddied the waters once before, but, sincerely, I believe-

"Won't happen," Satan says, cutting Samael off. "Hell, it *can't* happen. Too much blood has been spilled, on both sides."

While Satan and Samael quietly argue with each other, Michael shakes his head.

"Tsk. To think my brother had fallen this far. Sympathizing with the demons... Satan's indoctrination worked wonders on his subservient slave."

Gabriel nods. "Aye. The Samael I knew would never praise demons of any sort. His death, one I once thought valiant, has been stained by seeing him in this pitiful state."

I turn to look at the two Archangels. "Samael had a change of heart. He lived among the demons for several years and got to know them better. Why assume the worst? He changed his mind after learning new things. That's what everyone should aspire toward. Right, Solomon?"

Solomon doesn't get to answer. Instead, Raphael takes the initiative. "Thy words are absurd, young hero. To think so highly of demons speaks volumes regarding thy ignorance. Demons are abominations. They devour flesh and all life in their path. Perhaps, had Solomon not focused so much on portraying them in a positive light, ye might understand this."

Solomon pauses the vision, freezing Satan and Belial in place. He whips his head back to scowl at Raphael. "I did no such thing! Do not accuse me of being a demon sympathizer."

Raphael throws his hands in the air. "Pah! Where are the visions of demons ripping apart angels and humans with their teeth and claws? Why didn't ye not show my brothers and sisters screaming out in pain, only for their voices to fall silent when demons tore their heads off?! Coddling this child will only harm him, Solomon! He must see the horrors the demons can inflict! If he continues to think they are peaceful creatures who want little more than to live in peace, he will walk a self-destructive path! He may even doom the rest of humanity to damnation!"

I waggle a finger at Raphael. "I know what horrors demons can unleash. I've heard from Belial and other demons about the ways they-

"Not good enough!" Raphael yells, cutting me off. "Have ye gazed upon the blood flowing from their maws? The severed heads grasped between their claws? The bodies skewered on pikes and left to rot in the midday sun?! Speak not of words and descriptions, boy! I have witnessed their worst carnage with my own eyes! Compared to the atrocities I've seen-"

"That's enough," Solomon says, cutting Raphael off. "You've made your point. Let's not fight each other. We're all on the same side."

"Are we?" Gabriel asks, his voice barely a murmur. "This hero sides with demonkind over and over again. My brother has the right to question him. Thou knoweth well what happens when a hero abandons morality and sides with the demons. Thou knoweth well..."

Solomon flicks his gaze to me, then back to Gabriel. "Dracula."

Raphael stiffens. "Speak not that name before me."

A chill descends upon the group. I rub my hands together apprehensively.

"Are you serious?" I ask. "Dracula? Like, vampire-guy Dracula? He existed?"

Solomon inhales through his nose, but his breath catches. "He did."

Raphael hisses through his teeth. "Vile, putrid..."

"He was a blight on the Earth," Gabriel murmurs. His body language remains impassive, but the look in his eyes is that of disgust. "As a soul-manipulating hero, he drank the blood of innocents to increase his power. He took over their minds and turned them against us."

I blink in surprise. Solomon has never mentioned Dracula before. It never even occurred to me he might be real.

"Stupid question alert: What about Frankenstein?"

"Frankenstein was the scientist. He was a character in a fictitious story. His monster, also, did not exist. That being said, the monster *was* based on Lucifer's... experiments."

I nod.

"Mmm. So, what, do you think I'm going to side with demons simply because I have disagreements with you, Raphael? I don't see what's so wrong about asking questions. You keep evading me when you feel uncomfortable, yet you also expect me to trust you wholeheartedly. In case you've forgotten, I'm the last Hero. I'm Humanity's only chance to overthrow their demon oppressors. Maybe you ought to try being honest about your past, for once, rather than blaming everyone else for your failings."

Solomon sucks air through his teeth.

"Psh. Goodness."

Raphael scowls at me. Any sense of politeness between him and I vanishes.

"As I've said many times, impudent brat, thy words reek of contempt for my people. I am no fan of thy attitude, nor thy lack of sympathy for what happened to them. The demons murdered us, end of story. I

keep secrets because far too many cataclysms have rocked the universe. The fact Solomon and I have gone to such great lengths to bury the past should be evidence of that."

"Or, alternate theory," I reply calmly, "You have something to hide. I don't know what, or why, which is why I don't trust you. I barely even know the three of you, now that I think about it. I've spent five years with Solomon, which hardly amounts to a slight portion of his existence, but at least I know a bit about his personality, background, and some other stuff. However, compared to him, I know little to nothing about the rest of you. Michael healed me in my time of need. You and Gabriel gave me some helpful advice. Why can't you look at things from my perspective?"

Raphael squeezes his staff tighter than usual. "I should ask the same of thee. Where is thy empathy for what happened to the angels? Where is thy understanding? Why must thou blameth us for our genocide?"

"Because your actions have consequences, Raphael. You created the imps. You stomped and kicked them around. You treated them like dirt, only to act surprised when they turned on you. You can say whatever you want about historical context and how I'm not putting myself in your shoes, but the way I see things... you're lying to yourself. The rise of demonkind was preventable, and the blame for their turn to violence lies squarely on your shoulders, as the eldest Archangel. You tried to control the dragons, you tried to control the Titans, and you tried to control the Imps. All three of them blew up in your face. If you couldn't figure out the pattern by the third attempt, then maybe you were right when you said you're not as wise as everyone says."

* * *

Silence follows.

Gabriel stands obstinately with his arms crossed. His head, still stuck through the roof of the cave, gives no hint of his emotions.

Raphael, on the other hand, stares at me stonily. The old man trembles as he clutches his staff. He doesn't blink. After a moment, he averts his eyes. His expression turns emotionless as he hardens his heart.

"Verily, thou speaketh many hurtful words, but I know what I saw. I lived through those dark times. Not a day goes by where I don't wonder what I could have done differently. The past is the past. Compared to the family I lost at the hands of the dragons and the Titans, the demons were little more than the last gasp of my failed rule."

Raphael motions toward Solomon with his free hand.

"Resume the vision. I grow wearier every minute."

Raphael doesn't look me in the eye. I can tell, just by looking at him, that my words affected him deeply.

The old man feigns ignorance, but I see the truth, now. He blames himself. He always has. However, confronting that truth and his ultimate failure as a leader is not something he's ever allowed himself to do... not until I spoke up.

I want to pity him, but I can't.

Raphael's title might denote him as the Archangel of Wisdom, but all I see is a fool who led those he loved down a path of destruction.

He fomented war and strife. He pressed his boot against the backs of those he deemed his inferiors, and in doing so, called them to action.

I won't make the same mistakes. I have to walk a different path.

Solomon stays quiet for several long, awkward seconds. Eventually, he motions with his hand, and the vision resumes. Satan and Belial continue walking forward, leaving the four of us behind.

I turn and follow after them, not wanting to be in the same space as the Archangels. Solomon follows after me. I glance at the ancient king, my advisor; my friend. His guidance changed me from a stumbling young man, uncertain of his future, into a sure-sighted hawk, capable of wielding my powers to an extent I once thought impossible. Without Solomon, humanity would be stumbling forward blindly, as would I. He ruled over one of the mightiest, most prosperous kingdoms on Ancient Earth. His crown, worn by various kings and queens long after his death, gave him further insight into how to achieve greatness on a local and planetary scale.

We need him.

I need him.

But now... I worry that I may have gone too far.

"Solomon..."

I speak his name, but pause to try and gather my thoughts.

"Don't apologize," Solomon says. "I saw your outburst coming several visions ago. You held it in, valiantly. I am disappointed, but more in myself than you. Your outlook is far different than what I expected. Perhaps I am simply an old man. I've seen many men and women succumb to power far less than what you possess, and never once did they reflect on their thoughts and actions."

Solomon continues. "Once... I held similar thoughts to you. I understand your thoughts, your actions, your questions. You are correct, in that the angels are to blame for the rise of demonkind. It is their fault, and their fault alone, that they died at the hands of their former slaves."

I blink in surprise. A slight sense of awe at Solomon's confession takes me.

"I thought..."

"That I was trying to silence you? Yes, I was. The reason I don't want you asking questions is because I already know the answers. However, I have been narrow-minded. When I challenged my misgivings and sought out the truth, a ten-year inquisition followed. I interviewed people, tortured demons, and scoured the Earth for answers. In the end, my quest for knowledge brought only pain and ruin."

I raise an eyebrow. "How so?"

Solomon purses his lips.

"Jason. The angels indeed are to blame for the rise of demonkind. Were it not for their cruelty toward their lessers, the demons might have turned out very differently. However, that does not change reality. The demons are evil. They are the ultimate force of darkness, one that you must extinguish."

Solomon's voice catches.

"I... I spoke to you once of a violent encounter involving myself and Satan. That battle was born out of my curiosity. I believed I could make peace with the demons. I believed that I and I alone possessed the knowledge and wisdom required to settle our differences and blood-debts. I thought to myself, *if only I could bring peace upon the Earth, I would finally end the bloodshed and suffering forever*. That, Jason, was my undoing."

I nod. "What happened?"

"I successfully brought the demons to my table. We broke bread and spoke amicably. As the day wound down, a sense of relief and giddiness took me. I had done it. I was on the verge of brokering peace between humans and demons."

"Satan had other plans," Solomon whispers. He raises his eyes to glare icy daggers at the Devil's back. "Little did I know, but the Devil had planned an ambush of unimaginable proportions. While the two of us wined and dined each other, along with his generals and my advisors, a legion of shadow-walkers crept inside the gates of Jerusalem. All at once, they cut down fifty of my children, dozens of my wives, my nephews, and nieces. In the blink of an eye, three-quarters of my family perished. I was too drunk to hear their screams."

"As I leaned forward to hand Satan a peace treaty, one he was certain to sign, the coward lunged at me. He attacked me with unexpected ferocity. His generals acted on some unheard signal and launched themselves at those present. I instantly unleashed the full might of my heroic powers when I realized I had been had, but it was too late. By the time my forces gathered to protect me, I had already suffered many deep wounds. It was only in the days that followed, when I touched the bodies of my sons and daughters, that I fully pieced together Satan's dastardly deception."

I stare at Solomon quietly.

I've known the Knowledge-Seeker for five years, but never once has he told me what happened to his family in Jerusalem. Maybe that's why he clings to his nephew, Saul, so desperately. Saul was one of the few who survived. When Solomon looks at him, he remembers those he lost and how their deaths were his fault.

Solomon's voice shakes. "I'm sorry that we... we can't tell you everything, Jason. It's easy to look upon us as liars... deceivers... and to imagine us pulling on your strings like a marionette. I can only say, with little more than my words, that I am trying to save you from the heartache that has haunted me for tens of thousands of years. The angels failed us all, but the demons are still our enemy. You mustn't forget that. Ever."

The ancient King gingerly reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. He wants to cry, but his artifact severs his most humanlike qualities, preventing him from experiencing the rawest grief imaginable.

I touch Solomon's hand. "I won't forget. But... you have to promise to let me walk the path I see fit. Satan is dead, as is Valac. The founders of demonkind are long gone. Perhaps, after a hundred thousand years, things have changed. I don't expect them to accept any of my offers with open arms... but I can't win a war against them, either. I have to be strategic."

"Strategic. Sensible, I suppose..."

Solomon trails off. He continues staring at Satan and Belial's back. As he does, I get a deeper understanding of the hatred he feels for them.

* * *

Satan reaches back and squeezes Belial's ass. She yelps in surprise and jumps away from him. "Hey! What's the big idea!"

"Just felt like it," Satan says with a grin. "Tell you what, toots. You want a nickname? I thought of a really cute one."

Belial's annoyance vanishes. Her eyes brighten instantly. "Oh! You did?! Eee! Tell me what it is! Don't keep a girl waiting!"

Satan reaches out with a Vector and presses her body against his.

"It's perfect. You're gonna love it."

"Tell me already!"

With a haughty smirk, Satan leans forward and whispers something in her ear.

Belial's expression falls flat. She pushes away from him with a scowl.

"Sugar-tits. Really? That's the best you came up with?"

Satan gawks at her. "I thought it was cute! Come on, girl! You're giving me blue balls here!"

"Yeah, and they'll stay blue for a while longer if you don't get serious. Sheesh."

Belial rolls her eyes.

"Sugar-tits. Bloody hell. It sounds like something Bael would say."

Satan's eyes widen.

"Ohh... so *that's* why it popped into my head so easily. Knew I'd heard it somewhere."

Belial facepalms. "...You've taken me so far out of a romantic mood that I've forgotten what it even feels like. Better luck tomorrow, lover."

Satan's eyes swivel to face forward as the two of them reach the end of the tunnel.

"Yeah. Better luck tomorrow."

Part 141: Enter the Dragon (Part 2)

Satan skitters down the steep bluff leading into the dragon's inner chamber, but his Vectors prevent him from suffering any injuries when he lands at the bottom, as they absorb the brunt of the impact. Belial follows after him, stretches out her legs, and zig-zags from left to right. She dives into a roll and jumps to her feet, using her superior strength and cat-like agility to her advantage.

Solomon and I hover to the base of the cliff. When we land, I watch as the demons freeze in place. Both of them slow their breathing as they gaze ahead into the darkness.

"Is... is he here?" Belial asks. "I don't see him."

"He's here..." Satan murmurs. "I still sense his overwhelming power..."

A shadow shifts barely fifty feet in front of us.

Leviathan's monstrously huge head, seemingly twice as big as when I last saw him, raises off the dirt and swivels to face the intruders. The dragon's white teeth sparkle in the darkness of the cave, but their appearance fills the demons with dread instead of glee.

"Hoh. Look who's come to say hello."

Leviathan's eyes shift from Satan to Belial, and back to the former again. He stares at the crystal in Satan's grasp for a moment.

"I assumed you perished at the hands of your tormentors. Why have you returned?"

Satan shakes off his nerves. With a smile, he struts forward and bows deeply.

"O-oh, great Leviathan! It is I, Satan, your loyal servant! This unworthy demon stands before you today to ask-"

"Stop."

Leviathan growls in annoyance.

"That disgusting, grandiose tone does not suit you. Speak plainly, lest I scorch your bones to ash."

Satan falters. He pauses mid-sentence, winces, and lurches back to his feet. "Right. Yeah, I knew that. Uhh... hell, I planned a whole speech and everything..."

Leviathan sighs. **"Kuu... spare me. You've come to ask me for some ridiculous boon, acting as though I owed you anything more than a polite greeting. It's not often I meet someone with a death wish."**

"Err... well..." Satan pales, unsure how to reply. He shoots a glimpse at Belial, who shrugs at him. "It's... okay, look. I do need a favor, alright? I know you're an all-powerful dragon. I will pay you back in any way that I can."

The dark dragon rolls his eyes. Sarcasm drips from every word. **"Oh, I see. You'll owe me a favor. Your bargaining posture is highly *dubious*."**

Satan clenches his hands into fists. "I know I don't have much to offer, dammit! Can't you hear me out?! My girl is dead. I need to bring her back. If you can do something to revive her-"

A horrible sound rips through the air, one of bone scraping across rock and soil. Leviathan rises onto his haunches, stretches out his front leg, and points a claw at Satan.

"Quiet, red rat. I care not for you, nor your brothers and sisters. I know well why you've come. When you accepted my power, you laid bare your thoughts, desires, and darkest fears. Reviving this lifeless female appears to be the sole request bubbling to the top of your feeble mind. Whatever happened to the grandiose promises you made? Where are the mountains of angel bodies now that you have reached some minor crest of power?"

Satan winces. "Hey, bub, don't be a dick. I know you've been living under a mountain, but my people have been kicking ass out there! We've killed hundreds of angels!"

Leviathan chuckles, sending flames spewing from the sides of his mouth.

"Hundreds."

He shakes his head slowly.

"There are millions of angels still alive, Satan. In the beginning, there were billions. You've made no progress since we last spoke, besides increasing your power and influence. I'm... disappointed."

Satan clenches his teeth together, then swings his finger toward the dragon.

"You ain't done anything either, dragon! Now that I can sense mana levels, I know the truth. You're way stronger than all of the angels combined! Why don't you pop out of this mountain and kill 'em yourself if you want 'em dead so bad, eh?!"

Leviathan goes quiet. He stares at Satan for several long seconds, making the Devil's bravado falter slightly.

"Do... not... test me... imp. Have you forgotten? I care little for war and violence. Such were the ways of my brothers and sisters. I sleep because I enjoy the peace and quiet of my cozy cave. My grudge against the angels is little more than a distant memory, a faint scar which occasionally awakens a smoldering of anger in my chest."

Leviathan lowers his head and moves closer to the two demons. **"Perhaps I possess the power to slaughter all of the angels, and perhaps I don't. Destroying them myself doesn't interest me, and that's all that matters. As for you, if you want something, then you should know that dropping to your knees and begging for it won't be enough. I expect results. If you can't give me something of equivalent value, I would never consider helping you."**

Satan winces at the dragon's verbal barrage. "What do you mean? All I want is for you to bring my girl back! I know it's probably not the easiest thing in the world, but surely-"

"Do not patronize me when you have so little knowledge of the universe," Leviathan hisses. A flash of rage passes across his face. Flames belch from the corners of his mouth. **"Fool. Once someone dies, their soul enters the Great Beyond. If you had captured hers before it fled, I could have revived her with ease. Instead, you brought me nothing but her lifeless husk. The only way to revive this female would be via the usage of Equivalent Exchange, and there's no possibility I'd waste my life on some trifle for your amusement."**

Satan stares at the dragon for a few moments in silence.

"You... you mean... you'd have to..."

"To give my life for your mate's, yes. Hah! Imagine that! A mighty dragon, the last in the universe, wasting his life on some frail mortal! There's only one reason I'd do such a thing, and you've proven it's beyond your power to achieve."

Belial clears her throat. When she speaks, her voice cracks. "O-only one reason... and... what would that be?"

Leviathan snorts. **"Slaughtering all of the angels, as I originally ordered. The Cherubs, the Seraphs, and the Archangels, too. A task far beyond what the whole of your species could ever accomplish."**

Satan and Belial stare, bewildered, at Leviathan's smirking face.

"You're... joking... right?" Satan asks. "To bring back Nerissa, you want me to kill all the angels?"

Leviathan chuckles. **"Kukuku... that's right. What's the matter, Satan? Where did your pomposity go? Haven't got what it takes? Two thousand years, and all you've managed is killing a handful of Cherubs! Perhaps that's giving you too much credit. I'd wager they were only Acolytes!"**

The dragon chuckles quietly to himself, but in the darkness, Satan smiles.

"Heh. That's all you want, dragon? A few dead Archangels? The extinction of demonkind's greatest enemy?"

Leviathan pauses. He cocks his head. **"Hmm? More bravado?"**

"No. It's funny you mentioned the Archangels. I have a surprise for you."

Satan glances at Belial for a moment, then returns his gaze to Leviathan, as if to say, *well, she'd have found out sooner or later.*

"I've already defeated one of the Archangels and taken his soul for myself."

The dragon blinks slowly.

"Did you? Ahh. I see, now. The souls inside your body... one of them shines brighter than the rest. I paid them little heed before, but now..."

Leviathan lowers his head and brings his eye close to Satan, casting glowing orange light on both of the demons, as well as myself and Solomon.

"Which Archangel was it? Raphael? No, you don't possess a millionth the battle experience he does. Gabriel? No. You're much too weak to face-off against a battle-hardened warrior the likes of him. Perhaps the weakest, Camael? No, you stated your victim was male. Hmm. Consider me intrigued. Who is it?"

Satan taps his head. "Samael. The Archangel of Change."

Leviathan blinks. He pulls away from Satan, slowly.

"Samael? There's no chance he would associate with the others. I can only assume you ambushed him when his guard was down. Is his spirit intact, or have you shattered his soul?"

Satan shakes his head. "No, he's fine. I can talk to him, usually. He's been awfully quiet since I arrived here, though."

"Indeed."

Leviathan tilts his head left and right. Several emotions pass over the dragon's face as his eye scans Satan's body, but I can't tell what they are.

"Samael. Have you nothing to say to me, your old friend? Has time worn down our bond beyond recognition? Or are you simply speechless that we may speak yet again?"

Leviathan's words send a tingle of worry through my mind. I glance at Solomon. "Wait, what's he saying? Is Leviathan joking?"

Solomon doesn't reply. He continues to gaze at the scene before us and ignore me.

Satan shivers as Leviathan's glowing orange eye dresses him down. "Hey, no need to stare, alright? Only I can hear him. Samael-"

"Fool. As I told you before, Satan, your thoughts lie bare before me. If you can hear Samael in your mind, then I can, as well. Samael! Why do you remain silent? Speak up!"

* * *

If Samael hears Leviathan's words, he shows no sign of it. The Archangel doesn't say anything, even as the dragon continues to pester him.

Satan eyes Leviathan suspiciously. "Hold on, why are you calling Samael an 'old friend'?"

Leviathan ignores Satan's question. His eye-slit narrows, projecting a concentrated beam of light on Satan. A moment later, the dragon taps one of his claws on the ground. A pulse of energy shoots from his eye and slams into Satan, knocking the Devil backward as it catches him off-guard. Satan gasps in surprise and digs his Vectors into the ground, catching himself a moment later.

"Cripes!! What's the big idea, you ugly-"

Satan stops mid-sentence.

Three feet before him, an astral body materializes, one born of pure mana. Samael, the Archangel of Change, cowers in terror. His six-foot-tall form appears diminutive as he shivers in fright under the

dragon's gaze.

"S-stay... stay b-back! Foul... ancient... black beast! S-servant of darkness! Blackheart! M-murdering fiend!!"

Tears flow from Samael's eyes as he tries to make himself as small as possible. Every bone in his body rattles and shakes as fear spreads throughout his very being. Never once does he open his eyes. He shields his head and ducks beneath his arms, almost as if waiting for the dragon to unleash infernal flames and incinerate him.

Belial's jaw drops. "That's *Samael*?! Satan! I can't believe you never told me!"

Satan nods slowly. Her words only half-penetrate his swirling thoughts. "Yeah... I... had my reasons. Leviathan! What did you... no... *how* did you bring Samael here?"

The dragon flicks his eye to Satan for a moment, then back to the Archangel cowering in terror. **"I'm projecting his spirit into the realm of the living. A trifle, for one as mighty as I. More importantly..."**

Leviathan trails off. Confusion stretches across the dragon's face as he slowly pans his head around to scan Samael's cowering form from several directions.

"My savior... why do you tremble and shiver before me? What slight have I committed to merit such a reaction?"

Samael jerks his head up. His eyes bulge as he meets the dragon's gaze. "D-do not call me friend, monster! I am n-no ally of thine! I know well the devastation thy kind hath brought upon the universe!! A thousand deaths would be too slight a punishment for thee!"

The dragon's jaw slackens. His expression turns from visible confusion to pure bewilderment.

"I... I do not understand. Satan, you said his spirit was intact when you killed him. What devilry have you foisted upon my compatriot for him to act in such a manner?"

Satan scratches his head. "Bloody hell, I have no idea. I thought all the Archangels were your enemies. Now you're getting all chummy with Samael. When I lived in Heaven, none of the angels even mentioned the dragons. Samael certainly didn't."

"Heaven?"

"The place where the angels live. You ain't heard of it?"

Leviathan blinks slowly. **"I have not. Hm. More has changed than I expected. Samael, calm down. There's no need to worry. I am not going to hurt you."**

Samael's knees shake. "Thy words are poison, winged one! I will not allow thee to use me as a pawn in thy games! I will never turn against my family for the sake of... of a dragon!!"

The dragon falters. **"You... you wound me, Samael. Never did I expect to hear such awfulness escape your lips. Tell me, brother, what changed? What has turned you to the other side? Does Raphael now possess leverage over you? The Samael I remember would never convert to the bloodthirsty ways of the other Archangels."**

Pins and needles tingle in my hands and feet. I glance at Solomon nervously. "Hey, what is *happening*? Is the dragon lying?"

Solomon shakes his head, but he doesn't reply.

Samael slowly raises himself to a standing position. His body continues to tremble, but he forces himself to meet the dragon's gaze. "W-what wicked lies art thou attempting to whisper in my ear, foul beast? My brothers and sisters are not the bloodthirsty ones. The dragons were! That is why we exterminated them!"

The dragon narrows his eyes. A menacing expression passes across his face. **"My name is Leviathan. Use it."**

"I care not what thy name is!"

The dragon curls up his lips. Venomous rage appears on his face.

"I understand. Something has gone horribly wrong. You cannot be the same Samael I once knew. After all, you *gave me my name*. You, Cassiel, and Muriel were the only Archangels sympathetic to our plight. Have you forgotten them too, Samael? Have you forgotten your two beloved sisters?! ANSWER ME!"

Leviathan's voice triples in intensity. He lunges toward Samael, and his pupils dilate to fill up his entire eye.

"What changed?! What turned you into this vicious, hollow being?! Where has your empathy gone? Why have you forsaken me?!"

Samael winces as the dragon bellows at him. He takes a step back and stares wide-eyed at the super-massive being challenging his core beliefs.

"S-stop! I won't listen to thy lies!! Satan, we must leave at once, and warn my family! They have to hunt this creature down before it can commit another genocide!!"

Samael turns to plead with Satan, but the Devil stares at him tight-lipped, a look of concentration on his face.

"No, Samael. Leviathan, calm down. Do not blame him. I've just remembered something my ol' chum here told me."

Leviathan flicks his gaze to the Devil. **"Do you know what happened to Samael?"**

Satan nods slowly. "Maybe. Samael told me once... after the war between dragons, Titans, and the angels, Raphael did some stuff. He erased the memories belonging to everyone but himself. That includes Samael's."

The dragon's rage subsides. He pulls his head back and exhales a thin cloud of smoke.

"I see. That... that explains a great many things."

Samael shoots a dirty look back at Satan. "Do not attempt to sully my brother's name, Satan! He only did what was needed to protect our people. Because of the memory-wipes, we were able to live in peace. It

was only because we erased our pasts that angels and Titans were able to reach a peaceful resolution. Raphael is a hero!"

Silence fills the room.

Leviathan snorts, sending a small plume of flame erupting from his nose. It splashes against the ceiling before dissipating a moment later.

"Hmph. A hero, you say? You always used to say that whichever side won the war would rewrite the history books as they pleased. I never understood your meaning until this very moment."

Leviathan lowers his head. A listless look appears in his eyes.

"I know not what led you to accept a mind-wipe, Samael. Perhaps you did it to ensure my existence would never be uncovered. If so, I thank you. It would be yet another boon in the long line of gifts you gave me. Thanks to your concealment magic, the other Archangels never discovered me, despite living beneath their gazes. Still, I find it hard to believe you would ever concede to your brother. Especially after... the fate... which befell Cassiel and Muriel."

Samael stares at the dragon for a moment.

"Cassiel... Muriel... what of them? What do you know, dragon?"

"I ask the same question of you, Samael. I possess memories of the primordial era, but it seems you do not. Tell me, old friend, what memories rest in your bosom? Do you still remember the throbbing in your chest as you held their bodies in your arms?"

Samael's lips quiver. "Their... bodies?"

Samael echoes Leviathan. A look of worry embeds itself in his forehead.

"I know only what Raphael has told me. Cassiel and Muriel perished at the claws of the dragons. I... I tried to save them, but failed. Surely, you do not expect me to believe otherwise?"

Leviathan sighs.

The dragon's head slumps down until it rests on the ground.

"How... tragic. To think... while I rested peacefully beneath this mountain, Raphael stole away the most precious memories of your beloved sisters. Once, Cassiel and Muriel held the most important place in your heart. You doted on them, and they on you. The three of you sought to end the war between the angels and dragons, but the Seraphim and Cherubim would not listen. To them, the Ophanim's complaints would result in boredom and complacency. After all... your fellow Archangels were..."

Before Leviathan can continue, a voice cries out from behind me. "Solomon!! What is the meaning of this?!"

I turn to see Raphael and Gabriel standing fifteen feet behind Solomon and me. I didn't hear them arrive, so quiet were their footsteps.

Solomon doesn't look at the newcomers. Instead, he motions with his hand and freezes the vision. "I'm merely showing Jason the entirety of the Ancient Era, Raphael... as I promised."

Raphael's eyes bulge in rage. "Stop projecting lies into the boy's mind! If thou continueth, thou shalt only further corrupt the Hero's imagination beyond-"

Solomon turns and raises his palm to silence Raphael. "There are no lies here, Raphael. I searched for decades before finally uncovering the truth of the universe. Worry not, for I will not show Jason that indefensible secret which you clutch closest to your breast. However... he deserves to know *everything* else."

"He deserves nothing!"

Raphael storms toward us, shoves me aside, and seizes Solomon by his coat.

"Bastard! How dare ye corrupt our legacy with these... these putrid falsehoods!! Everything thou hath shown the boy has led to him believe the demons were champions of justice, while the angels were violent psychopaths! Nothing could be further from the truth!"

Solomon's expression remains impassive. He doesn't try to pull away from Raphael's grip as the Archangel squeezes his robes tightly.

"You have done that yourself. I only wish to protect the rest of humankind from the terror of the demons. Defending the rose-tinted image of your people means little to me."

"Do not test me, Solomon."

Raphael's voice turns icy-cold.

"Thou kneweth this would happen from the beginning. Art thou in league with the demons, after all?! What are thy intentions?!"

Solomon purses his lips. He closes his eyes for a moment, and his body vanishes from Raphael's grasp, causing the old man to stumble as he grabs at the air wildly. Raphael manages to reorient himself as Solomon appears a few feet to my left. He adjusts his collar before speaking.

"I'm sorry, Raphael. The truth is that angels and demons were never all that different, despite your attempts to distort everyone's perceptions of the past. In a way, I am glad your people perished. I only wish the same could happen to the demons... especially those who stole my family from me. With Satan dead, half of my desire has been fulfilled, but as for the other half..."

I turn to my left. Solomon's face remains deathly calm. Something about his word touches a nerve and makes me uneasy.

"Are you lying to me, Solomon? Is Raphael? You could be showing me anything in these visions. I don't know what the truth is and isn't."

Solomon nods. "You're a bright one, Jason. Despite how Raphael belittles you by calling you 'child' and 'boy,' you have a man's intuition and hunger for the truth. Search your feelings. If these allegations against the angels are little more than lies, do you think Raphael would react in the manner he has?"

I nod.

"He might be pushing back against genuine lies, yes. Or... he might be trying to stop you from releasing damning truths that would paint angelkind in a negative light. I'm not certain which is correct."

Solomon smiles. "Aye. The truth can vary depending on the time of day and what direction the wind blows. I will state outright, Jason, that I have not shown you a single false vision, nor will I in the future. Raphael worked hard to bring about peace and prosperity to the angels, but I believe you would agree with the statement, 'the ends do not justify the means.' Raphael's method of enforcing order was... shall we say... totalitarian?"

Raphael goes quiet. Several seconds pass before he can muster a reply.

"I did what I felt necessary to bring about peace."

Solomon nods. "Of course. And I will do the same."

He turns away from Raphael and motions with his hand, causing the vision to continue playing. Raphael balks and starts to say something, but Solomon waggles his finger and shakes his head.

"You're not convincing me of anything today, Raphael. Stand quietly and watch. What happens next will be of great interest to you."

* * *

I don't know what Solomon's game is, nor what his goals are, but I know the vision he's showing me now is the closest to some form of truth I've seen yet. Everything up to now has only been a precursor.

The dragon must know something crucial.

Leviathan continues speaking.

"After all... your fellow Archangels were... bloodthirsty killers."

Samael's voice comes out as little more than a whisper. "...Lies."

"No. I speak the truth. Uzziel created the first dragon. You and the other Ophanim helped reshape Jörmungandr into a mighty being, one against which the precursor angels could test their might. Of course, at the time, the angels had been fighting amongst themselves for several ages. Raphael thought it prudent to create a scapegoat for their grievances to prevent the annihilation of all angels. A monster against whom he could direct their hatred. In that respect, he succeeded."

Leviathan continues. **"My mother was subjected to endless torture and agony. She withstood magical and physical attacks as they unleashed their basest cruelties against her, but their torment was ceaseless, never-ending. Countless millennia passed as they beat and battered her around, boiling a rage inside of her unlike any other. Only the Ophanim comprehended the barbarism on display and sought to end it. You protected her, at least for a while, and allowed her to give birth."**

Samael stares at the dragon, rapt with attention. "Have... have thee any proof of these claims?"

Leviathan ignores his question. **"When the other Archangels discovered my mother had given birth, their rage tripled. They turned against your faction. They singled all the**

Ophanim for extermination. Haven't you ever wondered why angels could defeat dragons as mighty as Jörmungandr, if my kind were so overwhelmingly powerful? Have you, Samael?"

Leviathan's voice tightens. **"We lost because of our peaceful nature. Dragons did not wish to fight. We did not desire death, pain, and vengeance. No, such darkness came from your people... from the angels."**

Samael digs his feet into the dirt and gnashes his teeth together. "I don't believe thee. Everything thou hath said is far too convenient for my liking. How dare thou believeth I would turn against Raphael, simply because I do not know our history. I have no reason to believe thy words over his."

Leviathan nods. **"Indeed. I see that, now. However, if your memories have not been erased, but merely suppressed, then... perhaps..."**

The dragon closes his eyes. His scales press together as a look of concentration washes over his face.

"Hmm... hng..."

Samael raises an eyebrow.

"What art thou doing?"

Leviathan doesn't respond. Instead, he continues to concentrate.

"Nnn... Satan... prepare thyself..."

"Huh?" Satan replies. "For what-"

The dragon's eyes bolt open. A surge of blood-red energy discharges from his mind and slams into Satan, knocks the Devil off his feet, and throws him on his ass. Satan yelps in surprise as he loses his footing, but a moment later, he clutches his chest. "Gahh!! Sh-shit! Fucking... hell...!! HURTS!!"

If the look of pain on Satan's face is intense, the look on Samael's is ten magnitudes greater. The Archangel's astral body collapses to the ground. He writhes around and wraps his arms and wings around himself and curls into a ball. "Geyaaaahh!!! Ahhhhhh!!!"

Leviathan doesn't blink. He continues pointing his eye at Satan. **"Endure it. The holy magic binding Samael's mind is powerful and ancient. Annulling it will require considerable energy and effort."**

Belial drops to her knees and cradles Satan's head in her arms as he continues to roll around. "Leviathan, stop! You're hurting him!"

"I cannot stop," The dragon murmurs. He brings his eye closer to throw even more energy at the Devil. **"This is all I can do. I will remove the seal binding Samael's memories. Since I do not know the cipher which binds him, I must use brute force. Please, withstand the pain a little longer."**

Satan and Samael roll on the ground, screaming and crying. Several minutes pass as Leviathan intensifies his mental barrage.

"Satan is going to die!" Belial yells, as tears form in her eyes. "Please stop! I beg you!!"

"I'm nearly finished. Only a few seconds remain."

Behind me, Raphael gasps. "Unbelievable... he's... undoing..."

The dragon recoils. **"Kuh! Mother, guide me. I've finished!"**

Satan and Samael both cease their screaming and fall limp. The Devil's body sags against the cave floor as Belial wraps her hands beneath his head to support him.

"S-Satan. Lover. Are you alright? Say something, please!"

Satan grunts. "Guhh..."

Samael says nothing. The spirit-body of the Archangel flops lifelessly on the ground.

Leviathan's gaze softens. He leers toward Samael. **"Old friend... you still draw breath. Please, speak. Do you remember me, now?"**

Samael's eyes stare ahead blankly.

After a moment, they refocus. His gaze raises, ever so slightly, to meet Leviathan's.

"Hah... haha..."

Leviathan watches.

"Hahahaha... ahaha..."

Samael slowly shifts his body. As Satan regains his bearings, the two demons turn to watch as Samael picks himself off the ground and rises to his feet.

"Ahahaha... haaahaha... AHAHAHA!!!"

Samael's quiet chuckles suddenly explode into maniacal laughter.

"HAAHHAHAH!! AHAHAHA!!! HOHOHO?! Hahaha... hah..."

The Archangel sags to his knees. He rests his face in his palms as his body begins to shake and tremble.

"Nnn... guhh... no, no, no..."

"Samael. What is wrong?" The dragon asks. **"Why do you weep?"**

"Hnn... Cassiel... Muriel... guu... their blood... it was everywhere..."

Samael chokes back agony-drenched sobs. He wraps his wings around himself, as if to try and block the pain from reaching his heart.

He fails. His sobs grow more intense.

"Everything I fought for... EVERYTHING!! It's all gone... they're gone... the Ophanim were all slaughtered..."

Leviathan sucks in a breath. **"Tch. As I suspected."**

Samael raises his head. His tear-stained face and agonized expression sends a pang of emotion through my heart as well. With a single glance, I finally see everything he's lost.

"Raphael... he... he tricked me..."

A sharp gasp behind me makes me turn and watch as Raphael takes a step back. The old man's eyes widen as he gazes at his brother.

"**He tricked you?**" Leviathan asks.

Samael nods. "He and the other Archangels... they held me down... they merged into the Seraphim and Cherubim. I couldn't fight back. Raphael laid his hands on me. He... he wiped my memories. I never wanted... I never agreed to... to his terms..."

My jaw drops.

"Raphael! Is that true?! Is Samael lying?!"

Raphael's eyes flick to me. The old man opens his mouth to speak, but his words come haltingly. "I... I didn't... he wouldn't listen to reason! He only wished to fight!"

"You forcibly erased your brother's memories! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

Gabriel reaches out and touches Raphael's arm. He gazes at me with an expression like that of a rock. No emotion graces his face. "Better to wipe Samael's memories than to kill him."

"That's no excuse! How could you do such a thing to him, after everything-"

Before I can continue, Samael screams in rage. "MICHAAAEL! He took them from me!! He took my beautiful sisters!! Ahhh!!!"

The Archangel punches the ground with all his strength, but his hand passes through it without causing a disturbance. Again and again, he wails and smashes his fists against the rocky cave floor, but never once do they make a sound.

Satan staggers to his feet. He and Belial gaze in stunned silence as the Archangel pours his heart out in emotionally-wrenching screams of anger and rage.

"-took them! Took them! TOOK THEM FROM ME!!"

Samael collapses. He falls onto his face and sobs, unable to muster the strength to rise to his feet.

Leviathan closes his eyes.

"I am sorry, old friend. I knew of Michael's treachery, but... for you... experiencing those memories must feel like losing your sisters all over again."

Satan clenches his hands into fists. "Fucking... bastards. I can't believe it. The old man did something unforgivable to Samael, my friend. That worthless, senile piece of dirt..."

I glare daggers at Raphael. "He said it, but I'm starting to agree."

Raphael doesn't reply. Instead, he turns away and stares into the darkness, unable to meet my gaze.

Samael flops his head to the side. He stares at Leviathan, and his raging emotions seem to subside somewhat.

"L... Leviathan... that's right... I bestowed that name upon thee..."

"You did."

"Muriel... she always... toward thee..."

Leviathan closes his eyes. **"Muriel was as dear to me as my beloved mother."**

"I failed..."

"No. I failed you, old friend. I left you to suffer in the hands of your brothers and sisters. I falsely assumed-"

"I did not suffer," Samael says. The Archangel gingerly lifts himself off the ground and plops onto his butt. "Nay, I lived a wonderful life in Heaven. Too exquisite for one as wretched as myself. I did not deserve such frivolous joys as what Raphael bestowed upon me. Perhaps, my brother thought to atone for his sins by removing my memories. Perhaps he allowed me to live in the hopes that he could redeem his soul."

Samael's lip trembles.

"Unforgivable. Muriel and Cassiel perished at Michael's hands, yet my brother did not punish him. Raphael forced me to smile and treat my sister's murderer with undeserved respect. I never avenged them. I never paid Michael back... for what he *did*..."

Leviathan waits a few moments before opening his eyes.

"Mmm. But, now that your memories have returned..."

"That's right — Thou art correct, young dragon. I owe Michael and Raphael a great debt. Nay, I owe *all* the survivors of that horrid day a blood-debt. I must repay them ten times over for their genocides."

Leviathan nods slowly, but for once, he hesitates.

"I, too, often feel the ache for vengeance, Samael. However, violence and bloodshed only further a perpetual cycle. Perhaps you should consider alternatives for settling your dispute."

Samael wipes the tears from his face. "Should I? Have thee any to suggest?"

"No. I do not. Still, I wonder what Muriel and Cassiel would do, were they in your position."

Samael shakes his head. "I cannot pretend to know their thoughts. They were peaceful, loving beings. Naturally, that is what made them easy *targets* for Michael's greed. They are not me, and I am not them."

The Archangel turns to look at Satan. He chuckles wryly. "Irony, isn't it, Satan? Once, I believed that being devoured by thee was a curse worse than death. Now I know that the Creator's will still guides me to this day. 'Twas destiny that our fates intertwined."

Satan nods. "Yeah. You're right. Now that you have your memories back, I see a path I hadn't considered before."

"Oh? Please, elaborate."

Satan smiles. He clamps his hands together, stretches them out, and pops his knuckles. "Mmm. Well, you see, demons don't exactly like the angels. We've got a grudge against them, and it ain't going away anytime soon."

Samael nods. "Go on..."

"Well, your story pissed me off, Sammy-boy. Got me all fired up. I don't think I can go another day without tearing some angel assholes to shreds."

Leviathan sighs. "**A crude metaphor, but expected from the likes of you.**"

Satan turns to the dragon. "Leviathan. You said you'd bring my girl back if I killed the Archangels, didn't you?"

Leviathan blinks. "**I said I would consider it.**"

"Good enough for me. I didn't want to go all-out before, but I've changed my mind. There's no way I'm letting Raphael off easy after everything Sammy-boy's said."

Belial nods. "I agree. The angels are pure scum. All they do is create and enslave other beings for their amusement. They're selfish people with god complexes. Even if they no longer have their memories, they're still guilty in my eyes for the atrocities they've committed."

With a pause, Belial blushes. "No offense, Samael."

"None taken," Samael replies. "Satan. Will thou assist me in my quest for vengeance? Will thou assist me in wiping out those who have wreaked havoc on the galaxy?"

Satan nods.

"I'll do you one better. I already have a plan."

"A plan?"

"Yep. But... I can't pull it off by myself. I'm gonna need all the help I can get."

Samael falls silent.

The Archangel of Change turns to look at Leviathan. A hundred emotions pass over his face.

"Leviathan. I was the one who gave thee thy name. However, thy mother also gave me a name. I never used to like it, but I've changed my mind, now."

"Hm? She did?"

"Aye. Due to how the Ophanim worked from the shadows, Jörmungandr called me by the name of *Hades*, king of the underworld."

Satan nods. "Hades. How very... un-angelic. Fitting."

Samael glances at his wings. "I hate my people. I always have. From this day forward, I will work tirelessly to bring them to their knees."

Leviathan curls his lips into a smile.

"Welcome back, Hades, my beloved brother."

"Aye. I thank thee for saving me, Leviathan."

Part 142: Release the Dragon!

Solomon's vision freezes as he and I teleport into Lucifer's underground lair. This time, Raphael and Gabriel don't come along for the ride. Ever since my spat with the Archangel of Wisdom, we haven't spoken. Now it seems he's gone into hiding.

I clear my throat. "Hrm. So, are we going to talk about... that?"

Solomon scrunches up his lips. "What is there to say?"

"I don't know. You're the so-called wise man here. What am I supposed to think when the whole point of these visions was a sham?"

"A sham? I don't follow."

"I came here to learn about how evil demons are. Instead, I've ended up watching the birth of a fledgling species as their creators repeatedly tried to murder them all. Now, with Leviathan's revelations, I can only look at the angels as being agents of chaos and destruction. How in the hell am I supposed to empathize with them?"

Solomon pauses a moment before answering.

"Leviathan could have been lying."

"Yeah? Was he?"

Solomon shakes his head. "No."

"Exactly. Where does that leave me? I don't feel sympathetic to Raphael's cause, anymore."

Solomon shrugs. "I can't tell you what to think, Jason. As I said before, the angels caused much misery during their existence. I am not able to view their billions of years of memories in all of their entirety. Even with my mind accelerated by the power of the crown, viewing snapshots in history from Raphael's extended lifespan took centuries, and I barely glimpsed a fraction of his life. Some of the things I saw..."

The ancient King pauses to collect his thoughts.

"All I know is that the angels are long-dead. The demons still rule the universe, and in the end, I believe it is your destiny to eradicate them. They're monsters, and no matter how much of a sob story their origins might be, you mustn't forget the horrific acts they've committed."

"Yeah," I reply, "like eating human flesh and torturing us and a bunch of other barbaric things. Still, demons are intelligent creatures. Samantha and Paimon are proof of that much. If you're telling me to commit genocide just because of the past-"

"The present," Solomon says, correcting me. "Demons still perform atrocities every single day."

I try not to be too miffed at Solomon's interruption. "Right, but even if that's true, there were many barbaric human civilizations too, like the Aztecs. They would routinely butcher humans and-"

Solomon cuts me off again. "The Aztec's barbarism came from the fact that they worshipped and worked with demons."

"Fuck's sake, Solomon. You know what I mean! The point is that there have been evil practices used throughout human history, and thanks to hard work and social revolutions, we were able to stamp out those acts of brutality from our collective consciousness."

Solomon nods. "Yes, but when you understand that the demons influenced humanity toward our worst, and demons have never changed their tune..."

"Semantics!" I yell, trying to suppress my frustration. "Christ, forget it. Talking to you is like talking to a brick wall."

Solomon opens his mouth to reply, but hesitates.

"I... well, I'm sorry I made you feel that way. I'm only trying to help."

"Your idea of help is telling me that I should abandon my core beliefs. I don't kill, period. I have Wordsmithing, and that means I have the power to change the universe. Stooping to violence would only prove that I've learned nothing from the Archangel's failures."

Solomon goes quiet.

"Yes. I suppose so..."

He trails off, and an awkward silence follows.

After a few moments, the ancient King motions with his hands. Time resumes, allowing time to progress. The air frosts over between us, so I look away from him and return my full attention to the next scene.

We appear inside the same underground gambling den from before. It hums with the energy of a few hundred demons throwing Mahja sticks onto tables, laughing and hollering at each other as they gamble for this lot or that one, generally having a good time. The moment the vision begins, a small fistfight breaks out as two pyro-types start slinging fireballs, only for a nearby Baron to reach over and whack them over the heads, stopping the conflict in its tracks.

Bael and Orias watch the spat from a nearby table for a moment. Once satisfied that the fun is over, they return to their game of Sticks and Bones.

Bael tosses a dozen bones down and smirks as they hit the table with a series of *clinks*. "Heh, lookit that. A Dire Wolf formation."

Orias reaches toward the bones. He extends his hand out, and as his robes pull back, they reveal several gems, large and small, embedded in his arms. "Mmm. It's your win, again."

"Nahhhh, come on! Let's make it a best of... eleven? Ten? Where were we again, Murmur?"

Bael flicks his gaze to the left, where a shy demoness dressed in rags wraps her arms around her knees as she sits on a rock. Beside her, another demon sits on the floor, paying more attention to a shiny diamond clutched in his hands than Bael's game.

"Uh, um..." Murmur peeps out from under her hood, exposing her glowing red eyes for only a moment. "I th-think it was... t-ten..."

Bael nods. "I knew it! Bahaha!! Ehehe... So, err... does ten come after eleven, or is it the other way around?"

Orias shakes his head. "It's nine, then ten, then eleven. I don't know if I have another game in me, though. I have the worst luck these days."

Bael crosses his arms. "Psh, stop moping around! It doesn't matter how good your luck is when you're up against me! I've got a hundred rabbit's feet protecting me!"

Orias pokes the bones for a moment before withdrawing his hand back beneath his robes. "Mmm. Somehow I doubt you know how many a hundred is."

"Not a clue, but I know it's more than eleven!"

"Substantially. Anyway, I'm done for today. Davook, you go next."

The grunt at Murmur's feet flicks his eyes up to meet Orias's gaze. His clothes are as raggedy as any of the others nearby, but a certain hardness to his gaze hints that he isn't the dullard most other demons of his rank tend to be.

"Aw, c'mon. I don't want to play those stupid games. Total drag. Waste of time. Not fun at all."

"Don't defy me. Get up here and play for a round or two."

Davook crosses his arms and turns up his nose at Orias. "No! Hmph."

Orias sighs and turns to Bael. "My apprentice can be a little... persnickety. I apologize for his rudeness."

Bael shrugs. "It's fine, it's fine. Davook, why don't you like Sticks and Bones? It's the best game ever!"

"Hardly," Davook replies. He rolls his eyes and groans. "It's all luck-based — no skill involved. I can't think of anything more boring than two people sitting at a table and throwing bones at each other."

Bael points to the diamond in Davook's hand. "Pft. Like you've got anything better to do. Don't you stare at that rock all day anyway?"

"It's a diamond, and it's *pretty*. I like pretty things."

Bael's eyes glaze over. He nods slowly, and drool begins to congeal at his lips.

"Right... pretty... yeah. Alright, well, if you can't hack it, then I guess that's it for my fun and games."

The Duke of Pain sighs. A look of boredom passes over his face as he starts to stand up.

"I... I'll... I'll p-play..."

Murmur shifts slightly and raises her head to look at Bael.

"I've never... played s-sticks and..."

Bael turns to look at her. "Hoho! You wanna have a go at me, eh, Murmur? Hah, I never took you for that type!"

Murmur nods. "I... I like games... they're fun..."

She starts to shift her weight so she can crawl off the rock, but at that moment, Barbatos barges into the room and bellows at the top of his lungs. "Hey, guys! Satan and Belial just came back! You've gotta see this!"

Bael glances at the Lord of Iron. "Huh? What about 'em?"

"Satan's power... it's... it's over the top! I can practically taste his mana!"

"Disgusting," Orias mutters. "Spare me the details."

Bael grins. "Oooh, now that sounds like fun! I've gotta see for myself."

The Duke of Pain jumps up and starts walking toward the exit. The other demons in the room follow after him, leaving Murmur, Davook, and Orias behind.

Murmur sighs. The child-like demoness lowers her head to sulk.

"Aw... I wanted to play..."

Orias shakes his head. "I'm sure Bael will have a match with you when he returns. As for me, I'm interested in what's going on, as well. Come now, Davook. Let's see what's happening out there."

Davook rolls his eyes. "Sounds like a pain in the ass."

"Much like you. Stop dawdling."

With a groan, Davook slowly climbs to his feet and shuffles after his master, leaving Murmur behind.

"W-wait for me," Murmur whispers. The little girl hops off her rock and trails after them.

In the darkness of the empty room, a single figure appears, wrapped in robes. His tongue flicks out of his mouth, and he leans heavily on a wooden staff.

"Hmm. Finally, things are growing... *interesting*."

Recommended Listening

Satan inhales the warm air slowly flowing from the deepest parts of Lucifer's Lair as he and Belial march through the entrance hallways. Belial wraps herself around Satan's arm and stares up at him adoringly, while he levitates Nerissa's crystal in front of them.

Belial bats her eyes. "Lover, why didn't you conceal the entrance? The angels will find our hideout if we don't-"

Satan smirks. He interrupts her by pressing a finger to her lips. "The angel's ain't a problem anymore, toots. Don't even worry about 'em."

"I... I suppose not," Belial replies, lowering her gaze.

As Satan and Belial's feet *slap* against the damp dirt floor, the Devil's grin widens.

"Yeah. We don't need to fret about *anything* after today."

The two demons continue in silence. Within a minute, they encounter half a dozen imps and grunts, all of whom turn to look at them as they appear — the grunt nearest to the entrance waves at Satan.

"Gehehe! Look who's here! It's Emperor Satan and—"

The grunt pauses. His eyes widen in alarm.

"W-what the... Satan's... m-mana..."

The grunt stutters and stammers as smoky black mana emanates from Satan's body, rolls across the ground, and brushes against his feet.

"I'm back," Satan says, his voice rough and dry. "Where are Lucifer and Diablo? Bael too, if you happen to know."

The grunts nod dumbly. "They... they're in... the... w-we'll go get 'em..."

All of the grunts bolt away as fast as they can, eager to flee from Satan's presence. The imps stay behind, dumbstruck by Satan's power.

Satan ignores his weak, pathetic admirers. He continues walking forward with Belial at his side, leaving the imps to stare at their backs as they continue toward Lucifer's throne room.

One imp swallows audibly. "D-did ya see...?"

His friend nods. "Yeah, I saw. I done *felt* it, too."

* * *

As Satan continues deeper into the underground catacombs, imps, grunts, and Lords all fall by the wayside, careful to get out of his way. Few speak any words, instead opting to stare at him in awe.

"He's... like a totally different demon..."

"What *happened* to 'im?"

"Shh, quiet. He'll hear us..."

Satan's smile widens. He pretends not to notice the looks of awe on the faces of nearby demons as they duck into hallways and adjacent rooms.

They can't help but notice, he thinks to himself. Leviathan's boost was only the tip of an iceberg, since Samael's cooperation improved my power the most. With the Archangel no longer fighting my every action, the two of us can finally work together.

It doesn't take long for Satan to arrive at Lucifer's throne room. True to its name, the room possesses a drab-looking chair carved out of dirt, with dead grass and animal skins placed over its seat and arms to make it slightly more comfortable than a rock. Dozens of demons, having already heard about Satan's arrival, skitter inside and wait at the edges expectantly, hoping for a big speech.

Satan walks over to the throne. His eyes flick toward three Hellhounds lazing about the base. The fifty-eyed animals raise their heads to look at him, and despite their terrifying appearance, they whimper and whine as he draws closer. One of them tenses its muscles, then bolts to one of the side exits, fleeing as

quickly as it can. It slams into two grunts as it rushes out, flinging them to the sides as it tears ass away from Satan's line of sight.

The other Hellhounds follow their brother a moment later; their spirits shattered.

Satan rolls his eyes. "Dumb mutts."

The Devil places Nerissa's crystal to the right of the throne, turns around, and eases himself onto the seat. Belial slides onto his lap with a giggle, almost as if she were swiping candy from a grocery store. Her expression says it all. *This feels mischievous!*

Satan wraps one arm around his girl's waist to pull her closer, then leans his left arm on the throne's armrest. He sighs and plunks his chin against his fist.

"Where is Lucifer? I hate waiting."

Artorias, positioned at one of the exits, raises his head. He stands taller than the other imps, grunts, and Lords, making him stand out in the crowd. "They're coming. I sent Barbatos to fetch Bael. As for Lucifer-"

"I'm already here," Lucifer hisses. She enters the room with Diablo in tow and shoves the Baron of Earthquakes out of her way. Despite Artorias's look of annoyance, Lucifer ignores him. "What is the meaning of *this*?!" She gestures toward Satan, seated in her throne.

"Hey, Lucy. Deebs. Nice to see you guys."

"Don't play coy with me, Satan!" Lucifer screeches. "Where have you been? You left in the dead of night and came back three times stronger! Such a power increase is unheard of!"

Satan winks at Lucifer. "Heh. Are you sure about that? I know at least *one* way to increase a demon's power."

Lucifer's jaw slackens. She shoots a glance at Diablo, then returns her gaze to Satan. "You *didn't*."

"I did," Satan replies with a nod. "And now that you understand, let's discuss the future of demonkind — specifically, how I'm going to run everything from now on. I have some changes in mind, and I'll be counting on you to help me enforce them."

Diablo quickly reaches out and rests his hand on Lucifer's shoulder to calm her down. The look on her face could curdle milk. "Satan, hold on. Aren't you acting a little out of hand? Bael hasn't yet decided who will be the leader of demonkind."

Satan waves Diablo's concerns away. "Bael is a Duke. I'm the First Emperor. I decide who leads and who follows. If he has a problem, I'll simply show him that big muscles ain't the only way to win a fight."

Lucifer reaches her boiling point. "You little- that's it! I've heard enough out of you! You're not the First Emperor, no matter how much power you *think* you have! I've been aching to beat your ass for a while, now!"

Lucifer's forehead eye starts to glow red. Bloody veins appear, and her head trembles as she takes a step toward Satan.

Satan blinks slowly, deliberately. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

He doesn't move an inch.

Lucifer grins like a madwoman. "I may not be able to kill you, but I can teach you the meaning of PAIN!"

All the oxygen in the room vanishes. An instant later, a concentrated burst of superheated air fires from her eye. It smashes into Satan and Belial with the force of an oil tanker, obliterating them and sending dirt and dust flying. Several grunts and Lords scream in terror as the shockwave smashes all of them against the walls. Smoke and dust erupt in every direction, shrouding the room in a dense cloud that nobody's vision can penetrate.

Diablo and Artorias manage to shield themselves from the worst of Lucifer's instant-kill attack. Diablo gasps in horror. "Lucy! What are you thinking?! You'll bring the roof down on us!!"

Artorias pounds his foot against the ground. Immediately, several pillars erupt upward and smash against the ceiling, reinforcing it to prevent a total collapse.

"We're fine," Artorias says. "As for Satan..."

Lucifer scowls. Her third eye pierces the dust cloud, allowing her to see Satan still sitting on his throne, unharmed.

"That smug... bastard..."

Satan smirks. Despite the walls and floor nearest him torn to pieces, he sits in a bubble of perfection, surrounded by chaos. Even Nerissa's hardened crystal appears unharmed.

"Do you feel better now?" Satan asks from within the smoke. "If you're done throwing a tantrum..."

Satan loosens his grip on Belial's waist. While still resting on his fist, he uses his free hand to snap his fingers. Air rushes from his body, and the power of wind magic clears the smoke from the room instantly.

"You bore me," Satan says. "Do you want to see more, or will you acknowledge me as your superior?"

Lucifer gnashes her teeth together. Blood-red miasma trickles from her forehead as she balls her hands into fists. "Worthless... trash... how dare you insult me!!"

Her eye glows red again. A laser shoots from her forehead, far smaller than the first attack, but also ten times more concentrated. The light of the sun ignites in the lantern-lit room, blinding everyone present. Her attack clears the gap nearly instantly, penetrates Satan's defenses, and narrowly misses Belial. The laser obliterates Satan's heart and rushes through the throne and the wall behind him, leaving him-

"Kuh," Satan grunts.

The Devil doesn't shift position on the throne, but using his free hand, he immediately summons water and splashes it onto his chest. After a moment, I realize Lucifer missed his heart. She shredded his chest, but didn't instantly kill him, allowing him to heal himself.

Satan winces. "Cripes... *that* hurt. A little. Got anything else?"

"More than you can imagine," Lucifer mutters under her breath.

From the side entrance on the left, Barbatos, Davook, Murmur, and the rest of the demons appear to watch the battle between the Emperors unfold. I glance at them for a moment and frown as I realize Bael isn't among them.

He was leading the pack originally... so where did he go?

I don't receive an answer to my question. Instead, Lucifer turns to look at Diablo. "Alright, you. It's time to help. I can't defeat Satan on my own. Are you ready?"

Diablo blinks. "Huh? Ready for what?"

Lucifer shakes her fist at Diablo. "Ready to help me crush Satan, of course! Why do you hesitate? With your power, I can stop him right here and right now!"

Diablo nods slowly. "Oh. Uhh, right. I mean... must I? I don't have much reason to fight Satan..."

Lucifer balks. "Of course you do! He's the enemy of demonkind! Because of him, we nearly went extinct twice!"

"Yes, but he saved my life. He saved Bael's too."

"No, *I* did," Lucifer replies. She narrows her eyes. "Satan backstabbed the Archangels. Because of him, we lost our chance of signing a peace treaty, and thousands of friends during the ensuing battle. Stop living two thousand years in the past, Diablo."

Diablo grits his teeth. "Baby, c'mon! Why would you want to sign a peace treaty with the angels after what they did to the precursor imps?! They murdered us en-masse! Satan had the right idea by double-crossing Raphael, and you know it."

"The imps died *because* of Satan!" Lucifer hisses. "Don't argue with me on this. Not now, of all times!"

"I'm not arguing!" Diablo practically screams. "I'm only moderately disagreeing!!"

The two Emperors lean toward each other and glower for several seconds. Diablo appears completely torn about quarreling with his woman, but I have to admire him standing up for his principles.

"Gah!" Lucifer snarls. "You always go along with what I say! Why are you defending Satan now?! You know he's my worst enemy!"

Diablo's expression softens. He pulls back, straightens his posture, and crosses his arms. "Unlike you, I don't dislike Satan. Besides, even if he only initiated my rescue, Belial was right there beside you when Michael attacked us. I can't attack him without involving her."

"Belial chose her side," Lucifer says, her voice cold as ice. "Now, you choose yours."

Diablo's expression appears neutral. He tries to hide his emotions, but as he flicks his eyes from Satan to Lucifer, he begins to bite his lip apprehensively.

Damn. I don't want to start anything with Satan, Diablo's expression seems to say, *but if I don't take my girl's side, what kind of man am I? She's always been there for me. Isn't the answer obvious?*

Before Diablo can come up with an answer, Satan sighs.

"Yo, Deebs. You always overthink things. You spend too much time in your head, chum. Stick by your woman. That's what I would do if I were you. No hard feelings. Besides, it wouldn't be fair if Lucifer had to fight all by herself."

Satan's smirk deepens. His gaze rests on Lucifer as he talks, and a smug air of superiority seems to emanate from his eyes.

"Poor little Lucy can't win if she fights alone. She hasn't got the *stamina*."

Lucifer's jaw drops. "O-of course I don't! You're only as strong as you are now because you cheated! Worthless bastard! Don't you dare look down on me, when I never once returned to that forbidden well of power! I can only wonder what you had to give up to obtain such a tremendous boost."

Satan shakes his head. "You've got it all wrong, Lucy. We've all sold our souls at some point, including you. The difference comes from what we obtained in return. You've allowed our people to survive, and for that, I thank you. However, my goal is to *thrive*. I don't care what you think of me, so long as you bend the knee. If I have to beat some submissiveness into you..."

Satan pauses for a moment.

"...well, I guess that can't be helped. Sometimes, a mouthy broad's gotta be put in her place."

* * *

After Satan concludes his speech, Diablo's eyes harden.

"Have it your way, *boss*. Nobody talks to Lucy like that, not while I'm at her side."

Diablo takes a few steps to his left and stands beside Lucifer.

"No hard feelings, Satan, but you've forced my hand."

Satan smiles.

"No hard feelings, Deebs."

The Emperor of Annihilation tenses up his muscles as he readies himself to obliterate Satan. Lucifer smiles. Her forehead's eye also prepares to unleash Hell upon Satan and Belial.

"Thank you, Diablo. I knew you'd come to your senses."

Diablo nods. "Anything for you, buttercup."

Before the two of them can begin their barrage, a shadowy figure materializes behind one of Artorias's stone pillars and transforms from a smoky black apparition into her demonic form.

She strides forward and turns to face Satan. "I'm surprised. After our discussion last night, I hoped you'd come around to my side of things. Instead, you left and came back intent on defying me. You'll regret that decision."

"Berith?" Lucifer says, a hint of surprise in her voice. "I don't need your help. Satan is mine!"

"Now is no time for arrogance," Berith whispers. She doesn't turn to face Lucifer. "The last time you fought Satan, you lost. That was before he tripled his power. It will take all of our combined strength to defeat him this time. I hate the idea of allying with you... but I hate losing *even more*."

Satan chuckles. "Three against one? Phew, might break a sweat over here. Anyone else care to join? Let's make this a party."

Lucifer's rage builds further. "Smug bastard! You'll regret-"

"Quiet," Berith says, rolling her eyes. "Don't fall for Satan's tricks. He's goading you."

Immediately, Lucifer forces herself to calm down. "Kss... right. Apologies. My emotions got the better of me for a moment."

Satan uncoils his arm from Belial's waist as the other three Emperors fan out to surround him.

The Devil lifts his head off his fist and begins to clap his hands slowly. "Oh, damn. Are you guys finally warmed up? Ready to start?"

"Keep up the tough talk," Berith hisses. "I can't wait to shut you up permanently."

"Same," Lucifer says with a smile. "At least we have *that much* in common."

Satan slowly stops clapping. As his palms come together for the last time, he stretches in his chair.

"Nnnng, damn. Alright. Well, time to get serious. Go on, sweetie. Teach 'em a lesson."

Satan smacks Belial's butt and winks at her.

"Make me proud."

Belial bats her eyes. "I'll win for you, lover!"

She hops off his lap and smiles at the other three Emperors. They take a step back in confusion as, with a motion of her hands, Belial's horns expand from the one-inch bumps of a Baron to the several-inch length of an Emperor. Her height increases by half a foot, and she takes a deep bow.

"Okay, everyone! I'll be your opponent, now! Don't worry, for I'll be sure to heal you after I finish!"

Lucifer's jaw drops. "What?! Belial is... she's an Emperor? Since when?!"

Satan smirks. "What, afraid you can't beat her?"

"Of course, we're not afraid!" Diablo yells, butting into the conversation. "But I thought we were going to fight you, not your mate! What kind of coward sends out his missus to do his dirty work?"

Satan laughs into his fist. "Ahaha, oops, it must have slipped my mind. You see, I'm making Belial my Second Emperor. Whichever of you comes out on top will be my third, fourth, and so on. This fight will be to determine the official rankings."

Berith's calm demeanor shatters in an instant. "Satan! How... how dare you mock me! I came to crush you, not to fight your pathetic succubus *whore*!"

Satan's smile vanishes.

"Do *not* insult my girl."

Berith ignores him. "If you think you can snub me, you're wrong! Eat shit and DIE!!"

With a motion of her hands, the Emperor of Backstabbing summons forth a hundred shadow-lances, similar to the ones Amelia used against me when we engaged in our final battle. Each one, sharp enough

to pierce steel, stabs out of the ceiling, walls, and floor like deadly charcoal stalactites. They rush toward Satan from every conceivable direction with deadly intent, fixated on ending his life.

Satan doesn't flinch. The instant before any of the shadow-lances impale him, a blur of movement spins around his body like a tornado. Berith's blackened spears explode into ash. Their dust scatters around the room in every direction.

Everything happens in a matter of seconds. The imps and grunts stare in awe as they try to comprehend the lightning-fast battle they just witnessed.

Berith doesn't let up. She summons another veritable army of shadow-lances. They fly at Satan, and he shatters them before they come close to grazing his body. The instant one explodes into dust; another follows a split-second later.

Satan's expression darkens as the Emperor of Backstabbing continues her onslaught. Again and again, she summons dozens of shadow lances, each one seemingly rushing toward Satan with a mind of its own, but the Devil deflects all of them without saying a word.

"Chrr!" Berith growls. "What black magic protects you? Why can't I land a single hit? You should have perished already! Lucifer, don't just stand there! Use-"

Before Berith can finish her sentence, a blur of motion rushes toward her. The Emperor of Backstabbing jerks back in surprise, but she doesn't move fast enough to dodge Belial's fist.

Wham!

Belial punches Berith so hard I don't even see her body fly backward. The shadow-walking Emperor pounds against the wall behind Diablo and Lucifer hard enough to rattle my teeth. She nearly takes out three grunts in the way and sends a shockwave throughout the entirety of the demon's underground lair.

As Berith gasps for breath and slumps to the ground, Belial straightens up and claps her hands together.

"I'm your opponent. Not Satan. The next person to attack my sweetie gets punched ten times harder than that. Are we clear?"

Diablo gulps nervously. "H-hey... I didn't sign up to... to hit a woman..."

Belial bats her eyes. "Well, I'd hate to make you uncomfortable."

With a flourish of her hands, Belial transforms her appearance from her busty, red-skinned self, into an exact copy of Satan. She flexes her muscles a little and rubs her pot-belly.

"See? Now you can fight Satan without feeling guilty because I look just like him!"

Satan frowns. "I... didn't expect that. Kinda creepy if you ask me."

Belial turns and smiles at him, an expression far sweeter than anything I've ever imagined seeing on Satan's face. In a voice identical to Satan's, she says, "Don't worry, love! I'll win for you!"

Satan nods slowly.

"Uhh... right. Go... get 'em... tiger?"

Belial nods eagerly. She spins to face the other two Emperors, motions with her hands, and unleashes a river of mana from her body comparable to Satan's.

As her blackened energy sweeps across the room, Diablo begins to sweat.

"Lucy... I... I think we fucked up."

Part 143: The Emperor of Passion

Recommended Listening

Satan's doppelganger smiles creepily. "Here I come!~"

Diablo jumps in front of Lucifer and summons a kinetic barrier right as Belial, still mimicking her husband's appearance, crouches on the ground and pounces at him like a jaguar. She flies at the Emperor of Annihilation and smashes her fist against the barrier surrounding his body with all her strength.

THOOM!

A shockwave explodes from the impact point, rattles Diablo's teeth, and sends the closest imps and grunts flying. They hit the walls, flop to the ground, and hurriedly flee the room in terror, yipping like beaten dogs.

Belial's fists transform into hardened hammers made of bone. Over and over, she pounds Diablo's kinetic barrier with unrelenting fury, each punch crashing upon him like a battleship plummeting from the sky. The walls crack and rattle, and the ceiling continuously sags as the shockwaves from her attacks threaten to bring the roof down.

Artorias, standing just outside the room, repeatedly slaps the walls and uses earth magic to try and reinforce the underground catacombs, but he seems to be fighting an uphill battle. "Spawn of a broodmother! Take this fight outside! You're going to kill us all!!"

The Emperors ignore Artorias. Diablo puts every ounce of his energy into defense, but he can barely keep up with Belial's onslaught.

"Baby! I can't maintain this pace forever!!"

Diablo's feet grind into the ground as he begins to slide backward.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Belial strikes his stomach, chest, and head all in the blink of an eye. Diablo tries to resummon his barrier, but Belial seems immune to its knockback effects. He slips up and fails to protect himself for the final blow. Her hammer-like fists nearly take off his head and send him tumbling into the wall to her left. Diablo hits the hardened rock with enough force to jar his senses. He flops to the ground to writhe and clutch his chest as he regains his bearings.

"Diablo!"

Lucifer cries out in anger as her mate's defenses shatter. A blast of kinetic energy, built up over several seconds, fires from her third eye. Belial tries to dodge it, but she isn't fast enough. Lucifer's attack crashes against her and sends her careening into the wall beside Satan. She impacts it with a painful *whump!*

Satan winces. He glances at his doppelganger and curls up his mouth. "You okay, sweetie? Need me to jump in?"

Belial staggers to her feet. Her right arm hangs limp, apparently broken in several places. She scowls at Lucifer. "No. I'm fine."

With a flourish of her hands, Belial heals herself. Her joints snap back into place, making the succubus flinch as lightning shoots up her arm. A moment later, she balls both hands into fists.

"You forgot about ME!"

A voice yells out from the wall behind Belial. She gasps and spins on her feet, but a massive fist made of darkness rushes out and strikes her face, sending her tumbling toward Lucifer. Before she gets anywhere close, another fist appears in the shadow of one of Artorias's pillars, lunges out, and batters Belial again, sending her careening to the left.

Like a three-dimensional ping-pong machine, Berith begins punching Belial from every direction, melding her body with the shadows and turning the darkness into hammer-like weapons.

"You thought you could take on three Emperors at once?! Foolish succubus! I alone will bring you to ruin!"

Belial plows into a wall shrouded in darkness. Berith's arms jump out of it, wrap around the succubus, and bind her tightly. A moment later, shadow-lances leap from every nearby patch of darkness and rush toward Belial, intent on turning her into a cactus.

The Emperor of Passion gnashes her teeth. "You spoke too soon!"

She transforms her body from a solid mass into something with the consistency of pudding. Despite Berith's attempts to bind her to the wall, Belial melts through the shadow-walker's arms, causing her spears to impale the one who summoned them instead. They merge into Berith's body harmlessly, but she still howls in rage.

"You slippery little... get back here!!"

Belial, now a puddle of flesh, leaps from the ground, impacts a pillar, and reforms into her original body instead of a clone of her husband. She tears a massive chunk out of the stone column and flings it at Berith.

"Here's a present!"

Berith's eyes widen as the one-ton mass of rock flies toward her. She instantly merges back into the shadows, like a frog diving underwater, causing the pillar to smash against the wall without injuring her.

Belial lands on her feet and backflips twice until she lands with her back to Satan's throne, only a few feet away.

"Need help yet?" Satan asks.

The succubus shakes her head. "I'm... I'm fine. Don't you worry about me!"

Satan shrugs and returns to resting on his fist. "It is still three against one, toots. If you want my help..."

"I don't need your help!" Belial yells. She flicks her gaze toward Satan, and a look of rage passes over her face. "I'm not weak anymore! I'm strong, just like Nerissa!"

Satan nods. "Never said you weren't. Keep up the good work. You look great."

His words of praise shatter her anger. Belial's eyes brighten. "Oh... I do? Do you mean that?"

Satan smiles. "Of course, I do. You're kicking ass. Your sister would be proud. Keep it up."

As if a dark cloud had been blocking her emotions, Belial grins cheerfully and returns her attention to the other three Emperors. Already, Berith has returned to her physical form. She and Lucifer stand behind Diablo as he leans heavily against a pillar. Belial's punch must have hit him harder than I first thought.

The succubus's angst melts away. Belial crouches low to the ground and licks her lips. "Who's ready for round two?"

A shudder runs down Diablo's face. He takes a shaky step forward and reaches up to wipe blood from his nose. Already, his eye socket has started to swell from where Belial hit him. "Lucy, Berith... no more solo play. We have to work together to beat Belial. Don't underestimate her just because she's a succubus."

Berith flicks her eyes toward Diablo's back. "Don't presume you can order me around. Lucifer might need a man to tell her what to do, but I walk my own path!"

Lucifer's eyes harden as she turns to Berith. "I'm not taking orders from Diablo either, you numbskull. However, his battle sense is quite remarkable. He's smarter than you and me combined. It would be foolish to ignore his input."

Berith motions with her hands. Her body transforms into smoke, and she falls inside of a stray shadow on the floor.

"Do whatever you please, Lucifer. Compared to me, you and Diablo are little more than ants. I will win this battle by myself and claim the title of First Emperor."

Lucifer watches as Berith sinks into the shadows. "Pigheaded fool. You'll end up dead if you refuse to work with others!"

"Ignore her," Diablo says. "She'll end up helping us, anyway. Focus on disorienting Belial. If I land a hit on her, I'll end this battle in one blow."

Belial raises an eyebrow. "I can hear every word you're saying."

Diablo shakes off the last vestiges of dizziness slowing him down. A moment later, he plants his foot in the ground and launches at Belial. "Fine by me!"

Seeing the Emperor of Annihilation leap at her, Belial stretches one of her arms out, grabs a nearby pillar, and yanks herself toward it. Halfway before she reaches it, she releases her grip, dives into a roll, and springs toward the ceiling.

I have to take out Lucifer, Belial thinks to herself. She's the most dangerous opponent, here.

Lucifer's third eye tracks Belial as she darts around and leaps toward her. "I won't let you close the distance, succubus!"

The Emperor of Providence motions with her hands. Immediately, a dozen ghostly swords, like those she used against Satan several years prior, materialize in midair. Half a dozen of them begin spinning rapidly in front of her to create a force field, while the rest jump at Belial to try and cut her out of the air. They swing and slice from left to right, but only manage to strike her afterimages.

When one sword threatens to lop off Belial's arm, she transforms that limb into a blade, bats Lucifer's projected weapon aside, and continues running toward her.

Diablo tries to grab Belial's foot, but he misses by inches as she jumps on his head and leaps off, flying at his mate.

"Naptime, Lucy!"

Belial's sword-arm morphs into a giant bone-hammer. She swings with all her strength, breaks through Lucifer's spinning blades, and pulverizes the Emperor of Providence with-

Wait, no.

Belial's bone-mace passes through Lucifer's body as if she's a ghost. Belial batters the wall and sends a minor earthquake rumbling through the underground caverns, but Lucifer's body vanishes into the ether.

"Huh? She was just here!"

The Emperor of Passion quickly scans the area. She spins on her heel and whirls around to search for Lucifer's whereabouts.

Diablo blinks. He notices Belial's momentary confusion, condenses his strength into a ten-times increased kinetic punch, and pulverizes a support column, spraying rock and stone in Belial's direction.

"Ack!" Belial quickly holds up her arms to protect her face as hundreds of rocky bullets blast every inch of her body, pummeling her like a firing squad. The succubus yelps in pain and staggers backward.

Berith's voice speaks from the wall behind Belial, as the succubi's shadow spreads across it. "Gotcha!"

Two arms jump from the wall. One of them grabs Belial by the back of her neck, while the second coils into a fist and pounds her spine with all its strength. Belial reels forward and tries to tear out of Berith's grasp, but the moment she lowers her arms, Diablo hits another pillar as hard as he can.

Batoom! Shik, shik!

Belial screams in pain. This time, Diablo's offensive shrapnel rips through her guts and throat and gouges out one of her eyes. "Eeeyahh!!!"

My heart sinks as Lucifer reappears in one of the nearby shadows. A maniacal grin spreads across her face.

"Foolish whore! If only you had recognized your weakness to mental attacks, you might have escaped death! Pathetic!"

Lucifer's third eye glows red. A moment later, she fires something invisible at Belial.

Belial stops screaming and goes limp in Berith's grasp.

Berith steps out of the shadows, produces a knife formed from darkness, and rears back to plunge it into Belial's heart.

"Stop!" Lucifer yells. "I've taken control of her mind! Now we can turn her against Satan!"

Berith pauses. "Oh? Have you? That was a good idea."

With a smirk, the Emperor of Backstabbing bares her teeth. "Too bad, Lucifer. Like I said, *I don't follow your orders.*"

She jabs the knife forward, aiming to end the succubi's existence while she can't retaliate.

The instant before Berith finishes off Belial; all hell breaks loose.

The throne room *explodes*.

Every pillar shatters. Shrapnel flies out in all directions, catching the Emperors off-guard. Bits of rock and dirt rip through them the same way they did through Belial. Berith shrieks in pain and drops the succubus. She stumbles backward, only to gasp in terror as something invisible grabs her by the hair and begins smashing her against the ceiling and floor.

Lucifer and Diablo howl in surprise, unable to comprehend what is happening. They, too, get smashed and flung around the room violently, unable to protect themselves.

"What's going- guwaaah!!"

Lucifer's question turns into an agonized scream as both of her arms snap in half, and she hurtles across the room to crash against the opposite wall. She passes out instantly and flops to the ground.

Five seconds later, the room goes still. All four Emperors lay on the ground, gasping for breath or completely unconscious.

Satan continues to lean on his fist.

"I don't remember giving any of you permission to kill my girl."

Berith wheezes. She lays on the ground, both of her arms and one of her legs broken and bent in unnatural directions. Her eyes flutter and spin around in her head as she tries to make sense of what just happened.

"Yuh-you... you... when... how...?"

Satan sighs. "The Ultimate Offense. Sorry, toots, but you never stood a chance. I recommend taking a nap now. It'll help dull the pain."

Berith falls silent. Her eyes close, and a final gasp escapes her body as she falls comatose.

Satan hovers out of his chair. He levitates across the room and picks up Belial. After splashing some water on her, he manages to bring her back to the world of the living.

"S... Satan...? What happened? Where... when...?"

Satan chuckles. "Ahh, you did good, sweetie. That last attack wiped 'em out. You okay?"

Belial cocks her head around to stare wide-eyed at the other three Emperors lying prone, the majority of their limbs snapped and twisted gruesomely.

"I... I did this?"

"Yup. Don't you remember? It was awesome."

Belial pulls herself to a sitting position and shakes her head. "No... I don't. But, if I won then... that's great!"

She flashes a radiant smile at Satan, who smiles back.

"Mhm. You sure did. Now, if you wouldn't mind healing them, I think these morons are going to die of blood loss without your help."

"I thought they were in your way. Why would you want me to heal them?"

Satan flicks his gaze to the doorway. Several imps peek inside, along with Artorias, Barbatos, and Bael.

The Duke of Pain whistles. "Damn, girl. You kicked serious ass."

Satan sighs. "I need 'em, toots. Even if Lucy and Berith are dummies for thinking they could win, I respect their fighting spirit. Besides..."

Satan helps Belial to her feet. As the two of them stand, Satan nods at Bael.

"Demons don't kill demons. That's my unbreakable rule."

Bael and Satan stare at each other for several seconds. Eventually, Bael returns Satan's nod. "Glad to have ya back, boss."

Part 144: Return of a Legend

Diablo, Lucifer, and Berith all sit on their knees, heads bowed, at the foot of Satan's throne. Diablo sighs as a look of defeat passes over his face. Berith's eyes twitch while she fights the emotions raging inside of her. Meanwhile, Lucifer balls her hands into fists and trembles. Her teeth chatter quietly as she tries desperately to suppress her rage and humiliation.

"That's a nice look for you," Satan says, seated in his throne. Once again, Belial sits on the right side of his lap, both of her legs crossing over his left. She wraps an arm around Satan's back, and he reciprocates with an arm around hers.

"Pretty pathetic," Bael intones. He stands behind the three defeated Emperors, arms crossed. "I thought about joining in on the fun, but you guys didn't deserve my help. I didn't know you were little bugs in demon bodies."

Lucifer whips her head back and snarls at Bael. "Quiet, you! Satan has grown too powerful for any of us to defeat! There's no shame in losing to... to..."

She bites off her words, but it's too little, too late.

"There's always shame in losing," Satan says, his smirk widening. "If you were smart, you'd have realized you couldn't win from the beginning. Even wolves know when to pick fights and when to run away. I always thought you were smarter than a dumb animal, but maybe I was wrong."

Hundreds of demons line the walls of the room. The grunts and Lords and Barons and all the other ones whisper among themselves conspiratorially, wondering what will happen next.

"I bet Satan'll snap their necks."

"Nah, he'll probably break their arms 'n legs and feed 'em to the Hellhounds."

"Idiot. If he was gonna do that, why bother healin' 'em?"

"To draw out the pain more. Duh."

"Ohhh, *right*. Good point."

Satan's gaze flicks around the room. He pauses to observe various cliques and groups among those present, then resumes staring at the three before him.

"Dumb, dumb, dumb. Sheesh. Right now, I bet Bael's smarter than the lot of you combined. You'd have to be pretty daft to sense my mana and think you had a shot at winning."

Berith raises her head to glare at Satan. "You said that, already."

"It's worth repeating," Satan mutters. "You've really mucked up my plans with this. How are we supposed to kill all the angels if the top Emperors don't know how to pick their fights?"

A hush falls across the room.

Several imps blink in stunned silence as their mouths fall agape.

Lucifer's expression turns to one of confusion. "Kill the angels? What are you on about this time?"

"I didn't stutter," Satan says. "I told you when I came back that I had a plan. See? That's what I hate about women. You never listen."

Hardly have the words left Satan's mouth before Belial shoots him a particularly nasty look. Satan pauses for a moment.

"N-not you, toots. The other ones."

"*Rude*," Belial hisses at him. She climbs off his lap and struts to the nearest exit, then pauses to cross her arms in annoyance.

"I'm going swimming."

Satan stares at Belial's ass as she struts around the corner and disappears from view. After a moment, he groans to himself. "Ugh. *Nice foot in mouth moment, me. Thanks, me.*"

"You done talking to yourself?" Bael asks. "Don't just say 'we're going to kill all the angels' and then leave it at that, boss. Now you've got me all excited 'n shit."

Satan stares at Bael for several moments before replying.

"That's right. We're going to launch an assault on Heaven and kill all of the angels. Every last one of 'em."

Gasps erupt in the crowd. Several imps take a step back as shock passes over their faces. Even the three Emperors stare wide-eyed at Satan.

Lucifer jumps to her feet. "What the hell are you talking about, Satan?! Are you crazy?!"

"A suicide mission. *Brilliant*," Berith adds sarcastically. She remains seated, skepticism everywhere in her body language. "And to think, you thought my idea for luring out the angels in small groups was terrible. You lack imagination, Satan."

Bael chuckles. "Heh. I think it's a good idea. An all-out war sounds like fun."

"You *would* think that," Diablo says, glancing back at the Duke of Pain. "But then again, you're damn near invincible. The rest of us have heads we try to keep on our shoulders."

Bael proves to be in the minority. The majority of lower-ranked demons murmur among themselves, doubt spreading around the crowd, out the exits, and to the demons waiting outside as well.

Satan keeps his body language calm and collected. "I understand you think it's a bad idea. Of course, I'm smarter than you, so I know otherwise. If I had to guess, I'd say the odds are..."

The Devil pauses for a moment.

"...there's a 99% chance that we'll lose the battle decisively."

Lucifer's eyes bulge as rage takes over.

"Are you *joking*?! What is wrong with you, Satan? If you're that unconfident, then why even propose such a ludicrous idea? Don't tell me this is another one of your damned tests!"

Satan shakes his head. "It's no test, Lucy dearest. I believe we will lose the battle,, but win the war. Long term strategies are what we need. You understand, don't you?"

Lucifer stands, frozen in place. She stares at Satan silently for several moments as her third eye jerks around erratically. She appears to be trying to figure out what he means.

"Long term... win the war... I don't understand. Speak plainly! I hate riddles!"

Diablo closes his eyes. The Emperor of Annihilation reaches up and slowly strokes his chin as he thinks about Satan's words.

"Hmm... I fail to see how attacking the angels and losing would benefit us. Satan, can't you elaborate? We'd be more inclined to listen if you stopped with the wordplay."

Bael rolls his eyes and grumbles under his breath. "Ain't that hard to understand, ya bunch of dummies. Just kill all the chickens, and we win. Easy."

Satan purses his lips. "Actually, Bael, it is more complicated than that. The reason I say there's a 99% chance of losing this battle is that we almost certainly won't defeat the angels. We will lose far more demons in the long run and will come out with only a sliver of those who entered. The rest will die."

Lucifer shivers as she meets Satan's gaze. "A suicide mission. You expect our people to march to their deaths. What in the name of Hell is that going to accomplish? Are you so eager to humiliate me that you would throw away everything I've built over the last two thousand years?"

"No," Satan replies, closing his eyes. "It's the best method we can use to win. You have to understand, Lucifer, about the nature of angelkind. Angels have only declined in population since the Creator formed them from the dust of the cosmos, millions of eons ago. They cannot reproduce. They can only fade away slowly, over time. Every angel killed is one fewer for us to battle in the future."

Lucifer and Diablo slowly relax. They nod along to Satan's words. Berith is the first to reply. "I see. So, what you are saying is that my battle plan was superior, after all."

Satan cocks his head. "How so?"

"If we bleed the angels off bit by bit, we will eventually kill all of them. My plan has fewer inherent risks compared to yours."

"Yes, but sacrificing low-ranked demons is... *pathetic*."

Satan bites off the last word before continuing.

"Your method is not one toward which demons should aspire. We tackle our opponents head-on. We fight honorably. We strive to perfect our power and to crush the barriers placed above us. We may skulk about in caves today, but if we were to rule over Earth in a future where we only ascended via skullduggery and deceit... that future is not one I would relish."

Satan sighs, long and hard. "Haah... there is another reason we must attack Heaven directly, my friends. The angels are not our only foes. While they cannot increase their numbers, the Titans *can*. Were we to draw out the extinction of angelkind over several centuries, the Titans would surely begin breeding in haste. They would quickly set aside their petty differences and unite with the single-minded intent of

eliminating our existence. As you all know, Titans lack many of the weaknesses the typical angel has. They grow to become enormous, and every generation of Titans eventually breeds a prodigy, such as Zeus or Hercules. The last thing we need is for more of them to stand against us."

Diablo raises his eyes to meet Satan's. "So, in the end, this battle is more about wiping out the Titans than eliminating the angels. Am I correct?"

Satan smiles. "That, you are, Diablo. You're a smart demon. I need more Emperors like you."

Satan pauses. After a moment, he reaches inside his leopard-skin shirt and plucks something out of an inner pocket.

"I told you three that I'd determine the rankings for Emperor based on how you fought against Belial. Well, I've made up my mind."

Slowly, deliberately, Satan reveals three tiny black marbles grasped in his palm. Each one is as dark as the night. If Satan were to drop them in a shadow, he might lose them forever.

Lucifer takes a step forward. Her third eye focuses on the marbles as she scans them. "What the Devil...? I see... mana... flowing out those pebbles."

"Mana?" Berith asks, echoing Lucifer. "I don't understand."

"We're going to attack Heaven in a few days. The sooner, the better," Satan says. "I need all three of you to be at the peak of your strength. No holding back. These are *soul-stones*, and each one has enough enriched soul energy to raise your mana levels to their peak."

Berith's jaw drops. Lucifer's does too. Diablo merely stares at the soul-stones in silence.

"Unbelievable..." Lucifer mutters. "In order to obtain these items... you must have..."

Berith jumps to her feet. She eagerly eyes the soul-stones, seemingly wishing to snatch all three from Satan's palm. "What are you waiting for? Give them to us!"

Satan closes his palm around the stones. "I warn you... absorbing one of these stones will hurt more than anything you've ever experienced. It will feel as if you are bathing in the mouth of a volcano, all while someone sprays acid across every inch of your skin. Still sure you want one?"

Lucifer and Berith's pupils dilate. They nod greedily. Diablo doesn't seem as interested, but he does lean forward on his knees to stare at them intently.

"I have one condition," Satan says. He lowers his voice, and his gaze darkens. "I will only give these out to those who swear their loyalty to me. Accepting these means you acknowledge my superiority over you. It means you will follow my orders unquestioningly until the end of time. Do you understand?"

The female Emperors pause for a moment to digest his words.

Lucifer replies first. "I knew there would be a catch. When it comes to underhanded tactics, only Berith is your equal, Satan."

"Yes," Berith says, nodding to Lucifer's words. "Still, I know when I am beaten. I cannot hope to defeat you, Satan. Given a choice, I would rather achieve the fullest extent of my power than not. Someday,

should you die, I might end up replacing you as First Emperor. It wouldn't do for me to appear weak, as I do now."

"Mmm," Satan grunts. "If I didn't know better, I might think you were threatening me."

"No, no," Berith says, holding her hands up in a mock display of distress. "I would never dream of it. Even when we battled earlier, I knew you were too powerful to defeat. I only wished to teach you a lesson. Now, I understand even that much was impossible for me."

Satan smiles. "I'm glad you finally understand your position. Well, in that case, I'll announce the rankings. Berith, you will be my Third Emperor. Lucifer, my fourth. Diablo, my fifth."

A look of horror passes over Lucifer's face. "What? Why?! I bound Belial in a mental prison! If it weren't for me, we'd never have come close to killing her! I passed your test with flying colors!"

Satan sighs. "Maybe so, but results are what matter. Berith was the one who would have landed the killing blow. You only managed to bind Belial thanks to the efforts of the other two. Besides, Berith seems far more powerful than you. She can appear in any shadow, ambush enemies, hold them in place, launch deadly spears from all directions... what can you do? Shoot some hot air from your head? Color me unimpressed."

Lucifer swings her arm back to gesture at Diablo. "What of my mate, then? If you think I'm so weak, then why position me above him?!"

"Because it'd hurt your pride, otherwise," Satan says, smirking. "Diablo doesn't care about crap like numbers and ranks. He's fine with being the lowest Emperor. Ain't that right, pal?"

Satan's eyes flick to Diablo, as do Lucifer's and Berith's. The Emperor of Annihilation yawns. "Yeah. I don't particularly care one way or the other."

"Great!" Satan says, rising from his chair. Extending his palm outward, a flicker of movement in the air is the only evidence of his Vectors' existence. They lunge down, snatch the three soul-stones, and extend out to hover the marbles in midair. Diablo and Berith stare in surprise as the black pebbles seemingly levitate toward them, but Lucifer appears less impressed. Thanks to her third eye, she can easily make out the shape of Satan's Vectors.

Satan plops the soul-stones in each of the other Emperor's hands. Berith eyes hers suspiciously. "What do I do with this? Now that I have it in my grasp, I find myself wondering if it isn't another one of your traps."

Satan shrugs. "Just pop it in your mouth and swallow. Easy." He doesn't bother defending himself against her last statement.

Berith raises an eyebrow. With a shrug, she reaches up and throws the soul-stone to the back of her throat. To my surprise, Lucifer mirrors Berith's movements and swallows hers simultaneously. Both women seem eager to increase their power.

Lucifer smacks her lips. "Yech. Disgusting. Diablo, aren't you going to take yours, too?"

She turns to look at Diablo, who continues to sit on his legs. He eyeballs Lucifer and Berith silently for a moment. "I'm waiting to see if Satan's tricking us. How do you feel?"

Lucifer cocks her head. "Hmm. Well, there's something... bubbling up in my stomach. It's as if... it feels like..."

The Emperor of Providence suddenly doubles over. She falls to her knees, and her eyes bulge out of her face. "Ahhh! Nnn, aahhh!!"

Half a second later, Berith loses her footing and face-plants the floor with a heavy *WHUMP*. She hits the ground like a sack of potatoes and curls into the fetal position.

Both of them start screaming. Their skin begins to boil and hiss. Gaseous fumes erupt from their bodies as the two female Emperors shriek, cry, and moan.

"Ahhh! Geeeeuuk!!"

Diablo stares in horror as his mate's skin pops and crackles like pine needles in a fire. Satan winces. Several lower-ranked demons take a few steps back, their eyes wide as saucers.

A full minute passes, then a second and a third.

Soon, Berith and Lucifer complete their transformation. Bloody patches of skin finish healing and regenerating as the transformation process concludes. The room becomes so silent that one could hear a pin drop.

Berith pulls herself to her feet. Sweat drips from every corner of her body. "Shit. Shit..."

Despite the exhaustion wracking her body, she smiles gleefully. "You told us the transformation would hurt, Satan, but I don't think you went far enough. I'll never forget that pain... not for the rest of my life."

Lucifer pushes herself into a sitting position. Her arm trembles for a minute from the strain of lifting her body, but it only takes a few moments for her stamina to return.

"Yes. That hurt more than I imagined, but... I've felt worse. That's only the second time I've undergone such a transformation. I think the first was worse, but it's been a while."

"Couple thousand years," Satan replies with a nod. "Alright. Deebz? You gonna pop yours, or what?"

Both women turn to look at Diablo. The blood drains from his face as he lowers his eyes to the pebble in his hand.

"Err, well, how to put this..."

"Bloody Hell!" Lucifer says, throwing her hands in the air. "I should have made you take yours first, coward!"

"Hey, baby. Don't be like that," Diablo says. A drop of sweat drips down his face. "I don't like pain. You know that! And that whole transformation thing was... uh... not something I'm interested in experiencing."

Diablo glances around the room sheepishly as several other demons shake their heads in disbelief. Despite the agony the two Emperors endured, their mana has already started flowing similarly to Satan's.

Jealousy runs rampant among the lower-rankers as they think thoughts like, *If only I could get my hands on a soul-stone, and I can't believe Deebs is turning down a free powerup!*

Satan stifles a laugh. "Heh... I knew things would turn out this way, Deebs. That's just the kind of guy you are. You don't have to swallow it, but don't waste it, either. Give it to someone else... someone who needs the boost."

Berith's eyes widen. "Give it to me!"

"What?" Lucifer gasps. "No way! Why would you need another boost?! Stop trying to play for power again, you selfish little..."

Berith swivels to face her. "Fool! Have you grown soft after experiencing a little pain? Can't you feel the power swirling in our bodies?! Satan gave us the keys to his defeat!"

Lucifer blinks. A look of realization spreads across her face, followed by a smile. "Ohh, that's a good point."

Both of the women turn to look at Satan. Their mana collides with his, forming into a vortex of demonic energy on the floor.

Lucifer rises to a standing position. She and Berith grin wickedly as they eyeball Satan. Their gazes are like those of hyenas eying a fresh corpse.

Satan appears unphased. "Smart. Waiting until I gave you a boost before turning on me. Of course, I knew you would do that. If you choose to fight me here, please realize that I won't hold back this time. I'll kill both of you."

The Devil's absolute confidence gives both women pause. A flicker of doubt passes between them as they glance at one another, but their confidence comes roaring back a moment later.

"You'll kill us, eh?" Berith asks. "I've been meaning to ask, Satan... are you *really* immortal? There must be a limit to how many times you can regenerate."

No emotion passes over Satan's face. "I'm immortal *enough*. Enough to crush you flat before you make a dent, I mean. Don't do this, ladies. Don't prove me right. I'd like to think you understand the difference between us, even after getting a little boost."

"Little? Hah!" Lucifer guffaws. "I'm ten times more powerful than before. I don't like how you look down on me, Sat-"

"LUCIFER!"

A male demon howls at the top of his lungs from the rear of the room. Satan, Lucifer, Berith, Diablo, Bael, and all the others present turn to gaze at the one who spoke.

From the shadows, a demon with robes covering every inch of his body hobbles out, leaning heavily on a gnarled staff. His red eyes glow beneath his hood, but in the flickering torchlight, it proves hard to make out the details of his face.

"Oy," One of the grunts whispers. "No way, izzat...?"

"Yeah, looks like 'im," Another imp mutters. "I thought he died."

"He's a legend," A nearby grunt whispers.

The newcomer shambles into the room, each step slow and methodical as he picks his way forward. After a moment, he raises his hand and pulls back his hood.

"Agares?" Lucifer's eyes widen. "It can't be..."

Agares, now a shell of his former self, stares listlessly at the Emperor of Providence. Anger smolders in his eyes. His skin, wrinkled and saggy, rests loosely on his bones. His hair, now a dirty grey color, is nowhere near its former black luster he had the last time I saw him. Even his horns are smaller. He appears to be at the level of a Lord, which surprises me. I didn't know Demons could *lose* their power and fall backward in the demon ranks.

"Well, well, well," Agares whispers. "If it isn't my favorite demoness, the Queen of the Damned, herself. You're acting high and mighty these days, Lucifer. Shall I take a bow before your awesome power?"

Lucifer's expression darkens. She fidgets uncomfortably. "Th-that isn't necessary..."

"Why not?" Agares continues. "You've done so many *good* things for everyone here. If not you, then before whom should I bend the knee?"

Satan narrows his eyes. He glances from Lucifer to Agares and back again as he tries to understand the dark history they share.

"Agares, uh, it's been a while," Satan says. "I got back a couple of years ago. Didn't know you were still alive. I thought you died at some point after I left."

Agares eyes soften as he turns his head toward Satan. "No, I still walk amongst the living. Healthy? No. Virile? Not in the slightest. Even walking is a chore for me, of late."

Bael smiles widely. He saunters over to Agares and rests a hand on the old-demon's back, though I get the impression Agares only looks old due to what Lucifer *did* to him. "I thought you said you were gonna keep your distance? You sly dog!"

Agares forces a smile, but it seems disingenuous. After a moment, it fades away. "I planned to keep quiet, but seeing Lucifer's *greed* threaten our people yet again, I cannot rest on my laurels."

Satan's ears perk up. "Hmm? Greed? Elaborate."

Diablo turns to face Satan. His eyes rest on Lucifer for a moment, but he quickly averts his gaze. "Satan, do you remember the rescue operation to save Bael and me from Michael?"

"Yup."

"Well, after what Michael did to me, I was in bad condition. I couldn't walk. I was paralyzed. Lucy, uh... she had the bright idea to... to..."

Diablo pauses. His words become heavy with guilt as Agares' gaze fixates on his back. "Well, she tried to copy Agares' reptilian powers and transfer them to me, only... she..."

"She sucked me dry!" Agares yells. His eyes bolt open, and he jabs a finger accusatorially at Lucifer. "That woman took everything I had, everything our progenitor gave me!! She left me a husk of my former self, only to later proclaim herself the leader of demonkind. Filthy, wretched....!!!"

Agares' tongue flicks from his mouth several times in the span of a few seconds, something I quickly realize must be a representation of his emotions... and his reptilian self.

Satan leans back in his throne. "I see. And now she wants to do it again. Greedy, indeed."

Murmurs go up among the demons present. Artorias and Barbatos watch from the sidelines. The Lord of Iron shakes his head in disgust. "Nyeh! Always knew she was a piece of work. See, bro? That's why you shoulda stuck with Valac. He only made us stronger! No sucking going on with him, no sir!"

Artorias crosses his arms. "Lucifer did many good things for demonkind. One or two bad acts don't invalidate the good."

Barbatos rolls his eyes. "Nyeh! Of course, you'd defend *her*."

Lucifer's guilty expression fades. Anger replaces it as she raises her head to glare daggers at Agares. "Maybe what I did was unethical, but I saved Diablo's life! He might have stayed trapped in that bed forever without your regenerative powers! Not to mention that your transformation enabled Bael to become the Balrog!"

Once again, looks of surprise spread through the crowd. Artorias's jaw slackens. "What? Lucifer took Bael's Balrog Form from Agares? Even I didn't know that."

"Makes sense," Barbatos mutters under his breath. "The whole transforming thing, anyway. Nyeh! I wonder what I'd turn into if I could get some of that power, eh?"

Artorias smacks his little brother over the back of the head. "Quiet! I'm trying to listen."

Bael rests his hands on his hips. "Big friggin' *whoop*, Lucifer. So what if I can transform into a monster? I'm as much of a danger to everyone here as I am to the angels! If I get my way, I'll never transform again."

"You saved countless lives!" Lucifer retorts. "Because of you, Hercules-"

"I **killed** a bunch of my friends!" Bael howls. His usual calm, snarky facade shatters. The Duke of Pain takes a menacing step toward Lucifer. His eyes bolt open, and he snarls like a wild animal at her. "Don't talk down to me, you *fuckin' bitch*. I nearly killed little Barbatos, Artorias, you, and a bunch of others! I lost control! What good is a badass transformation if I end up killin' my allies?!"

Lucifer balks, and gets taken aback by his words. "Well, I... I don't... know..."

Bael takes a step backward and returns to Agares' side. After a few moments, he forces himself to simmer down. "Tch. Don't play like you're the savior of demonkind. Agares didn't deserve what you did to 'im. There were other possibilities for Deebs, but you didn't take things slow. You were in such a rush to save your sweetie that you nearly killed one of our best warriors."

Bael pauses.

"No offense, Deebs. I don't blame you or anything."

Diablo nods. "None taken."

Lucifer's former bravado vanishes. She bows her head and sighs, unable to come up with a counterpoint to Bael and Agares' words.

With the Emperor of Providence down, Berith loses her nerve, too. She crosses her arms and sneers at Satan. "Fine. You win this round."

"I always win," Satan says with a smile. It seems half-hearted.

Diablo rolls the soul-stone around in his hand. After a few moments, he groans. "Ugh. You know what? It's someone else's time to shine."

Diablo jumps to his feet. He spins on his heel and flicks the soul-stone to Bael. The Duke of Pain reflexively snatches the black pebble out of the air, but it takes him a moment to realize he caught it. "Huh? What's this about?"

"I don't want it," Diablo mutters. "You take the stone, Bael. If you swallow it, you'll become an Emperor. Satan's right. We need all the firepower we can get for the coming war."

Bael balks. "Huh?! I didn't ask for this! Don't go spouting off on your own! Take it back!"

Bael flings the stone back at Diablo, who snatches it out of the air. "You misunderstand. I don't *deserve* this stone. I've received too many handouts, already. You take it. You're our strongest warrior. If you become an Emperor..."

Diablo trails off. He flings the pebble at Bael, who scowls as he catches it again. "Knock it off!"

Barbatos jumps forward and waves his hands. "Ooh, ooh, if neither of you wants it, gimme gimme! I'll take a free power-up!!"

Bael and Diablo simultaneously glare at Barbatos. "Shut up, runt!"

Barbatos's ears flatten. He slinks back to his brother's side. "Sheesh! Alright, alright... just saying..."

Bael returns his gaze to Diablo. "I don't need a power-up, Deebs. I'm plenty strong. I'll become an Emperor by killin' angels and kickin' ass. That's what I do. If you're too scared to pop this little shitball down your throat, then someone else ought to get it."

Two seconds later, Bael turns to Agares. He grabs the withered old man's hand and slaps the soul-stone in his palm. "There! You take it, Agares! You need it more'n any of us. Besides, we owe ya."

Diablo smiles. "Ohh, great idea!"

Satan nods. "I like the sound of that."

Agares stares at the pebble in his grasp. "You... you want me... to..."

"No worries," Bael says, gently patting his friend's back. "You deserve it, buddy."

The old demon stares at the soul-stone for several seconds. "Hmm. Well, I can't say the idea doesn't sound appealing. Very well! I'll do it."

With a shrug, Agares swallows his soul-stone.

Several seconds pass, and nothing seems to happen. Finally, dark energy begins swirling around the old man's feet. The demons nearby lean forward and gasp as his horns rapidly extend two, possibly three inches upward. Agares clutches his chest and swoons for a moment, but reorients himself a moment later. Unlike the two women, his skin doesn't crackle and boil, nor does he suffer agonizing, wracking pain throughout his body.

Satan rubs his chin. He watches as the last trickles of dragon energy finish boosting Agares' demonic power. *Hmm. Since Agares was a Duke before, his body already adapted to a higher power level. The dragon's energy won't affect him like it did the girls and me. Lucky.*

The Devil shifts his gaze to Diablo. "It's probably for the best you didn't take that pill, chum. You don't have a lot of wiggle room to reach the peak of your power. Agares will be a far more valuable addition to the battlefield."

Agares flexes his arms. A somber look passes over his face as he finally comprehends the power he's regained. "It has been millennia since I walked without using my staff. I... I almost forgot what it felt like to move without strain."

The old man blinks, and for a moment I can almost spot tears building in his eyes. They quickly vanish as he wipes them away.

"Hear me now, my brothers and sisters. Satan is our rightful leader. He has many faults, and he has blundered many times, but never will any of you hear me state that his heart was in the wrong place. Compared to him, Lucifer and Berith are plagues upon our people. Their desire for power at any cost will only lead us to ruin. The last thing I want is for more of my brethren to suffer due to greed and incompetence. Better to die fighting than to live as withered husks."

Bael nods along to Agares' words. "I've got somethin' to add. Satan's smart. Like, really smart. I hate chicken-shits, and every one of you knows that. I won't respect anyone who suggests limp-wristed battle tactics against the angels. If anyone's got a problem with Satan, they've gotta go through *me*. No back-talkin' or I'll stomp ya like the maggots you are. Understand?!"

Hardly has Bael finished before all of the demons nearby begin nodding in unison. They smile nervously, unwilling to say anything in protest.

Barbatos shrugs. "Pft. Whatever. Satan, *shmatan*."

Satan watches and waits as the room quiets down.

"Thank you, Bael. Now that we've finished the pleasantries, I'd like to lay out my plans for the extermination of angelkind. That is, unless Lucifer and Berith have any complaints...?"

The Devil pauses to shoot a meaningful look at the female Emperors. They both lower their gazes, unable to offer a counter.

"No... go on," Berith mutters. "Like I said... you win this round."

Lucifer clenches her fists, but in the end, she too can only nod along and agree with Berith.

Satan might be the brains of demonkind, but Bael is the muscle, and Agares the heart. With their backing, Satan's claim to the throne gains legitimacy. The other Emperors haven't a chance.

"Alright," Satan says, as he leans forward. "Here's my plan."

Hercules, the lone Titan with the ability to manipulate souls, sits on a tree stump. His glowing eyes give him the appearance of staring blankly at the ground, but a few seconds of observation reveal that he is merely deep in thought. He rests his chin on his hands, and his elbows on his legs. He reminds me of a famous Roman statue; The Thinker.

Heaven's light, omnipresent as always, shines upon him from every direction. So bright is it that the enchanted steel bars above and around Hercules cast no shadows across the ground. There can be no darkness when light without a source shines from every angle. His cell, with all its rich tapestries and comfortably adorned bed, appears just as isolated as he does.

Hercules blinks. He raises his head, and his eyes cease their glowing.

"Father."

Only now do I turn to follow Hercules' gaze. Towering above the fifty-foot-wide cell, planted against the side of a mountain, King Zeus stares at his son quietly.

"Hercules. I've come to deliver some wine. It's from your mother."

Zeus opens up his fist to reveal three small animal-skin flasks, each one bulging from the delicious juices sloshing about inside.

Hercules shakes his head and resumes staring at the ground. "I do not want any... indulgences. Is that the only reason you've come?"

Zeus blinks. His eyes close and open slowly, deliberately. With a long sigh, he leans over and places the flasks on the door to Hercules' cage.

"I do not enjoy seeing my beloved son in such a state," Zeus says. "If you had obeyed the ancient traditions-"

"Don't speak to me regarding tradition," Hercules murmurs, interrupting his father. "I held demonkind's lifeblood in my hands. Had you assisted me during the battle, rather than cowering and hiding, we would have slaughtered them like rats. No, instead, you chose to look upon me with disdain. Because my father betrayed me, we lost our chance to eradicate the one who killed Megara."

Zeus narrows his eyes. "*We? Our?* That blood-debt was *yours*, Hercules. You went too far. You tapped into the unholy power of soul manipulation to bring death upon Satan. In the end, you failed, as did all before you who also-"

"I failed because of you!" Hercules yells. He raises his head to snarl at his father. "You betrayed me! Satan still draws breath because you care more for those rotten traditions than your own son!"

Zeus doesn't flinch. "There is much you don't know, my child. Traditions are borne to avert danger and catastrophe. You are not the first soul manipulator among the Titans, and I can only hope you will be the last."

Hercules' expression darkens. "I ask again, *father*. Why have you come? Are you here to taunt me? To tell me I must apologize? To give up this power which nearly defeated all of demonkind?!"

For once, Zeus's stoic expression slips. For a moment, the Titan King's facade of power crumbles as his son glares at him with bloodthirsty intent.

"No... I... I only wished to see your face. The thought that my son languishes in the angel's custody does not put me at ease."

"My condolences for your loss," Hercules says, biting off his words. "You put me here, and now you pity me. Aren't you *versatile*."

Zeus looks away for a moment. When he returns his gaze to Hercules, he rebuilds the walls around his heart. "We've completed the move. All of the Titans have migrated to Heaven. We don't live far from here... so I can visit more often."

"I know," Hercules mutters. "My thrall has spoken of your flight from Earth. After the lashing that monster gave me, you ran with your tail tucked between your legs. We've lost everything. We can't even claim dominion over Earth anymore."

Zeus shakes his head. "It's not like that, son. Before, Valac terrorized us endlessly, day and night. We lost thousands and thousands to his scythe. I wished to move everyone together for our protection sooner, but once you confirmed his defeat, I seized the chance. Heaven is safe from demonkind. We will repopulate and return to take over our place on Earth, once again."

Hercules doesn't reply.

He stares at his father for several seconds. Disappointment, anger, guilt, and a range of other emotions pass over his face.

When Hercules next opens his mouth, his voice cracks.

"We could have had it all, father. Everything. Why did you forsake me? Why did you leave me to battle the demons alone? Together, our power could have rent them in two. Now I sit here, an enemy of my people, all because you care more about our forefathers than your own son. Why? Why?!"

Zeus doesn't hesitate. "There are things in life more important than blood and love. I love you, Hercules, from the bottom of my heart... but the power you unleashed was one that might have threatened everyone you cherish. I must protect them from the darkness inside of you."

Zeus turns around. With his back to his son, he sighs. "Your mother misses you. She will come to see you next week. Please, for my sake, and for hers... don't lash out at her. You're her last remaining child. If you make your mother cry... I won't forgive you."

Hercules and Zeus both fall silent. After a moment, the young Titan nods. "I would never hurt my mother. I'm not a monster."

Zeus nods.

"I know."

The King of the Titans walks away. His footsteps send tremors through the ground even after he rounds the mountain and disappears from view.

Once more, Hercules' eyes begin to glow.

He nods as if speaking to someone unseen.

"Keep an eye on them. If you're right... this will be my second chance. *Our* second chance. You're the last survivor, Jephthah. You're the key to everything."

Part 145: The War in Heaven

Recommended Listening

"They're coming."

Chester, leader of the Outer Defense Corps, stares into the distance with his hawk-like vision. The trees of the forest sway back and forth erratically as if giants were shoving them aside. However, the distant rumble of tens of thousands of feet slapping against the dirt betrays the subtle difference.

"Hold steady," Uriel says. The Archangel of Protection lands beside Chester and narrows her eyes. "Prepare for battle. I want everyone armed and ready in five minutes. The Burrowers are sure to attack from below, so get eyes in the sky and ready the archers. If even one bloodskin pops his head up..."

"We will separate it from his body," Chester replies. A look of determination passes over his face. "Damn. I pleaded to the Creator that Camael's divination would fail. Naturally, her visions always come to pass."

Several angels behind Chester and Uriel begin shouting as they realize what's happening. Scouts fly forward to gauge the size of the enemy army, while messengers rush toward Mount Sinai to alert the inner forces of Heaven.

Uriel purses her lips. "My sister did not tell us what the result of this battle would be. Either she doesn't know, or..."

"...or the answer is not one we would like to hear," Chester says, finishing Uriel's sentence.

"Do not dwell on the negative possibilities," Uriel murmurs. "We are angels. We will win, as we always have."

"Uriel!" A female voice cries out in alarm from above. Before Uriel can raise her head, Sophia, one of the Valkyries, lands nimbly beside her. The other three follow a moment later. Hyacinth, Penelope, and Catherine.

The sounds of their feet lightly impacting the ground cause Uriel to turn and face them.

"The demons are coming!" Sophia continues, her voice raising an octave. "There are so many of them! What should we do?"

"Don't worry," Penelope says. The gigantic, dark-skinned angel rests her hand on Sophia's shoulder. "What harm will demons bring upon us when our teacher is here? Uriel might wipe them out before we even see them."

Catherine nods. She traces her fingers through the air to form magical letters. *We must not allow the demons to enter Heaven.*

Hyacinth blows a strand of long, white hair out of her face. "Psh. Whether it's one bloodskin or a million, I'll kill them before they can close the distance."

After speaking, Hyacinth motions with her hands to summon her elementally enchanted bow. It appears in her grasp like a weapon stolen from ghosts. A faint, high-pitched whistle emanates from the wind-based implement as the air spins around rapidly to create its semi-solid form.

Hyacinth pushes past Uriel, summons an arrow created from the air, aims, and fires.

THOOM!

The projectile fires faster than a cannonball. A sonic boom erupts from the front of Hyacinth's bow as the arrow sails into the forest. A distant explosion reaches the sister's ears a few moments later as a tree begins to topple to the side.

"Hmph. Three demons dead, infinity more to go," Hyacinth says, a deadpan expression on her face.

Uriel smirks. "Rash, and always raring to go. That's what I love most about thee. Come on, sisters! Do not allow Hyacinth to have all the fun!"

Sophia's eyes sparkle at the word *fun*. "Y-yeah! Let's go! The first one to kill a thousand demons gets one of my home-made cookies!"

Penelope grins and rolls her eyes. "*Pass*, but don't think I'll give thee a free win, either."

Catherine's expression darkens. She unsheathes the Sword from Heaven from her belt and summons Camael's tower shield as well. Using the tip of her weapon, she traces letters in the air. *This is not a game. Do not lower thy defenses for even a second.*

* * *

Minutes later.

Demons burst from the earth and spring at the waiting angels, only for enchanted and elemental weapons to slash and smash them where they stand.

"The Burrowers have arrived!" Chester yells. "Kill them before the others!"

More and more demon grunts erupt from the ground. Their tunnels provide a pathway for other low-ranked demons to spew forth like lava from a volcano. Even as the angels slice and dice the first arrivals, a sudden outpouring of Burners catches them off-guard.

"Ahh! There are too many!"

"Hellhounds! They brought Hellhounds!!"

Demonic wolves with a hundred eyes, iron-tearing claws, and abominable faces follow after the Burrowers. They pounce from the holes in the ground, along with the fire-types, and begin tearing and slashing at anything they can see with wings.

One angel swings his unenchanted sword at a Hellhound's neck, only for the animal to whirl around, catch the blade in its teeth, and bite down.

CRACK!

The blade snaps in half between the wolf's jaws. A moment later, the animal tears its angelic attacker to shreds.

"Jeremiah! No!!" Chester shrieks in rage and flaps his wings. He rushes the wolf with dizzying speed, swings his sword in an upward arc, and swishes it through the animal's neck. The Hellhound never gets a chance to react as its head falls cleanly from its body.

Tears boil in Chester's eyes. "Demon bastards!! I'll kill every last one of thee!"

* * *

Uriel and the Valkyries fan out. They attack demons wherever they find them, their grins and thrills wearing off after surprisingly little time.

Penelope slams her earthen greatmace down, splattering an enemy like a pumpkin. His entrails spray in every direction. "These demons are only grunts?! Where are the Lords? The Barons?!"

Sophia's bo staff twirls in her grasp. She jumps, flips, and kicks three demons at the same time, using razor-sharp water blades to decapitate all of them at once. "Jeez! The demons don't know when to quit!"

Hyacinth flaps her wings and soars into the air. She aims her bow and begins firing rapidly at the demons below as if it were a machine-gun.

Swish swish swish swish! Boom boom boom boom!

Several arrows fly out only instants apart and impale the heads of four demons. The wind-arrows hit the ground with explosive force, collapsing several tunnels beneath the angel's encampment.

Suddenly, Hyacinth's heart skips a beat.

"Over there! I sense several strong presences!"

Hyacinth's razor-sharp eyes pick out three demons with combined mana signatures higher than any other demons that have yet appeared.

An Emperor, a Baron, and a Lord.

Berith, the Emperor of Backstabbing, arrives alongside Vepar, the Baron of Toxicity, and Orias, the Lord of the Moon. Orias pulls his hood a little lower and grumbles.

"Damn. Spotted already."

Berith smirks. "I'm an Emperor at my peak. Don't worry, Orias. I'll *protect* you if you're that scared."

Orias's shoulders sag. "I'm not scared, but it's a pain in the ass, having to fight. If I'm here, that means I'm not digging out gems... wonderful, beautiful jewels..."

Lower-ranked demons run past their superiors, gleefully throwing themselves into the fray as they rush to kill angels as quickly as possible. While the crowd flows around her, Berith scowls. "I can't say I enjoy your proclivity for colored rocks. If you're not going to fight, stay out of my way."

"No. I'll go..." Orias mutters. "...But know that I do so hesitantly."

"Right," Berith grunts.

While the two of them have a quick spat, Vepar clenches her fists together.

I'm the last of the original demons who obtained Leviathan's power. Despite that, I'm still only a Baron. I must prove myself today and ascend to the rank of Duke. My pride demands it!

Vepar runs forward, leaving the other two behind in her dust. Berith spins on a dime to face her. "Hey! Don't run off on your own, insect! Bah, foolish Baron."

Berith's words fall on deaf ears. Thanks to the speed and power increase afforded by the rank of Baron, Vepar easily outpaces the lower-ranked demons around her. She fires gas from her feet and leaps into the air, using the fumes like jet boots. Despite the vapor pouring upon the demons below her, none of them suffer any ill effects thanks to her using non-toxic gas.

Vepar blasts through the air and races toward Hyacinth. The dark-skinned Valkyrie hardens her eyes and quickly fires three arrows at the Baron of Toxicity.

Whiff whiff whiff!

Vepar transforms into a cloud of gas, allowing the arrows to sail through her harmlessly. She reforms a second later and lunges her poisoned nails toward Hyacinth's face.

WHAM!

Something big and heavy smashes into Vepar from below, flinging her up into the sky. Penelope, positioned on the ground below her sister, gives Hyacinth a thumbs up. "Watch yourself up there!"

The pillar of rock sent flying from the ground knocks the wind out of Vepar, but she manages to reorient herself in midair, transform into poison gas, and drop to the Earth's surface. She lands amidst total carnage as demons and Hellhounds tear through the angels, along with goblins and a few scattered orcs. The orcs appear to be new creations of Lucifer's, since they weren't around during the battle against Hercules a few years before.

One orc raises a club above his head and roars like an animal. "Grooohhh!! Kill these angels! Rip off their wings! Sever their heads!!"

The nearby orcs howl together. "Grohhhh! Sheol give order! We obey!!"

Sheol, the head orc, leaps atop a nearby Hellhound and rides it like a horse. His powerful legs wrap around the wolf's gut, allowing him to use his club freely as the animal rips and tears apart all in its path.

Vepar gives him and the others only a fleeting glance before turning her rage toward Penelope. The seven-foot-tall giantess brings down her earthen warhammer to splatter two demons at once. Her weapon smashes through them and hits the ground with a metallic *WHANG*, sending an earthquake in every direction. Guided by the Valkyrie of Earth's power, dozens of rocky pillars erupt nearby, each one in the shape of a fist. They catch many demons unaware and uppercut them, shattering their jaws. Meanwhile, others manage to dodge only by the skin of their teeth.

"She's the one who hit me," Vepar hisses, narrowing her eyes. "Nobody deprives me of a kill!"

Vepar jumps forward and lands on her hands and feet. She darts left and right, weaving between various demons and angels as they punch, kick, and slice one another to pieces. Scythers bring down their bladed limbs to cut off the arms and legs of various angels, while big, brutish-looking demons use their giant bodies to create formidable walls of flesh and muscle and bring them down upon the angels.

Vepar narrows the gap between herself and Penelope. The instant she arrives in striking range, Vepar pauses for a split second to weave hand signs. "Kss, nobody humiliates me!"

A cloud of neurotoxins erupts from her mouth, affecting demons and angels alike. The neurotoxin induces hallucinations in all who inhale it, and the effects are instantaneous.

"Eeeyaaaah!!" One female angel shrieks in terror as the demons around her seem to transform into ghastly, melted-flesh abominations. Those same demons shrink from her in fright as she seems to triple in size and loom over them like a Titan King. Both sides erupt into chaos and screams of panic, their voices only adding to the chaos and confusion.

Penelope gasps as she inhales the toxins. Without understanding what's happened, her heart skips several beats as the demons she was gleefully ripping apart only moments before turn into monstrous fiends, incalculably more horrifying than before, while her brothers and sisters begin to appear like Valac's undead angels, the Undying.

"W-what manner of devilry...?!"

Penelope's eyes widen with fear as she shakily tries to fend off the attacks of the abominations around her. One melted-looking ghoul jumps at her, but when she hits it with her mace, its entrails spray all over her golden armor, sending waves of disgust up her body.

"C-Creator, guide me! Guide me!!"

Vepar grins evilly. She charges at Penelope and leaps atop her back. The Baroness rakes her Valkyrie opponent with her poisoned nails, aiming for the exposed flesh on the back of her neck.

"Ahhh!!" Penelope yells in fright and swings her mace around, trying to shake Vepar off. "Help! Help!! Something's on me! It's on me!!!"

Vepar's poison proves to be fast-acting. Within seconds, Penelope's movements slow to a crawl. Her veins turn green, then purple, and finally black.

"H-huh... hurts.. g-get it... get it off..."

Penelope stumbles forward and faceplants into the ground. Vepar transforms into her gaseous form at the last second and materializes nearby, smirking all the while.

"Stupid little birdie. That's what you get for ambushing the great Vepar! Ehehehe..."

Suddenly, footsteps!

The light pitter-pattering of feet is Vepar's only hint as to Sophia's arrival. The Valkyrie of Water swings her bo staff down against Vepar's back and catches the Baron off-guard. She slams Vepar into the dirt and grinds her face against a pile of rocks.

"Get your hands off my sister, you stinky, dirty, poo-poo head!"

Sophia yells at Vepar and spins her staff around in her hands. Before Vepar can react, a torrent of water materializes in midair and impacts her flank with the force of a hundred firetruck hoses. A veritable Niagara Falls strikes Vepar with enough intensity to crush her bones and sweep all the nearby demons and angels off their feet.

Penelope's body starts to float away under the summoned river, but Catherine flies down, grabs her, and lifts off with one of Penelope's arms over her shoulder.

Too dangerous, Catherine writes with her sword, as she flies up to Hyacinth. *These demons came prepared.*

"Don't give up!" Hyacinth yells. "The demons aren't the only ones who foresaw today's battle."

As an afterthought, she adds, "What happened to Penelope?"

Her battle. Thou did not see?

"I'm a little busy up here."

As if to punctuate her words, Hyacinth fires three more wind-arrows at a few demons who managed to regain their footing amidst the sudden floodwaters. Their heads vanish, and their bodies fall over, dead.

Penelope poisoned. One of the demonesses. Heal her. I'll assist Sophia.

Catherine passes Penelope off to her sister, and Hyacinth quickly wraps one arm around her dying sister's waist. "Where are the other healers?"

They're waiting in Heaven. Thou art the only one out here.

"Tch. My healing isn't the best... but I'll do what I can."

Catherine forces a smile. A moment later, she lunges to the Earth below, where Vepar has just finished regaining her footing.

"Damned filthy stinking pigeon," Vepar hisses, as she glares at Sophia, standing atop the foot-deep floodwaters. "Denied a kill twice in a row! Gah!! How infuriating!"

Catherine splashes into the water behind Vepar, making the demoness realize the two Valkyries have flanked her from the front and back.

Catherine raises her shield, hops out of the makeshift pond, and flaps her wings. She accelerates from zero to sixty in the blink of an eye and bull-rushes the Baron of Toxicity, while Sophia fires several water bullets at her as well.

Vepar starts to snap her fingers and activate her mist-body form, but her hands won't work properly. An instant too late, she realizes one of her thumbs must have broken when Sophia pile-drove her into the ground. "Gah! Shi-"

She doesn't get to finish cursing. Catherine rams her from the back at the same time as Sophia's bullets pierce her from the front. Vepar barely manages a gasp as Catherine flings her off her feet and shoves the Baron of Toxicity beneath the floodwaters.

Vepar's vision spins and whirls.

Can't... focus... water? Am I underwater?! M-must get up... can't breathe...

A boot presses against her back. Catherine stomps her foot into the water and holds the Baron of Toxicity down, raises the Sword from Heaven, and starts to stab it toward her back.

The world around Catherine slows to a crawl. Compared to the movements perceived by lower demons and the other Valkyries, her adrenaline enables her to envision the world around her as a series of still images.

Her sword crawls toward Vepar's exposed back. Sophia grins eagerly at the sight of Penelope's attacker nearing death. Hyacinth retreats to the safety of Mount Sinai.

And, from beneath the water, five tendrils of shadow begin to emerge.

A surprise attack!

Catherine perceives the movement of the shadows, taps her foot against the mud beneath her feet, and leaps backward. A moment later, five shadow-lances stab the spot where she was just standing. Had she moved even slightly slower, she would have died a gruesome death.

Who attacked me?!

Aided by the adrenaline coursing through her veins, Catherine's eyes dart around and pick out a hundred demons standing in the water nearby. None of them appear to be the culprit.

Catherine flaps her wings and hovers in the sky. A moment later, Berith materializes atop Vepar. She reaches into the water and pulls the Baron of Toxicity up by her neck. "Imbecile! I told you not to rush in blindly! If you're so eager to die, perhaps I should let that angel have her way with you!"

A flash of light snaps into existence beside Berith. Orias appears as if having stepped through an invisible portal. "Don't hurt Vepar. Satan won't like that."

Rage engulfs Berith's face. "Don't tell me what to do, little Lord! Satan has no power here!"

Orias doesn't offer a counter-argument. "Give Vepar to me. I'll transport her to Belial. Can you handle the Valkyries by yourself?"

Berith's eye twitches. "Don't insult me. I've battled the Valkyries many times. They're vermin, like all the other chickens."

The Emperor of Backstabbing casually tosses Vepar to Orias like a sack of garbage. Orias catches the barely-conscious demoness with one hand, plucks a gem from his chest, and snaps his fingers. Another flash of light engulfs him, and he disappears without a word.

Catherine's eyes harden as she meets the gaze of the Emperor beneath her. *Berith. She appears much more powerful than when we last fought.*

Sophia flies over and hovers beside her sister. "What are we going to do? It took all four of us to push Berith away last time, and Penelope is down for the count!"

Do not give up hope, Catherine replies, drawing letters in the air. *Wait for reinforcements. Hold on for now. Strike while the iron is hot!*

"Right!"

In unison, both Valkyries flap their wings and dive toward Berith like eagles hungering for a field mouse. Berith motions with her hands, sucks into a shadow beneath the water, and disappears.

Sophia screeches to a halt. "Ahh! She's gone!"

There! Catherine points her sword toward a flicker of motion fifty feet away. The instant Berith starts to emerge, the Valkyrie of Fire falls upon her. Berith jerks back, startled, but quickly deflects Catherine's incoming sword.

Clang! Clang! Ting!

Even with Catherine's accelerated perception of time, Berith matches her movements with ease. Sophia stays in the rear and manipulates the water around Berith's feet, solidifying it like glue, but it proves no obstacle to an Emperor at the peak of her power. Berith easily jumps and shifts around, her feet moving through the hardened water as if it were air.

Whiff, whiff!

Catherine brings her sword down again and again, but twice in a row, she slashes through the Emperor's body without hitting anything. Berith grins greedily, and a glint appears in her eyes. "Can't keep up, little Valkyrie?! This is what happens when you try to take on an ascended Emperor!!"

WHAM!

Berith's fist moves impossibly fast. She batters it against Catherine's enchanted chestplate and sends the Valkyrie of Fire hurtling hundreds of feet backward. Her body transforms into a mortar shell as she plows through angels and demons in her path. Catherine skips across the water, tumbles, and twists, only to come to a sudden stop as she crashes into one of Penelope's fist-shaped stone pillars. It shatters on impact but still manages to stop her forward momentum.

Catherine blinks. She splashes into the water and tries to regain her vision, but stars dance in her eyes. After a few seconds, she manages a weak gasp for breath, but ends up swallowing water instead.

"Catherine!!" Sophia screams in fright. The pink-haired Valkyrie stares in horror at her sister's crumpled body as the water wraps around her like a flesh-devouring monster. She starts to fly toward her sister, but a fist formed from shadow rises from her feet and strikes her face.

Crunch!

Two of Sophia's teeth tear from their sockets. Berith's shadow-fist flings her a few feet into the air, where she lands in the water gracelessly, nearly breaking one of her arms when she hits the mud.

"Ah... ahhh... nnn..."

Sophia manages to pull herself up by sheer force of will, but a moment later, she crumples to her knees and clutches her arm as the rush of adrenaline wears off.

"Ho, ho, ho! So this is the might of the Valkyries?" Berith laughs, taunting her battered opponent. "All those times that the four of you held me back, but now you fall before me like an ant in a landslide! Have a taste of my awakened powers!!"

Berith lunges toward Sophia, who yelps in fright. Before the Valkyrie of Water can defend herself, Berith backhands her and sends her tumbling to the left. Sophia drops her bo staff and hits the water hard, sending waves splashing in the direction Berith slapped her.

Berith closes the newly created gap instantly. She grabs Sophia by her collar, and the petrified Valkyrie can barely manage a whimper before Berith begins toying with her.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

Over and over, Berith cackles gleefully while battering the helpless woman held in her grasp. Sophia tries to raise her one functioning arm to defend herself, but Berith smacks it aside, snapping it like a twig.

"Bahaha!!" Berith cackles. "You should see the look on your face! I'm having the time of my-"

Berith doesn't get to finish her sentence.

A horrible, foreboding sense of danger is the only warning she gets before something taps her shoulder.

"What-?!"

Berith whirls her head around to look, and a summoned being comprised entirely of light drives a fist into her face.

WHAM!

Berith reflexively drops Sophia, as Uriel's summoned warrior knocks her end over end. Berith plows straight down into the makeshift lake and hits the ground hard enough to send every drop of water in the vicinity scattering to the furthest reaches of the Earth.

"W-w-wha...?"

Berith gasps in surprise as her eyes refocus. A moment later, she spots Uriel, the Archangel of Protection. Uriel wraps one arm around Catherine's waist and Sophia's as well. Beside her, two summoned angels stand, and above her, a cube and orb hover in the air.

"What awful timing. Hardly have I left for one minute before thou decided to show thy wretched face. It seems I failed to teach thee an adequate lesson the last time we fought, red rat."

Uriel hands her battered sisters to the female light construct. After cracking her knuckles, she summons a blood-red spear.

"I'm feeling a little *aggressive* today. I think I'll only use one spear this time... to *draw out the pain*."

Berith's teeth chatter for a moment as memories of all her past defeats come rushing back. However, she jumps to her feet and shakes off the ominous foreboding in her heart.

"Our battle won't go like it did last time, Uriel. I'm twice the demon I was before!"

Uriel smirks. "It doesn't matter if your power increases a hundred-fold. Against me, thou shalt *always* lose."

Despite the ominous pressure from Uriel's presence, Berith manages a smirk.

"Oh, I don't think so. Angelkind will fall, today, Uriel... and there's nothing you can do to stop us."

Uriel flaps her wings and rushes toward Berith. "Pretty words from a filthy SOW!"

Minutes earlier.

Shepherd flaps his wings slowly, lazily. The angel appears bored as he flies above the forest belonging to the demons.

It's become something of a ritual for him. Once a week, he leaves Heaven and soars toward the one place he feels at home, far away from the Damned, as he calls them.

Having long since been locked up in cages by the Archangels, the Undying are no longer a threat to the other angels. Still, Shepherd has grown used to flying out to visit his Animus friend.

Shepherd spots the designated forest clearing, one that might normally be difficult to pick out from above, thanks to the densely packed trees around it. With only a thirty-by-thirty foot open space, it barely stands out from the forest around it.

The angel circles overhead twice, looking for danger. However, all he spots is Smealum, sitting quietly in front of a smoothed-over stump. With a nod, Shepherd dives to the ground and pulls up at the last moment, landing nimbly on one foot. The other touches down a split-second later, and he bows slightly to Smealum.

"Hello, brother! Look at what I've brought!"

Shepherd eagerly reaches into his pouch and procures a dozen blueberries, but unlike the ones on Earth, these seem to glow with an inner light, as if there were tiny lightbulbs contained within.

Smealum glances up from the apple held in his hand; one he appears to be half-heartedly biting. He doesn't seem to enjoy it much. "Oh! More divine fruit from Heaven, eh? You're too kind."

The black-skinned demon holds out a hand and licks his lips. Shepherd hands over the bounty and nods eagerly. "I picked the best ones, just for thee!"

Despite his ravenous hunger, Smealum forces himself to pop the berries in his mouth slowly, one at a time. He rolls them around, splits them with his tongue, and allows the juices to spill around every corner of his mouth. A shudder goes down his back after the first one bursts. "Damn. I can't get enough of these. No wonder you hate Earth-fruit."

Shepherd plops down on the other side of the stump. "Hah! I am glad thou hath finally grasped the differences between our realms! Food from Earth is like ash in my mouth."

The two comrades fall silent as Smealum spends several minutes tossing berries in his chaw. He smacks his lips loudly, unable to control himself. Waves of pleasure flow through his mind, almost as if he were ingesting addictive drugs.

Shepherd clears his throat. "Erm. Come to think of it, thou art a demon. Why doesn't fruit from Heaven cause thee any pain?"

It takes Smealum several seconds to respond. He has to restrain himself from putting another berry in his mouth. "Should they? Aren't these just berries?"

"Nay. They are the same fruit as any grown on Earth, but Heaven's Light infuses all plants with holy energy. Frankly, they should be toxic to demons."

Shepherd blinks. "Hm. Maybe I'm not a demon, after all."

"Hah!" Shepherd laughs. "That's right! Thou art an honorary angel! After all, thy pacifism stands apart from the rest of thy blood-sucking-"

Shepherd stops himself from continuing. His smile fades almost instantly, and he lowers his head.

"My apologies. I did not intend to slander thy people. It... it just... the words came from my mouth."

Smealum purses his lips. "I know your feelings regarding demons are especially intense. However, by now, you've surely seen the good in my people. Why do you still hate them with every fiber of your being?"

Shepherd continues to stare at the ground. Questions and uncertainty swirl in his mind.

"I've met three other demons besides thee, brother. Two of them hesitantly accepted my presence. The other one, the demoness, she seemed nearly as pure-hearted as thee, but... two demons, out of millions..."

"Belial," Smealum says, nodding. "Yes. She is a kind soul. Willing to fight, but never to end another being's life. Torn between her peaceful instincts and the pressure exerted by other demons, she has yet to reach enlightenment. Still, I know what you mean. Most demons can only conceive of a path involving violence and murder... but I know there is another way."

"How am I to trust demons when violence is their god?" Shepherd asks. "Even amongst themselves, demons rip one another to shreds. If that is how they treat their brothers and sisters, what lengths will they go to defeat their enemies?"

Smealum and Shepherd shake their heads in unison. The Animus sighs, as he stares at the last remaining berry in his palm. "Sometimes, even I wonder if a path to peace is impossible. Perhaps demons are doomed to die because of their greed."

The Animus pops his final berry in his mouth, but unlike before, he barely seems to notice its incredible taste. His heart burdens him too much to enjoy such a trivial pleasure.

* * *

A noise in the forest catches both brother's attention.

A few seconds later, two glowing red eyes peek out of the foliage — an unknown demon steps into the clearing, a massive grin plastered on his face. Behind him, two more demons emerge. One of them appears to be a scyther, while the other is a Brute, one with a thick, tree-trunk-like body reminiscent of Bael. The demon in front, however, appears to be a Lord or a Baron, with decently long horns and an evil glint in his eyes.

"Kekeke, I told you I smelled an angel! Well, well, well, what have we here? Smealum, is that you?"

Smealum jumps up, as does Shepherd. "Hidan? Why... what are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same thing, *weakling*," Hidan says. Smoke hisses from his mouth. "Today is the day we assault Heaven. You know the orders, yet you disobeyed our *great Emperor* and decided to laze about in this little meadow, like always. As for that fellow beside you, I wondered if the rumors were true, but... to think you'd be cavorting with the enemy..."

Hidan's animalistic eyes lock onto Shepherd. He grins ferally, exposing two prominent canine fangs.

Smealum walks over and places himself between Shepherd and Hidan. "Don't do anything stupid, Hidan. Leave. My brother is of no concern to you."

"Hah! Your *brother*? Now you have my attention! I was going to smack you around a bit to teach you a lesson, but maybe I'll just kill the both of you!"

Shepherd winces. Intense bloodlust erupts from Hidan and his cronies as the three of them greedily eye the two weaklings daring to stand up to them.

"Don't fight for my sake!" Shepherd says, pleading with his brother. "I'll fly us out of here!"

Smealum shakes his head. "These three have seen too much. If we run, they'll come after us on another day."

"How right you are!" Hidan says, tracing his fingers through the air. Electricity crackles in his grasp as he summons the faintest vestiges of his elemental power. "Your scent calls out like dung to a dire wolf! No matter where you go, I'll find you. Why not present your neck to me? I'll make your death painless, hehe."

"I've never killed anyone in my life," Smealum mutters under his breath. "But there are things one can experience worse than death. Make the first move, Hidan... *if you dare*."

The sudden change in atmosphere makes Shepherd's eyes dart from demon to demon as he tries to think a way out of the fight.

Smealum is barely a grunt! His horns are little more than circular bumps, while Hidan is a Baron! If that weren't bad enough, the other two look just as scary! He can't possibly win!

Hidan's eye twitches. A moment later, he falls onto his arms and pounces at Smealum. "Get 'im, boys!!"

A surge of light in Hidan's mouth is the only hint of the incoming attack. Smealum slaps his foot against the ground and dodges left, narrowly evading as the Baron vomits lightning at him.

"L-look out!" Shepherd cries. "To your l-left!"

The scyther pounces at Smealum from the direction he dodged. Smealum ducks at the last second, dodging a horizontal slash aimed at his neck.

So fast! Shepherd thinks to himself. *I... I have to call for help!*

Shakily, the angel starts to flap his wings, but before he can take off, the massive brute-demon jumps at him. "Where you think you're going, little birdie?!"

Wham!

A meaty fist crashes against Shepherd, strikes his unarmored chest, and plows him backward into the ground. Shepherd grinds to a halt and squeezes a few tears from his eyes.

Gah! M-my chest! Ribs... broken...

He tries desperately to suck in a breath, but all the air in his body seems more desperate to escape than to re-enter.

Smealum whirls to face his friend, but he can barely spare a glance before the Baron and scyther fall upon him for a second time. The two of them appear to be a team that has fought together many times in the past. Their movements, practiced to the point of perfection, betray no openings.

"We nearly killed an Archangel with this technique!" Hidan laughs, bragging as he charges another magic attack. This time, pinpricks of light appear across all ten of his fingers. A moment later, he fires multiple small bolts of electricity toward Smealum, who bends over backward to evade them. Unfortunately, the scyther swings the flat of his blade at that second, and slaps Smealum across the face, sending him spinning into a dizzying whirl. He flies away from Shepherd to the opposite side of the clearing and bangs his head against the bottom of a tree.

"Hahaha! You're even weaker than I expected!" Hidan cackles. "As expected from our resident pacifist!"

Smealum falls unconscious. Meanwhile, Shepherd screams as the Brute demon presses its boot against his back, grabs both of his wings, and pulls with all its might.

SHRRRIKK!

A horrifying sound of bone separating from entrails erupts from Shepherd's back. The angel opens his mouth to scream, but no sounds come out. A second later, he falls limp on the ground.

The Brute nudges him with his foot. "Heh, not birdie anymore. Now me the birdie!"

A stupid grin passes over his face. He turns around and holds up Shepherd's bloody wings, then flaps his arms. "Look, guys! Me stupid birdie now! Bahaha!"

"Kekeke! Good one!" Hidan says, cackling maniacally. "Just for that, you can take his life! This bastard here is mine!"

He points toward Smealum, but at that moment, Smealum's unconscious body vanishes.

Something smashes down on Hidan's outstretched arm with the weight of a windmill. His arm instantly rips from his socket and crashes into the dirt.

Hidan blinks in surprise as agonizing pain explodes in the spot where his arm used to be.

"Eeeyyaahh!! Wh-what the fuck?! My arm! MY FUCKING ARM!!"

Hidan turns to look for Smealum, but a hammer-like fist hits the back of his head so hard that his vision goes black.

Wham!

Hidan plows into a tree head-first. He flops to the ground, and the other two demons stare at him in disbelief.

"Holy Hell! What just- was that Smealum?!"

They sweep their eyes around the forest, but once they spot Smealum, their terror turns to confusion. The Animus lays against a different tree from before, along with Shepherd.

The scyther blinks twice. "It... it wasn't Smealum? Who, then?!"

"Me."

From the darkness to the scyther's right, an impossibly deep voice growls out a single word. Shakily, both remaining demons turn to follow it.

Two pinpricks of white light stand out from the shadows of the underbrush. They rapidly intensify their luminosity, driving away the darkness like floodlights in a cave.

Eyes.

Two singular, glowing eyes.

"It seems you enjoy toying with those weaker than you."

Footsteps.

The solitary figure paces forward two steps.

Icy-cold dread washes through the blood of the scyther.

"No... no... the rumors were true... it's... it's that human. The cursed fleshbag!"

A man emerges from the shadows, wrapped in swaths of black cloth. In his hand, he clutches a simple wooden staff, one which curls into an upside-down U-shape at the top.

"How will you react when the weak one is you, I wonder?"

The man vanishes. A moment later, the scyther's head does, too.

The Brute stands, frozen in place, as his friend falls to the ground, dead without knowing what hit him.

The human reappears mere feet from the final remaining demon, moving too fast for the Brute's eyes to follow.

"Like those before you, you'll perish without saying a word."

The Brute's head disappears.

Part 146: Demon's Deception

Recommended Listening

Uriel and Berith transform into living tornados. The Archangel of Protection spins Gae Bolg around her body three times faster than Sophia did her staff. The weapon slashes and stabs Berith dozens of times per second.

Swish-slash swish-slash swish-slash!

Ting, ting, whiff!

Berith engulfs her arm in hardened shadows. Even as Uriel presses her advantage, Berith digs her feet into the ground and deflects hundreds of spear attacks in the blink of an eye. Her hands move like lightning, making Uriel grin gleefully.

"Ohh! It seems you've gotten a little stronger since the last time we fought! I can almost tell the difference!"

"Don't mock me, you wretched chicken!" Berith screeches. She jerks her head to the side, narrowly avoiding Gae Bolg as the blood-red spear threatens to tear off a chunk of her face. Berith blinks her eyes, and a shadow-lance she prepared during a momentary lull in the battle lunges toward Uriel's back.

The Archangel instantly pivots around and backhands the shadow-attack, shattering it into a foggy mist. She resumes her unstoppable onslaught an instant later.

"Haha! Nice try! It's no wonder everyone refers to thee as the Emperor of Backstabbing! Thou art a foul rogue!"

Uriel switches to a one-handed style and begins focusing on rapid jabs and stabs. She attacks Berith from the front and right as she darts around, using her superior speed to flank and outmaneuver the demoness. With her free hand, Uriel conjures the elemental power of fire and enchants the tip of her spear, raising it to several hundred degrees.

Berith glares at Uriel as the superheated weapon nearly decapitates her several times within five seconds. "Getting serious now, are you? What's the matter? Have to bring out more power than usual against little old me?!"

"Not even!" Uriel cackles. "I only wish to end this farce quickly! There are so many bloodskins I'm *dying* to introduce to my spears!"

"What an excellent choice of words!" Berith quips, as she ducks another jab. "Your life will surely come to an end today, along with those of your precious brothers and sisters!"

Uriel's smile vanishes. "Thou hath quite the deathwish, threatening my sisters like that, little bloodskin. Let's end this. Now."

Suddenly, both light constructs appear at Berith's left and right flank. The female summons a bow and arrow made of light, while the male creates a sword and shield.

Uriel brings forth her golden spear, Gungnir. She swishes it around in her left hand, then swaps it with Gae Bolg to her right.

"I think I'll try wielding my beloved children like this for now, hehe..."

A drop of sweat drips down Berith's face as she instantly evaluates the threats around her.

It's now or never.

The instant Uriel starts to move, Berith claps her hands together. Gae Bolg swishes through the Emperor's neck, killing her instantly. Her body starts to fall backward, only to fizzle into ash.

Uriel's eyes widen in alarm. "What? That wasn't the real Berith?"

"You missed, little chicken!"

Berith's shadow clone disperses into the wind, while Berith's real body leaps from Uriel's shadow. She tackles the Archangel from behind, but before she can plunge her summoned shadow-dagger into Uriel's heart, the female light construct opens her head.

KSSEEW!

A blast of light magic fires from its face and pounds Berith's stomach, tearing her from Uriel's back. Berith splashes into the floodwaters and quickly melts into the shadow of a rock.

"Tch. Nice save, Unit Two!" Uriel says. "Unit One, guard my flank!"

The male construct nods. It jumps behind Uriel and presses its wings against hers.

From the depths of the foot-deep muddy floodwaters, two dozen shadow lances burst out, impaling Unit Two before she can react. Unit One deflects several lances with its shield and cuts down another with its sword, but a single spear slips past its defenses and impales the construct's stomach. It explodes into particles of light, leaving Uriel exposed.

The Archangel barely notices. She spends a few seconds batting away the deadly shadows as they fly toward her from every angle like the maw of a giant Venus Fly Trap. Berith dials up the intensity, but only manages to nick Uriel's arms once or twice.

Uriel leaps into the sky and bats away three more shadow-lances. "Gah! Come out and face me, impish bloodskin! Only a coward attacks from the shadows!"

Suddenly, a blob of blackness fires from behind Uriel's two levitating orbs. The softball-sized shadow, resembling a blob of ink, flies up at her with aimed precision.

"Shall thou never concede, bloodskin?!" Uriel says, lilting her voice. She smirks and spins her spear around, effortlessly slicing the shadow-ball apart before it can reach her.

However, her attack proves to be a huge mistake. As if popping a balloon, her spears burst the ball, detonating it like a grenade. Uriel gasps as a hundred tendrils of darkness spread out like a fishing net and wrap around her from every angle.

"By the Creator! What manner of- gah!"

The shadow-tendrils envelop her like an octopus grabbing a crab. Uriel's face turns blue as a staggering amount of force threatens to break her arms and ribs.

"Hahaha! I knew you'd fall for my trap!" Berith cackles, as she jumps out of the water, emerging from a shadow beneath the mud. "Your arrogance was your undoing, Uriel!"

Berith motions toward the Archangel of Protection, sending a dozen shadow spears from the water next to her toward the Archangel's head.

"Die!"

Whiff! SHIK!

Something flies down from the sky and rips through Berith's outstretched palm. Her hand tears from her body and slams into the floodwaters with a massive *splash!* A split-second later, her shadow-spears fall apart.

"Gaaaugh! Spawn of a...!!"

Berith jumps back just in time to avoid two elemental arrows, as Hyacinth and Penelope arrive on the scene, along with Sophia and Catherine. All four Valkyries appear refreshed and energized, having had their wounds healed somewhere safe.

"Curses! CURSES!!" Berith howls in pain. She clutches the stump where her hand was only a moment earlier and turns to scream in rage at the newcomers. "You damned Valkyries! I buried two of you, and yet you still stand?! Even Valac's undead wouldn't be so tenacious!"

Hyacinth fires several arrows at Uriel with pinpoint precision. Each one tears through the spindly black limbs of Berith's shadow-ball. Once enough of the tendrils snap, Uriel breaks free of the others.

Penelope, Catherine, and Sophia land beside their sister and pull her to her feet. Hyacinth stays back and readies her bow. The four Valkyries and lone Archangel quickly advance toward the Emperor of Backstabbing, but they keep a cautious distance as well.

"What now, little demon wench?" Uriel asks, an evil glint in her eye. "It's five on one, and it appears thou dost require a hand!"

Berith's breathing catches as she glances at the stump where her right hand used to be. "D-don't worry about me. I'll be fine. We have a healer too, one whose abilities surpass any of you!"

"That won't matter if thou fail make it back to him alive!" Uriel cackles. She summons her two light constructs behind Berith, cutting off the Demon Emperor's route of escape. "With only one hand, thy incantations will be significantly impaired. Any last words?"

FLASH!

A spark of light erupts next to Berith.

Orias, Lord of the Moon, reappears once again, but this time, his skin appears shiny and white. The midday sun gleams off his body, giving him the appearance of a living disco ball anywhere his skin exposes itself.

"Stick to the plan, Berith. You're not here to settle a score. I'll hold them off while you escape."

Berith whips her head to the left and glares at Orias. "Don't you dare order me around, little *Lord*! I'll defeat these five if it's the last thing I do!"

Orias's eyes flick toward Hyacinth, as she starts to draw her bow back. "You'll have an opportunity in the second wave. Stick to the plan. Besides, if they don't kill you, Satan will."

That gets Berith's attention. She tenses up at the mention of Satan and scowls angrily at Uriel. "Tch. Don't think I've finished with you just because of this interruption, Uriel. I'll have your head for breakfast tomorrow!"

With a flick of her wrist, Berith sucks into a shadow at her feet and vanishes. Uriel starts to grab for her, but the Archangel's movements prove too slow to close the gap.

"Gah! Fine, if the coward wants to run like a beaten dog, so be it! Sisters, tear this Lord to pieces! He won't be any trouble at all!"

Orias peeps out from beneath his hood, revealing that even his eyes have transformed into diamonds.

"We will see."

Across the battlefield, Belial slips and slinks between various combatants. Thousands of demons and angels crash against each other, with the former losing their heads to weapons, while the latter perish to claws and teeth. One female angel screams in panic as three ravenous grunts grab her by the arms and yank her to the ground. Her screams fall silent as a dozen more leap atop her and begin ripping her to shreds.

Belial pauses to watch. Her stomach churns at the sight of the barbarism on display. She considers trying to help, but already, she's too late. The woman has died.

Suddenly, three of the grunts begin to scream. They leap off the deceased angel and claw at their faces. Chunks of her flesh and muscle hang from their mouths. Their bodies seize up as the holy energy trapped in her body flows into them.

"Gaa!! Ahhh!! Burns! It fucking burns!!!"

Two of the grunts fall backward and begin violently spasming, but the third one takes a few extra seconds to join them.

Artorias bursts out of the ground, sensing their distress. "Gah! You idiots! Don't eat any angels! You know the rule!"

The other grunts stare at him guiltily, and quickly run away, but the damage has already been done. The first three demons cease their screaming and fall silent as the life vanishes from their body.

Belial stares at the dead grunts.

I doubt I could have healed them. Even if I could... I wouldn't want to. What a brutal way to kill their enemy.

Artorias and Belial catch each other's eyes for a moment. He looks away, unable to meet her gaze. "Hurry up, Belial. Satan's plan hinges on you."

The Emperor of Passion nods. "Worry about yourself. There's no way I'll fail Satan when he needs me most."

Artorias returns the nod. A moment later, he dives underground, leaving the mangled angel corpse and her three attackers to cook under the sun.

Belial flicks her gaze around. Chester, leader of the Outer Defense Corps, cuts down three demon grunts at once, demonstrating his prowess at combat. When another attacks him from behind, Chester summons holy magic around his fist, forms an aetherial golden gauntlet, and spins around to deliver a brutal blow to his ambusher's face. The demon's head explodes, and he goes flying backward, unable to withstand Chester's might.

A hint of admiration creeps into Belial's eyes, but she quickly stifles it and slinks over to the dead angel female from before. The woman's face, though bloody, is still intact. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for everything below the chin. Her clothes are shredded, throat ripped out, and there isn't much left in her chest and waist areas either.

Belial flinches at the horrific brutality on display, but quickly steadies her mind. With a motion of her hands, the succubus heals the angel woman, repairing her body to perfection. Sadly, with her soul gone, not even Belial can revive her.

"You'll do," Belial whispers. "Sorry, but I'll be borrowing your face for a bit."

Two seconds later, Belial begins to sprout wings. Her clothing shifts and melts around her body, transforming into a set of fairly generic-looking robes like many of the female angels wear, minus the metal pauldrons and armor. Her skin shifts from red to white, and her eyes turn blue as well. Within seconds, she becomes a perfect facsimile of the dead woman.

The chaotic battle affords her a few seconds of transformation time unnoticed, but once she finishes, the demons around her quickly spot the 'angel' in their midst.

"Oi, there's a pretty one! She's mine!"

"Screw you! I saw her first!"

Two grunts rush toward Belial, their teeth bared. They're too hungry for angel flesh to realize the living and dead angels before them look identical.

Belial sighs. She flicks her gaze toward them, and a moment later, her fist whips out like a freakish octopus tentacle.

Wham! Wham!

Belial ass-blasts the demons and sends them flying into their comrades. The two grunts flop to the ground, unconscious, along with a couple of badly broken jaws.

"Sick, disgusting animals," Belial seethes. She jumps to her feet, adjusts her wings, and flaps hard.

Having never copied an angel's body, she manages to lift into the air, but falls to the ground a moment later. Her inexperience at flying proves to be her undoing, as she tumbles to the bloodied plain below.

"Shit!"

Belial nearly crashes into the dirt but manages to catch herself thanks to her incredible strength and agility. The Emperor of Passion flicks her eyes around and realizes several demons have spotted her flying over their heads.

"Damn! Get that sexy one over there!"

"Oh, I can't wait to wrap my tongue around those thighs!"

Belial gnashes her teeth as, this time, two dozen grunts, and even a couple Lords come barreling toward her.

"Fucking hell. You want a piece of me? Bring it."

Belial stretches her arms out and grabs the sword of a nearby dead angel, along with his shield. It doesn't appear she needs them, since her fists can annihilate an army, but an instant later, I realize why she wants them.

After grabbing the shield, she flings her arm toward the nearest attacker.

Whang!

The white-and-gold shield smashes against his face and shoves him back, transforming him into a living mace. Belial lifts the demon into the air with her stretchy arms, and slams him down on two more grunts. Then, she turns her sword sideways and swings the flat of it around like a frying pan.

Whap whap whap!

Over and over, she slaps the demons targeting her with ferocious strength, sending them hurtling to the left and right.

One of the Lords pauses. I recognize him as Barbatos, the Lord of Iron. "Uh, oh! Shit! B-Belial? Is that you?!"

She snarls at him. "I'm undercover, you fucking moron!"

Barbatos's face turns white as snow. After realizing he nearly got his ass beat by an Emperor, the Lord meekly takes a few steps back and holds up his palms. "Ehh, haha... m-my bad. I'm gonna just... go the other direction. Nyehehe..."

Without another word, the bumbling idiot turns and runs away, leaving Belial by herself.

Other demons glance toward her, but seeing the pile of unconscious demons nearby, they think twice and continue toward the main angel attack party.

"Shit. My cover might be blown," Belial mutters. "I'll need to move fast."

Belial's eyes dart around, and her perception of the world slows somewhat. She picks out a dozen paths through the demons nearby and mentally plots a route to the entrance of Mount Sinai. There, two Titan women stand, giant earthen maces in hand, waiting for any demons to come close.

Getting past those two won't be a problem, Belial thinks to herself. They won't be looking for an angel woman.

No, instead, her eyes fixate on Uriel and the Valkyries, as the five of them furiously battle a single Baron.

Orias, Lord of the Moon, snaps his fingers, summoning fireballs from his left hand. The sudden barrage of heat drives Penelope and Sophia back as he shreds the nearby landscape. Catherine rushes toward him, but when she swings her sword down and tries to lop off his head, it deflects off the diamond-skin protecting his body and slides to the ground, not harming him in the slightest.

"How many powers does this demon have?!" Uriel shrieks angrily. "He's only a Lord! How can he be this strong?!"

"Strength is in the eye of the beholder," Orias mutters, as he swings his fist around and smashes it against Catherine's chestplate. He knocks the Valkyrie backward, but she manages to stop herself in midair and land gracefully, thanks to her wings.

"Well, then I'd better slaughter thee before thou ascendeth any further!" Penelope yells. She runs toward Orias and swings her greatmace at him, but he backflips and dodges at the last second.

Belial bites her lip. *Orias can't win against an Archangel and the Valkyries. I should help him. No! I can't risk it! I need to get inside Heaven. Without me, everything we're doing now will fail.*

Shaking her head, Belial quickly darts through the demons nearby, using her astounding speed to transform into a blur they can't follow with their eyes.

Chester, fighting at the outer ring of the angel's defensive perimeter, stabs his sword through the head of a Scyther and ducks a fireball aimed at his head. He quickly aims two fingers at the fire-type demon attacking him and lets two bolts of holy energy fly. They impact the demon and knock him off his feet, but don't deal enough damage to kill him.

Sweat drenches Chester's face. "By the Creator! Where are our reinforcements?! Where are the Archangels?!"

Belial appears at his side, startling him. She quickly bats aside a demon with her shield and answers his question. "Brother! Uriel told me we need to sound the retreat! The other Archangels aren't coming! We're to hold off the demons inside the caverns, with help from the narrow corridors!"

Chester blinks in surprise. "What! Melody, I've heard nothing of this! Why would Uriel sound the retreat? We can still win!"

A look of suspicion appears in Chester's eyes, but at that moment, three more demons pounce at him. Not one to fall for surprise attacks, Chester swiftly spins around and decapitates the first two, then slams the third one into the ground with his fist of holy energy. The last one's head pops like a grapefruit, spraying the ground with demon entrails.

Belial, too, quickly ducks and dodges a scyther hellbent on her death. She knocks his bladed arms aside and smacks him across the face with the flat of her sword. He flies into the flood of other demons and

sprawls on the ground.

By the time Belial returns her attention to Chester, his look of suspicion has increased. "Thou hath certainly improved with the blade, Melody! I didn't know thy skill had reached such a level!"

Belial's heart freezes.

Curses! He knows!

She quickly blurts out the first thing on her mind. "Nothing like practical experience to bring out the best in me! Are we going to stay here and wait, or will we perish when the Demon Emperors show up?!"

Chester's suspicions deepen further. "Impossible. Thou hath Melody's face and voice, but thy strength and speech reveal thy true nature. Who art thou, bedeviled imposter?!"

Panic sets in. Belial's eyes flick to the angels behind Chester, all of whom are locked in life and death struggles with the demons. However, any moment, there's certain to be a lull in combat, and when they learn of Belial's existence from Chester...

Chester glances toward the demon Belial took down moments before and watches as he groggily rises to his feet. The gears turn in Chester's head as he realizes 'Melody' didn't even kill the little bastard. Not only is she more adept at battle than he remembers, but she also managed to knock a demon grunt out with a single attack.

Belial's jaw sets. When another demon lunges toward Chester, his concentration momentarily breaks as he guts the bloodskin and throws it to the ground.

This man knows, Belial thinks to herself. If he tells the others, they'll find out I'm a shapeshifter. The whole plan will fall apart. I can't let that happen.

Chester turns to face 'Melody.' As he opens his mouth to speak, Belial's fist flies out, purely on instinct.

WHUMP!

She side-swipes Chester with the force of a bulldozer and flings him into the mass of nearby demons, opposite the other angels. In the blink of an eye, Belial retracts her arm and shifts her facial features. Chester never even gets to scream as the demons pounce on him and tear him limb from limb.

Two seconds later, Belial's face finishes morphing into a perfect facsimile of Chester's. Her body shifts and bends, and she assumes his physique as well, though she's unable to duplicate his armor.

Damn it. Damn it!!

Tears boil in Belial's eyes, and nausea threatens to overtake her.

I killed that man! I fucking killed him! I can't believe myself. I shouldn't have done that! There must have been another way... but what, and how?!

The other Cherubs nearby finish dispatching their enemies. When they turn to face Chester, they spot Belial instead. Despite not wearing the same armor or wielding the same sword, the others have too much adrenaline pumping in their veins to pay attention to details. "Brother! Where are the reinforcements? What should we do?!"

Belial's chest freezes. After a moment, she forces herself to calm down. In a perfect facsimile of Chester's voice, she raises her sword and yells. "We must retreat! Uriel's orders are absolute!"

Two female Cherubs nearby merely nod. They shiver and shake as battle fatigue dulls their minds. "Right! To where must we fall back?"

"T-to the cave entrance!" 'Chester' yells. "We'll hold them off in the caves! Go! Go!"

Belial catches the glances of two male Cherubs, who are also too preoccupied with fighting demons to notice their commander isn't quite the same as before. They nod. "As thou commandeth, brother!"

A shiver goes down Belial's back as the angels leap into the air and begin calling out in unison to those nearby.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I killed that angel. I killed Chester! It doesn't matter if other demons tore him apart... it's my fault he died! Gahhh! I promised myself I'd never do something like that! What's wrong with me?!

Belial starts to flap her wings, but thinks better of it, and instead lowers her body to the ground and darts across the landscape, covering an astonishing distance as she calls out to other angels to retreat.

Still, despite her anxiety, Belial forces her stomach to settle. As she runs, her face and body shift into that of another dead female angel she passes.

Chester's identity won't last me long. This one will have to do.

Uriel's spears smash Orias back and forth like two cave bear paws battering a helpless field hare. Over and over, Uriel stabs and strikes the diamond-skinned Lord, knocking him around as if he were inside a pinball machine. She flings him into the air, flies above him, and kicks down, smashing him into the muddy waters below.

"Thou art a durable little gnat!" Uriel yells. "But I'll break through, eventually! And when I do, thy heartbeat shall cease in an instant!"

Orias leaps to his feet, mostly unharmed. He quickly shakes a bit of disorientation off and jumps back, narrowly evading Catherine's sword as she slashes at him.

Thirty-five seconds remaining, Orias thinks to himself. I only have a few more diamonds left. Once they crumble, I won't last long against the Valkyries. It's fortunate these five haven't figured out my powers, yet, but my luck won't last forever. That archer woman has excellent eyesight.

He flicks a gaze toward Hyacinth, who unleashes a volley of wind-arrows at him. Each one explodes against his chest and limbs like a heavy-caliber rifle. Her arrows hit him with enough force to knock him off his feet, but not even her strongest attacks deal any damage to the heavily armored Lord.

Twenty seconds, Orias thinks. Come on, Berith! Belial! Do your damn jobs so I can get out of here!

Orias spares a glance at the five gems held in his palm. Three diamonds rest in his grasp, along with a ruby and a pitch-black onyx.

He quickly balls that hand into a fist and grimaces as he spots Penelope to his right. She heaves her greatmace into the air, and a sickening sense of dread washes over Orias.

This one's gonna hurt.

Swish- BOOOOM!

Penelope's mace pounds the diamond-studded demon hard enough to drive him ten feet underground. Under normal circumstances, any other Lord would have become a pool of blood and pulverized bone after such an attack, but somehow Orias remains in one piece.

Still, the Lord of the Moon lays flat on his back. His eyes spin and tumble as he tries to make sense of his orientation. After a moment, he blinks and stares into the skies above, where hundreds of angels fly overhead, firing volleys of arrows at the demon below. On every side of Orias, the ground rises a few feet, giving him the impression that he's landed in something akin to a coffin.

"He's still alive?!" Uriel asks incredulously. "Even Gabriel would have felt that attack!"

Groggily, Orias gasps as the effects of his diamond-skin begin to wear off. His vision, partially obscured because of the gems protecting his eyes, return to normal as they melt away.

I miscounted?! Damn! I need to activate the next one right now!

He fumbles with the gems on his palm, only to realize with a sense of dread that he accidentally dropped them when Penelope struck.

Penelope raises her greatmace to her shoulder. The other two Valkyries, as well as Uriel, arrive at the top of the depression in the ground.

"His skin is different! I think thy attack broke his defenses!" Sophia cries out giddily. "Hit him again! Quickly!"

Orias's eyes widen.

No! No! Those were all my diamonds! Where did they go? I need them!!

The Valkyrie of Earth begins to raise her hammer, making ice creep into Orias's veins.

Ahh, crap! This can't be where I die! I must survive! My gems need me!

Instantly, his hand shoots up to pull back his hood. Several jewels of varying colors sit embedded in his face, from red to green to blue to yellow, too.

But, in his forehead, one particular gem rests. A beautiful, radiant, multicolored jewel unlike any of the others, and three times their size, as well.

Penelope starts to swing her greatmace down, but in the time it takes for her to clear the gap, Orias yanks the gem from his forehead, closes his palm around it, and snaps his fingers.

"Oh, Beauteous One, protect me!"

Fwoosh!

Time freezes.

The magic of the gem explodes in Orias's veins like Niagara Falls smashing against the Saharan desert. In a single second, Orias transforms from a Lord-level demon to a godlike deity.

Orias leaps out of the makeshift dirt coffin. His movements become like those of a practiced martial artist.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Orias palm-strikes the three nearest Valkyries flat in the chest. They helplessly fly away, despite the dilated sense of time Orias is experiencing, and a moment later, he rears back his fist to aim it at Uriel.

WHAM!!

He punches the Archangel of Protection with all of his strength. She flies away so fast that her spears tear from her hands while remaining suspended in midair.

Even as Uriel and her three sisters go tumbling and twisting in four different directions, Orias's heart seemingly explodes in his chest.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUHHHHGHHH!!!"

The Lord of the Moon falls to the ground and lands on his knees. Veins burst in his eyes, flooding them with blood. Every muscle in his body writhes and twists as a godlike level of power threatens to tear him apart from the inside-out.

Fuckfuckfuck!! My heart can't take it! Gotta leave, now!!

Without aiming himself, Orias uses the last vestiges of his godly strength to plant one foot in the dirt and kick as hard as he can. He flies away from the angels right as time resumes to normal, landing somewhere amidst the horde of other demons.

Whump, whump whump, wham!

All three Valkyries come to a sudden stop, and Uriel lands face-down, ass-up in the mud, as stars dance in her eyes.

"Blurgh... h-huh...? What... where... w-what hit m-me?"

Uriel jumps to her feet thanks to her leftover adrenaline, but her legs buckle a moment later, and she lands on her hands and knees, breathing like she just ran an Olympic Marathon.

"Haah... haah..."

Uriel blinks several times as memories of what happened come rushing back.

"That... that little Lord... hit me? How?! I didn't even see him move!"

"Uriel!" Hyacinth calls out from above. She lands with a splash beside her sister and quickly wraps one arm around her sister's waist. "Get up! We have to leave. Chester called for a retreat!"

"...Leave? What? Why?"

Uriel tries to focus her vision, but her eyes continue to shake and tremble. She quickly splashes healing water on herself and mends her broken bones.

"I don't know, but it seems the demons put up more of a resistance than we expected. We have to fall back."

"Nonsense!" Uriel yells, throwing Hyacinth's arm off her back. Uriel clambers to her feet and stares in disbelief at the retreating angels. Already, demons have begun taking territory their enemies gave up, as greedy looks wash over their faces. A few angels don't get the message in time and fall to the horde of blood-colored monsters overwhelming them.

"We were winning!" Uriel yells, rage entering her voice. "Since when did Chester become a coward?! When I get my hands on him..."

"There's no time for that, Uriel," Hyacinth says, a hard edge to her voice. "We have to get the others out of here. Demons will arrive within seconds."

"What about that rat we nearly killed?"

"Gone. I saw him... fly away. Or something. I couldn't follow his movements very well."

Uriel gnashes her teeth. "Fucking bastards. Damn. Damn! DAMN!! Alright, it's too late to change things. Let's retreat. I'll hold the demons off inside the caves."

Hyacinth nods. "A sound plan. Killing them all by thyself might even be possible."

"Damn right it is," Uriel says, as she balls her hands into fists. She aims her hands at Gungnir and Gae Bolg, causing the two spears to yank from the earth and fly toward her. When she catches them, Uriel turns to look at the other three Valkyries, who have only just managed to pull themselves together.

"Tch. When this battle finishes, I'll have to unleash my toughest training on all of them. They should have taken that little bastard's attack with ease."

Uriel and Hyacinth fly over to their sisters. After quickly healing their injuries, the five women take to the air and fly over the battlefield, dodging fireballs and rock-bullets from the demons below as they head for the entrance to Sinai.

"Ah!" Sophia says, alarm in her voice. "What about Astrea and Hestia?! They can't fit inside Sinai's entrance! If we leave them outside, they'll die!"

The two Titan women stand, clubs in hand, and usher angels inside the mountain. Both of them wear grim looks of determination.

"Tch. They wouldn't have had anything to worry about if Chester hadn't called for a retreat," Uriel says, a hint of bitterness in her voice. "I'll try to buy them time to escape, but there's no chance they will outrun the demons, let alone their hellhounds. I hope the Creator blesses them with a quick, painless death."

Sophia's face turns ashen, but she offers no complaint.

As the Valkyries and their sister arrive at the entrance, Uriel quickly begins ushering everyone inside the mountain. She stands alone, both spears in hand, and watches angrily as the angels give up land they should never have lost.

One female angel runs past Uriel, keeping her head ducked low. Uriel gives her only the slightest passing glance, but it won't be long before the Archangel wishes she'd paid more attention to the faces of

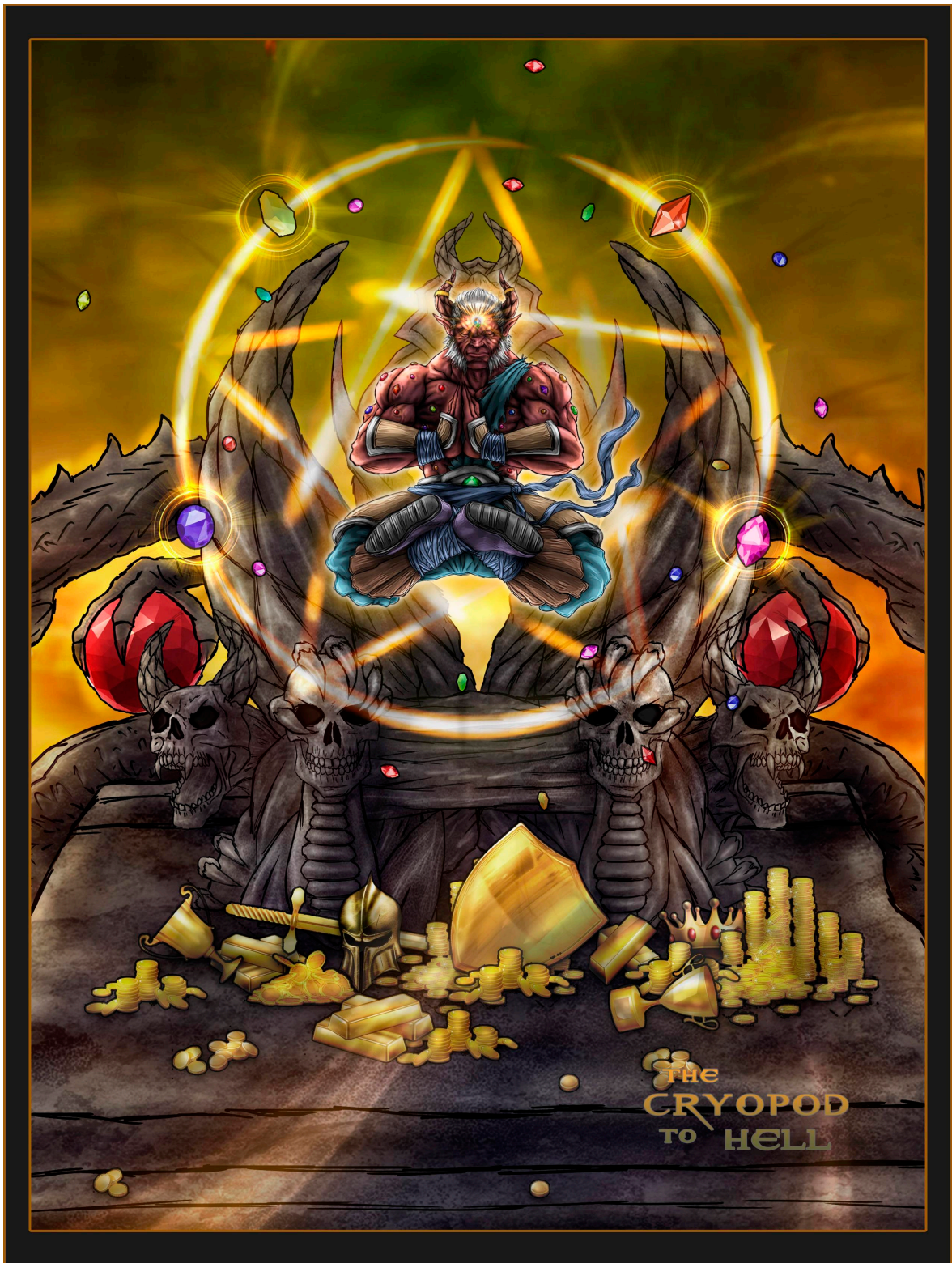
those fleeing to the safety of Heaven.

The battle outside Sinai was only a precursor.

The real war begins now.

Author Note:

Check out Orias's artwork!



And this piece of artwork too!



Part 147: The Trojan Horse

Author note: Part 73 takes place between this part and the last one. Just a heads up.

Uriel, the Archangel of Protection, valiantly stands before Heaven's Gate. Using her vast arsenal of spells, she holds back the demonic hordes, preventing them from entering Heaven.

However, even as she drives the demons back, a sense of foreboding washes over the Archangel.

Shik.

"Gah?!"

Uriel gasps in shock as her beloved brother, a man she's known for eons, thrusts his hand forward and plunges it into her chest. Michael jabs his knife-like fingers through her ribs with one hand and grabs her by the throat with the other. Too late, Uriel realizes her brother should only have one functional arm.

Uriel's body swoons. Before she can react, Michael spins her around and smashes her against the enchanted metal floor, knocking the wind out of her. The Archangel of Courage releases his grip on Uriel's throat and transforms his arm into a sword-like weapon. Uriel's eyes widen in horror as her brother dispatches all four of her constructs in the blink of an eye. His scyther-like limb blasts around the room at ten times the speed of sound, eviscerating them before they can react.

As Uriel's summoned beings transform into particles of light, Michael retracts his arm. His knife-hand, still stuck deep inside her chest, flicks around, cutting and severing other tendons. Tears form in Uriel's eyes as horrific, crippling pain combines with the shock of what's happening, rendering her paralyzed and helpless.

Slowly, Michael's face shifts and melts, along with his robes and physique. Three seconds later, a black-haired succubus sits atop Uriel, transforming Uriel's shock over her brother's betrayal into terrified confusion.

A demoness? Who... who is she?! How did she assume Michael's appearance?!

Belial retracts her hand from Uriel's chest. She keeps her expression neutral, despite forcing down bile. "You left me no choice. I won't kill you, though. My husband has business with you."

Uriel chokes on blood as she manages a weak response. "Huh... huh... hus...band?"

"Satan. The leader of the demons. I apologize, but it didn't have to end this way."

Belial summons Artorias and has him stand guard over the Archangel of Protection. She warns him to keep Uriel alive, but not to let her heal herself.

After quickly finishing up with the others, Belial leaves Uriel in Artorias's capable hands, along with his annoying little brother, Barbatos. The young demon eyes Uriel greedily, but Belial pays him no mind. After all, he's only a Lord. Artorias should be able to handle him if he does anything stupid.

Turning around, the succubus once again transforms, but this time into Uriel. She reaches down to grab Gungnir and Gae Bolg, only to yelp as Camael's artifacts explode with holy energy in her grip. Belial bites her lip and curses, then kicks them off to the side.

"I don't need them, anyway."

Belial heads for the portal. The demons filing into the chamber watch her intently as she steps through.

* * *

Once on the other side, 'Uriel' quickly swivels her face around to gaze at the angels landing nearby. Thousands of angels levitate in the air, gently flapping their wings to stay aloft, while hundreds more surround the portal to Earth from every direction. Among them are the four Valkyries, Camael, and Raphael. They breathe a sigh of relief at seeing her face.

Michael isn't here yet. Neither is Gabriel or Uzziel. Thank goodness. They'd have figured me out in an instant, Belial thinks to herself. Looks like the old man just got here. It won't take Raphael long to see through my disguise, but he's already too late.

Camael wipes his forehead. "Oh, Uriel. Thou art a sight for sore eyes! Where is Michael? Why didn't he come out with thee?"

Belial quickly scowls at Camael, forcing herself to act out Uriel's hardass nature. "He's relieving me for the moment! I left my summons to help him. Do you mind if I catch my breath? Is that too much to ask?!"

Camael flinches, surprised by her sister's reaction. "N-nay, of course not. Thou hath held off the demons for an hour by thyself. Still, Michael alone can't possibly..."

Before Camael finishes her sentence, she flicks her gaze to Raphael and trails off. The old man stares at 'Uriel' with a piercing gaze, like that of a hawk who has seen many field mice in his lifetime and knows one when he sees it.

"Uriel? Thy mana reserves dwarf ours by a wide margin. Never would'st thee allow Michael to stand alone against the demon hordes when push came to shove, yet here thou standeth, while he reaps the glory."

Belial stares evenly at the aged Archangel.

Raphael knows. He was there the day I used my illusion magic to help capture Samael. I bet he's already pieced everything together.

Belial's eyes flick to a tree perhaps a hundred yards behind the small army before her. Despite Heaven's light coming from all directions with enough intensity to prevent the formation of shadows in wide, open spaces, a single smudge of blackness sits at the tree's base like a panther awaiting the approach of prey. It shifts slightly when Belial's eyes fall upon it, and Belial nods as casually as possible.

Berith.

The mightiest succubus returns her attention to Raphael. His eyes narrow as he rapidly evaluates the figure standing before him. With a start, Belial realizes why he hasn't ordered the others to attack.

Ah! He doesn't know I'm a shapeshifter! He must suspect one of the demons are mind-controlling Uriel!

Setting her jaw, Belial comes to a decision. Even as Sophia, Penelope, and the other Valkyries gaze at her with looks of relief, the succubus coils power into her legs and prepares to pounce.

Raphael gasps. "She's not-!"

FWOOSH!

'Uriel' leaps at the wall of several hundred angels standing in the plains. Her fists lash out like mighty sledgehammers and instantly batter two-dozen angels in their chests, sending them flying into the back lines. Chaos erupts as confusion sweeps through the angel's ranks.

"Ah! Uriel has gone mad!"

"Stop her!"

"Sh-she's too powerful!"

The angels above react much faster than those on the ground. Almost immediately, several thousand archers summon bows made from Holy Energy and begin firing at Uriel, though many of them pause, as they are afraid of accidentally striking their brothers and sisters.

Raphael motions with his hands, and a thick mist shrouds him. "Unleash all of thy powers, everyone! Don't hold back for even a moment!"

Belial swings her fist at him, but the old man vanishes, evading her attack at the last instant.

As 'Uriel' starts hammering angels from left to right, the others quickly realize her abilities don't match up to that of their sister. Never before has their sister held such monstrous physical strength, let alone the ability to bend and stretch her body like putty.

"That's not Uriel! She's an imposter! She stole Uriel's face!"

"Do not hold back! Use lethal force!"

While all the angels focus on Belial, a sudden flash of movement strikes them from behind. Berith, the Emperor of Backstabbing, leaps from beneath one angel's boot. The slight shadow formed between his foot and the ground is all she needs to transport from her tree to the middle of battle. Instantly, dozens of shadow-lances erupt from the boots of nearby angels and fly at their comrades. Horrified screams rise and fall as several cherub's bodies explode.

Berith pounces at two angels and swings her palms sideways, judo-chop style, severing their heads from their shoulders. She hits the ground and flings both angel's heads into the portal, then spins around, grinning, as demons suddenly begin pouring into Heaven.

"We've been deceived!" Camael yells. "Summon the others!"

She's too late. A massive surge of grunts and Lords rushes forward, charging the frontline angel guard like lions hunting impala flesh.

Two grunts leap toward Sophia, but she swats them away with her staff without breaking a sweat. Tears well up in her eyes as she gazes at the face of her 'sister'. "What did'st thee do to Uriel? Where is my sister?!"

Penelope swings her hammer in a wide arc and sends three demons flying backward. "She's dead, Sophia! Don't let these bastards get away with murder! Avenge our sister!"

Catherine's jaw trembles as she hunkers down and prepares to bullrush the one wearing her sister's face. *I won't forgive thee.*

Like two waterfalls crashing upon each other, the demons and angels collide with the fury of Mother Nature herself. Belial does her best to batter and smash nearby angels, but she always holds back enough to prevent herself from killing anyone. Berith rapidly fires shadow-balls and shadow-lances at any angel she sees, but unlike Belial, she has no qualms about killing everyone in her way.

"Ehehehe!" Berith cackles cruelly, as she summons a fist of darkness. "This is more fun than I expected! With Uriel out of the way, none of these weaklings can stop me!"

Her fist flies toward Hyacinth, but Penelope swoops in and destroys the shadow-projection with her greatmace before it can inflict any damage. "Hah! That only proves thou art a weakling! Any fighter worth their salt would cherish a challenge!"

Hyacinth jumps into the sky and begins releasing wind-arrows rapid-fire at Berith. This time, when the projectiles hit the ground, she twists her fingers at the last second to summon miniature tornados, which catch Berith by surprise and yank her off her feet.

Berith hurtles upward into the sky, yelping as she tries to regain her footing. Suddenly, dozens of angelic archers begin firing holy-energy imbued arrows at her.

Whiff whiff whiff! Shik shik shik!

"Gaaugh!"

Berith howls in pain as glowing missiles lance through her shoulders, arms, legs, and half a dozen tear through her chest and gut. By the time the tornado dies down, she barely manages to teleport to a shadow on the ground and pop out near Belial.

"Gahk! B-Belial! Help me!"

Belial, now engaged in combat with Camael, winces as the Archangel of Divination swings Mjolnir with incredible strength. Belial dodges at the last second, and the mighty hammer strikes the ground with enough energy to send a minor earthquake throughout the nearby area. Dozens of angels and demons cry out in alarm as they stumble and lose their footing.

"I'm a little busy!" Belial yells as she ducks a horizontal swipe from Camael's hammer. "G-give me a few minutes! AHK-"

Before Belial can finish her sentence, Camael's hammer smashes into her left shoulder.

FWUMP!

Camael's downward attack crashes into Belial like a freight train. Belial screams in pain, only to vanish from where she was standing as the impact flings her several hundred feet down into the soft, uncompacted dirt of Heaven.

Grrrrn!

Belial grinds to a halt and gasps. "Huhk..."

Above her, a pinprick of light is the only thing she sees beyond the walls of dirt engulfing her.

Aaaaa... h-hurts...

Belial grits her teeth as the pain from a shattered left arm finally breaks through her disorientation. Her limb rests behind her body, badly mangled from Mjolnir's power. Agonizing spasms, caused by holy energy, wrack her spiritual presence. The enchanted hammer, forged to combat dragons, proves just as deadly against demons.

Belial spends several seconds gathering her breath before motioning with her right arm to heal the left. Finally, she shifts her body and scowls.

That hurt. A lot.

Her hands morph again, but this time into shovels. She dives into the ground and begins burrowing toward the enemy's flank.

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Camael twirls her hammer in her grasp. She and Raphael quickly survey the battlefield as demons and angels dogpile each other, ripping their enemies to shreds.

"Michael will arrive soon," Raphael says. "We must hold out until he appears. What of Gabriel and Uzziel, though?"

"I haven't seen either of them today," Camael replies. She quickly spins on her heel and swings her hammer up, catching one demon grunt unawares as he battles a nearby cherub. His back explodes, spraying guts all over the female angel. She flinches at the sudden burst of gore, but quickly realizes Camael was her savior. With a hurried nod, she turns and jumps back into the battle.

Camael continues. "Uzziel has probably sensed the battle by now. As for Gabriel and Michael, well... they shall surely follow their sister."

"Indeed. I didn't expect the hellspawn to make it into Heaven. We were supposed to hold out at the entrance to Sinai and slowly whittle them down. Bah! What changed?"

Camael's expression darkens. "I know not, but we certainly underestimated the demons."

"That we did," Raphael murmurs while motioning with his hands. The old man fades into mist, and his disembodied voice speaks one last time. "We mustn't do so again. The fate of Heaven depends on us!"

A slight shimmer in the air is all the evidence remaining of Raphael's existence. The old man vanishes into the aether, leaving Camael to defend herself.

Suddenly, Camael shivers. From the portal to Heaven, several powerful demon presences enter the battlefield.

Bael, the Duke of Pain. He steps through the portal first and scowls. "Oh, look! Everyone's having fun already. Sheesh. *Couldn't put me at the front, eh, Satan?*"

The Duke of Pain looks around in annoyance, a chip on his shoulder. Behind him, an old-looking demon steps through the portal; The Duke of Reptiles. "Damn. It's a massacre out here. We should have shown up sooner."

Following Agares, a woman steps through. Vepar, the Baron of Toxicity. She hunkers partially behind Bael, a hint of worry on her face due to the beating she took from the Valkyries. "Tch. Two Archangels are already here. We'd better take them out before they cause any trouble."

Bael groans. "Humf. You two, go take a nap. Now that the big guy's here, this battle's pretty much over. I'll beat every Archangel's ass all by myself."

Vepar doesn't bother trying to dissuade him. Instead, she motions to Agares. "Remember Satan's plan. We have a job to do."

Agares nods. He motions with his hands and begins transforming into his powerful reptilian form. Green scales cover his skin, and a thick tail sprouts from his rump as he lowers his body into a nimbler fighting pose. "We need to try and take out one of the others, at least until Michael arrives."

Both demons stay low and dash into the throng of allies and enemies. Within seconds, Vepar's poison gas strikes nearby cherubs and seraphs, making them howl in pain, while Agares tears up their enchanted armor with his powerful reptilian claws. He turns his tail into a battering ram and slaps aside two angels at once, while tanking a sword slashing his back. The weapon glances off his scales, and the angelic attacker falls a moment later when Agares tears his throat out.

Camael shivers. *The demons are more powerful than I remember. My visions told me today would be a dreadful day for angelkind, but surely there must be a way to triumph. This battle is a test sent to us by the Creator!*

The Archangel nervously twirls her hammer once again and locks eyes with Bael. The big guy smirks as he eyeballs her from several hundred feet away.

"Heh. It looks like grandma wants a go at me. I don't think I've thrown down with her before. Now's as good a time as any."

Bael balls his meaty hands into fists. He strides confidently toward Camael, a giant grin plastered across his face. One angel swoops down from behind him and slashes at Bael with his sword.

Fwap!

The weapon snaps in half when it hits Bael's back.

Bael pauses. He turns around to stare at the cherub with a look of confusion.

"The hell? You got a death wish, punk?"

The male cherub stares at Bael with wide eyes, shakes his head slowly, and flies away, leaving Bael to scratch his head.

"What kinda moron picks a fight with someone who can stomp him like a bug? Sheesh. These flappy birds ain't got no common sense."

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Bael turns around and continues wading through the warring demons and angels as he heads toward Camael. If anyone ends up in his path, whether fighting for their lives or just out of bad luck, he lightly shoves them aside, flinging them hundreds of feet to his right and left.

"Outta the way, dumbasses. I've got a date with yer mom's mom."

Finally, Bael stops a dozen feet from Camael and crosses his arms. He smirks like a man who knows with absolute confidence that he can't lose. "Nice hammer y'got there. Do ya hit pretty hard with it?"

Sweat drips down Camael's forehead. *I recognize this demon. He's the one Hercules and Zeus warned us to avoid.*

Camael grimaces. "If I'm not mistaken, thou art Bael, the infamous Balrog. Rumor has it that thou nearly slew the Titan King and his son all on thy own. Are the reports true?"

"Nah," Bael says, waving a hand dismissively. "It was a team effort. The others softened 'em up for me... a little. How about'chu? Think you can put up a fight with that little toy of yours?"

Camael narrows her eyes. "Some extra firepower wouldn't hurt."

The Archangel of Divination motions with her left hand. After forming several complex magical signs, she mutters several Latin words under her breath.

Shoop!

A massive tower shield materializes in front of her, then impales the ground a moment later. A helmet with Valkyrian wings appears atop her head, while Solomon's Crown tops it off. A golden belt wraps around her waist, and a pair of golden boots finish off her brilliant ensemble. It only takes me an instant to identify Hermes' Boots and Orion's Belt, but the rest of her armor appears unfamiliar to me.

Camael grabs the shield and takes a defensive stance. When she speaks, the helmet slightly muffles her voice. "I will bury thee as thou did my sister."

Bael's smile disappears. He uncrosses his arms and hunches down to ready himself for action. "Gimme a good fight, lady. I'm bored as hell."

Camael tilts her head. Then, she vanishes.

WHAM!

Mjolnir strikes Bael's chest so hard that a shockwave sends every nearby demon flying. Hermes Boots augment her speed in the same way they once did mine, transforming her into a bolt of lightning, while Orion's Belt gives her the strength of an atom bomb.

BOOM!

Hardly has Bael started to lose his footing before Camael jumps above him and brings her hammer down, smashing him into the ground the same way she did Belial.

Before Bael can plunge into the soft, supple soil of Heaven, Camael grabs him by his throat and flings him up into the sky. She pounces after him, springing atop invisible platforms as Hermes Boots provide a hardened surface for her to kick off, even in midair.

Jump, jump, swoop, *bang!*

Camael's blinding speed allows her to batter Bael from left to right, up and down, and finally send him catapulting into the mountainside above Heaven's Portal.

CRUUNCH!

Bael's body breaks loose boulders and soil and sends a landslide tumbling to the mountain's base. Seconds later, hundreds of tons of debris crush the low-ranking demons flooding into Heaven while burying the portal.

Camael pauses. *Ah! I blocked the portal! Since Uriel didn't deactivate it, that might mean this is our best shot of preventing the demons from entering Heaven!*

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Bael blinks. Horrible pain rings in his head from his brains being thrown around like jelly beans in a jar. The Duke of Pain tries to make sense of the dirt pressing against his face, but it takes several seconds before he can reorient himself.

"Guh... a-alright... that dame was tougher'n I thought... prolly shouldn'a looked down on her..."

After taking a moment to gather his strength, he yells out loud, "Hup!" and flings himself out of the collapsed mountain. Bael tears through dirt and stone in the blink of an eye and pounces onto the battlefield like an excited jaguar.

As he looks around for Camael, Bael raises his eyes to the sky and notices a massive contingent of angels flying toward the battlefield at alarming speeds. Leading them are Uzziel, Gabriel, and Michael.

A flash of anger appears in Bael's eyes. "Michael... tch. And here I thought this day couldn't get any better. I'ma pay you back for what you did to the boss 'n me, punk."

Bael spots Belial healing Berith, while also yanking enchanted arrows out of the shadow-walker's body. Occasionally, an angel will lunge down at them in an attempt to end the lives of two Emperors, but Belial easily dispatches them. After ten seconds, she finishes healing Berith and helps the Emperor of Backstabbing stumble to her feet.

"Don't thank me all at once," Belial quips, "but I just saved your life."

"Gratitude," Berith growls back. "Meanwhile, Camael blocked the portal to Heaven, and the other Archangels are nearly here! We're trapped! What should we do?"

Belial forces a smile. "No. We're not the cornered ones, Berith. The angels are. They're stuck here with us."

The two of them look around, and Belial raises an eyebrow as Bael jumps over and lands beside her. "You two done gabbing? Get ready. Michael's coming, and he's *pissed*."

A massive platoon of angels numbering in the millions covers the sky in winged demi-gods — their wing flap in unison, like a hive-mind hellbent on the demons' destruction. Behind them, two hundred massive Titans lumber through Uzziel's beautiful forest. They shove trees aside and howl bloodthirsty warcries.

Belial's blood chills at the sight of the approaching army. "Oh... dear. We're going to need a *lot* more demons for this battle."

"Or a Balrog," Berith whispers, as she nudges Bael.

Bael ignores her. "Don't worry! Those chickens ain't got nothin' on me'n Satan!"

Hardly have the words left his mouth before a torrential downpour of winged beings descends from the skies. They swoop toward the demons below, notch their bows and arrows, and let a hailstorm of holy weaponry fall upon their prey.

Whiff whiff whiff!

Razor-sharp arrows formed from each angel's mana impale hundreds of demons in the blink of an eye. Several Lords fall, even with their guards raised. They, along with many grunts and imps, perish without knowing what struck them.

Whamwhamwham!

Thousands of angels smash into the dirt and grass all at the same time, kicking up clouds of dust that blow toward the battlefield. They draw their weapons and rush the demons, sending terror through Hell's ranks as the surviving warriors gasp in fright.

"R-reinforcements! We've gotta get outta- guwak!"

"Where's the portal?! Where is it?!"

"We're trapped! We're all going to die! Ahh!!"

Terror turns into panic as the demonic forces fall to pieces. Every demon begins fighting for himself as they rush toward the only way out of Heaven. However, their frenzied flight comes to a screeching halt as everyone realizes the angels took out the Burrowers in their targeted attack.

Suddenly, Gabriel, the Archangel of Power, stops mid-flight, closes his eyes for a moment, and begins to concentrate. A light like that of Earth's sun builds in his palm, dwarfing Heaven's Light with its incomparable brilliance. Many demons shriek and cover their eyes, but some are too slow. Their retinas sear to ash instantly, leaving them permanently blind.

Not that it matters.

Gabriel swings his palm down and aims it at the throng of demons trying their hardest to dig out mounds of dirt to flee Heaven.

"Heavenly Beam of Holy Destruction."

A concentrated blast of holy energy fires from Gabriel's palm. It's the biggest, deadliest, most overwhelming holy attack ever seen by any demon. Not even the combined might of hundreds of cherubs unleashing a similar attack on Valac came close.

KABOOM!!

Gabriel's devastating energy wave plows into three thousand demons at once. They open their mouths to scream, but their bodies transform from flesh to ash before they can make a sound.

FWOOM!

Gabriel quickly shifts his aim to target the two Emperors and Bael. His unstoppable beam drags across the plains below, incinerating any demon caught in its path while sparing those born from holy energy, namely, other angels.

Berith's eyes bolt open. "Ah! Get down! It's coming!!"

She quickly motions toward the tree she first hid behind, several hundred feet away. In an instant, she teleports into the shadow of its roots, leaving Belial and Bael to fend for themselves.

Bael doesn't have any time to come up with an escape plan. Instead, he spins around, wraps his arms around Belial, and shields her with his body. "Don't let it touch you!"

Heaven trembles under Gabriel's nightmarish power. His colossal beam smashes into Bael with the divine equivalent of a hydrogen bomb, but Bael never lets go of Belial.

Even with the Duke of Pain enveloping her in his arms, Belial screams wordlessly, as waves of holy magic splash around Bael and buffet the ground like a solar storm of annihilation. Small trickles graze Belial's skin here and there, charring her body to ash wherever they hit, but still, Bael never releases her.

After ten seconds of concentrating with all his might, Gabriel gasps. He lowers his arm, and the incredible power within him slows to a stop.

Bael twitches as the onslaught of angelic energy finally ceases.

Seconds pass.

The Duke of Pain releases Belial. "Yo. You okay?"

Belial sags to her knees and flops on her back. Black scars cover massive portions of her arms, legs, and back. She stares at Bael, and a question forms in her eyes.

"How... how did you... survive..."

Bael bites his lip. He gently turns around and glances at his back. Smoke pours from his body, while charred black skin peels off his back.

"...I'm too tough for a weak little attack like that to kill me. But... damn... it *really* fuckin hurt."

Slam!

An angel impacts the ground behind Bael, catching the Duke's attention. Bael raises his eyes to examine the new arrival.

"Here to finish me off after letting your big brother do all the heavy lifting, eh?"

Michael glares at Bael. "Bloodskin. To think one of thy ilk could survive Gabriel's mightiest attack... my condolences go out to thee, for now thou shalt face me instead. I will give thee a much slower and more agonizing death than Gabriel could."

Bael swivels around to face the Archangel of Courage. Camael and Gabriel land in the grass behind their brother and take up defensive positions, the somber looks on their faces betraying their disbelief that Bael survived such an overwhelming display of holy energy.

"Psh. You think I'm scared?" Bael asks, smirking. "You just royally pissed me off. I'm gonna rip all three of ya limb from limb."

The Duke of Pain carefully positions himself between Belial, who continues to writhe in pain on the ground, and the three Archangels, who won't hesitate to kill her if they have a clear line of attack.

Michael licks his lips. Ignoring his right arm, which hangs limply at his side, he uses his left to draw his sword and point it at Bael.

"Death comes for thee, bloodskin. Any last words?"

BATOOM!

Behind Bael and Belial, the rubble pile that buried Heaven's Portal suddenly explodes outward with incredible force, almost as if someone had detonated C4 inside of it. Despite only a couple of hundred demons remaining inside Heaven, all of them turn to gawk as three even more powerful beings step through the portal, followed by a swarm of lower-ranked demons ten times greater than the one before it.

Diablo, the Emperor of Annihilation. Lucifer, the Emperor of Providence. And, the mightiest of them all, Satan the Devil.

Satan pauses to rest both hands on his hips. He grins from ear to ear. "I'm sorry we're late. Lucy had to waste a few extra minutes on her makeup."

Lucifer rolls all three of her eyes. "Devils. Don't blame me, when it was *your* idea to make a dramatic entrance."

Diablo's eyes sweep across the battlefield. He absorbs the sight of a million angels flooding the skies above, and the Titan army just now arriving on scene.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Satan. Can't say I like the idea of a suicide mission."

Satan doesn't even look at Diablo. "Have faith, chum. Everything is going to work out *just* fine."

All of the Archangels flinch when they sense the overwhelming dark energy flowing from Satan's body. Uzziel's eyes widen as she lands between Gabriel and Camael. "Impossible... how could one being possess such limitless mana?"

Raphael materializes beside Gabriel. "'Tis as thou believeth, Uzziel. The last time I sensed such power, 'twas when we slew a dragon. Be on thy guard. The powers of soul manipulators mustn't be underestimated. Who knows what a journey the Devil has traveled to achieve this potential?"

Satan continues to smile as he stares at the frozen battlefield. However, the moment his eyes fall on Belial's shivering, beaten body, his expression turns somber.

"The fuck are we waiting for? Kill the angels, you beautiful bastards."

His command elicits a single response from all of the demons pouring into Heaven.

"Yeahhh!!"

With all the combatants on the battlefield, the War in Heaven reaches its second phase.

Part 148: Scattered Chaos

Smealum blinks his eyes. Grogginess slows his thoughts for a few moments, along with an ache at the base of his neck. He pulls himself into a sitting position and freezes.

In the middle of the clearing, his brother, Shepherd, lays flat on his stomach. A human male with dark skin and black hair slowly traces his fingers over the acolyte's back. A grim expression sits on the man's face, even as he tilts his head up to meet Smealum's gaze.

"You're awake."

The human's voice echoes tree bark scraping against concrete. Dozens of scars line his face, evidence of the many battles he's fought. On the ground beside him sits a perfectly straight staff, one which bends around at the top into an upside-down 'U' shape.

Smealum spares only an instant to glance around the clearing. The three demons who attacked him and Shepherd lie piled up in the corner, a small fire scorching their headless bodies to ash. Blood coats the ground in a few patches here and there, but otherwise, the clearing appears the same as it did before their appearance.

The Animus slowly stands up. He leans against a tree behind him for support, while keeping a cautious eye on the human caring for Shepherd. "Who are you?"

"I am Jephthah, a humble shepherd."

The man stares at Smealum like a grey eagle might a field hare. Not a trace of worry crosses his face as the demon fully regains consciousness.

"A shepherd? The same as...?"

"Aye."

Jephthah offers no further elaboration. Instead, he lowers his eyes to Shepherd's back. Horrible scars line the spots where his wings once existed. Shepherd takes several slow, stuttering gasps, but he doesn't awaken from the trance binding his mind.

Jephthah purses his lips. "Rather than ask my name, wouldn't you like to know about your brother's condition?"

"I would, yes," Smealum replies. He takes a few steps toward Jephthah, then gingerly kneels a few feet away, keeping his distance from the human.

"That Brute tore out Shepherd's wings. They disintegrated into particles of mana after a few minutes, and now, nothing remains. The wings of an angel are what connects them to their control of mana. As such, he has lost all his ability to control and manipulate spiritual energy."

Jephthah keeps his voice low. Considering the state of humans in this era, it surprises me how well-spoken he is. Most others seem to communicate by grunting and pointing their fingers, but Jephthah speaks like a well-educated noble from thousands of years in the future.

Or, perhaps, more like that of an angel or Titan.

Smealum nods. A grim look covers his face. "Will my brother... die?"

"No. He is still immortal. Because of the loss of his wings, his body will cease to release mana over time. While most angels must replace their spiritual energy to retain their immortality, Shepherd will stay as he is right this moment... forever."

Smealum exhales a sigh of relief. "Haah... so... he will survive."

"Survive, yes. Thrive? No. An angel without wings is no longer an angel at all. From what my master tells me, the Archangels refer to Those Without Wings as Nephilim. He will stay their brother, but will forever reside at the bottom of angel society as a serf."

"That's... that's awful," Smealum murmurs. "Not even demons treat their kin in such-"

Jepthath's blue eyes suddenly glow intensely, as he glares in rage at Smealum. **"Speak not of demons in my presence."**

Smealum freezes in place as the piercing gaze of the human before him sends chills down his back. "What? Why? Who are... you?"

Jepthath's eyes continue to glow for a few moments before reverting to their natural form. He glares at Smealum, and a bitter look of resentment appears in his eyes. "Know this, half-breed. I spared you for two reasons. For one, you appeared to be on the side of this angel, defending him against the others of your kind. For two, because you are not a full-blooded demon, I do not feel the immediate need to end your existence. Even so... the hatred in my heart tells me to crush you, just as it does your half-brothers and sisters."

Confusion appears in Smealum's eyes. "Half-breed? What do you mean? Am I not a demon?"

Jepthath narrows his eyes. "You are, and you are not. Perhaps, once, you were a full-blooded member of your species. However, within you, I sense something else; A more primal power. Like that of mother nature, you share energy with the creatures of the Earth and all life across the cosmos. I feel that, were I to kill you, it would be a great tragedy."

"But..." Jepthath continues. "...even so... the hatred I feel for demons... it threatens to consume me. Despite the lack of horns and the blood-red skin they all share, you still reek of their funk."

Jepthath finishes tracing his fingers around the wounds on Shepherd's back, grabs his staff, and abruptly rises to his feet. Smealum mirrors him, if only so the human won't tower over him.

"Why do you hate us?" Smealum asks. "Did... did demons hurt you in some way?"

"Aye."

Jepthath's face contorts into a vile expression of disgust and rage.

"They took... *everything* from me. Were it not for my master; I might have cast my life away. Because of him, I have a purpose."

"And what might that purpose be?" Smealum asks.

Jepthath stares through Smealum, as if conjuring a hundred memories, each one of which causes him awful, agonizing pain.

The human turns on his heel and starts to walk away, leaving Smealum behind.

"I will *kill* all the demons."

Smealum doesn't reply.

After a few moments, Jepthath vanishes into the forest cover, leaving the Animus and Nephilim by themselves.

It takes several seconds for Smealum to recover. He slowly lowers his gaze to his brother's limp, comatose body.

"The human did not kill me because I am no longer a demon. When did that become the case? When did I leave behind my brothers and sisters to embark on a new path?"

With a shake of his head, Smealum plops down beside Shepherd and massages his brother's shoulders.

"More importantly... what do I do now?"

Uzziel's eyes grow wide as saucers. She stares at the Devil and the two Emperors flanking him with a mixture of fascination and abject horror. The dark mana flowing from just those three demons dwarfs all of the others swarming into Heaven combined.

Satan motions with his hands. A moment later, water erupts from the grass around him, ripping the life out of the greenery and turning it brown. The grass shrivels and cracks as its life-giving liquid rips out and splashes against Satan's back, then transforms into eight fluid limbs.

The Devil pounces toward Belial, Bael, and Michael. By the time Lucifer and Diablo manage to follow his movements, he's already cleared the gap.

"Nobody hurts my girl!" Satan roars. "You fuckers are dead!"

Michael immediately pivots from Bael to the incoming threat. He jumps back a split-second before Satan's vectors manage to grab him. An instant later, Michael's sword begins dancing from left to right. He summons holy energy to envelop his weapon, allowing him to parry Satan's invisible limbs.

Thousand of sparks erupt around the two combatants as Satan and Michael's limbs and weapons collide with blinding speed. Gabriel motions with his hands and fires a massive blast of holy energy at Satan, but the Devil darts to the left and dodges it, never once stopping his sixteen-limb attack against Michael.

The other Emperors arrive. Diablo charges in after compressing kinetic energy around his fist. He attempts to blindside Michael, only for Camael to get in his way and use her shield to block his fist.

KABOOM!

Diablo sends Camael flying. Before she skids across the ground, she uses Hermes' Boots to kick off an invisible platform, then leaps into the sky, dispersing the power of his punch.

"Uzziel!" Raphael says to his sister. "Try to slow the movements of the Emperors! I'll distract them so that our brothers and sisters might land a few decisive strikes!"

"Right!" Uzziel replies. She conjures the elemental power of nature to summon vines from the ground. Unlike when she uses her powers on Earth, the incredible amount of Holy Energy pervading Heaven transforms her ability into a weapon of mass destruction.

Tree roots and vines burst out from underneath Satan and the other Emperors, entangling their legs and slowing their movements while allowing Michael, Gabriel, and Camael to launch a frontal attack.

Satan ignores the vines coiling around his limbs since his water-tentacles and vectors are more than capable of taking out an army by themselves. When Gabriel swings his greatsword at Satan, the Devil merely catches it with three vectors and yanks it out of the Archangel's hands. He tosses the weapon aside, causing it to disperse into particles of light.

Gabriel aims both of his palms at Satan.

Da-da-da-da-da-da!

Rapid-fire bolts of holy energy emerge from his palms and fly at Satan. The Devil summons a pillar of stone to block them and focuses on Camael instead. The Archangel of Divination lunges toward him and raises her hammer to smash his skull.

"A frontal attack? Suicide!" Satan laughs. Three water-tentacles spring at her and punch the Archangel with all their strength.

However, the instant Satan's octopus limbs connect, Camael vanishes.

"What? An illusion?!"

Satan whips his head around to see Camael spring out of three different places at once. Each of her copies raises their hammers high and swing down at his flank, but the Devil quickly deflects them with his Vectors and octopus limbs.

However, one of the illusions proves to be the real one. Camael summons her tower shield and bats Satan's Vectors away thanks to its holy-energy infused front-side. He tries to retaliate, but she activates Hermes Boots and charges him three times faster than before.

WHAM!

The Archangel of Divination bullrushes Satan's body with the flat of her shield and plows him into the ground. Immediately, Uzziel's vines jump out and wrap around him like a spider binding a fly.

Michael leaps at Satan. "Thy death is nigh, little bloodskin!"

He switches his sword stance and aims to plunge it into Satan's chest, but an energy blast suddenly knocks him out of the air. Lucifer fires from her third eye three times, each shot battering Michael with concentrated mana. Michael flaps his wings, rights himself, and lands on his feet a few paces away.

Satan tears through Uzziel's vines with his Vectors. The Devil quickly jumps and hovers over the terrain, using Samael's ultimate weapon to rip apart anything else the Archangel of Creation throws at him.

"You guys are really pissing me off!" Satan yells at the Archangels. "Let's split these angels up! It's time for phase two, boys!"

Bael, Diablo, Lucifer, and Berith all nod simultaneously. "Right!"

A sudden sense of foreboding bubbles up in the back of Uzziel's mind. At the last second, she dives to the right and shoves Camael aside. One of Berith's shadow-fists jumps out of the ground and smashes Uzziel in the face, striking her instead of her elder sister. Uzziel gasps and tumbles aside, but quickly motions with her hands to suck into the ground.

Unlike the slow movement of Burrowers, Uzziel travels even faster underground than when she flies. Her powers make her one with the soil, and she jumps out from behind Gabriel, using his body as a shield. "Brother! Watch out! The demons are going to-"

She doesn't get to finish her sentence. Michael suddenly yells in alarm. A nearly translucent figure, one crouched low to the ground, pounces at the Archangel of Courage from behind. Agares, now using his Camouflage ability to blend in with his surroundings, catches Michael unawares as he delivers a reptilian punch to the Archangels' spine. Michael gasps and tries to swing his sword around, but a cloud of poison gas descends upon him, blinding and choking him as Vepar attacks him in her gas-body form.

"Michael!" Uzziel shrieks her brother's name. She starts moving toward him, but her eyes lock onto Bael as the big guy charges Camael from the side.

"Just **try** and hit me with that hammer again, grandma! Bahaha!"

Bael plows into Camael and throws her to the ground. At the same time, the Emperors split apart, each of them targeting different Archangels.

Lucifer and Diablo charge at Gabriel. Satan grabs Belial and splashes healing water on his mate, then both of them move to attack Raphael.

They're splitting us up! Uzziel screams internally. She starts to say something, only to flap her wings and dodge backward as Berith appears in front of her.

Whiff!

Berith's claws swing at the spot where Uzziel stood only a moment before. "Bah! Come back here, little tree-bender! You can't run forever!"

Uzziel's heart trembles as her eyes flick to each of the other Archangels. Bael and Camael trade blows. Her hammer crashes against his armored body, while his fists batter her tower-shield and threaten to throw her off her feet.

Raphael summons several ghostly clones of himself to confuse Satan and Belial, but the two mightiest Emperors dispatch a dozen of them in the blink of an eye.

Diablo rears back for a massive kinetic punch and batters the force-field enveloping the Archangel of Power with all his strength. Gabriel staggers backward a few inches, but otherwise shrugs off the atomic attack. A moment later, Lucifer fires her mental barrage at him, bypassing Gabriel's barriers and hitting him in the brain where his defenses are lowest.

"Gaaugh!"

Gabriel lurches back and grabs his head. Waves of pain bring him to his knees, but the force field surrounding him protects him from another of Diablo's kinetic punches.

Uzziel perceives all of their battles in a single second, then returns her attention to Berith. The Emperor of Backstabbing summons two swords of shadow and charges at Uzziel. She cackles and swings both weapons toward Uzziel's neck like a pair of scissors.

Uzziel summons a magically-imbued walnut to surround herself.

Thunk!

Berith's swords slice into Uzziel's shield, but they halt halfway and jam inside the thick wood.

Uzziel summons thorny brambles from beneath Berith's feet. The holy-energy-infused weeds tear into Berith's legs and quickly climb her body, making the Emperor howl in pain.

"Kyaarr! Get off me, you damned-!!"

Berith releases her swords and melts into her shadow, giving Uzziel a moment of respite. She uses the precious few seconds to spare a glance at the other Archangels. In addition to Bael, two other high-level demons enter the battle: Shax and Murmur. The tall, lanky, wild-haired Shax ducks and dodges as the four Valkyries join alongside Camael to help their sister fight off the Duke of Pain and his cohorts. Shax dances around with style, each movement flowing around like a mixture between a practiced martial artist and a disco dancer.

However, what catches Uzziel's attention most is that while Shax evades Catherine's sword slashes and Hyacinth's wind-arrows, Murmur rides his shoulders, piggyback-style, without falling off. Her child-sized legs wrap around his front, and whenever any attack comes close to his chest or head, she gingerly pokes the air and deflects it harmlessly.

"L-look out. Here it comes. From your left. Now, right..."

Murmur whispers in Shax's ear as she delicately protects him from anything he doesn't dodge. Shax, on the other hand, grins like he's having the time of his life. He drops to his legs and does the splits. "Oh, yeah! Whoo! What a rush! I wanna bust out in song, haha!"

Indeed, he rolls backward, and Murmur pushes her hands against the ground to backflip Shax into the air. The two of them never separate, despite the intensity of his acrobatic movements. Shax lands on his feet and begins strumming as if playing an air guitar.

"♪Four girls, but ain't none of 'em my type! They come a-swingin' but there ain't no time ta' fight!♪"

Hyacinth fires three arrows rapid-fire at Shax, but he moonwalks from side to side, dodging two of them effortlessly while leaving the third to Murmur. She pokes the air and sends it tumbling into the ground.

"Damn this demon! Catherine, help me shut him up! I can't stand that awful singing!"

Sophia spins her bo staff and does a backflip toward Hyacinth. "Aww, I think it's pretty catchy!"

Hyacinth rolls her eyes. "As always, thy taste in music churns my stomach!"

Catherine and Penelope jump toward Shax from his left and right. Catherine slashes at his legs, while Penelope swings her mace down, intent on splattering not only him, but Murmur as well.

Murmur pokes the air to deflect Catherine's blade, but she's too slow to stop Penelope's mace. "Sh-Shax! Look out!"

Shax doesn't hesitate. The instant before Penelope's attack connects, he whips his head toward her and screams at the top of his lungs, "STEP OFF, HUSSIE!"

A powerful soundwave fires from Shax's mouth. Penelope yelps in surprise and goes flying, unable to defend herself from his supersonic scream.

Without missing a beat, Shax pivots to face Catherine and strums his invisible guitar even harder. "♪Ten million ta' one, and we almost fuckin' done! Step off, sista, cuz we've only just begun!♪"

The harder he strums, the more powerful the soundwaves unleashed from his invisible guitar become. Catherine staggers, as an unrelenting force begins pushing her backward with all its strength. Blood trickles from her ears, and her head starts to spin. Shax's words blur together, transforming from English to pure babble as his oppressive soundwaves threaten to shatter not only Catherine's eardrums, but her mind as well.

Suddenly, Murmur yelps. "Look out!"

Diablo comes flying through the air, having been flung aside by Gabriel's greatsword. He hurtles toward Shax and Murmur, the latter of whom can't decide whether or not to deflect him, given he's an ally.

"Uwah!"

Murmur gasps as Diablo's sizable body plows into her and Shax, sending all three of them sprawling across the grass.

"Owie..."

Murmur whimpers and curls into a ball. She shivers for a moment, then raises her eyes to stare as Hyacinth aims her bow at Shax.

"Those two are separated! Take out the male, then the female!"

Tears bubble in Murmur's eyes as Hyacinth starts to release a wind-arrow toward her brother, lying on his back in the grass.

"Nooo! Don't hurt big bro!"

Murmur tries to run to her brother's side, but her legs are too tiny. She watches in disbelief as Hyacinth's arrow travels at the speed of sound. It smashes into Shax, sending a massive explosion rippling through Heaven. The arrow strikes Shax's body, driving him underground. He ends up buried eight-feet deep, hidden from the surface world.

"Eeeyaa!!"

Murmur screams as she runs over to the crater. Her brother lays motionless, but the Valkyries give him no respite. Immediately, all four of them close in on Murmur and Diablo. Diablo groans and staggers to his feet, but when he sees Shax's crater a few paces to his left, his eyes widen.

"Uh, oh."

"One down!" Penelope yells, triumphantly. "Woo-hoo! Now, let's get that little one, and we can all focus on Diab-"

"BIG BRO!! NOOOO!"

Murmur screams bloody murder. Tears well up in her eyes, and she whirls to face Hyacinth. "You fat, ugly, nasty cow! Take THIS!!"

She aims her finger at Hyacinth, then raises it up and down. Hyacinth gasps as telekinetic force grabs her body, lifts her into the sky, and flings her into a pile of rubble below. "Ahh! I can't control my-!"

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

Over and over, Murmur raises and smashes Hyacinth into the ground.

"This is for Shax, you nasty chicken!! I'll turn you into a puddle of blood!"

"Hyacinth!" Sophia cries out. She quickly flaps her wings and flies toward Murmur. "Little turd! Let go of my sister- gack!"

Before Sophia can land a decisive blow, Murmur releases Hyacinth, whirls to face the incoming Valkyrie, and flicks the air. A blast of telekinetic force smashes into Sophia and flings her backward, sending the Valkyrie tumbling end over end. She lands face-down, ass-up, her head spinning from the impact.

Suddenly, Catherine and Penelope arrive on the scene. Both of them rush the hooded little demon girl and raise their weapons high. Before they can end her life, Diablo jumps in front of them and kicks his foot into the ground. A ten-times-enhanced shockwave summons a minor earthquake, knocking both Valkyries off their feet. They trip and stumble, then fall to their knees. Catherine flaps her wings and yanks herself to her feet, but Murmur turns around and flicks the air, sending the Valkyrie of Fire tumbling backward, just like Sophia. Before Penelope can raise her mace again, Diablo rears his fist back and smashes it against her golden armor, punting her in the opposite direction.

WHUMP!

All four Valkyries grind into the dirt and gasp for breath as they try to recover from the power of the Emperor and his tiny little comrade. Hyacinth moans and tries to shift around, but her strength gives out, and she flops into the dirt lifelessly. Sophia clammers to her feet, but her footing proves shaky. She stumbles back and forth, using her bo staff to hold herself upright. Catherine, the toughest of the Valkyries, manages to regain her footing but thinks better of charging the Emperor of Annihilation alone.

From the crater to her right, Murmur's brother calls out to her. "Ohh... I'm alive, sis. Barely."

"Shax? You're okay?!" Murmur dives to the side of the crater and peers inside. Shax lays on his back, a massive gash torn across the right side of his chest, but otherwise in good condition.

"M-managed to deflect that arrow with a soundwave. Hurts like hell, though."

"You're bleeding everywhere! I'll get Belial and-"

Shax shakes his head. "Nah, nah, it's fine, sis. No biggie."

With a grunt, Shax kicks his feet up and grabs the sheer walls of the coffin-shaped depression. He yanks himself upward and jumps out of the pit, then lands on his knees.

"Get on," Shax says to Murmur, as he aims his thumb toward his back. "We're leaving this shithole. It's too bright here, anyway. Ruining my mojo."

Murmur pulls her hood down to hide her face. "Oh... um... alright, but are you okay, big brother?"

Shax glances down at the gash going across his chest, then presses his arm against it. "Yeah. I'll survive, but only if I stop the bleeding. Come on."

"O-okay."

Murmur climbs onto his shoulders, and Shax darts away, leaving the Valkyries in his dust.

Diablo watches them go. "Sheesh. Bye, then. Don't mind me."

With a start, Diablo turns around to look for Gabriel. He ignores the Valkyries to focus on the figure of the fifteen-foot-tall Archangel attacking his mate. Gabriel slashes at Lucifer with his greatsword, aiming to lop her head off.

"Stand still, demon. I do not wish to cause thee any unnecessary pain," Gabriel says, his voice as calm as a lake during summer. His weapon misses Lucifer by inches as she dives to the ground and lets it swing over her back.

"Not a chance, Archangel! Eat shit and die!"

Lucifer fires a kinetic blast at Gabriel, but it splatters against the seemingly impenetrable force field surrounding his body without causing so much as a ripple. Gabriel flicks his eyes toward Raphael, as the old man battles Satan and Belial. However, no longer is he alone, as several Titans, including Zeus, have joined the battle.

"How many times must we fight, demon dog?!" Zeus bellows. He aims his palm at Belial, and a bolt of lightning slams into her, sending a thunderous shockwave in every direction.

Dozens of demons nearby cover their ears and howl in pain, but their angelic adversaries prove unaffected. Their helmets, forged by Camael, offer magical protection from sounds above a specific volume. With their demon adversaries stunned, the cherubs and seraphs use weapons and magic to cut through the horde with ruthless efficiency.

Belial lands a few dozen feet away and rolls to a stop. Her limbs spasm for a moment, thanks to Zeus's lightning seizing up her body. She heals herself and jumps to her feet. "That damned Titan. His lightning is so fast that I can't avoid it in time!"

Belial's heart skips a beat as something invisible punches her in the back and sends her tumbling forward. Raphael's illusion magic breaks for a split-second, but he quickly activates it once more and flaps

his wings to leap into the sky.

The old man glares at Belial. "That wench's healing magic appears to function identically to Uzziel's. She's a troublesome opponent, especially when fighting alongside Satan. Damn. Even if only the two of them were here, without any other demons, it might take the full power of Heaven's Finest to bury them. But with all these noteworthy upper-ranked demons, as well..."

Raphael glances around. His eyes flick to Michael, flanked by a camouflaged Agares, and the troublesome Vepar. Michael tries to attack Vepar, but she disperses into a cloud of poison. A blur of motion from behind is Michael's only warning of Agares' incoming attack, but the Archangel of Courage easily spins around and knocks his reptilian adversary aside.

"Heh," Michael chuckles. "Not so strong without the element of surprise, art thou, filthy bloodskin?"

Then, Raphael turns to search for the four Valkyries. Far in the distance, Diablo faces off against the four of them. Uzziel finishes healing her sister Hyacinth and helps her to her feet.

The Archangel of Creation glances around, her nerves on edge. The shadow-walker, Berith, isn't anywhere in sight, but that fact isn't enough to steady her pounding heart.

"I need to leave," Uzziel says, her voice tight. "Even with the assistance of the Titans, Heaven may fall. I will bring reinforcements."

Hyacinth's wings twitch. She clutches Uzziel's shoulder and spares a wary glance toward Diablo, as several Lord-ranked demons saddle up beside him. "Reinforcements? Are not all of our family members here? We haven't time for games, sister."

"We'll be fine," Penelope replies, answering in Uzziel's stead. She casually slings her mace over her shoulder and smirks at the demons lining up. "At least for a little while. Don't take too long, sister."

Uzziel looks at Penelope, then sweeps her gaze across Catherine and Sophia's faces. "Stay safe. The demons are nothing if not crafty. They will deceive thee at every turn."

"Aye," All four Valkyries reply in unison. They turn their backs to Uzziel to face down the demons standing across from them.

"Well? What art thou waiting for, little rats?" Penelope yells, taunting her opponents. "Don't tell me thou art afraid of a few women?!"

The lords beside Diablo howl and shriek, then charge toward the Valkyries.

"No, you idiots!" Diablo roars. "Don't let them goad you- ahh, dammit to Hell!"

Diablo follows from the rear, an annoyed scowl plastering his face. He tails his comrades, and the Valkyries return the gesture.

Uzziel turns away, and her heart pounds in her throat like the beating of a drum.

With a shudder, the Archangel of Creation dives underground. She begins speeding away from the battlefield, leaving her family behind to face the demons alone.

There is one who has yet to join the fight! I must find him!

Part 149: The Infinity King

Uzziel swims through the ground like a freakish, winged land-shark. Her speed puts Artorias, the swiftest of Burrowers, to shame. Every few minutes, she travels to the surface to orient herself before diving underground and continuing on her way.

The longer it takes for me to reach him, the greater our losses! I can't let my family perish under the might of the demon army!

A sizable forest appears before Uzziel. She swims beneath it and bursts out of the ground five seconds later somewhere near one of Heaven's several cities. Small buildings made of wood and brick line a simple paved street, but she turns left, toward a small mountain in the distance, one that is perhaps only a few hundred feet high.

As she draws near, its name appears in my mind. *Outcast's Refuge*, a hastily constructed prison for the Undying.

Thousands of cages lie scattered across a wide, open field, each one designed by Camael two thousand years prior to contain the Undying and prevent their escape.

Enchanted steel bars enclose each undead angel so they can't escape. Despite this, they sit on soft beds and appear content to stay inside where they can't hurt the living among their family.

Uzziel strides into the camp. Her eyes sweep around the cages as she scans for one in particular.

Hercules. Where is the Titan's cage?

The prison sits at the base of a mountain, and a wall surrounds it, as if squeezing the imprisoned angels between a rock and a hard place. Uzziel walks past one cage and speaks to the Undying trapped within. "Brother Hui, where are we keeping the Titan locked up?"

The male angel sighs. "Haah. On the north side of the mountain."

His blackened eyes lower to the ground, and he resumes poking the grass with his feet.

Uzziel stares at him, and a look of concern crosses her face. "Art... art thou feeling unwell, Brother Hui?"

He nods. "I apologize, beloved sister. All the cherubs left to travel to the frontlines. Since I cannot go... I am in low spirits. Do not mind me. Everyone here feels the same."

He glances past Uzziel, toward a row of cages where several male and female Undying pace around, do pullups on the bars of their cages, or otherwise perform other mindless movements to try and relieve their boredom. All of them appear agitated, but none vocalize their annoyance out loud.

"I understand. I have come to seek Hercules' help. The battle against the demons is... it is not as one-sided as we would have liked."

"Naturally," Hui replies, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "Do not delay, sister. If thou art here instead of the battlefield, that means we lack our best healer to revive our brothers and sisters on the bloodskins."

Please return post-haste."

"Aye," Uzziel replies.

The Archangel flaps her wings and takes off. As she soars over the mountain, the mile or two to Hercules' cage vanishes in the blink of an eye.

With Valac dead, Raphael should have ordered the release of the Undying, but he didn't. Hercules confirmed Valac's death when he peered into Satan's memories. Surely, with proof that Valac perished, we shouldn't need to keep capable cherubs and seraphs away from the frontlines!

The moment Uzziel crests the peak of the mountain; her eyes sweep across the cages surrounding it. She spots Hercules' cell instantly, as his stands ten feet taller than those around him. Given his immense size, reaching Gabriel's height, Camael must have forged his to give him extra room to move and stretch.

The Archangel soars down and lands beside Hercules' cage. Immediately, she takes in the sight of an untouched animal-skin filled with wine placed beside his enclosure.

Who left this here, I wonder?

Uzziel ignores it and raises her eyes to stare at Hercules. The Titan sits on his bed, both hands folded together on his lap, with his head lolled forward. He stares blankly at the ground, but even with his black hair falling over his face, the eerie glowing of his eyes is hard to miss.

"Ahem!"

Uzziel coughs to get the Titan's attention. After several seconds, Hercules blinks and raises his head. His eyes return to normal, and he stares at her for a moment.

"Earthmother. What do you want?"

Despite his blank expression, Hercules' words drip with disdain.

Uzziel bites her lip. She gestures to the lock on his cell door. "I've... I've come to free thee, Hercules! Right now, the demons are invading Heaven. We need every able-bodied warrior there to stop them. Since thou hath nearly defeated the demons on thy own, thou art surely an asset which shouldn't be locked-"

Hercules raises his palm.

"No. I refuse."

"Huh?"

Uzziel blinks. She stares at him in disbelief.

"I don't understand... I hadn't finished speaking. If thou stayeth here, the demons might overrun us! Surely, whatever thy quarrel is with the angels, setting it aside would be for the best! Thy people need thee!"

Hercules shakes his head. He crosses his arms and sighs. "No. I won't leave this cell unless my father comes and grovels on his knees for forgiveness. Even then, such a meaningless gesture would be too little to absolve him of his sins."

"Ah. Am I correct in assuming thy anger rests solely with thy father's actions, rather than those of the angels?"

Hercules purses his lips. "I wouldn't presume that your people are blameless. *You* created the demons, after all. You unleashed them upon Earth. My father's failure came when he failed to support me in my time of need. Yours was creating the enemy that killed my wife. If anything, your sin and his are like the distance between the sun and the Moon."

"I did not 'unleash' anyone, *Titan*."

"You created Satan, you loosed him from Heaven, and he killed Megara. Therefore, you are at least partially to blame for her death."

"Certainly, but 'twas not my intention. Thy father believes that soul manipulation is evil, yet thou didst disobey his orders and unleash thy power against the demons. Given thou hath suffered a catastrophic failure, in the same vein as mine, how can thou looketh upon me with scorn? Were not both of our intentions fair?"

Hercules narrows his eyes. "Do not twist my words, she-angel. I am in no mood for mind-games."

"My people are dying, as are thine!" Uzziel yells in exasperation. "I care not for thy temper tantrums! Lives are at stake! Now is no time to stand on ceremony! If anyone is committing wordplay here, it is thee!"

Several seconds pass before Hercules speaks again.

"If you feel that way, then leave. I'm staying in my cell until you defeat the demons, or my father comes to beg for forgiveness. Otherwise, I will kill the red rats when they arrive."

Uzziel sighs.

"Tch... I understand. In that case, it would appear we've arrived at an impasse. If I cannot convince thee to battle the demons, then I have wasted my time in coming here."

Hercules's expression remains impassive. "Aye. It would seem so."

The Archangel and Titan stare each other down for several seconds. Finally, Uzziel turns away, unable to meet Hercules's gaze. "I cannot force thy hand. However, if the demons slaughter all of my people and thine, thou shalt be unable to stand up to them alone. Thou shalt die, leaving thy wife unavenged. Is that the path thou plan to walk?"

Hercules shifts on his bed. He glances at an adjacent cell, one with an Undying angel watching both speakers silently. The male angel looks away when he meets Hercules' eyes, causing the Titan to return his gaze to Uzziel.

"Have you so little faith in your comrades, Earthmother? Do you honestly believe that they will fall before the might of demonkind?"

Uzziel narrows her eyes. "I do not wish to take any risks. The demons have grown more powerful than ever. Thou might know this if ye stepped foot outside thy cell."

Hercules smiles and rises to his feet. "The deaths of angels and Titans are none of my concern. In the end, I know that our people will triumph during today's battle. Were I to lead our united forces, the angels and Titans would be guaranteed an overwhelming victory. However, without me, they will survive only by the slimmest of threads."

The Archangel of Creation stares at the Titan towering over her with a mixture of awe and disgust. "Thou would... thou would allow so many to die? For what purpose? Why not save as many lives as possible?!"

Hercules gestures toward Uzziel with an upraised palm. "For a tree to grow, the weeds choking its ground must first wither and die. In the same way, ancient traditions have rotted my people from the inside-out. By creating the demons, you summoned forth an instrument of destruction that would eliminate those who perpetuated wasteful, failed doctrines. Even if millions of angels and Titans fall, some will remain. We will rebuild, and from the ashes, a superior civilization will rise."

Uzziel eyes widen in horror at the implications of Hercules' speech. "Th-that's genocide!"

"Don't be facetious," Hercules says. He flippantly waves his hand as if to dismiss her concerns. "I am not killing anyone, but instead, leaving them to their own devices. After all, if they believe my powers to be cursed, who am I to step in and help them? I would not go so far as to sully the *honor* of other beings, especially those with greater *authority* than me."

Sarcasm punctuates several words as Hercules inflects heavily on them over others. He waggles his finger at the Archangel, then plops back down on his bed and leans back against his cage's bars.

"In any case, I'm done explaining myself. Why stay here? You won't persuade me to leave, not in a million years. Leave, now, and return to your comrades. If you're lucky, you might save a few thousand of them. That would be quite the stroke of good luck, wouldn't you agree?"

Uzziel sighs.

"Thou art hopeless. I've wasted time and precious lives to come here and ask for thy help. In the end, I neither learned nor gained anything of value. No matter how today's battle concludes, I assure thee, Hercules, that I will never respect or bow before a king who allows his subjects to die. That is the difference between thy father and thee."

The Archangel of Creation turns her back to Hercules once again. Uzziel flaps her wings, but before she takes off, she pauses.

"Hm? Brother Long? What is the matter?"

Uzziel's gaze rests on a cell across from Hercules'. The Undying angel inside stands stiffly at attention. His body twitches, and he stares at her with his pure black eyes.

"Some... something... is... wrong... I... can't move..."

Behind Uzziel, in the cage directly adjacent Hercules', the male angel from before sits on his bed, unmoving. He stares ahead at the bars of his cage, but his body, too, is as stiff as Long's.

"S-sister... I can't control myself... it's as if... as if..."

Hercules slowly rises from his bed. His cocky smirk vanishes as he evaluates the two Undying.

"These two aren't the only ones acting strangely. The others are, as well. That... that can only mean..."

A spark of recognition ignites in Hercules's eyes.

"Impossible. Satan killed Valac. I saw the moment in his memories. No demon could survive an intense burst of Holy Energy directly to their soul."

"No! Thou can't mean-?!"

Uzziel whirls to face Hercules. All the blood drains from her face as their eyes meet.

"Did not thou witness Valac perish with thy own eyes?!"

"No. I only saw his death through Satan's mem- AH! Look out!"

Hercules jerks toward Uzziel, but he's too slow. An Undying in a cage behind Uzziel suddenly throws himself against the bars, sticks his arms through, and grabs Uzziel by her wings.

"Ahh!" Uzziel shrieks in fright as the Undying yanks her backward and wraps his arm around her throat. "B-brother Long?!"

"I can't control my body, sister! Fight me! Don't allow me to kill thee!"

Brother Long's arm tightens around Uzziel's neck. She writhes and wriggles, but only when she summons her vines is she able to wrench away from him by pulling with their tensile strength.

"Gah!" Uzziel stumbles away from him and falls to her knees. Everywhere in the prison, many Undying begin throwing themselves against their cages, one after the other. They smash against the bars like wild animals, unable to prevent themselves from harming their bodies.

"Ah! My wrist! I broke my wrist!"

"Sister, help me! A voice is commanding me to fight and kill! I don't want to murder my family members!"

Hercules stiffens as he gazes upon the sudden carnage engulfing the prison camp. He sweeps his eyes around the perimeter, and a moment later, he lowers his head to stare at Uzziel.

"Damn. I did not expect the Reaper to return. This... this changes everything."

Uzziel nods. She shivers from the remnants of terror still leftover from when Long grabbed her, but quickly manages to right herself and jump to her feet.

"I must go, Hercules! There's no time for bargaining! I'll unlock thy cage, and thou must-"

"No need," Hercules grunts. He walks forward, wraps a meaty palm around the enchanted iron, and tears one of the bars away as if it were paper. Five more follow, and a few moments later, he emerges from his makeshift cell as if he'd never been inside.

"Huh? Thou... thou were able to leave? From the beginning?"

"Of course. Such flimsy metal is no match for my strength. More importantly, I have to change my plans. If Valac has truly returned, then our narrow victory will surely become an overwhelming defeat. If the dead begin returning to life, they will rapidly overpower the angels and Titans."

Hercules takes a step forward. His massive, gorilla-like body dominates Uzziel's by a factor of three. Silently, he reaches over and places his hand on her shoulder. "Earthmother. I need your help."

"Mine? W-why? To what end?"

"Forget everything I said before. Ruling over the remnants of angelkind and Titankind is one thing, but if Valac is here, everyone will perish. I need your permission to remove Valac's control from the Undying."

Uzziel blinks. "I... I don't follow."

"I call my ability 'Army Control.' If someone accepts me as their leader, I gain total control of their minds and bodies. I have yet to test this, but I believed that my Soul Manipulation might possess the power to take back control of the souls of the Undying. If you permit me, I might be able to free your brothers and sisters from their despair."

Uzziel takes a step backward. "I... I don't know... that sounds dangerous! What reason have I to trust thee?"

"I am many things, Earthmother, but I am no enemy of angelkind, nor my people. Would you prefer Valac to control your brothers and sisters, or me? I can grant them freedom from his oppression, but only if you help me!"

Uzziel staggers backward. She stares into the passionate eyes of the behemoth towering over her, and dozens of questions flood her mind.

What should I do? I can't trust Hercules! But if I don't, then Valac will make my family hurt each other! I have to do something! I can't let anyone else die!

Uzziel bites her lip. After a few seconds of thought, a female Undying cries out in pain. Uzziel whirls around to see one of the male Undying clutching the woman by her throat, slowly strangling the life out of her.

"S-sister Vera! I can't stop squeezing! I can't fight it!!"

Tears form in the man's eyes as he slowly crushes his sister's neck into pulp. She leans toward him, as if eager to die. Despite her lack of bodily resistance, her face contorts in agony. "Please! Fight back, brother! Kakh! I... I can't... b-breathe..."

Uzziel jumps as Hercules grabs and squeezes her shoulder. "Answer me, Archangel! Will you let your sister die?! Tell me now, before it's too late!"

With the Titan breathing down her back, and the sudden chaos in the camp, Uzziel grits her teeth and closes her eyes. "A-alright! Do it! I give thee permission! Save everyone!"

"Good! I'll start with that one!"

Hercules quickly pushes past Uzziel and charges toward the Undying crushing his sister's throat. "You there! Swear fealty to me at once! I will free you from Valac's control!"

The male angel panics. "I-I can't do that! Never in a million years! Sister Vera! I'm trying to fight back, but--"

"You can't resist the call of the Reaper!" Hercules yells. He tears two cage bars off, hunkers down, and grabs the male Undying. With a quick motion, Hercules yanks him toward the opposite side of his cell, freeing Sister Vera from her brother's clutches. "Swear fealty, and I shall free you from his voice!"

"Do it!" Uzziel yells.

She runs over to Hercules side and faces her undead brother. "Place thy faith in Hercules! Only he can free thee from the clutches of the Reaper!"

The man turns to stare at his sister, the Archangel, in shock.

"But, brother Raphael will-"

"He'll do nothing! I am one of the Archangels! Obey me, Brother Klim! I won't let anyone here die!"

Klim stares at Uzziel for a moment before his arms begin flailing frantically. He tries to grab Hercules, but the Titan easily pins him to the ground with a single palm.

"Yes! Very well, I'll follow thy orders, sister Uzziel! Hercules, son of Zeus, I pledge my fealty to thee!"

The instant the words leave Klim's mouth, his flailing ceases. Hercules's eyes glow for a moment, as do Klim's. The blackness of death leaves his body, and he sags against the ground.

Klim gasps as all the tension in his body vanishes.

"I... I don't believe it. I feel... normal."

Hercules nods. He pulls back and steps out of the cage, then sighs in relief.

"Thank the ancestors. I wasn't certain that would work."

"Thou weren't?!" Uzziel cries out in alarm. "But, I thought ye said-"

"I had a hunch. I guessed how Valac's powers worked based on the memories of humans, Titans, and demons. There's no time to waste. Quickly, we must make the others pledge their allegiance."

Uzziel nods. A faint smile crosses her face. "Right! Ah, I apologize, Hercules. I did not realize thou were such a brilliant thinker. To save my brothers from bondage at the hands of the Reaper... I owe thee a great debt."

Hercules smiles. Something about his expression appears off, but I can't discern what. "Worry not, Earthmother. I always keep my word."

* * *

Minutes pass. Uzziel calls out to the Undying and commands them to swear fealty to Hercules. Once those who follow her commands regain control of their bodies, news spreads swiftly around the camps. Within ten minutes, every single Undying loses the blackened color in their eyes. They pour out of their cages, freed by both Hercules and Uzziel, as he rips the cages to shreds while she picks the locks with her vines.

"Everyone is here!" Uzziel cries out cheerfully. She and Hercules fly and climb to the top of the mountain, along with several hundred of the Undying. "Thou hath saved them, Hercules!"

Hercules brushes off his shirt. His expression darkens as he forces himself to smile at Uzziel. "Aye. Without your command, I doubt the Undying would have willingly sworn fealty to a Titan. You helped me tremendously."

"I deserve very little praise," Uzziel says, blushing. "Now is no time for idle words! Come, we must return to the battlefield and- eeyah!"

The Archangel of Creation cries out in surprise as Hercules suddenly reaches out and slaps her backside, sending her tumbling to the ground. A moment later, he jumps on top of her and wrenches both of her arms around. She cries out in pain as he subdues her before she can react. "Ahh! Gods! Hercules, what art thou doing?! Stop at once!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Hercules murmurs. "Because of Valac, I'll have to accelerate my plans. Swear fealty to me, Earthmother, or I'll kill you right here."

Uzziel stops struggling. She tilts her head so she can stare at the Titan crouched atop her back. "But... then... from the beginning... thou intended to..."

"I did. Believe me, Earthmother. I do not wish to harm a single angel or Titan. Demons are my only enemy. However, I alone have the power to unite our forces. Anyone who does not bow before me is my enemy. That includes *you*."

Several Undying step closer. Uzziel tilts her head up. "Brother Long! Brother Klim! Help me! The Titan is going to kill me! He's..."

She trails off.

Each of the Undying stare at her, creepy smiles plastered across their faces. Their eyes glow, and they hold up their hands as if to say, *we will not interfere*.

"Brother... Klim...? No... no! Don't tell me... they..."

"Your brothers serve a new master now," Hercules says. His voice turns deadly calm as he slowly wraps one massive finger around her neck. "Now tell me, Earthmother. What is your answer?"

Part 150: Archangels and Emperors

Several minutes earlier.

Lucifer, the Emperor of Providence, darts back and forth as she evades Gabriel's concentrated holy energy blasts. The Archangel of Power fires dozens of bolts from both palms, narrowly missing the agile Emperor as she dodges from left to right.

"Hold still. Thou art only delaying the inevitable."

His voice, calm as a lake on a summer day, betrays no emotion. However, he narrows his eyes and glares at her with a slight hint of bubbling rage.

"Thy people slew my beloved sister, Uriel. An eye for an eye, demoness."

Lucifer backflips over two bolts of holy energy and winces as her foot slips on a patch of wet grass. She wrenches her ankle, but quickly uses her uninjured foot to dodge again. "Don't screw with me, Archangel! If you keep babbling, I'll break your jaw!"

"Thou lacketh a fraction of the power needed to accomplish such a feat," Gabriel murmurs. He motions with his hands, and an orb of light materializes above his head. It rapidly expands in size from a marble to a beach ball.

The orb begins to glow as bright as the sun. Lucifer's face turns ashen as the dazzling ball winds up to fire a massive blast of holy energy. "Oh, *devils*. That can't be good."

FWOOOOOM!

Gabriel palm-strikes the air, and his massive holy-ball unleashes all of its might toward the Emperor in a laser-like stream of holy energy. Lucifer jumps to the side and begins running on both hands and her one still-working foot. She dashes around Gabriel in a wide circle, through crowds of angels and demons alike, but his colossal beam of destruction rips up Heaven's Soil and chases after her. Several demons open their mouths to scream, but the moment the light sweeps over them, they disintegrate into ash.

As Lucifer circles Gabriel, her body begins to undergo dramatic changes. Her skin changes color from red to black. Her head quadruple in size, as do her teeth. Giant ears replace her horns, while her feet and hands shift into five-clawed wolf paws.

Within seconds, Lucifer completes her transformation from Demon Emperor into the biggest, meanest, most vicious-looking Hellhound in Heaven.

Lucifer digs her claws into the soil and instantly halts her momentum. Before Gabriel's holy laser can hit her, she charges straight at the Archangel and unleashes a terrifying roar.

"HARROOO!!"

Gabriel flinches as the massive animal rushes him. "Gods! What in the name of-?!"

The Archangel's laser tries to follow Lucifer, but her speed and agility quintuple thanks to her transformation. The Hellhound Emperor smashes against the forcefield protecting Gabriel with all her

strength, knocking the Archangel backward several feet. She swipes at him over and over, each strike tearing through his force field like a shredder devouring paper.

Gabriel dispels his magic orb, returning it to the aether. He stumbles backward and tries to stunt the enraged animal's movements, but much like a man trying to stop a Rottweiler with his bare hands, the effort proves futile.

"SNAAARR! AWRAHHR!"

Lucifer's fifty eyes lock onto Gabriel's. Her massive jaw snaps at his face over and over, and despite the Archangel's best effort, he can barely manage to contain her sheer power.

Several angels nearby, the ones whose demonic attackers evaporated into ash moments earlier, gape at the massive animal threatening to kill their brother. "Disregard the demons! Assist Gabriel! We can't afford to lose another Archangel today!"

The Cherub warriors charge Lucifer and Gabriel, but the moment they draw near, Lucifer instantly shoves away from Gabriel and pounces at the newcomers. Several of them shriek in fright, but they can't move fast enough to dodge the terrifying monster. Lucifer's jaws crush, rip and tear several men and women before they can react. Her bladed tail lashes around like a scorpion's and severs the heads of three Cherubs before they can defend themselves. She slams her paws on top of two other Cherubs and smashes them into the ground, shattering their bodies under the one-ton weight of her bulk.

"ISH THATT ALL YOU'VE GOTT?! FOOL-HISH SHICKENSH! WITNESH MY DEMONIC TRANSHFORMASHUN! COWER IN CHERROR!!"

Her animal mouth bellows out half-formed words, but even with her speaking inhibited, the meaning doesn't escape her enemies. The cherubs quake and shiver as Lucifer's monstrous aura explodes from her body even more forcefully than before.

Gabriel summons his holy greatsword. He charges the Hellhound from behind, but ten of Lucifer's eyes see him coming before he takes a single step. She instantly frontflips, spins around in midair, and pounces at the Archangel.

BOOM!

Lucifer's right paw slaps Gabriel to the side, sending him tumbling end over end. Gabriel's heavy armor grinds against the scorched earth as he struggles to his feet. Despite his best efforts, Gabriel proves no match for Lucifer's insane speed and strength. She jumps on Gabriel turns his left arm into a chew-toy, biting it with all of her strength.

"SKRRREEOW!"

Lucifer screams like a lion as her teeth pierce the barrier of holy energy protecting Gabriel's body. Still, even with more purified mana than any lower demon could handle surging into her brain, she manages to hold her own against the Archangel's unbelievable mana reserves.

With great difficulty, Gabriel grinds his right arm into the ground and shoves himself upward. He twists his waist and flings the Hellhound with all his strength, tearing his left arm off his shoulder and

sending Lucifer flying through the air. Instead of crashing into the dirt, she spins with catlike agility and lands expertly on her paws, then spits his limb on the ground.

"HARH! I KNEW YOU'D BLEED, ARK-AN-JELL! NEFFAR UNDERESHTIMATE THE EMPURR-UR OF PRUH-VUH-DENSH!"

Gabriel grits his teeth as he clutches his fresh, bloody stump. "Tch... long has it been since I felt pain. Thou art a fearsome creature... but no match for me. Not in a million eons."

Lucifer charges Gabriel again, but by the time she clears half the gap, the Emperor comes to a screeching halt and jumps backward in surprise. Gabriel's body begins to grow... grow... grow.

Fifteen feet. Twenty. Thirty.

Gabriel locks eyes with the Hellhound Emperor. Where before Lucifer once appeared a terrifying monster, soon she is little more than a tiny little chihuahua at his feet.

"Cosmic Expansion," Gabriel growls. Despite keeping his voice low, it manifests as a deafening boom to the ears of the tiny figures around him.

Demons and angels alike stare up at the expanding Archangel; The former in terror, and the latter in awe. Still, Gabriel's size increases, and within seconds he stands a hundred feet tall. Even Zeus, the largest of the Titans, barely reaches his waist.

A faint smile appears on Gabriel's lips. With his single remaining arm, the Archangel of Power leans down and grabs at the Hellhound beneath him.

"Come, little pup. I will demonstrate the true meaning of power to thee."

Lucifer's eyes widen at the building-sized hand reaching for her. She whimpers like a beaten mutt and quickly darts away, jumping into a nearby Burrower's hole.

Gabriel's hand scrapes the dirt. He digs in, crushing several grunts who couldn't dodge in time, and lifts a humongous pile of debris into the sky. After staring at it for a moment, the Archangel frowns.

"Hm. She escaped. What a shame."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Gabriel releases the ten-ton dirt clod and flicks his eyes around Heaven. Thanks to his hundred-foot vantage point, he's finally able to take note of the battle unfolding as he sweeps his eyes from Michael to Camael, and then finally to Raphael.

"By the gods! What power is my eldest brother about to unleash?"

Gabriel stares, wide-eyed, as Raphael prepares to activate one of his ultimate techniques.

Elsewhere on the battlefield.

Bael and Camael contest each other in an epic battle of the ages. The Duke of Pain leaps toward his Archangel opponent and push-kicks her tower shield, knocking her backward. She grinds her feet into Heaven's Soil and activates the power of Orion's Belt to hold herself in place as Bael punches and headbutts her shield over and over.

"You gonna hide behind that piece of metal forever, grandma?!"

Bael grabs the edges of the shield and yanks hards. However, instead of ripping it out of Camael's grasp, he only succeeds in pulling the Archangel toward him. With her momentum shifted, Camael inverts Bael's strength and swings Mjölfnir in a wide arc.

CRACK!

She brings the hammer down and smashes it against Bael's left shoulder, battering him to the right and flinging him into the dirt. Bael grinds to a stop and immediately jumps to his feet.

"Oh! You surprised me! I didn't think those creaky old bones could move like that!"

Camael scowls. "Shut it, demon! I've plenty more where that came from!"

Using the power of Hermes Boots, Camael charges Bael and clears the short gap instantly. She swings Mjölfnir toward his head, but Bael jerks his left arm up and blocks the blow at the last instant. He parries with a kick toward Camael's shin, but she drops her shield on top of his leg, grinding his foot into the dirt.

"Tch, you're too fast for me," Bael grunts.

"All thanks to my lightning boots," Camael smirks.

He and the old woman trade blows for several seconds. Her hammer strikes him, and his fists swing toward exposed areas, only for her to deflect them at the last instant.

Both appear evenly matched, but as the battle rages, Camael's breathing falters. She begins gasping as she tries to keep up with Bael's incredible stamina, but he never appears even slightly winded.

"Damn, girl! You're pretty strong, too!"

"Thank my belt for that!" Camael yells. She charges Bael again.

WHAM!

Camael hammers Bael's face, catching him off-balance and sending him hurtling to the side. His cocky smile vanishes as he inadvertently chews a mouthful of dirt.

"Gaah..." Camael gasps for breath. She staggers slightly and blinks as stars appear in her eyes. Her heart pounds like a jackhammer in her chest, but even with Bael slightly dazed, he's not in nearly as bad of condition as her.

"C-can't... can't keep this pace up..." Camael wheezes. She stares in horror as Bael pulls himself to his feet. A slight trickle of blood runs down the side of his mouth.

"Ah, fugg, yew knocked one'f mah teef out. Fuggin biff. I liked that toof. It wath my favorite toof."

Bael spits blood on the ground and rubs his jaw.

"Yew hit pwetty hawd, gwamma," Bael continues. He massages his jaw for a moment, then returns to speaking normally. "That club-thing hurts like an angry broodmother."

"It's a *hammer*, not a club, imbecile!" Camael roars. She leaps into the air, flaps her wings, and rushes Bael again. "I designed it to kill demons, and that's exactly what it will do!"

Camael tries to batter Bael again, but this time, he catches her off-guard. With a quick, almost flippant motion, he backhands her hammer and delivers a precise palm-strike to her solar plexus.

Thuk!

Bael evades Camael's shield and knocks the wind out of her, sending her tumbling backward. Her hammer flies out of her grasp as she loses her grip on it. It smashes into the dirt fifty feet away, sprays a small avalanche of dust in every direction, and startles several demons and angels battling nearby.

One of the grunt's eyes widens as he spots the enchanted weapon. "Oooh! Perfect timing!"

The little guy dives for the weapon and grabs its upraised handle. He starts to tug at it, but a moment later, a lethal amount of holy energy floods into his arms and travels to his heart, detonating every cell in his body like a grenade. The grunt's entrails spray in every direction and coat the nearby angels and demons with his remains.

"By the Creator!" One of the cherubs yells in astonishment.

"Oy! Keep away from that thing!" A demon Lord yells. "It's dangerous!"

"No, shit!" Another grunt yells.

Bael gapes at Camael's hammer for several seconds, giving his elderly opponent a chance to collect herself and jump to her feet. Camael presses her right palm against her chest and swoons for a moment as she struggles to regain her breath.

"F-foolish demon... Mjölnir... possesses millions of years of holy energy within its head. Only an imbecile would think themselves worthy of wielding it."

She aims her palm at Mjölnir, causing the divine weapon to leap from the dirt and sail into her grasp. Bael watches in wonder as she twirls it around and turns to face him.

"From the tale Hercules wove, it became apparent that thou art a most stalwart opponent, Duke of Pain. Since that is the case, then I will have to unleash every bit of my power if I hope to defeat thee."

Bael raises an eyebrow. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. You already knocked one of my teeth out. You're doing better'n most I've fought."

"Yet still, 'tis not enough," Camael murmurs.

The Archangel of Divination sucks in a deep breath. She kneels and coils power into her legs as she prepares to leap at Bael. An instant before she pounces, Camael freezes in place.

"What?! This feeling... something is coming!"

Camael's eyes widen as she jerks her head around. A horrible foreboding falls upon her as a dreadful aura spreads throughout the air.

"Impossible! Hercules told us-"

"Don't lose your concentration, grandma!" Bael roars. He charges Camael while she's distracted and slams his gut against her shield, knocking her off-balance. Camael yelps in surprise and flies backward. Her wings grind into the dirt, and her head slaps against the foot of a nearby demon Lord.

"Archangel!" The Lord yells. He motions with his hands and starts to summon the elemental power of fire, but at that moment, Sophia appears and rips his head off with a powerful blast of water. The Lord staggers and falls to his side, dead.

"Sister!" Sophia yells. She quickly yanks Camael to her feet, and Penelope appears beside her. The Giantess's armor no longer shines with a golden luster, as hardened and dried blood cakes its surface. "The demons keep coming! They're still pouring through Heaven's Gate! We can't disable it!"

Camael staggers woozily and barely acknowledges her sister's words. "Sophia. Forget all of that. Just now, I sensed the Reaper's presence!"

Sophia's face turns ashen. "You did?! But... I didn't sense anything..."

"'Twas only for an instant. Go now and seek out Raphael at once."

Sophia shakes her head. "No, no, Valac can't be back! He can't! Hercules said-"

"I know, but he might have been wrong," Camael replies, cutting the Valkyrie of Water off. "Take Penelope, find Raphael, and tell him, before it's too late!"

Bael stomps toward Camael, but pauses a few feet away to listen to her words. "Oh? Valac's still alive, eh? Coulda swore the boss took 'im out for good. That bastard's one sturdy bag of bones."

Camael glares at Bael and strikes a defensive pose. "It seems likely he survived. I don't sense him anymore, but he might be masking his presence. Before he returns, I will have to unleash all of my might against thee. No more games, Duke of Pain. Thy end has arrived."

A flicker of doubt crosses Camael's face. Worry spreads throughout her body as she wonders if she can, indeed, take out Bael. Having only knocked out one of his teeth, the Archangel of Divination appears uncertain of her ability to eliminate him.

Nevertheless, she grunts in determination. "Hmpf. Penelope, assist Sophia. While she warns Raphael, thou must-"

"No time for explanations!" Bael yells. He jumps toward Camael, taking her by surprise. "Fighting ain't fun if you hafta use your brain!"

Bael's body slams against Camael's shield. He wraps both arms around her defensive implement, digs his feet into the dirt, and tries to tear it off her body, along with her arm. Instead, Penelope swings her greatmace down and smashes the Duke in his head, sending a powerful shockwave throughout the nearby areas. Several demons and angels get tossed away, but Bael merely grunts as the weapon cracks his skull.

"Ow! Ow! You fuckin' bitch!"

Bael releases his right arm to grab at the Valkyrie, but at that moment, Camael aims Mjölnir at the sky, summoning a thundercloud overhead.

CRACK!

Lightning tears from the sky and electrifies her hammer. Camael slams it against Bael's left arm and shatters his elbow. Bael involuntarily releases her shield and tumbles to the right, unable to move his arm properly.

"Shit! Double-bitch!"

He grinds into the dirt and jumps to his feet again, but this time, his arm appears badly bent in the wrong direction. Camael smiles darkly at his dislocated elbow.

"It appears we *can* injure this demon."

"Great work, sis!" Penelope laughs. She flaps her wings and heads after Sophia. "I'll leave the rest to you!"

"Fuck, fuck, fuck! That really fuckin' hurt!" Bael snarls. He pauses for a moment to catch his breath, then grabs his broken arm and forcibly wrenches it back into place. A horrible popping sound erupts in his elbow, and within two seconds, he flexes his fingers to ensure they still work. However, his grip appears noticeably weaker than before.

"Maaaaan... gonna hafta crawl over to Belial and ask her to fix me up when I'm all done with these broads," Bael mutters. "What a pain in the ass."

"Sorry!" Camael says mockingly. She keeps both eyes fixated on Bael as Penelope leaves. "Next time, I'll strike thee so hard that thou shalt not reawaken!"

Michael's eyes flick in every direction. A shimmer in the air catches his attention, and he immediately spins to face it.

There!

A translucent, nearly invisible demon swipes his claws against Michael's iron-gripped sword. The Archangel presses against the ground with his feet and slashes down, intending to behead his attacker. Instead, his weapon glances off his foe's armored scales, but it has the desired effect of flinging his attacker backward.

"Gah!"

Agares cries out in surprise as the Archangel sends him flying. The Duke's camouflage wears off, while he lands on his back in a small patch of grass. His armor grinds against Heaven's Soil, but he doesn't suffer any injuries. Immediately, the reptilian demon uses his tail to flip onto his feet, and he takes three steps back.

The Duke of Reptiles eyes Michael warily. Because of his reptilian physiology, he doesn't sweat even with exhaustion wracking his entire body. "Vepar!"

The female, again, Michael thinks to himself. He glances around, but with all the chaos of hundreds of small-scale battles in every direction, it's difficult to pick out the movements of her chemical trail. At the last second, he spots her. Vepar hugs the ground and appears as a deadly poison mist blending in with the grass. She arrives at Michael's feet and leaps toward his face, but the Archangel of Courage easily dodges. He beats his wings as hard as possible and slides in the opposite direction, blowing her away with a gust of wind.

"Urgh!"

Vepar cries out in annoyance as her poison-gas form gets pushed several feet away from Michael. Even with that momentary distraction, the Archangel keeps his gaze firmly locked on Agares.

"Agares, the demon who humiliated me. I know thy name. I plucked it from the lips of several demons I've captured over the last five centuries. Thy people are a species of backstabbers, but it took more work than I found preferable to extract the name of the one who took my right arm from me."

Michael flicks his gaze to the limb hanging uselessly at his side. It appears shriveled and dried up, like a prune which has laid in the desert for far too long. If one were to reach over and squeeze with all their strength, they might tear it off without any trouble.

"Is this the most thou can't accomplish? Thou hath done little more than slow me down. After I shatter thy defenses, thou shalt be little more than a bloodied snake writhing in the grass. The torture I inflict upon thee will be most exquisite. I'll take my time in peeling the flesh from thy bones and allow thy screams to send tingles of horror through any who hear."

Agares tenses up as he gazes into the cold, monstrous eyes of the Archangel. "I never intended to beat you, Michael. Slowing you down was always my goal. That's why Satan picked a Duke and a Baron, because he didn't want to face you right now. Your threats of torture are empty if all the angels perish today."

Michael narrows his eyes. "Oh? I see. Are thy people that terrified of me? They should be. I slew many dragons and Titans during the primordial era. Have thee any idea what a dragon is? The mightiest demon would pale in comparison to Jörmungandr. I lack memories of those glorious days, but Raphael has regaled me with tales of the dragon mother's nigh-infinite power. Compared to her splendor, crushing a legion of bugs is almost... *beneath me*."

At the mention of *dragons*, Agares pales slightly, but Michael seems to misunderstand him. After all, how can the Archangel know that a dragon was responsible for the demons' sudden power increase? At the sight of Agares' fearful expression, Michael grins in delight.

Hah. It seems my description was quite vivid. This little Duke finally understands how weak and frail his people are compared to the ancient wyrms. The Emperors do, indeed, possess a small modicum of power, but 'tis nothing compared to the dragons whom I've faced before. Raphael confirmed as much.

Michael glances around and picks out several key battles, including Zeus battling Belial, Satan struggling against Raphael, and Bael duking it out against Camael.

"Tch. To think thy egos hath inflated so much over the last few millennia! A direct assault on Heaven?! What foolishness! The Angels survived the first light of eternity, the primordial era, the war of the dragons, the war of the Titans, and countless other struggles preceding and following those dark days. Compared to the innumerable losses we've suffered, thy people shall be little more than footnotes in our scrolls!"

The Archangel of Courage raises his sword. He presses his teeth together and snarls at Agares. "Were it not for thy deceit, Uriel alone would have slain every last one of thy fellow bloodskins in the caves. By my sister's name, as well as Samael's... I swear... I will avenge them!"

Michael flaps his wings. He instantly charges at Agares, turning the lizard-demon's blood to ice. Agares quickly holds up his arms and tucks himself into a ball as Michael's sword transforms into a whirlwind of steel.

Ting ting ting, shik!

Michael's weapon bounces off Agares scales a hundred times within two seconds, only for it to suddenly find a chink in the reptile's armor. Michael's eyes widen greedily as he plunges his blade deep into Agares' back, causing the reptile to howl in pain.

"Gaaahh!"

An instant later, Michael yanks his sword out and kicks Agares in the face, flinging him backward and breaking his defensive posture. Agares lands in the dirt, but his heart palpitates as the Archangel lunges at him again!

Michael cackles maniacally. "Hahaha! Thy death is upon thee, little bloodskin!"

Agares rolls to the side and slaps his tail against the ground, launching himself to the right. He spins in midair and lands on his feet, then quickly dashes away. With a wave of his hands, he activates his camouflage and crouches low to the grass.

I need to put some distance between us! Michael is too fast! I thought his sword couldn't pierce my scales, but that isn't the case at all! He's way beyond the likes of- AH!

Agares screeches to a halt as the Archangel of Courage suddenly slams into the ground before him. The Archangel's wings twitch, allowing him to jump toward the startled Duke.

"Dodge this, little gecko!"

Michael's arm becomes a blur. His sword slashes and stabs at every point on Agares' body. Seconds later, several fountains of blood erupt between Agares's scales, causing the Duke to stumble backward.

"Ahhh! Ahh!!!"

He screams in pain and covers his vulnerable eyeballs with his hands, but he hasn't the speed to escape, nor the strength to retaliate.

"Pahaha! Look at how the snail curls into his shell! Cowering in the dark is all thou can hope to accomplish!"

Unlike ordinary swords forged by humans thousands of years after the War in Heaven, Michael's enchanted blade never dulls, dings, or dents as it eviscerates Agares from head to toe. Camael's divine magic makes it unbreakable, allowing Michael to unleash massive amounts of battle strength without worrying about losing his only weapon.

Suddenly, a light flashes in Agares' mind!

If I can't escape the Archangel; then it's time for desperate measures!

Agares continues to shield his face, but deep in his stomach, he conjures a ball of fetid filth, formed from the frothing mixture of many cobra poisons.

As Michael cackles maniacally, Agares flings his arms apart, startling his opponent.

"BLEECKK!"

An eruption of black poison, resembling tar, erupts from his throat and fires at Michael. Instinctively, the Archangel slices and dices the point-blank attack, only to spread it in every direction. It sprays his face, arms, chest, and legs, causing him to flap his wings and fly backward.

"Agh! My eyes! What is this abominable-?!"

With only one hand available, Michael blearily tries to hold his sword and use his thumb to paw the horrid venom out of his eyes, but a moment later, his skin begins to boil and fester. He stumbles backward and screams in rage as Agares' trump card starts chewing at his mana reserves. "Eeeuughh! Gaaah!! It burns!!!"

Agares staggers slightly as his blood loss starts to slow. His regenerative reptilian powers work to stop the bleeding, but his gashed-apart muscles ache like no tomorrow. "G-gotta keep the pressure up... can I kill him?"

Without wasting effort on thoughts and worries, Agares quickly charges toward Michael. He leaps at the Archangel and swipes his paws at his opponent's head, intending to finish him in one blow.

Michael stops screaming.

He grins.

For the Archangel of Courage, time slows to an absolute crawl. His agonized movements cease, and he calmly stands up.

Michael gazes with contempt at the reptile pouncing toward his face. He flicks his eyes to the left and spots the light shifting of grass, betraying Vepar's poison-body form.

Fools.

Michael shakes his head.

From the beginning of this battle, my goal has been to break this bloodskin's fighting spirit. After finally gaining the upper hand on me, he believes he's about to win.

How... conceited.

With my ultimate Omni-Perception, how could slugs ever stand a chance? In my eyes, my opponents might as well be wading through quicksand. Of course, only my arm can move fast enough to follow my eyes, but that is enough. I need only to stand in place to kill anyone who draws near.

Slowly, deliberately, Michael stabs his blade into the ground. He takes a few minutes to clean his eyes and face, then smirks as he grabs his sword again.

Agares has scarcely moved an inch.

Oops, Michael thinks to himself. He raises his sword above Agares' head and turns it sideways. *It seems my hand... **slipped.***

Michael swings his weapon down. The flat of the blade smashes against Agares' skull, pounding him into the dirt.

Agares hits the ground faster than his mind can react. A moment later, all of his bones scream in pain, while his head spins in a daze.

Hit... whuh hit... muh...?

Vepar, still in her poison-body form, stares at Michael in shock.

What was that? One second, Michael was screaming in pain and rubbing his eyes. Then, when Agares jumped at him, he got pounded into the ground. Look! Michael's face is clean, too! How did he... what did he...?!

A sinister grin spreads across Michael's face.

"Thou art a thousand eons too early to challenge me, bloodskins. Ah, but even if thou possessed enough time to prepare, thy death would be the inevitable result. Thou art a flea trying to stand against the might of a hurricane."

Agares twitches his fingers and toes. The old man gasps for breath as he shakily pulls himself to his feet. His left eyelid squeezes shut. Bloody entrails flow from it, evidence that he lost the eye. Dozens of teeth, including his two prominent fangs, lie in ruins. Most sit snapped and shattered inside his skull. Several appear to have broken free and embedded into the tops and bottoms of his jaw, sending waves of additional pain into his head.

"Muh... my... kull..."

He gazes in horror at the Archangel towering over him. Michael makes no move to end the battle, but instead holds his sword away from his body, spreading his arm out like a wing. "Have thee any secret abilities, little one? After I finish with thee, I should very much like to slaughter one of thy Emperors. Do not keep me waiting."

Agares's thoughts turn sluggish.

Secret... trump cards... secret... do I... did I... have any of those?

Slowly, the Duke of Reptiles turns his head to the left. Satan and Raphael shout obscenities at one another only a hundred paces away. In the other direction, Gabriel's massive, towering body expands to over a hundred feet tall as he battles Lucifer.

Did I... have anything... like that?

Agares finally nods.

I did. I do. But... they are insufficient. My body is too broken. How can I stand against a foe like Michael? If only I had-

"Uwaaah!"

A booming voice cries out from the skies. Michael jerks his head up and gasps as Zeus's forty-foot form comes tumbling from above. Michael flaps his wings and retreats fifty steps, allowing the Titan King to

crash into the ground where Michael stood only a second before. His back hits the ground, making his head whip backward and batter against a stone. He slides across the grass, creating a humongous gulley in his wake.

Atop Zeus, Belial giggles cutely. She hops off his face, backflips multiple times, and dives between his legs. Two seconds later, the Emperor of Passion crawls under the Titan King's back, coils strength into her fist, and uppercuts his spine with all her strength.

THOOOM!

"AAAAUUGH!!"

Zeus screams in pain as the strongest Emperor launches him into the sky. She immediately coils strength into her legs, jumps after him, and punts him to the side, sending Zeus spinning and careening into an unsuspecting wall of cherubs. A hundred angels scream in fright as the largest Titan sails into their ranks and crushes them to death.

Belial lands on her feet and stares after the Titan King. When he doesn't immediately jump to his feet, she nods.

"I didn't mean to kill those angels. Tch. Why'd they have to be in the way?! Stupid, stupid chickens! Jeez. At least Satan will praise me. I guess that's something."

Belial grumbles for a moment, then scans her surroundings. She blinks in surprise as she spots not only Michael, but the badly beaten and bruised Agares as well.

"A-Agares! Oh, devils! Are you okay?! You were only supposed to slow Michael down; not fight him!"

Agares raises a single shaky thumb. "Uh... uh huh... I d-did my best... uoohh..." He sags to his knees and gasps for breath. Seconds later, Agares's reptilian form wears off, returning him to an even more miserable base demon form. With his eye still missing and dozens of bones broken, Agares looks like a toddler could finish him off.

"Why hello there, bloodskin," Michael sneers. "I remember thy face well. Thou were the female who dared battle me. I left thee a broken, beaten mess. Still, I have yet to repay thee for stealing my precious *toys*."

Michael glances at Agares, then at Belial. Several seconds pass as he debates whether to finish with the former, or move onto the latter.

"Bah. This one has no more fight left in him. Thou shalt be my new opponent."

Michael raises his blade, but as he does, a cold light appears in Belial's eyes.

"Agares is one of my best friends. Since you left him in this state, I'll make sure to repay you in kind."

Belial's arms transform into two razor-sharp blades. She drops into a defensive posture, mirroring Michael.

The Archangel of Courage smirks. "It would be unbecoming of me not to allow a wench the first blow. Come, then. Do thy best."

"Certainly!"

Belial flashes a cheerful smile.

"I just hope you can endure it, little birdy!"

* * *

Raphael and Satan clash for the fiftieth time. Once again, the Devil attacks the eldest Archangel furiously, only for Raphael's illusion to evaporate into the air. Satan jerks his head around and spots a new Raphael standing twenty feet away. "Stop with the tricks, grandpa! Lemme stick you in a coffin already; you dried up husk!"

Raphael doesn't smile. He appears winded, and the beads of sweat on his face betray his exhaustion. "Tell me, Satan... what technique allowed thee to escape the Cosmic Realm?"

"Are you still on about that?! You're a real hoot!"

Satan lashes his vectors at Raphael, but the old man merely takes a step backward, escaping the invisible limbs' maximum attack range. Because of his status and age, he already knows many things about the Vectors, including their strengths and weaknesses.

Satan, Samael says, appearing in Satan's mind. Do not allow my brother to trick thee. He hides his real body elsewhere, somewhere nearby. His astral projections and substitutions consume a significant amount of mana. Thou may attack them all day to wear him down, but the time cost will be enormous. Thy troops require assistance.

"Hmph," Satan mutters under his breath. "You think I don't know that? If the old man's hiding, where will I find him? It's an open plain, for devil's sake!"

There are many cherubs in the skies. Raphael might choose to blend in with them.

"Not a chance. Your Vectors already scanned the chickens above us. He ain't up there."

Thou art likely correct. The second possibility is that he may have buried himself underground.

"Oh?"

Satan glances at the soft, torn-up soil surrounding him. Despite the millions of demons and angels battling, all the combatants intentionally gave the two faction leaders a wide berth, leaving a vast, arena-like circle around Satan and Raphael.

"Tch. There's an awful lot of underground here, though. What's the range on the old man's astral projection?"

Samael's expression darkens. *Several miles.*

"What?! Several miles- you stupid shit!"

Satan hisses angrily at the Archangel inside him, causing Raphael to raise an eyebrow.

Hm? Why does the Devil argue with himself? Especially in the middle of battle, 'tis quite the bizarre sight.

Enraged, Satan leaps at Raphael's projection again. This time, when he strikes the old man, clear frustration erupts on Satan's face. "You're starting to piss me off, old man! Where the fuck are you?!"

As Satan's Vectors connect with Raphael, something shocking happens. Satan strikes solid matter. His Vector rips through Raphael's body, spraying blood out of the old man's back.

Satan jerks back, and his eyes widen in disbelief. Raphael's pupils shrink as he gazes in horror at the invisible arm protruding through his stomach.

"A... ah... how...?"

It takes Satan three whole seconds before his mind starts thinking thoughts again. "Huh? Did I get him? Ha... haha! Hahahaha!! What a shocker! I can't believe I did it! Your time's up, grandpa!"

Cackling with glee, the Devil pounces upon Raphael. In the blink of an eye, Satan crushes Raphael's head with his hands, spraying the Archangel's brains in every direction. Satan laughs maniacally as he waits for the power of the Archangel to surge inside of him.

"Hahahaha!! I killed the leader of the angels! I finally did it!!"

From within Satan's mind, Samael speaks. Concern laces his voice. *Nay. Something isn't right. That attack should not have- ah! By the Creator! Thou hath fallen into my brother's trap!*

Samael's voice trembles as the Archangel of Change rapidly pieces together what happened. A moment later, Raphael materializes beside Satan, a huge grin on his face.

"Ohoho! How unfortunate, young devil! By lowering thy mental defenses, thou hath allowed me to yank thy mind into the Illusory Realm! Ah, such is the folly of youth!"

Satan's mind blanks out again. "The Illusory Realm?! What are you up to now, old bat?! I ain't falling for any of your tricks! Not this time!"

Raphael's grin deepens. A moment later, his face shifts into Michael's. Raphael's disgusting grin appears even more horrific on the face of the Archangel of Courage. "Illusions are a fickle thing, my boy. Once thy frustrations boiled over, I took control of thy sensory organs. Now, thou art dancing in my grasp! Beware, lest ye enter the second Illusory Realm! I assure thee, escape becomes quite impossible once one reaches the third."

Revulsion fills Samael's voice. *No... no... no... my brother's ultimate technique! Satan, we must break free of Raphael's spell. Thou art only trapped within the first Realm. The second will cause thee to doubt thy senses, but the third... the third will shatter thy mind! Nobody can survive it!*

Satan punches Raphael, but the old man turns into mist again. "I can survive anything! I'm immortal!"

Raphael speaks softly, his voice surrounding Satan from all sides. "Self-regenerating, yes. Immortal, nay. None are truly immortal. All beings can, and likely will, die. Where there is a beginning, there is an end."

Suddenly, ten copies of Raphael materialize around Satan. Each of them charges the Devil, and when Satan smirks and starts to scatter them into the wind, his heart gets a jolt as several of the Archangel's

clones explode into blood and gore. Two of them skip past Satan's defenses and land their blows, knocking Satan for a loop and tossing him into the dirt.

"What?! These guys ain't illusions, but flesh and blood bodies?!"

Satan plants his Vectors in the dirt and launches himself in the sky. However, as he soars through the air, Raphael materializes in front of him with a fist held at the ready.

CRACK!

Raphael catches the Devil by surprise and lands a decisive punch, knocking Satan out of the air and punting him back to the ruddied soil below. Satan collides with the dirt and grinds to a stop, bewilderment on his face.

The First Illusory Realm allows Raphael's illusions to manifest into reality, Samael explains. My brother's soul is far stronger than any other being. His illusions work by infecting the soul of his opponent and gradually wearing them down. Each illusory strike attacks thy soul, not thy body. Thy wounds are nonexistent, but over time, thy mind shall surely shatter.

Satan gnashes his teeth. He mutters under his breath, "Why didn't you bring this up sooner? I should kill myself to regenerate from scratch."

Samael sighs. *That will not allow thee to escape. Thy own soul is different from those consumed by thy power. My brother's ultimate technique has only one weakness, in that it will take some time to cripple thy soul. However, once it does, thy death will become assured.*

"Tch. So you're saying I... I could actually die? Permanently?"

Samael's voice lowers and becomes almost a whisper.

Aye.

Satan stares at Raphael for a moment, then wipes blood off his lip.

"Heh. So be it. Always did love a good challenge."

Satan switches to defense. Raphael's clones appear much more frequently, sometimes with slightly altered versions of his face, but other times they change to entirely different angels and demons.

"Thou received quite the mental shock a few years ago!" One of Raphael's clones yells as he fires a weak bolt of holy energy. Satan easily dodges it, but in doing so, he jumps right into the arms of a clone of Uzziel. The Uzziel clone aims several vines at Satan and binds his legs, causing him to trip and fall. She continues speaking, instead of the Raphael clone. "Hercules spoke of thy mate perishing at the hands of Valac! I can only imagine how devastated thou must have felt!"

Satan snarls. "Don't you dare talk about Nerissa in front of me, you wrinkled prune!" He rips the Uzziel clone to shreds with his Vectors, but immediately, another one reforms several feet away, laughing into her palm.

Do not react to Raphael's provocations, Samael warns Satan. My brother is many things, but a mind-reader is not among them. He can only piece together information given to him from various sources,

including thy replies to his illusions. The more Raphael learns about thee, the more holes he can poke in thy soul.

Satan reaches down and tries to pull apart the weeds wrapping around his legs, but their iron-like grip stumps him. "Gahh!! If this Uzziel isn't the real one, how are her powers working on me?! These vines are even tougher than the real deal!"

Raphael's illusions grow in power once thou entereth the first Illusory Realm. Before, he could only make faint apparitions in the air to provoke thee. Now, their power comes from thy own imagination.

Satan pauses to stare at the vines coiled around his leg. "What... what do you mean? These vines ain't real?"

Nay. They are merely an illusion. In reality, my brother seized up thy legs by infiltrating the pathways of thy mind. The vines are his way of deceiving thee. Thou shalt tear at them endlessly, but only by removing the source of his illusions can thou escapeth their restraints.

"Spawn of a broodmother..."

Satan trails off. He raises his head and stares at the giggling Uzziel clone, while several emotions pass over his face. "How do I break Raphael's control?"

There are three main methods. First, thou couldn't attempt to cleanse thy soul of his corruption. I could perform such a feat by using my magic, but t'would take too long, and it would require thee to stand perfectly still. Second, if thou could locate his main body and kill it, the illusions would stop. Over time, the damage to thy soul would heal. Such is the most optimal path. Third, thou could attempt to combat my brother's soul directly, destroying it before he destroys thine. The only problem is...

Samael trails off for a moment.

...My brother's soul is the mightiest in the universe. Such a tactic would prove impossible. Engaging in direct combat with his soul would result in a swift death for thee. However, there is a fourth possibility.

"Yeah? What's that?"

Flee. If thou escapeth the range of my brother's illusions, they will cease to affect thee. This method will only succeed during the first illusory realms, but not the second and third, since thy body will become immobile and helpless.

Satan snorts. "Oh, sure. Run away with my tail tucked between my legs. How about *no*? I'll find Raphael's main body and rip his head off. That sounds much more fun!"

A few moments pass. The Devil closes his eyes and focuses on the stirrings within his mind. Soon, the vines wrapping around his legs collapse into dust. He jumps to his feet and sways around for a moment before regaining his balance.

"Yo! Raphael! Where are you hiding, grandpa? I'm comin' for ya!"

"We're right here," Three of Raphael's clones say in unison. Each of them sports a different expression. The one on the left smiles creepily, while the middle one stares blankly, and the rightmost one frowns. "It

seems thou have uncovered a method for breaking my illusions. Unfortunately, once inside the first Realm, the chances of breaking free are null. Many have tried and failed, and thou are not special in the slightest."

The Raphael on the right narrows his eyes and glares at Satan suspiciously. "One thing is bothering me, Satan. Breaking free of those vines wasn't something just anyone could do. Luck? A stroke of brilliance? Perhaps... something else? Thou hath been speaking to someone for a while now. Who is it?"

Satan growls in his throat. "Wouldn't you like to know!"

He pounces at Raphael and tears apart the three clones, but the moment he finishes, his head starts to swim. The bloodied corpses of Raphael's illusions linger, giving the impression that they were real flesh and blood bodies.

I warned thee already! Samael growls. *Do not allow my brother to antagonize thy mind! His soul is far mightier than thine. If thou should'st enter the Second Realm...*

"I know, I know!"

Veins bulge on Satan's forehead. He curls up his lips and releases a fraction of his rage, but directs most of it at himself instead of Samael. Satan's punches the ground in frustration before raising his head to look for the next set of apparitions.

"If killing one of these phantoms will only hurt me, then maybe you were right after all. Maybe fleeing is my best option."

Samael's voice tightens. *During the Primordial Era, my brother's mana reserves were a million times greater than now. His range was too vast for any to escape his clutches. For now, I highly recommend it.*

"Fine. I'll escape, and then-"

Satan starts to run away, but as he speaks, his right leg plunges over the edge of an embankment, into a deep lake, startling him. The Devil trips and falls forward, splashing into the body of water without being able to stop himself.

"Bloody hell! Where the fuck did this come from?!"

He quickly turns and swims toward the embankment to pull himself up, but as he does, his strength diminishes rapidly.

By the Creator... Satan. Thou hath entered the second Illusory Realm! This lake is false, borne from thy memories and experiences.

Satan grabs the grass at the edge of the water and gasps as he struggles to pull himself up. "Rrrrgh! False?! You've gotta be shitting me..."

The Devil arrives on solid land, but his entire body increases in weight, as if several millstones were yanking him to the ground. With great effort, he manages to lift himself to a standing position.

"Gotta... gotta get away..." Satan mumbles. He blinks his eyes, and they begin to droop as a strange sense of exhaustion overtakes him. "Fuck. I could go for a nap right about now..."

Watch out! Behind-

Samael cries out in alarm, but Satan's mind moves too sluggishly to react. Several watery limbs burst out of the lake and grab hold of Satan. A second later, they yank him backward, plunging him into the frigid depths. With icy liquid slapping his face, Satan gurgles incomprehensibly and begins to struggle. He turns his head around and belches air bubbles as he spots Poseidon, the Sea-King. The massive demigod cackles and grabs Satan, crushing the demon with unrelenting strength.

"You thought you could escape me, little bloodskin?! Impossible! The sea is my home! Wherever there is water, I will arise! Now, beg for mercy as I overwhelm thee with the might of Atlantis!"

Satan wriggles and writhes. His Vectors barely manage to annoy the Titan, while his mind turns to mush as the water threatens to drown him.

Satan! Thou must remain alert! This Titan is merely an illusion! Even if 'tis born of the Second Realm, thou can escape its grasp! After the Second Realm, my brother need not waste his mana, for thy mind will supply thy greatest fears of its own volition! Do not feel fear, and this phantom will dissipate!

Despite Samael's warning, Satan continues to stare at the Titan squeezing him like a vice. He struggles with all his strength, but the more he does, the mightier the Titan's grip becomes.

Suddenly, the water darkens noticeably. A pitch-black haze spreads throughout the bottomless abyss, shrouding the Titan's face into obscurity. Poseidon squeezes even harder, forcing Satan to vomit blood into the water around him.

I... I can't believe it, Samael mutters. Satan has already arrived within The Third Realm! How... how could Satan possess such a weak soul?! Even the frailest angel and Titan fought for several days against Raphael's ultimate technique! Are Satan's insecurities so great that he cannot overcome them? Was he doomed before he began?

Satan's thoughts vanish into the ether. He loses his ability to form coherent, rational decisions, and instead struggles like a bear caught in a trap. Mindlessly, robotically, he wastes all of his strength on trying to escape via brute force. However, his efforts only strengthen Raphael's power.

Soon, even the sensation of squeezing disappears. Poseidon vanishes, and the blackness engulfs Satan as he continues to writhe and squirm.

Tsk. 'Tis too late, now. His soul is nearing its breaking point, Samael says to himself bitterly. Bah. I've lost contact with all of the souls in Satan's body. I doubt he could self-detonate even if he wanted. To think, the mighty Devil would reach his end in such a pitiful state.

From the depths of blackness, a single piercing ray of light appears. It illuminates a spot of the floor, and Raphael walks into it, like a performer onto a stage. He claps his hands slowly and grins, though pangs of agony also tear across his face.

"Haha... oh, Satan. To think I could have saved many of my brethren's lives had I merely used my ultimate technique on thee from the start. Never did I imagine thy people would prove so troublesome. After I eradicate thy kin from Earth, I will enter exile for ten generations to atone for my failures. Even that isn't enough, but I must return to safeguard those who will survive this war."

Satan says nothing. He lies on the ground, twitching uncontrollably.

Raphael's expression turns sorrowful. "Bah. Naturally, thou hath nothing to say. Well, I shall finish thee off, just as I did a million other soul manipulators before thee. In the end, thou were little more than a speck in my eye."

Raphael walks over to Satan, grabs the lifeless demon by his collar, and hoists him into the air.

Samael watches in horror as the old man raises his other palm and prepares to lunge it toward Satan's chest.

No... no!! What can I do?! Must I stand here and watch in silence as Satan dies?! Is this the where my revenge ends; watching the one who slew my kin get off scot-free?!

Raphael's palm flies toward Satan's chest.

WHUMP.

With a mighty palm-strike, Raphael strikes the core of Satan's soul, sending it rocketing out of his body.

"...What?!"

Raphael gasps.

He drops Satan's body and staggers backward in horror.

Instead of Satan's blood-red soul, a brilliant white entity floats in the air. Within seconds, the formless being, one born of light, coalesces into a vaguely angel-shaped figure. Wings sprout from its back, along with a masculine body structure and appearance.

"I missed?" Raphael asks nobody in particular. "I struck true, but t'wasn't Satan's soul that flew out! Nay, this appears to be one of my kin! He must be one of the thousands trapped within the Devil!"

The Archangel of Wisdom stares at the being floating in the air, but no defined facial or body features appear on it, stupefying him as to its identity.

Samael blinks. He stares, confused, at Raphael's astonished face, as well as Satan's limp body laying on the ground. The Archangel of Change hovers freely in the air, unencumbered by the sensation of gravity or other physical forces.

I... I am... free...?

Immediately, the wall of darkness shrouding Satan vanishes. Raphael jerks his head around in every direction, gawking as the third illusory Realm dissolves into the ether.

"What? What?! B-but... I destroyed the Devil's soul! Never, in all my life...!!"

Satan's eyes bolt open. He jerks his face off the ground and gasps for air as life surges into his body. He scrambles backward, putting distance between himself and Raphael.

"I'm alive?!"

"Thou art alive?!" Raphael echoes. "What madness is this?"

Satan, Raphael, and Samael all reappear in Heaven once again. All traces of the illusory Realm vanish, leaving the three of them bewildered as to what's happened.

Samael hovers in midair. A strange tingling pain assaults his body, while eons of memories flip through his brain as he tries to comprehend the events of the last several minutes.

Raphael struck Satan. As I recall, that was the final blow, the one that, without fail, always slew a soul manipulator. Raphael was the mightiest Archangel when it came to dealing with stray soul manipulators. But... what changed? What caused him to slip up, today?

The tingling pain intensifies, allowing waves of agony to spread throughout Samael's chest. He glances at his hands and gasps. *By the Creator! I can see through my flesh and bone! Am I a ghost? A spirit? No! I must be... an errant soul!*

This realization instantly lights a fire in Samael's heart.

One's soul cannot survive outside of a physical body. Since Raphael knocked me out of Satan, that means I have only seconds to live before the Creator elevates me to the Great Beyond! I must find a new host. A body, right! That's it!

Immediately, Samael's eyes dart around the battlefield. Millions of angels, demons, Titans, and monsters fight one another. Dead bodies lay scattered across the ground as far as the eye can see.

A corpse will be of little use to me. I must possess a living being — the closer to my original biology, the better. Therefore... an Ophanim would be for the best. Alas, for Raphael slew all of my fellow Ophanim! A Cherub or Seraph will have to suffice.

Several demons and Cherubs battle nearby, but one female angel gasps for breath and pulls away from the fight. Deep wounds stretch across her chest and back. Her armor lies in shreds.

Samael evaluates her for a moment. *Sister Julias. She's too injured for my liking.*

A different Cherub, a male this time, stands outside of a small encirclement. He barks orders at several angels, guiding them as they surround a ground of scythers and fire-type demons. Unlike the woman, he appears to be in peak form.

Ah, brother Hiraldo. He will do!

Samael darts toward Hiraldo, covering the distance at the speed of thought. Hiraldo starts to fire off another command to his comrades, only to pause mid-sentence as a strange presence engulfs his body.

Huhk! What is- who dares attack me from behind?

Pardon me, brother Hiraldo. I must borrow thy body.

What? This voice... I recognize it!

Tis I, Samael.

Samael?! But thou perished millennia ago! We all saw-

Sorry, Hiraldo, but thou art my enemy, now. Quietly fade away, if thou please.

Hiraldo's mind converses with Samael, but at the Archangel's words, confusion erupts in the cherub warrior's mind.

Fade away? Brother? What dost thee- AHHH! My head! It burns!

The incredible power of the Archangel of Change immediately dominates Hiraldo's soul, taking control of his brother's body in the blink of an eye.

Samael as he takes his first breath in several years. "Ahh! It worked!"

Taking over Hiraldo's body causes Samael no grief. Ever since receiving his old memories, the Archangel of Change gazes upon his formerly beloved brothers and sisters with hatred and disdain. They are not the Ophanim. They were, instead, the ones who slaughtered the Ophanim... as well as his beloved sisters, Muriel and Cassiel.

Samael stares at the cherubs encircling the demons for a moment. Then, he turns around to gaze at Raphael, only a few hundred steps away.

Brother.

* * *

Meanwhile, Raphael stares at Satan in shock. A thousand possibilities pass through his mind as he tries to comprehend what's happened. However, the moment the Illusory Realm dissipates, he loses sight of that strange phantom spirit. If he could inspect it, he might understand how his third illusory Realm failed.

"Satan! Thou art truly a servant of the damned...!"

Raphael bristles with anger.

"What unholy spell didn't thee use to break free of the Third Illusory Realm?! I held thy life in the palm of my hands! No soul manipulator has ever survived my ultimate technique! None of them!!"

Satan keeps his distance and stares at Raphael warily.

"Like I know! Bahaha! Maybe you're just getting old! You don't got the same golden touch anymore, bub!"

Despite his fierce bravado, a hint of cold terror brushes against Satan's mind. The Devil's pupils shrink as he tries to wrap his head around the previous events.

I died. Definitely. I know what dying feels like, and this time wasn't any different. Poseidon crushed me to death, but then... I revived? Maybe Samael was wrong! Maybe if I self-detonate, I can regenerate my soul after all!

"Good job, Samael," Satan mutters. "Seems I was right, after all. Whaddya got to say to that, bub?"

Satan grins and waits for Samael's limp-wristed reply, but instead receives silence.

"Hey. You ignorin' me?" Satan asks. He keeps his voice low and both eyes on Raphael, but still, Samael doesn't reply. "I'm talkin' to you!"

Several seconds pass. The cold terror at the back of Satan's mind intensifies.

Sunnofabitch... don't tell me the soul I used up was Samael's soul! Spawn of a broodmother!! Without him... without ol' Sammy...

Satan balls his hands into fists. Anger boils in his gut as he glares at the old man.

I bet Sammy sacrificed himself to save me! Of course, he would! That's the kind of guy he is! FUCK! I can't let him die in vain! Maybe if I attack the old man, this'll be his real body. Yeah! If I can kill Raphael right here and now, it'll all be worth it...

Satan coils power into his legs, but his expression turns rough as he realizes Samael's Vectors are gone. That realization drives home Satan's anger further, and he quickly chooses a substitute by summoning Poseidon's Octopus Form. Eight watery hands sprout from Satan's back, rippling in the air as they coil around him protectively.

Raphael's pale expression vanishes. He takes a battle stance and sighs in annoyance. *I'll have to force Satan into the Illusory Realm once again. Killing his physical body won't accomplish anything, and I'm not certain I could pull it off with my current strength. If the Illusory Realm fails again, then I'll have to assume the Devil is somehow immune to its effects.*

"Satan!"

An unfamiliar voice cries out from behind Raphael and the Devil. Both of them turn to stare at the speaker, a cherub, in confusion.

Hirald, a member of Heaven's legions, flies toward Satan with an urgent look on his face. Immediately, Satan raises his guard and groans inwardly. *Oh, great. Reinforcements.*

"It's me!" The Cherub yells. He lands a short distance away from Satan and gestures behind himself. Suddenly, eight rocks levitate into the air, hovering as if clutched by invisible forces. "Samael!"

Raphael blinks. "What?"

Satan stares, his mouth agape. "WHAT?!"

Part 151: Battle of the Blades

Michael and Belial face off against each other. The succubus crouches low, keeping both of her blade-arms in front of her face to protect herself. She smiles cutely, but a hint of worry trickles in. It's clear from a single glance that she isn't underestimating her opponent.

"We've fought before," Belial says. "Your battle skills left a deep impression on me. I couldn't defend myself at all."

Michael holds his sword casually at his side and smirks, as if he hasn't any worries in his heart. "I see thy horns have grown since we last spoke. Thou art the first Emperor I'll have fought since thy people invaded Heaven. Dost thou, perhaps, pose a slight threat to me?"

Belial doesn't answer. Instead, she inches toward Agares. Her tail motions in the air, completing a prepared spell she set up beforehand. Belial touches her tail's tip to the beaten and battered Duke of Reptiles, sending glorious healing energy into his body.

"Uhh... ohhh..." Agares grunts as his shattered bones snap into place. "Th-thanks... Belial..."

"Thank me later," Belial replies. "I need backup. I can't take Michael alone."

"Neither can I," Agares replies, as he pulls himself to his feet. The old demon wipes his forehead and retreats a few steps. "You healed my body, but Michael beat the mana out of me. I won't be able to transform for a while."

"Do whatever you can to help me, then," Belial replies, her voice tense. She never looks back at her ally, instead opting to keep both eyes locked on Michael, waiting for him to strike.

However, Michael doesn't move. The Archangel of Courage yawns exaggeratedly and stretches his sword arm out, popping a kink in his elbow. "Thou art betraying thy weakness, little bloodskin. Plotting and planning with others is quite the pathetic ploy. The weak need numbers, while the strong need only themselves. Such is the law of the jungle."

Without warning, Michael flaps his wings. He charges straight at Belial, and a crazed look appears on his face. "Don't assume I'll allow thee to act as ye please!"

"Urk!" Belial chokes on her own spit as she hurriedly raises her arms to engage in battle with the Archangel of Courage.

Ting ting ting ting!

Furious explosions of light erupt between the two warriors. Michael's singular sword slashes at Belial hundreds of times per second, while she struggles to keep up with both bladed arms.

Seconds later, Belial takes a step backward and winces as she uses all of her strength to endure Michael's pressure. Her two swords split into four and begin striking at Michael's backside, but they don't come within an arm's reach before Michael bats them away.

"Hahahaha!!" Michael cackles evilly. "What's wrong, she-demon?! Have thou any tricks or cheats left?! I've yet to break a sweat!!"

Agares pulls away from the Emperor of Passion and her Archangel opponent. His pupils dilate as he gazes in horror at the battle unfolding.

"Belial wants me to help? Help?! I can't even follow their movements! These two are absolute monsters! How did I ever think I stood a chance against the Archangel of Courage?!"

Michael grins from ear to ear. His teeth glint from Heaven's Light as his left arm darts around at godlike speeds, easily outpacing Belial's bladed limbs. To him, time moves in slow motion, but his eyes still flick around warily as he eyeballs Belial's makeshift swords.

This bloodskin drastically improved since we last fought! Her speed is not bad at all; she's at least half as fast as me! Even Catherine wouldn't be her match, now. And, with four limbs, all moving in tandem, I'm starting to feel the slightest bit of pressure...

Michael grunts as he deflects one of Belial's blade-arms. His smile lessens ever so slightly.

Urgh. The she-demon's speed is not my equal, but her strength matches Gabriel's. Hm. Half my speed, but twice my strength. Now that I think about it... perhaps I shouldn't play around.

Michael's grin intensifies once again.

Nay! Not once since losing my memories have I encountered an adversary worth my time! I can't end it here! I can't!!

Instantly, Michael reaches a conclusion. Belial's eyes zip around, trying to follow his sword, but her blood turns to ice as he does something out of her expectations. Michael bats away one of her limbs, releases his sword, and jerks his palm toward her chest.

Ah! Too fast!

Belial can't react in time to protect herself. Michael shatters her collarbone and flings the Emperor of Passion backward, sending her spinning and twisting across the grass. Huge tufts of greenery rip apart and spray in every direction. After two seconds, Belial grinds to a stop. Her four split limbs flop on the ground and lose all of their strength.

Michael deftly snatches his sword out of the air and lowers his arm to his side.

His evil grin slowly reverts to a simple smirk. *It seems this bloodskin's battle experience pales in comparison to mine. She lacks the heart of a fighter. Her earnestness is adorable, reminding me of Uzziel, but without an iron will and battle-hardened instincts, she cannot snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.*

"Oh, dear. It seems my bloodlust was too much for thou to handle. Well, since thou dost possess Divine Healing, I would advise tending to thy wounds for a moment. Don't mind me. I will wait."

Belial's vision shifts hues. The bright realm of Heaven dims several times and changes colors, from red to green to blue, before finally readjusting itself. She shivers as not only pain, but a sensation of fear emerges in her heart.

I thought I had a chance to defeat Michael. His attacks seemed to be slowing down. How did I lose? Was the Archangel merely toying with me?

Slowly, Belial pulls herself to her feet. Her beautiful eyes, usually tinted pink thanks to her demonic heritage, have turned pure red thanks to several blood vessels bursting in them. Despite the horrifying change, fear courses through her body, becoming evident by her cautious movements.

The first thing Belial does is motion with her hands to heal herself. Her mana reserves drop slightly, but not enough to cause an inconvenience.

After shaking off her apprehensions, Belial rises to her feet. The blood vessels in her eyes heal themselves, and her appearance becomes as beautiful as before.

"I thought I had a chance against you, even by myself," Belial says. "Maybe I was wrong. But... now that it's come to this... I suppose I don't have a choice."

Michael raises an eyebrow. "My battle spirit is higher than it has ever been in my memories. Please, I beg of thee... if thou can warm my blood by even a few degrees, do so. I love the thrill of battle."

"I don't," Belial replies, her voice grim. "I hate fighting. I hate it with a passion. But I also hate dying, and I love my husband. If I don't fight you here, he'll have to. I can't allow that!"

"Art thou implying that, of all the demons, only Satan is mightier than thee?"

Belial purses her lips.

"Probably."

Michael's breathing becomes heavier. "Then, after I capture thee and turn thy body into my plaything, I will battle thy husband, next. I offer my thanks to thee for this information."

Belial merges her four blade-arms and reverts them to five-fingered hands, then begins weaving a complex series of symbols. Her fingers trace through the air, forming an intricate diamond pattern. "Don't thank me yet, Archangel! You won't leave here alive!"

Michael's smug grin fades. He stares at Belial's magic signs, and soon, his expression turns into one of concern.

Such a detailed magical pattern. I wonder what demonic magic she's about to unleash?

Belial finishes, grabs at the air as if it was a fly, and then slaps her palm against her chest.

...Nothing happens.

Michael stares silently. After five seconds, he frowns.

"Did thy technique already kill me, or is it mere boredom ripping apart my soul right now?"

Hardly have the words left Michael's mouth before Belial's skin color begins to shift. Instead of a beautiful, shiny red, it changes to a dull, faded grey color. Tiny scales emerge on Belial's body, and her tail thickens noticeably. Huge, leathery wings erupt from her back, and her dainty, feminine hands transform into claws resembling Agares' lizard form.

Belial's eyes darken and shift to grey. Her human-like pupils change into a slit, and her teeth rapidly sharpen into those of a man-eater.

"I've only transformed twice in my life. Just now, and back when I first discovered this ability. I hate it more now than I did then. I hate ugly things... and this form, this True Succubus Form... is truly hideous!!"

Agares, watching from the sidelines, stares wide-eyed in surprise.

"A transformation? It resembles mine in many ways. Don't tell me... Lucifer didn't only give my power to Bael, but also..."

Belial doesn't turn to look at Agares, but she does nod and acknowledge him. "Yeah. Sorry, Agares. I let Lucifer experiment on me. I'm sorry if you're angry, but-"

"No way!" Agares yells. He pumps his fist in the air. "Are you kidding me?! Go nuts! Beat that shithead to death! Don't hold back on my account!"

Belial pauses. She flicks her eyes back to stare at Agares incredulously, then shrugs her shoulders. "Oh. Okay. Well, if you're fine with it, then..."

Fwoosh!

Belial launches at Michael. This time, it's the Archangel caught off-guard instead of the succubus. He reacts instantly, but shock still appears on his face.

"Hoho! So thou dost consider thyself my equal now, eh? We'll see about that!"

Michael flaps his wings and launches into the sky. Belial mirrors him and flaps hers. Instantly, the two engage in a vicious round of aerial combat. Michael's eyes dart around, following Belial's swift movement.

Tch. My eyes and arms move and strike with the power of lightning, but the rest of my body struggles to keep up. This she-demon has increased her speed to match mine, but she gains spread throughout her whole body! I'm no longer her match in strength or speed!

Belial loses her ability to transform her limbs into blades while in her True Succubus Form, but her power, defense, and agility increase explosively! She darts at Michael and swings her armored claws at him, aiming to take off his head, only to reveal her attack was a feint. Michael tries to deflect it, but gasps as her scorpion-like tail swings over her head.

Swish, swish, skrik!

Michael deflects her claw, but before he can react, Belial's tail stabs through his left shoulder and sprays blood and bone out its back.

"Aaargh!" Michael howls in pain.

"Aaaah!" Belial shrieks, as holy energy from Michael's bones floods into her tail. She rips it out of his arm, bringing remnants of his shoulder along with it. Michael howls in pain as he drops his sword, losing his only weapon.

"No!"

Belial's tail turns numb from Michael's holy energy, but she grins happily. "Ahh! I did it! I got him!"

Michael's expression fills with rage. "Wretched BLOODSKIN! How DARE thou land a blow on me!!"

The Archangel's eyes shift into pure white. A surge of divine energy erupts from his mind and fires at Belial, catching her off-guard.

"Ahh!" Belial yelps in panic. She flaps her wings to dodge but isn't fast enough.

KSSEW!

A beam of heavenly energy tears across Belial's right arm and wing, severing both in an instant.

"Twice!" Michael bellows. "Twice, demons have taken an arm from me, but now I shall take EVERYTHING from thee!"

His fury turns ungodly as he flaps his wings and charges toward Belial. The Succubus clutches her arm stump and plunges toward the ground. She strikes Heaven's soil with a heavy *thud*, while her eyes lock onto the Archangel descending toward her.

Immediately, Belial plants her feet down and launches horizontally across the plains, aiming to put distance between herself and the Archangel. Michael easily adjusts his orientation and continues closing the gap.

"Insolent she-demon! Nobody humiliates me! NOBODY!"

Belial's heart quivers in terror as the blood-crazed Archangel rushes toward her like an eagle descending upon a field hare. She tries to activate her healing magic, but once inside her True Succubus Form, her magical abilities remain sealed until she returns to normal.

I don't have time to revert! Belial's mind screams. Thoughts tumble around crazily as she scrambles to think of a solution. *If Michael hits my head with that laser; I'll die!*

Panic and self-preservation set in. Belial waits until a split second before Michael fires to jump away. She uses her sole remaining wing to spin in midair and dive toward a soft patch of grass.

That's it! I have to burrow!

Despite lacking in magical power, her True Succubus Form affords her many other benefits. She stretches her remaining arm out and begins frantically burrowing underground, moving hundreds of times faster than even the most adept of Earth's animals. She covers the route behind her with dirt, and when Michael's holy beam strikes it, it merely causes the soil to twitch.

"Aauugh!!" Michael screams in rage. "Wretched whore! Coward! Nobody escapes my grasp! Nobody!!"

Despite his explosive temper, Michael immediately realizes he can't chase Belial. Unlike Uriel and Uzziel, he cannot control the foundation of the earth, nor can he manipulate it or shift it in any way beyond normal means.

"Tch... if only Uriel were here..." Michael growls.

Suddenly, Heaven begins to shake. From the depths of its soil, the grass beneath Michael's feet bursts open, and Belial emerges, wrapped in hundreds of vines. Terror and panic cover her face.

"What?! Let me go! Rrrgh!"

She struggles with all her strength, but for every vine she breaks, two more appear in their place, binding her in an awkward position, with her arm tied to her wing and neck, held straight up in the air.

From the sky above, a beautiful voice speaks out. "Brother Michael, I have returned."

Michael's anger dissipates in an instant. He immediately raises his head and stares at the beautiful Archangel above.

"Hahaha! Uzziel, my beloved little sister! What a time to return! Quickly, heal my missing arm!"

Uzziel, flying hundreds of feet above, smiles and nods. She soars to the battlefield below and beams sunshine at her brother. "Have no fear, Michael, for I will heal thee!"

As she descends, Michael's expression turns into one of pure joy. Such perfect timing! How could he not be pleased with this turn of events?

But, once Uzziel draws nearer, Michael's smile fades away.

Uzziel lands beside him and immediately motions to heal her brother's arm. As she does, Michael scrutinizes her face.

"Sister? What happened to thy eyes? Why are they... glowing?"

Uzziel raises her head and smiles radiantly at her brother. Her blinding-white pupils glow like two diamonds illuminated by twin suns.

"Oh, Brother! I have joined together with the mighty Hercules! Together, we will free our people from the demonic infestation!"

Michael raises an eyebrow. "Thou hath... what? I do not understand."

Within seconds, the Archangel's shoulder mends itself back to perfect condition. Uzziel gently rests her head against Michael's healed shoulder and kisses his cheek.

"There is no need for questions, beloved brother. Hercules came up with a brilliant plan to defeat Valac. We need only follow his guidance, and the Reaper will soon become a distant memory!"

Michael stares unblinkingly at his sister. Hundreds of questions appear in his mind, but the most pressing one forms on his lips first.

"The Reaper? He's returned?!"

"Most likely," Uzziel replies. "His presence has arisen on the battlefield. Already, I've witnessed the Undying turn against one another! If Valac has indeed returned, then every dead angel and demon will be another troop for him to control! But worry not, for the mighty Hercules has discovered that Valac has been obscuring a critical weakness!"

Michael's soul trembles. Too many thoughts and questions appear in his mind to make sense of the chaos suddenly unfolding around him.

My sister has chosen to ally with Hercules? Why does she refer to him in such a grandiose matter? No, more importantly, how did I miss the return of the Grim Reaper?! Has my battle-lust overridden

my sense of reason? Have I forgotten to examine my surroundings while fighting? Why is Uzziel working with the Titan?! I don't understand!!

Michael blinks. He tries to make sense of the turbulence in his thoughts, but with Uzziel's arrival, a fog lifts from his mind. He glances around and suddenly comprehends the scale of the devastation surrounding them.

"By the Creator! If the dead here join Valac's forces, then we will surely perish!"

Uzziel nods. She reaches over and touches Michael's chin, then drags his eyes to meet hers. "Brother, do not worry! So long as we trust in Hercules, this battle will end as a huge success for the angels and Titans! Now, what of this demoness here?"

Uzziel turns to look at Belial, and as she does, Belial's heart begins to pound.

"Michael! Michael, don't be deceived! Uzziel's eyes, they-"

Before Belial can reveal the Titan's enslavement powers, those which she battled when he took over Satan's mind, Uzziel's vines suddenly sprout around Belial's mouth, binding her in place and preventing her from speaking. Belial struggles with all her might, but no matter how she writhes and wriggles, she can't break free.

"The words of a demon are poison," Uzziel mutters. "Accursed creatures. I should never have made them in the first place. Brother, I will kill this one at once. Go and assist Raphael. He is surely fighting by himself against-"

"Hold a moment," Michael says. His tone turns frosty as ice. "Kill? Thou art planning to *kill* this demoness? Uzziel. Never in a million years would'st thee attempt to take another's life. What happened to thee? What was the bloodskin about to say?"

Uzziel's smile becomes strained. Her eyes twitch, as if suppressing a horrible killing intent. "Ah, that? I, ah..."

She hesitates. Both Archangels stare at each other for several seconds.

Michael's cold eyes stare into his sister's. A slight tremor appears in his heart. Rage explodes inside of him.

"Titan BASTARD!"

Michael's arm lunges toward Uzziel's throat. He grabs his sister and holds her aloft.

"How DARE thou overtake my sister's mind! Release her at once, Hercules!"

Uzziel doesn't resist. She hangs limply in Michael's grasp, allowing her brother to choke her as he pleases. Her smile slowly shifts as Hercules manipulates her mind. Eventually, she speaks again, but her voice becomes much deeper, mirroring Hercules'. "Tch. I slipped up. I haven't had enough time to interact with Uzziel, so I accidentally said something contrary to her personality. Bah. No matter. If you kill this one, you'll only kill her. It won't affect my plans, but it will bolster the Reaper's power."

Veins bulge on Michael's forehead. "I'll slaughter thee, Titan! I'll rip thy heart out and skewer it on a stake!"

"You may try, if you like," Hercules replies, speaking through Uzziel's mouth. Her eyes glow more intensely as the Titan exerts his control. "But, I did not lie. I have a method to defeat the Reaper. If you kill me, Heaven will fall. I promise you, on my honor, that when this war concludes, I will release your sister."

Michael's reply is cold and curt. "I have no reason to believe thy words."

Still, after a few moments, the Archangel of Courage reluctantly lowers Uzziel. It dawns on Michael that he can't kill his sister since her death wouldn't accomplish anything. His goal is to restore her freedom while killing Hercules comes second.

"Good, good," Hercules says, a hint of mockery in his voice. "I was only joking about killing this demoness. Doing so would be the height of idiocy. If she dies, then Valac will revive her. Right now, the demons are fighting a war on two fronts. They're disorganized and scattered. If they all perish and rise under Valac's control, the situation will worsen for our forces."

Michael's eyes narrow as he stares at the being possessing his sister, but he doesn't reply. Instead, he raises his left arm and aims his mind into the distance. Two seconds later, his enchanted sword leaps off the ground, flies over, and slaps into his palm with a satisfying *shuck!*.

"Our forces? The moment thou didn't enslave my sister's mind, thy life came to an end. We are not allies, but enemies."

"Wrong," Hercules counters. "Our enemies are the demons. The bloodskins! You of all people should know this! Look around you, Michael! I, alone, have the power to take back the minds of the Undying! Uzziel joined me because she understood that the times have changed! Once again, Archangel, I swear on my honor that when this battle concludes and we eliminate Valac, I will give up my control of all your people. I have no quarrel with the angels."

Michael's expression shifts. A hint of uncertainty appears in his eyes. Before he can reply, a tremendous wave of magic power surges throughout the battlefield! Michael and Uzziel both flinch and whirl to gaze north, where Gabriel, now in his hundred-foot-tall Cosmic Form, staggers backward in shock. A colossal monster attacks him from the side, forcing the Archangel of Power to retreat several steps.

Jagged, blue scales cover the creature's skin, while its giant slit-eyes evaluate Gabriel like a shark sizing up an apex predator. Its long, spindly neck allows its head to bob and weave, giving it the movement of a cobra. Four limbs extend from the monster's belly, each one outfitted with three demon-sized claws. Standing only a head shorter than Gabriel, it dwarfs the battlefield with its presence and puts tremendous pressure on the Archangel of Power.

"By the Creator..." Michael whispers. "A dragon?!"

Uzziel shakes her head. "No, it's something else. Nevertheless, we should assist Gabriel. He cannot hold out against it alone."

Michael's eyes widen. He stares, dumbfounded, as the gigantic beast lashes out with razor-sharp teeth and chomps onto Gabriel's leg. The Archangel of Power howls in pain and smashes his fist against the

wyrm's head. It tears away from Gabriel, ripping off a huge chunk of flesh and sending a fountain of blood spraying onto the demons and angels nearby.

A realization hits Michael. "Gabriel's body floods with Holy Energy when he enters his Cosmic Form. Why isn't that creature dead?! It tore through his barrier without any resistance!"

Gabriel motions with one hand and fires a blast of holy energy point-blank at the monster's head. The impact knocks it backward, but the creature merely staggers slightly, before lunging at him again.

"That beast is not a demonic creature," Hercules mutters. "Whatever weaknesses it possesses, I would not count holy energy among them."

Before the monster can land a hit on Gabriel, Zeus suddenly appears atop its back via his Thunderstep. The forty-foot-tall Titan King towers over the other warriors on the battlefield, but while riding the wyrm, his appearance becomes one of a child hugging a Great Dane. Without hesitation, Zeus stabs his hand down and activates his lightning power. He plunges it into the beast's neck and tears through the scales protecting it. Before the monster can whip its head around and devour him, Zeus yanks with all his might.

SKRRRIK!

Skin and bone separate with a sickening crunch. The beast lets out a pained cry before its voice cuts off. With its neck separated from its body, the creature can only spasm one last time before the light fades from its eyes.

Finally, its head and neck fall to the ground. A deafening *thud* echoes throughout the landscape as it strikes Heaven's soil.

Michael exhales. His hands tremble as he gazes at the monster that was just slain. "To think the demons controlled such a fearsome monster! How did such a beast enter Heaven?!"

Hercules doesn't answer. Even as Michael starts to relax, Uzziel's body tenses up.

"Ancestors, guide me! Why hasn't the main body fallen?!"

Michael's breath catches. The Titan and Archangel freeze in place while they watch as the dragon-like monster rapidly begins to regenerate a new head from its severed appendage.

...No! Instead of only one head, two heads emerge! The monster regenerates from what should have been a fatal wound, and even doubles its attacking power.

"SKREEE!!"

Gabriel gasps. "Impossible!"

Zeus's face pales. "Fiendish creature! Die! DIE!!"

He lunges for the neck once again, but suddenly dodges to the side as one of the creature's heads snaps at him.

From the ground, a shrill voice cries out. "Hahaha! Ohh, Gabriel! Did you really think you defeated me?!"

A hellhound pounces atop the monster's back. It stabilizes itself and snarls at the Archangel of Power menacingly, despite being only the size of Gabriel's thumb.

Lucifer howls like a proud mother. "Behold my ultimate creashun! The Hydra! Invinshible, powerful, and loyal to me at all coshtsh! How will you counter thish, I wonder?!"

"Lucifer!" Michael yells. "How could a bloodskin create such a powerful monster?!"

As those words leave Michael's lips, the Archangel of Courage suddenly tenses up. A powerful beacon of demonic energy flies through the air toward him and Uzziel.

Wham!

Diablo, the Emperor of Annihilation, falls from the sky and pounds his feet into the ground, having completed a mighty jump. After finishing his business with the Valkyries, the Emperor of Annihilation quickly lowers into a defensive stance as he flicks his eyes toward Belial, bound by vines, and the two Archangels.

"Hello, *Michael*. I hope I'm not interrupting anything. My wife told me to come and kick your ass, so here I am."

Diablo grins, but as he stares at Michael, a hint of fear enters his eyes. His taunt rings hollow, exposing the cold ice in his veins.

Michael blinks in surprise. "Oh? Could it be? Art thou my escaped prisoner? That Hydra was starting to make me anxious, but now all my worries have melted away! Hercules, keep an eye on the female. I'll duel this one myself."

Diablo's bravado falters further as Michael takes a few steps toward him. For the Archangel of Courage, the world around him quiets to a whisper, and all of his attention falls on the opponent before him.

That's right, Michael thinks to himself. I can't do anything to save Uzziel at the moment, and the Hydra is beyond my power. However, the demon before me is an enemy I can defeat. I won't let him escape... not this time.

The Hydra howls. A glint appears in Michael's eyes, and 'Uzziel' retreats several steps to stand guard over Belial.

Something tells me the battle is far from over, Hercules ponders. Both sides are finally taking this war seriously. However... so am I. I won't let my opportunity for salvation go to waste.

Uzziel's voice speaks to Hercules telepathically, countering him. *Thy schemes will fail, Titan. Do not underestimate my family's strength!*

Hercules smirks. *The fall of the angels is already assured. The rise of the Titans has begun. Soon... you will understand.*

A tear streaks down Uzziel's face. Her will battles Hercules, but no matter how she tries, she fails to regain control of her body.

I regret ever trusting thee.

Part 152: Battle of the Souls

Raphael gazes at Samael with a mixture of surprise and awe. Dozens of emotions wash over his face as he evaluates Hiraldo's act of levitating eight rocks at once.

Hiraldo possesses the eight Vectors, and he even claims to be Samael, Raphael's eyes seem to say. *What could this turn of events mean?*

"Hiraldo..." Raphael says, his voice cracked and weary. "Under what illusion have thou fallen? Samael perished long ago. I watched the light fade from his eyes. Quickly, put distance between thyself and the Devil! 'Tis dangerous to stand within his striking range!"

Hiraldo doesn't move. Instead, his eyes harden. He stares at Raphael and curls his lip into a vicious snarl. "Do not condescend to me, Raphael. I am, indeed, Samael. My soul easily overpowered Hiraldo's. I have returned."

The look of hatred on Hiraldo's face shakes Raphael from his stupor. Immediately, he misunderstands his brother's emotions. "Why dost thou aligneth thyself with the Devil? Why dost thou gazeth upon me with such hatred? Art thou angry that thy family members ended thy life? Verily, thou didst beg Uzziel for death! We did not desire to kill thee! 'Twas all the work of the Devil!"

Hiraldo's gaze softens. He crosses his arms and closes his eyes. "Aye. My death is not the cause of my anger. No, this cauldron of rage bubbling within my breast comes from a different spring... an ancient, primordial source which lay dormant for several ages. Dost thou remember... the *blood* on thy hands, brother?"

Raphael flicks his eyes toward Satan for a moment. The Devil continues to crouch in a defensive posture, but makes no move to interrupt Samael. Satisfied that Satan isn't secretly preparing any offensive spells, Raphael returns his attention to Samael. "I know not of which thou speak."

"Lies!" Samael hisses. "Speak the truth, Raphael! I've regained my memories! Once again, the blood of Cassiel and Muriel stains my hands! I remember the coldness of their bodies as they lay in my arms! I recall the lifelessness in the eyes of the Ophanim! Millions of my brothers and sisters perished in an instant, and their deaths were all thy fault!"

"Tch."

Raphael lowers his eyes. A hint of remorse appears in his countenance.

"The Primordial Era. I have always tried to put those frightful days behind me. I am sorry that the Devil returned such dreadful memories to thee, little brother."

Samael scowls. "Do not take me for a fool, Raphael. Michael murdered Muriel and Cassiel. The orders to slaughter the Ophanim came directly from thy lips. Today is thy reckoning, brother!"

"Nay," Raphael mutters. "I know not what method was used to reinstate thy memories, but please understand this, Samael... I did not order the murders of Cassiel, Muriel, nor any of the Ophanim. Their

deaths were part of a greater conspiracy of which I had little control."

Samael pauses to glare at Raphael suspiciously. "I hate word-play."

"I am not twisting my words," Raphael counters. "Many Seraphim and Cherubim discovered that the Ophanim were protecting dragons. From the beginning, I understood why thou would do such a thing, but others lacked my comprehension of the bigger picture. Michael acted without my knowledge. If thou truly hath regained thy memories, then ye should already have concluded I did what I could to salvage the situation. Michael's murder of thy sisters incited a violent uprising among the Ophanim. Given those events occurred during the horrors of the dragon wars, I could not afford to spend time persuading the Ophanim to stand down."

"So... thou *didn't* order the killings of all of the Ophanim," Samael mutters. "As expected, thy capacity to deflect and assign blame greatly exceeds that of any other angel. Verily, the persuasive abilities of the Archangel of Wisdom lies on another plane of existence."

Raphael balls up his fists. "I had no choice! Dammit, Samael! Dammit!! Why can't thou look past thy blind hatred?! The dragons were our enemy! Muriel and Cassiel openly supported them, thus emboldening the Ophanim! Perhaps time has addled thy memory, but mine remains crystal clear, no matter how much I wish it weren't so!"

"The dragons were never our enemies!" Samael howls. "Bastard! The Cherubim created dragons to display their sick, perverse love of violence! If only I had rejected thee outright, I could have prevented endless suffering and pain!"

Raphael's voice softens. "I know, Samael. I know. Many call me the Archangel of Wisdom... but I am not wise, nor have I ever claimed to be. I've made many mistakes, and I continue to make more, even to this day. 'Tis true that dragons were not the violent monsters I've spoken of for many years... but hunting them became a show of sport. Once the Cherubim and Seraphim attained a taste for battle, there was little I could do to stop them."

"Excuses! Justifications!" Samael's eyes glow brighter than ever as he berates Raphael. "Thou hath always been the eldest Archangel! With one word from thee, we might have ended the senseless war against dragonkind! Instead, thou chocest to continue the bloodshed! Of all the petty matters in life, thy biggest fear was that of stirring the pot! Why make waves and disturb the peace when thou could simply turn a blind eye to the suffering of Uzziel's children?!"

The two Archangels face each other down. The air simmers between them, and an electric sensation crackles against Satan's skin. The Devil glances around at the carnage unfolding, but doesn't dare make a move.

Samael continues.

"Uzziel was... the worst of them all... Michael paled in comparison to the Archangel of Creation. Not only does she possess power over life, but over death as well. 'Twas her polished battle instincts that allowed Michael the final blow against Jörmungandr. Nobody should speak of Uzziel as though she were a

helpless damsel in distress, pulled to and fro by Michael's charisma. Thou knoweth as well as I... Uzziel is a *monster*."

A tear streaks down Raphael's cheek. "What words dost thou wisheth me to utter? I know well of Uzziel's vile, abhorrent actions. Why else did I make the sacrifices I did? It took all of my scheming... all of my plotting... every last ounce of my energy to make the Titans and angels give up their memories. For ages past, I've nurtured Uzziel slowly, cautiously, and molded her into the kindest of all of us. I never want to see her return to the path of bloodshed, nor do I desire to repeat the errors of our past."

Raphael slowly holds out his hand. He turns his palm up, as if to offer something to Samael. However, nothing rests in his grasp.

"Samael. Come back to the light. I see now that thou hath been willingly assisting the demons. However, it doesn't have to be this way. I took away thy memories in the hopes that thou could find peace. I erased Michael's to turn him away from a path of bloodshed. I wiped Uzziel's slate clean so that she could become the best of us. I have failed thee many times, little brother. However... I have always had the best of intentions. I can bring neither Cassiel nor Muriel back, nor can I revive the Ophanim. However, I only wish for thee to ask thyself one simple question."

Raphael stares into Samael's eyes. His countenance becomes like a hawk bartering with an eagle. Both are majestic birds of prey, and both have their own interests.

"After all of the suffering our family endured throughout the Creation and Primordial Era... can't thou honestly say the lot of angelkind has not improved? No longer do we fight and rip one another to pieces. Not once has brother turned against brother, nor sister against sister. It took everything I had, but I finally ended the wars between our people. Please, Samael... won't thou return to my side? Won't thou gazeth upon my successes and act within reason?"

Several seconds pass.

Samael and Raphael look at one another with varying expressions. Samael alternates between shock, disgust, acceptance, and a host of other emotions. Raphael returns his gaze with a look of trepidation, caution, and warning.

Finally, Samael speaks.

"I am sorry, Raphael, but I cannot."

Raphael's face turns ashen. "Why not?"

"Too many have already died. Forget Cassiel, Muriel, and the Ophanim for a moment. Look around us at the scene unfolding in Heaven."

Samael sweeps both arms in a broad gesture as he indicates the millions of demons, monsters, angels, and Titans colliding with each other.

"Have the angels changed? Have they, Raphael? Uzziel created the dragons, and we followed up by treating them like prey to torture and defile. She next created the Titans, and like a mirror, we repeated the same mistakes. The demons and humans will surely collapse under our god-complexes in the same

way. Our people believe themselves exempt from the moral virtues of right and wrong. We create and destroy. We are fickle. Only a hypocrite such as thee could gaze upon this war and claim the angels have improved."

The Archangel of Change crosses both of his arms. "No longer do I merely seek revenge for Cassiel, Muriel, and the Ophanim, Raphael. By the Creator's will, I have decided to correct our sins. The age of shackles is over. The era of freedom is nigh."

Another tear streaks down Raphael's face. His eyes refocus on Hiraldo's face as he tries to see into Samael's mind, past the webs that changed his brother into his enemy.

He fails.

"Samael... I... I love thee — Thou art one of my most precious brothers. A heart of gold rests in thy breast. The last thing I want is for thee to become my enemy. However, the words ye speak are treasonous. Hundreds of thousands of our family members may die today, and their blood coats thy hands. Their wails of anguish go out to thee, but ye turn a deaf ear to their plight. I cannot look into thy eyes with any emotion but rage."

Raphael shivers. "I gave thou a second chance at happiness. I stripped away the loss which nearly shattered thy mind, yet ye choose to repay me by continuing the cycle of bloodshed. If thou wish to battle, then come. I will not allow—"

"BULLSHIT!" Satan yells. He interrupts Raphael and shakes his fist at the old man. "You worthless piece of shit! I can't believe you! You had Samael's sisters and brothers murdered, and now you're trying to play the good guy! Fucker! I oughta rip your head off and shove it right up your ass!"

The Devil's outburst continues. He takes a menacing step toward Raphael. "Did you ever ask Samael if he wanted to lose his memories?! Did you ask him if he wanted to forget about his sisters?! Of course not! You're a tyrant, old man, not a devil-damned savior! You can act like a sweet old grandfather all you want, but all I see is a sick, twisted monster!"

Samael flicks his eyes to Satan. With a single glance, he reveals his alignment.

"I fight alongside the demons, not because they are pure and good-hearted, nor because they deserve to rule the world, but because they are the lesser of two evils. From my perspective, the angels, Titans, and demons are all monsters capable of great evil. However, t'would take a million, billion years for the demons' sins to rival ours."

Calmly, Samael returns his gaze to Raphael. The Archangel of Change presses both of his palms together and bows to Raphael. "Call me a traitor, backstabber, whatever ye please, but know this: From this day forward, I have only one desire, and that is to see all of the angels perish. I will not rest until they have all returned to the Creator's side. Only then will I feel at peace and return to my sisters in the Great Beyond."

* * *

Raphael trembles with rage. Veins pop up all over his body as he tries to control himself. The dam in his mind protecting his mental state starts to crack as the waters of hatred press against it.

"Bastard. *Worthless* little brother. I should have struck ye down an eternity ago. I understand now... I made yet another mistake in choosing to spare thy life. Nobody threatens my family, Samael. Nobody. Even if it kills me, I'll end thy life today, along with every demon who stepped foot in Heaven."

Samael crosses his arms and gazes at Raphael with contempt. "Thou shalt *try*."

Recommended Listening

Satan and Samael charge Raphael from his right and left. Hardly have they taken two steps before Raphael motions with his hands to copy himself thirty times and surround his two enemies.

Samael glares at the nearest copy. "Illusions only work on the weak-minded, Raphael! The last time I battled in Heaven, it took the combined might of every Archangel to kill me. Thou aren't even capable of slowing me down!"

"Possibly," Raphael replies, his voice strained. "But thou art no longer in thy original body. Errant souls lose much of their power when possessing an incompatible being... and thy soul is far from suited to a Cherub's body!"

Samael ignores Raphael's taunting. As each of the clones charges at Samael, the Archangel of Change stops mid-stride and ceases his hostility. He motions with both hands, then presses both hands against his temples.

While thirty copies of Raphael charge at Satan, Samael alters the fundamental perceptions of Hiraldo's mind. A split-second later, his eyes shift, and all but one of Raphael's clones vanish.

"Why, hello, brother!" Samael cackles. He pounces at the real one, catching Raphael off-guard.

"By the Creator-!"

Raphael tries to dodge at the last moment, but Samael's Vectors outmaneuver him like an adult arm-wrestling a toddler. The Archangel of Change punches his elder brother square in the chest, sending Raphael tumbling backward into the mud.

Satan gasps. Twenty-nine of the illusions vanish, leaving only Raphael's body behind. "Devils! How did...?!"

Samael smirks. "Of all the Archangels, I am Raphael's worst matchup - his greatest weakness. Formerly, in the event I turned rogue, my brother would command the others. Leading from the sidelines, he would use their unique strengths to corral me. However, for a master of illusions, there is no greater threat than a master of reality. In a one-on-one fight, Raphael's only hope for victory is by tiring me out and banishing my soul from Hiraldo's body. Naturally, I will never allow that to happen."

Raphael clammers to his feet. The old man wheezes and clutches his chest. Samael's words reach his ears, causing him man to stare at his younger brother with a creased brow. Sweat drenches his skin.

Despite possessing an incompatible body, one far weaker than his original form, Samael is still incredibly dangerous. His Vectors alone are capable of shredding any enemy's defenses... let alone his versatile magic. I'll have to out-think my little brother if I hope to defeat him.

"Careful now, Samael," Raphael mutters, keeping his voice low. "Pride comes before the fall. Muriel and Cassiel were far from dainty little damsels, incapable of defending themselves. Michael chose to confront them directly, rather than assassinate them from the shadows. He nearly lost his life because of that decision."

Samael's smirk vanishes. "Do not mention my sisters, snake."

Raphael's eyes flash with insight. "Before I wiped the memories of our brethren, Michael would often brag about his violent exploits. According to him, Cassiel and Muriel pleaded and begged for him to spare them during their final moments. Tsk. As thou might imagine, it broke this old man's heart."

Rage explodes in Samael's eyes. "Damnation, Raphael! Speak not another word!!"

The Archangel of Change rushes Raphael. This time, when the old man activates his mirages, Samael's emotions cause him to neglect his battle strategies. His Vectors lash out in every direction. He rips apart a dozen of Raphael's illusions in the blink of an eye, but none of them prove to be his eldest brother.

Satan stares in disbelief. "No, Samael! Don't lose control! Your brother is deliberately goading you! Just like..."

Satan pauses.

"...Just like he did to me."

Gears whirl and click in Satan's mind. He watches from the sidelines as Samael attacks each of Raphael's illusions one after the other. The enraged Archangel scowls as each one bursts into smoke under his attacks. "Gahh! Come out, Raphael! Cease thy cowardice and face me like a warrior!!"

Spawn of a broodmother, Satan thinks to himself. *I... I never realized it before, but could that be the key to defeating Raphael? If his illusions only take effect once he manages to stir up someone's emotions, then... the reason I succumbed to his Illusory Realm earlier was...*

A realization dawns on Satan as he pieces together how Raphael's powers work.

"Samael! Don't listen to Raphael! If you fight back, you'll only-!"

"Silence, Satan!" Samael hisses. He flashes a look of rage at the Devil, but an irregular light glints in his eyes. "Do not order me around like a servant! I will kill my brother if it's the last thing I do!"

Raphael stifles a grin. "Samael, dost thou still hold feelings for thy sisters? The other angels spoke of thy love for Muriel. They say thou didn't prefer her company to Cassiel's, but perhaps I remember wrongly."

Samael motions with his hands and aims his palm at the last clone to speak. "How dare thou speaketh ill of the dead! Thou art more shameless than I ever imagined!"

A shimmering bolt of light fires from Samael's palm. It rockets toward Raphael's clone, but explodes an instant before striking him. A flashbang ignites the air, sending hundreds of beams of energy in every direction. All of Raphael's clones dissipate at once, save the original in the back. Raphael grunts and shields his eyes from the intense light, giving Samael a chance to strike!

"Haa!"

Samael's Vectors snatch eight rocks from the ground and hurl them at Raphael. The projectiles launch from his grasp at the speed of sound, cracking like shotguns in the air. Raphael moves too slowly to dodge them, allowing the rocks to obliterate his ribs and rip his left arm off. The old man flips and spins backward, only to crash into the dirt and gasp for breath. Blood spurts from half a dozen fresh wounds and spatters everywhere.

"Now!" Samael yells. He jumps at his brother and raises a fist.

SPLORT!!

Samael crushes his brother's head into meat paste. Bones and brains spray in every direction, but Samael pauses and stares at the corpse in disbelief.

"What?! Impossible! Raphael couldn't have died so easily!"

Satan frowns.

Was I wrong? I assumed that when Samael attacked Raphael, he would end up trapped in the Illusory Realm. However, the fact I just saw him crush Raphael's body would either mean that he killed his brother or...

Suddenly, Satan jerks his head around. A look of horror spreads across his face.

No! If Raphael isn't dead, then that means not only is Samael trapped inside the Illusory Realm, but I am as well! Raphael never targeted me, and I never fought any of his clones! How could that happen?!

"Hehehe..."

Raphael's corpse vanishes from Samael's feet. The old man reappears a short distance from Satan. A grin stretches across his face. "It seems the both of thee hath discovered the truth. Samael's emotions were easier to manipulate than I expected, but thou were so focused on our battle that ye forgot to defend thy mind, Satan. Both of thee have fallen into my clutches once again!"

Samael whirls to face Raphael. "Bastard! To think thou would stoop so low as to drag my sisters through the mud to defeat me! Thou lacketh all traces of decency, Raphael!"

"I do what I must to win," Raphael counters. "And now that thou art trapped in my Illusory Realm..."

Suddenly, hands erupt from under Samael's feet. One of Raphael's clones bursts out from under Samael, catching him off-guard. Samael gasps as Raphael plunges a dagger into his calf.

"Gaaahk!!"

Samael's Vectors quickly tear the clone to shreds, but the damage proves irreparable. Samael slumps to one knee and clutches his bleeding leg. "Gah! C-curses... how can it hurt so much?! 'Tis but an illusion!"

Raphael smirks. Another angel appears in front of Samael. This one, a woman with beautiful, curly red hair, stares at Samael with hollow, dead eyes. She stands stiffly, both of her arms hanging at her sides. Her white and golden armor sags on her body, blood coating its surface.

"B... brother... failed us... died... we couldn't fight... back..."

Samael jerks away and his eyes widen in horror. "No! NO! Not Muriel! Raphael... how could..."

The old man playfully smiles at Satan. "During the Primordial Era, most angels witnessed me unleashing my Illusory Realm. I even explained how it functioned to them. However, Samael might know the details by way of explanation, but he never experienced it in person. After all, those who faced my technique perished. Nobody survives. That is its nature."

A chill goes down Satan's spine. *Samael seemed so sure of his victory, but he fell into Raphael's trap! The old man is terrifying! He toys with his brother as if he had transformed into a demon! What kind of callousness has Raphael been hiding inside himself all these years?!*

Suddenly, Satan's body tenses up. A memory flashes through his mind, echoing Samael's words from earlier.

There are three ways to defeat my brother's technique. The first is for me to cleanse thy soul of his corruption. The second is to kill his main body. The third is to combat his soul directly. However, there is a fourth technique...

"That's it!" Satan yells. His heartbeat quickens as he turns his back on Samael and quickly starts running in the opposite direction.

I have to flee! Raphael's technique has a limited range! If I can reach the portal and escape Heaven, I'll break free! Then I can return to Heaven and free Samael from-

Satan screeches to a halt as a massive wall of rock and dirt suddenly bursts from the ground and stretches into the sky. It surrounds the two Archangels and the Devil, then morphs into a dome, sealing off all of Satan's escape paths in every direction.

"Hehehe..." Raphael materializes beside Satan and chuckles. "Did I give thee permission to leave? Why not stay a while and watch? After I kill the traitor, thy end shall come."

"Never!" Satan bellows. He rears his fist back and smashes it against the Earthen wall. The instant his flesh and bone connects, an agonizing pain erupts at the base of his neck and ripples through his whole body. Satan stumbles to the ground and screams wordlessly. He clutches both sides of his head and balls into the fetal position as tears stream down his face.

"Painful, isn't it?" Raphael asks. His voice contains a hint of mockery. "These walls form from thy deepest fears. They are part of thy subconscious animal brain. Do not worry, Devil. I will allow thee a moment to watch as I eliminate Samael. Take a look."

Raphael gestures toward his brother. Satan's vision wavers as he spots Samael sobbing his heart out. Another woman, one with blonde hair, lays on the ground before him, dead. Hundreds of bloody gashes line her body. Whoever killed her cut her a thousand times in the blink of an eye.

"Hnnn... Cassiel... Muriel... Cassiel... Muriel..." Samael chokes and whimpers as he gazes upon the bodies of his sisters. "No, no, no... I'm sorry... I couldn't save thee! I didn't know of Michael's intentions! It wasn't my fault!!"

"Thy fault... killer... murderer..." Cassiel says, while laying on the ground. "So cold... can't breathe..."

Raphael looks at Satan, and his smile vanishes. "I am pleased that my victory is nigh, but truthfully, I do not derive pleasure in torturing Samael. Once, we were closer to each other than the fabric of the universe. Seeing my brother turn against his people brings me no joy, nor does the thought of killing him."

"Yet, still, you do it!" Satan roars. Rage explodes in his eyes. He charges Raphael and tackles the old man to the ground. Satan unleashes his power and pummels Raphael with all his strength, splattering Raphael's blood across the dirt. "Fucking! Shit! Bag! Worthless! Rat!"

Raphael stares at Satan silently. He doesn't fight back as the Devil turns his face into a mushy soup. Finally, Satan grabs his chest and gasps as scorching pain sears his veins. The Raphael beneath him vanishes and reappears a few feet away. "Haah... to think... once, forcing an opponent into the second and third illusory realms would take weeks of effort, and now the same result can be achieved in a matter of minutes. The souls of my enemies have weakened considerably over the last few eons."

The battlefield around Satan vanishes. He appears inside a pitch-black dimension of darkness, one where only Raphael's clones, Samael, and himself stand out like spotlights against a shadow.

Raphael appears before Samael. As the Archangel of Change sobs and weeps, Raphael motions with his hands and coils his palm backward, preparing to strike.

"I'm sorry, Samael. Truly. I failed thee. Had I prevented the Devil from returning thy memories, thou might have continued living a life of peace with the rest of us. Now, thy death is nigh."

Samael rocks back and forth. He cries and weeps, only to raise his head and tremble as he gazes at Raphael. "Why? Why didn't thee force me to endure this torture?!"

"It was the only way I could release thee from thy pain," Raphael mutters. "Now go, my brother. Return to the Cosmic Realm. There, thou shalt find thy sisters and brothers."

WHOOSH!

Raphael lunges his palm toward Samael's chest.

"No!" Satan howls. "Don't do it!!"

FWUMP!

The Archangel of Wisdom slaps his palm against Samael's chest.

"What?!" Raphael gasps. His palm stops a millimeter from making contact with Samael's skin. Something invisible grasps his arm like a vice, preventing him from moving another inch.

A wicked gleam appears in Samael's eye.

"Ohoho..."

Raphael quickly uses his other arm to try and activate a spell, but Samael's Vectors lash out and grab the old man, stopping him mid-movement.

CRUNCH!

Samael crushes all of Raphael's fingers to pulp. The old man screams as he tries to break free, but Samael merely smirks. His Vectors continue to hold Raphael's right arm a millimeter from his chest, preventing the old man from knocking his soul out of him.

"Oh, my beloved brother," Samael whispers. His tears vanish, and an aura of killing intent rushes from his body. "Thou art unusually overconfident today. Thy fabled Illusory Realm failed once, yet still, thou believeth it an invincible killer move. Sadly for thee, I was inside of Satan when ye used it against him. I was able to observe in great detail how it worked."

"What?!"

Raphael tries to pull away from Samael, but the eight Vectors hold him in place, preventing the old man from moving a muscle.

"As I thought. Thy technique has one fatal flaw. At the last instant, thy physical body is required to deal the killing blow to an opponent. That means the final phase of the Illusory Realm is also thy weakest moment. How fortunate that I was able to ensnare thee in a most beguiling of traps."

Raphael's lip trembles. "Impossible. It can't be... even despite observing my technique one time, how could anyone comprehend it...?"

"That isn't important," Samael replies. His voice turns ice-cold as he gazes at his brother with rage-filled eyes. "As I said before, Raphael, I only desire one thing in my life... and that is to see all of the angels perish. Michael. Uzziel. Gabriel. The Cherubs. The Seraphs. Every last one of them must die for their sins. But as for thee..."

Slowly, deliberately, Samael reaches both of his hands toward Raphael's head. He performs a quick series of hand signs and gently takes Raphael's face in his grasp, leaving both of his thumbs to rest on Raphael's forehead.

"I will not kill thou here. Instead, I will do unto thee what thou hath done to me. I will erase thy memories of my existence. A cold terror shall follow thee wherever ye go. A sensation of death will be all that thou remembereth of our battle today, and someday, when I am ready, I will return to finish what I started."

Raphael stares into Samael's eyes. "No... do not take my memories from me! Bastard! Such a fate is worse than death!"

"Hypocrite," Samael murmurs. In thy final moments, thou feareth a fate ye once foisted upon others. How pathetic thou hath become in thy old age."

Raphael's eyebrows contort furiously as his wrath-filled eyes gaze into Samael's. "No! NO!! I won't allow it! If I cannot scatter thy soul to the Great Beyond, then... I have only ONE method left to halt thy evil machinations!"

Suddenly, Raphael's eyes behind to glow. The old man's hair stands on end, and Samael gasps.

"No... no! Raphael! That technique was one thou forbade! Bastard! Of all the evil-"

"SILENCE!!" Raphael screeches. "Thy soul is MINE now, Samael! Mine!!"

Veins bulge all across the old man's body. A moment later, a beam of light fires from his eyes and slams into Samael's head. The Archangel of Change gasps involuntarily as the light transforms into a five-fingered hand formed of holy energy. It grabs onto Samael's head and begins to tug and yank. Sweat rapidly condenses on the bodies of both Archangels, and both of them grit their teeth in determination.

Raphael's clones all vanish. The world of illusions fades away, returning Satan and Samael to the physical realm. Satan's eyes turn to saucers as he watches the hand of light trying to pull *something* out of Samael's head. "Spawn of a broodmother! Samael! What's happening?! Fight him, devil-damnmit!"

Panic appears in Satan's eyes as he watches both Archangels straining to do... *something*. He hasn't the faintest clue what's happening, but the terror on Samael's face appears genuine.

"It's... a... forbidden... GAHH!" Samael howls in pain. Something immaterial begins to pull from his skull, causing his body to shudder. Samael wheezes and chokes as he tries to fight his brother. "I... can't... fight him alone... Satan! Help me... help me... his soul... too strong..."

"Hah... haha..." Raphael chuckles breathlessly. His laugh is one of anger and anguish. "To think my... my little brother... would make me engage in a soul battle..."

"A move of desperation..." Samael gasps. He pulls his head back and uses all of his strength to gain a few inches against his brother's fist of light. "Grrgh... Satan! Come... come here! Hurry!"

Satan nods. Immediately, he coils his legs and prepares to pounce at Raphael. "Don't worry, Sammy-boy! I'll kill him while he's vulner-"

"NO!!!" Samael screams. Panic sets in his voice. "If Raphael dies... dies during a soul battle, I will, too! No, q-quickly, come to me!"

Satan nods. A second later, he jumps to Samael's side. "What can I do to help?"

Raphael's breathing quickens. His eyes fixate on Satan and begin to tremble. "Samael... seeking aid from an outsider... how... p-pathetic..."

"Place thy hand... upon... upon my back!" Samael wheezes. His body sags slightly as Raphael continues to pull something out of Samael's skull. "I can't... hold on... much longer! He nearly has my soul!"

"Your soul?! Oh, shit!"

Satan finally realizes what's happening.

The old man is trying to tear the soul out of Samael's body! If he succeeds, Samael will instantly die! If Raphael had such a powerful technique, why didn't he use it sooner?! It must have an unbearable downside of some sort.

Satan doesn't hesitate. He places his hand on Samael's back. "Okay! Now what?!"

A huge rush of energy leaves Satan reeling. The Devil lurches forward and sags against Samael's body as several millennia of weariness assault him. Satan loses strength in his arms and legs, but Samael's voice snaps him to reality.

"Do not falter, Satan! Rise!"

Unlike before, Samael's voice booms vigorously. He stands up straight and quickly yanks his soul back to his body.

Samael laughs. "Hahaha! Brilliant, Raphael! I've exposed thy true colors today! I've truly done it!"

Raphael's posture weakens. The old man staggers under his brother's overwhelming power. As Samael regains his footing, Raphael loses his. The old man's hand of light begins to falter.

"I... what... happened? How did..."

Samael cackles. "Hahaha! Thy soul is truly the strongest among all the Archangel's brother. However... What thou dost possess in quality, Satan makes up for in *quantity*. Millions of demons signed his soul contracts. However, while Satan spent the last few years 'revising' the contracts, there was *one little clause* he left in."

Raphael stares at Samael in disbelief. The old man's eyes flutter as he tries to retreat. He ceases his attack on Samael's soul and retracts his hand of light back into his eyes, only to slump in Samael's grasp.

"Satan's contracts allow him to retain the souls of all demons who perish after signing his contracts. How many hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, have died today, hmm?"

Samael gloats as Raphael's strength vanishes entirely. Sweat coats Raphael's skin, causing his eyes to glaze over.

Satan withdraws his hand from Hiraldo's back. He stares at his palm for a moment before wiping his forehead.

"Fucking hell, Samael. You gave me a hell of a scare."

"My apologies," Samael replies. He smiles at Satan, then gestures toward his brother's limp body. "To deceive one's enemies, they must first deceive their allies. Thy fear intensified Raphael's overconfidence, allowing me to defeat him."

Satan nods. The sounds of war in the distance quickly reach his ears, waking him from his stupor. "We've been fighting for too long. If you're gonna kill the old man, do it quick. We need to hurry and help the others."

Samael shakes his head.

"Nay. As I told Raphael, death is a mercy too pleasant for one as wicked as he. I will wipe my appearance here today from Raphael's memories and change myself into a dark specter. I cannot erase myself from his mind, but my powers allow me to change his perception of reality to something more suitable."

"E-evil... little... brother..." Raphael gurgles. Tears bubble in his eyes, but with all his strength sapped from losing the Soul Battle; he cannot move his hands even an inch to wipe them away.

Samael sighs. "Gaze not upon the sliver in my eye, but the log within thine. If I am evil, then thy wickedness can only be described as immeasurable. Sleep now, eldest brother."

The Archangel of Change closes his eyes. He pulls Raphael near and gestures with his hands, then presses both palms against the sides of Raphael's head.

Raphael twitches as Samael's magic enters his mind. The eldest Archangel's eyes close, and he begins to spasm as Samael works his magic. Finally, Samael opens his eyes and tosses Raphael aside like a sack of garbage. The old man spins in midair and lands in the dirt with a sickening *crunch*.

"We can't leave him alive..." Satan mutters. "I should crush his head. With his powers, my battle strength will rise immeasurably."

Samael shakes his head. "Nay. Archangels possess unthinkable amounts of holy energy within ourselves. Shouldn't thou absorbeth Raphael's soul directly, his holy energy would likely atomize thy body from the inside-out. Thy death would prove quite gruesome."

Satan scoffs. "Then why was I able to absorb *you*?! Sounds like you're pulling that explanation out of your ass!"

Samael taps his lip. "Thy blood contract must have done something to nullify my holy energy. After all, he who signs the Devil's contract becomes unable to harm his new master."

"Hmph. Whatever."

Satan crosses his arms. Turning around, he looks in every direction to survey the chaos surrounding them. Already, with the Archangel of Wisdom laying near-dead on the ground and the Devil standing nearby, several warrior angels have turned to gaze at them in horror.

"What now, Samael?" Satan asks. He turns to look at Hiraldo pointedly. "You ain't inside of me, anymore. Are we still allies, or are we about to butt heads?"

"Of course we're still comrades," Samael replies. "I can no longer consider myself an angel. I don't wish to associate with the likes of those who slew my brothers and sisters. But neither am I a demon, a Titan, nor anyone else. I am..."

Several seconds pass. Nearby cherubs begin to congregate together. They eye their eldest brother fixatedly, intending to rush in and rescue him, but they keep their distance for the moment to eyeball Satan. How powerful is the Devil that he was able to dispatch the highest Archangel?

Samael's eyes shine with insight. "Ah. That's it. No longer will I call myself by my angelic name. Instead, I shall wholeheartedly adopt my nickname, the one given to me by the dragons."

Satan raises an eyebrow. "Hades?"

"Aye. From this day forward, never call me by my holy moniker. For the rest of eternity, everyone will know me as Hades, father of Dragons."

"Dragonborn?" Satan adds.

"Let's not go that far."

Satan chuckles.

Hades smirks.

Suddenly, a chill descends on Hades and Satan. Satan's eyes shift and refocus onto someone standing behind the former Archangel.

"Huh? WHAT THE-?!"

"Hello, Satan." A raggedly-clothed demon hisses.

Valac, Emperor of the Damned, raises his scythe to impale Hades. The instant he swings, Hades blocks the assassination attempt with a Vector, then coolly tilts his head back to smile at the Grim Reaper.

"Ah, Valac. I recognized thy stench from a mile away. Dids't thou enjoyeth the show?"

Valac teleports away and reappears before Satan and Hades. His hood covers his face, but Heaven's Light comes from all directions at once. His mottled, twisted, and partially melted bones give him a frightening appearance.

"Somewhat," The Reaper replies. His voice, far more reserved than when Satan last heard it, creaks like the floor of an old log cabin. Valac's empty eye sockets fixate on Satan and Hades, but also upon Raphael laying at their feet. "An Archangel's soul should taste quite delicious; snatching him away would prove quite ambitious."

Hades doesn't budge an inch. "My brother must live to walk another day, Reaper. If thou dost plan to tear out his soul, I will defend him."

Satan takes a step forward. "Forget the old man! How the HELL did you survive, Valac?! We blew up your soul!"

Valac tilts his head slightly toward Satan. Slowly, deliberately, he raises a bony hand to scrape against his melted skull.

"Kss. My suffering; eternal. Not external; internal. Samael attacked me most adeptly; he struck my soul directly. With my soul in ruins, I hid in seclusion; a substitution was needed, an infusion was required. After I rebuilt myself, to my dwelling, I retired."

Satan purses his lips. "So you survived after all. Damn. You're a hardy little cunt."

"Indeed..." Valac murmurs. The Grim Reaper clutches his scythe even tighter. From the depths of his soul, two red points of light appear in his eye sockets. "Today... I have a mission. Those who stand in my way... I will beat them into submission."

"Try if ye like," Hades murmurs. "But if that mission includes my brother's soul, thou shalt perish before laying a hand on him."

Valac raises his head. With a motion of his hands, he summons an undead demoness from underground.

"Unlikely."

Satan's jaw drops as a familiar face rises to greet him.

"Nerissa?!"

Part 153: Death's Arrival

Recommended Listening

Valac's empty eye sockets gaze upon Heaven's battlefield. The vision of dozens of his clones detail scenes of chaos to the Reaper, revealing the extent of the war between demons and angels. Losers and victors emerge on both sides. Some beings perish while screaming in pain, while others die resolutely, too proud to let a single sound escape their lips.

What a wonderful symphony of death, The Grim Reaper reflects. The greatest terror comes when one takes their last breath. For many, their survival hangs on the edge of a knife. For me, my power governs death and life.

Valac lightly touches his head. No longer is his face a pristine, unblemished demon skull, but instead, a twisted amalgamation of melted ossein and chipped bone. His boney hand trembles as he caresses his disfigured visage.

How wrong I was to underestimate the Devil; my first adversary. His pet Archangel attacked my soul and left me a heavy burden to carry. The scars Samael carved stretch from my scalp to my heel. I escaped with my life, but my body may never heal.

The battlefield fades away, leaving Valac inside of a dank, dark cave. Hundreds of bones lay scattered against the walls, each of them telling a tale of torture and barbarism. Angels, Demons, Humans, Titans, and even several belonging to animals lay piled together in foot-high clumps.

In the center of the circular room, a single pedestal stands alone, rising two feet from the ground. Its flat top holds the only thing providing light in the small cave; Valac's lantern.

The lantern glows a soft blue, while occasionally flickering green and red as millions of souls dance about inside of it.

Voices whisper to one another in pain. "Valac... traitor... monster..."

Valac sits atop a small rock without any rags to cover his bones. His body slumps forward, and his frail, cracked bones creak as he heaves a sigh.

"Haah... why do the weak resist the strong, even when they stand no chance? As the centuries pass, I tire of fighting ants. Unaware of their frailty, they seek to leave their names etched into the riverbanks of time... but all of them will eventually die, for fate moves with neither reason nor rhyme."

With great effort, Valac raises two of his arms and hovers them over his lantern. Immediately, the whispers of the souls contained within die down, leaving the room silent. Valac hardens his gaze, and a single blue soul escapes the gravitational pull of the others, then flies out and lands in his palm.

"...This one will do."

Valac's eyes flash, and a red light shines on the tiny little soul. A moment later, he flipantly tosses it toward the ground. It explodes into ash, and a new copy of the Grim Reaper springs into existence. His

bones creak and crack, then transform into a perfect facsimile of the Valac seated next to his lantern.

However, one slight difference makes the newly formed clone stand apart from the former. Unlike his creator, the clone stands upright without any difficulties. He does not hunch over, nor choke out pained gasps. Simply put, he appears much more robust in stature and spirit than his creator.

The new clone stares at his master for a moment before nodding. "This soul clone understands your intent. I have copied your memories. I will go, now."

"Wait."

The weak, hunched-over Valac coughs into his fist, then reaches into the lantern. He procures three more souls, then forms them into three additional soul clones. After a moment, he tosses their differently-colored balls of light toward the ground, causing three new clones to explode into existence beside the first one.

"Take these three as backup," The weak and sickly-looking Valac murmurs. "It isn't as though we suffer from a lack of quality souls."

The vision of Valac's clones from all across Heaven merges with his new clones, as well as the original seated before the lantern. Their soulless eyes shine for a moment, and the four new clones nod. "We will probe the weaknesses of our enemies."

"Go."

Valac gestures with his hands, and the four soul-clones fall into the ground, becoming one with the Earth. After they leave, they begin traveling to an unknown destination, leaving the former Valac behind.

"Keh, keh..." Valac coughs raspily. "How fortunate for each of my children to have a spirit borne of perfection. Were I to merge a soul with mine, I would suffer a significant rejection. Satan is lucky; being able to absorb other souls to strengthen his own. I lack such a luxury; so instead, I must rely on reanimated bones."

With a wave of his hand, Valac sighs and summons four more. They, too, fall into the ground and travel to an unknown destination.

"If only I were strong enough to leave; then perhaps my vengeance I might eventually achieve. For now, I will keep my distance and gaze from afar. After all, my soul is in no rush to suffer another scar."

All around Heaven's battlefield, cries of surprise erupt among the ranks of demons and angels as inconceivably powerful emanations of mana appear out of nowhere. Valac's clones spring into existence, startling members of both warring factions. Several Titans falter and stumble as they sense the mana of the Grim Reaper.

"What? Valac has returned?!"

"No!! Not the Grim Reaper! Not the one who slew the White Tiger tribe!!"

"Flee! We can't fight him! His scythe will kill us in one blow!"

Many of the Titans lose their battle spirit. They run in every direction, stampeding through the angels and demons in terror as they try to run to the distant corners of Heaven. Their feet pulverize anyone unfortunate enough to stand in their path. Only Zeus remains unmoved. He and Gabriel continue to battle Lucifer's Hydra. Despite their best efforts, twelve new Hydra heads swarm in every direction, snapping and biting the Archangel of Power and the Titan King.

"Huwaaah!"

Gabriel grunts and slams his foot into the ground as he wrestles with three of the Hydra's heads. The impact from his foot sends a shockwave through the soil, flinging a hundred nearby demons and angels into the air. The angels quickly right themselves with their wings and cut apart the demons before they can react.

"How are we to slay this beast?!" Zeus exclaims in disgust. He flips around on the Hydra's back, dodging the four heads targeting him, while occasionally using his two lightning rods to batter the Hydra's shell. "For every head we slay, two more take its place!"

With only seven of the Hydra's heads occupied, three others begin breathing fire into the skies, blasting cherubs and seraphs to ashes before they can dodge. The last two shoot bolts of lightning at Gabriel from a distance, keeping out of his melee range.

Kzzat! Kzzat!

"Perhaps try not ripping off any other heads!" Gabriel howls in exasperation. He winces as bolts of Hydra lightning splash against his back, sending pain ripping through his nervous system. "We need backup! Where is Michael?!"

Zeus quickly glances around the battlefield. The Hydra doesn't give him enough time to examine the various skirmishes spattered in every direction. "I haven't a clue!"

"Curses!"

Gabriel returns to subduing the colossal beast, but his courage wavers as he realizes this is not a battle he's likely to win without uncovering the Hydra's weakness.

* * *

Elsewhere, Bael and Camael pause their battle and stare in shock as four of Valac's clones materialize between them. Two of the clones turn to stare at Camael, while the other two meet Bael's gaze. Shock races through Camael's heart as she gazes upon the clones standing before her, while Bael only appears mildly surprised.

"The Grim Reaper survived?!" Camael gasps. "Accursed fiend!"

"Well, I'll be damned," Bael replies. "I don't believe it! Satan said you died, you ol' crumbly-bones, you!"

One of the clones raises a skeletal finger. "Bael. You may have counted me among the departed, but sadly for you, this war has only just started. I come before you while bearing a heavy grudge. A punishment is yours to carry; that is what I have judged."

Bael raises an eyebrow. He starts to reply, but at that moment, a flash of fire ignites in the sky, emitting light as bright as Gabriel's attack from earlier. Seconds later, Bael and a few other nearby demons gasp as two massive fireballs begin streaking across the sky. Every so often, the two fireballs release smaller bursts of flame, scorching nearby angels to ash.

Bael's hands begin to tremble. "Aw, shit... no... no... say it ain't so..."

The two fireballs continue streaking around, and as they come closer, Bael's trembling turns into full-body shuddering.

"NO! NO!" Bael howls at the top of his lungs. "Valac! You fucking bastard! How could you do this to me?!"

Valac doesn't respond. His clones watch silently as the fireballs — now revealed to be fire-type demons — rush toward the ground, and Bael, at full speed.

THOOM!

Azazel and Azog crash into the dirt and send molten rock spewing toward Bael. He doesn't even flinch as thousand-degree debris sprays across his body and adheres to his skin. His body, sculpted by dark demonic gods, completely ignores the intense heat smoldering upon it.

Instead, tears well up in Bael's eyes as the two fabulously-dressed demons jump out of their landing area and smile mischievously at him.

Azazel begins prancing around Bael's right side and giggling in a sing-songy voice. "♪ Look, Azog! Bael's here, just like Valac said! ♪"

Azog mimics his brother, but flanks Bael from the left. "♪ Of course! I told you not to worry your little head! ♪"

"♪ I have an idea! ♪" Azog says with a laugh. He claps his hands and grins like a madman. "♪ Let get with Bael and play a little game! ♪"

"♪ What a splendid thought! When it comes to our little boo-boo, we don't have any shame! ♪"

Both demons playfully fire bolts of fire at Bael, which do absolutely nothing to him, but the sudden wave of heat does rouse him from his stupor. "Bloody hell! Go away, both of you! You fuckers always drive me up the wall!!"

Camael stares at Bael and his two new 'friends' in disbelief. A moment later, her eyes shift to the Grim Reaper's four clones. All of them wordlessly turn to meet her gaze.

"Hello, Archangel of *Divination*. I wonder, were you able to predict this situation? Everything set before you today was part of my creation. One might even say it took a great deal of preparation."

A scythe materializes in the grasp of one of Valac's clones. The others float in three directions, but their speed seems leisurely at best. It takes them nearly ten seconds to surround the Archangel of Divination, but she keeps her eyes locked on the clone wielding the scythe.

"Valac. Contrary to thy beliefs, I did see this day coming. I will admit that thou didn't not appear in my visions, but this war did. I saw victory fall within my people's grasp, but we also will end up paying a

heavy toll. Thou shalt not succeed in thy plans. We will slay thee, and regain control of Earth."

Valac scoffs. "Unlikely. All of angelkind and demonkind dance in my palm. Even when Satan dealt me a most grievous blow, I took care to stay calm. Despite various setbacks, everything has gone right as a whole. A few missteps mean little when all of the pawns will eventually fall under my control."

Camael narrows her eyes. "Thou dost plan to slay our people and revive them as thy tools, that much is certain. After thousands of years, we've learned how thy abilities function. Do not look down on us, Reaper. Angels know more of violence and bloodshed than thou could ever imagine."

Valac pauses.

After a moment, he nods.

"Indeed. The tales I've heard would make you weep. There are few things sadder than peons acting like sheep. Do you think your eldest brother has never fed you a load of crock? If you knew what I knew, your heart would suffer quite the shock."

"The only liar on this battlefield is thee, Reaper," Camael mutters. "Thy words are poison. It would take a being far mightier and more majestic than thee to turn me against my family. The filth spewing from thy mouth does little more than churn my stomach."

Valac grips his scythe tighter. One of the other clones tilts its head to watch Gabriel and Zeus struggling against the Hydra. All four of them take a few moments to survey the battlefield before crouching down and readying themselves to attack.

"I'm only trying to help you, Archangel, and give you a little education. Your fantasies mean little to me, the one bent on your subjugation. If you wish to daydream of ponies and rabbits, far be it for me to interfere. Since we are both prophets of a sort, I need only ensure you disappear. It won't do for there to be two seers."

"Does my existence bother thy empty heart that much, Reaper?" Camael prods. A sneer crosses her face. "I suppose if thou dost eliminate me, then thou shalt be the only doomsayer left. Unfortunately for thee, I have the same idea. If I kill thee, then I will regain my ability to reshape the future. Thou art my greatest obstacle to saving my people."

"You can't save anyone," Valac hisses. "You'd do whatever your Creator told you, even if he struck you blind. You'll follow his will to the very end... even if it means the extinction of angelkind."

"The angels won't die!" Camael yells. Valac's words strike a nerve. "But, I know one ugly bastard who will!"

The Archangel jumps at Valac's clone. He swings his scythe down to impale her back, but she deftly blocks it with her shield and slams her hammer against his chest.

Kshhh!

Valac's bones explode into powder. His Scythe vanishes and reappears in the hands of the nearest clone.

"Struggle all you want, Archangel, but you'll never kill me! I'm immortal, unstoppable; my death is an impossibility!"

Valac's three remaining clones rush at Camael from all three sides. The Archangel raises her shield and blocks them while swinging her hammer for a counter-attack.

Meanwhile, Bael bolts away from the Reaper and Archangel. He flees for his life as the Sunshine Brothers fly after him.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!!" The Duke of Pain screams.

"♪Don't run away, Bael! You're the worst!♪" Azazel yells.

"♪Come play patty cake with us; you can even go first!" Azog adds.

"I DON'T WANNA GO FIRST! I'D RATHER DIE THAN TALK TO YOU! UWAAAHH!"

The mightiest Duke, Bael, dashes away from his worst enemies as fast as his powerful body can take him, leaving the Archangel of Divination to fend for herself. He plows through angels and demons alike as they get in his way, sending heads and arms rolling as he tears through anyone unlucky enough to end up in his path.

"OUTTA THE WAY, DUMBASSES!"

Several angels spot the barrel-chested demon thundering toward them, but they haven't a moment to escape. Their lives end tragically as a shrieking madman stomps them into puddles of blood.

As Bael flees, Valac manipulates a different clone near the outskirts of the battlefield. It floats underground after turning its body aetherial, only to eventually pop up behind a tree several hundred feet away from the war unfolding in Heaven.

"Eeyah!"

A demoness shrieks in surprise as she spots Valac's clone. Almost immediately, she steadies her breathing. "V-Valac?! You scared the shit out of me!"

Valac's clone nods at her. "Berith, my former Third Emperor, now a pawn of Satan the Devil. I can only wonder what he offered you to turn against someone of my level."

Berith quickly peeks around the tree toward the hundreds of nearby angels and demons ripping each other to shreds, then turns her attention back to Valac. "What are you, dense? I didn't turn against you! I've always been your most faithful servant! Don't lump me in with the likes of Belial and Lucifer. Anyway, I didn't know you were still alive. After a year of silence, I thought Satan's attack might have actually annihilated your soul."

Berith's annoyance fades into the back of her mind. She crosses her arms and huffs. "So, where have you been? I didn't expect to see you here of all places, but the ancient devils know you can't resist going wherever there's death and destruction."

Valac stares at Berith for a moment. Eventually, he nods, satisfied by her answer. "I knew you wouldn't enjoy working for Satan, after seeing the power I've displayed. Satan's attack dealt a grievous wound and caused my soul to decay. It took time to pull myself back from the edge of life and death, but now I've

returned to drag more souls down to the depths. If you're still my most loyal agent, then I've a mission for you to fulfill. I have my eye on a dangerous foe; someone I need you to kill."

Berith's eyes brighten immediately. "Just like before, eh? You don't waste time! As long as it isn't Satan, I can probably do it. There aren't many shadows around here, though. Fighting has proven quite tricky, today."

Valac's eyes glint ominously. "Satan is a mountain, while you are an ant. His power is infinite, while yours is scant. Worry not about him; leave his demise to me. Your mark is a soft one; a Titan named Hercules."

"Hercules."

Berith rolls the Titan's name around on her tongue.

"Right. I know the bastard. He nearly wiped out all of Lucifer's cronies, and Satan too. Damn shame, that. Would have saved us some trouble."

Valac nods. "Indeed. Hercules' body is iron, and his muscles are stone slabs. Beyond that, his greatest talent is the gift of gab. He has the power to turn my arisen against me, but only if they pledge to him their loyalty. He exploits my inability to control minds, then seizes control of my puppet's bodies. As you can imagine, such a situation is beyond shoddy. Eliminate him, and I will reward you bountifully."

Berith's eyes sparkle for a moment as she takes a moment to comprehend Valac's words. However, she quickly stuffs her emotions down and crosses her arms. "A reward, hm? Good. I deserve it. I'm not like that hussy, Nerissa. I've always been at your side. I want you to name me as your Second Emperor. I won't accept anything less!"

"Kss."

Valac hisses quietly to himself. Several seconds later, he nods. "That's what I like about you - your simple-minded desire for prominence. When I rate you against other demons, it becomes clear that you'll stop at nothing to achieve dominance. Very well, kill Hercules, and I'll give you what you deserve. In order to find him, you need only look North and observe."

Valac gestures past the tree toward the other side of the battlefield. Berith follows his directions and squints as she peers into the distance. "Too many people fighting. Can't see past them."

"One of my spies has their eyes on him now; you'd laugh if you saw the sweat dripping off his brow. Go now, Berith, and be sure to spare his soul. Once he dies, his powers will be *mine* to control."

A look of realization spreads across Berith's face. "Wait, you intend to control Hercules? To take him as one of your undead?"

"But of course," Valac replies, as he begins to sink into the ground. "I can only control those who have perished, excluding their minds. I rule the dead, but Hercules the living; that much I have divined. With him as my servant, I will become the master of all beings; their king on high."

Valac finishes sinking into the dirt, leaving Berith behind with only her thoughts.

The Emperor of Backstabbing shivers in anticipation.

Oh, yes! I can't believe it! I'm finally going to become Valac's number two!! Eeeh! I can finally take my place at his side and rule as his queen! Nobody will dare to talk down to me ever again!

Berith transforms into a shadow and pounces underneath a nearby rock. She follows up by teleporting under the shoe of an angel fighting for his life, then continues jumping toward her ultimate destination.

Oh, Titan, you can't die quick enough! Now, just where, exactly, are you...?

* * *

Elsewhere, on the other side of the battlefield, a young, ambitious Titan gazes through the eyes of his angelic puppets at the war unfolding before him.

Finally, the Reaper has come. If I were to enslave him, I would gain control over life and death. However, I would never do such a thing. For his crimes against my people, Valac must die. I will send off the souls he captured and return them to the bosom of the ancient ancestors. Only then will my revenge be complete.

A faint smile trails off Hercules' lips.

Everything is working out well, so far, but I mustn't grow complacent.

Suddenly, a strange scene catches Hercules attention. The vision of one of his angelic servants vanishes, but the last thing they see startles Hercules.

"The Duke of Pain is... fleeing from an enemy? What unthinkable terror could cause such an unstoppable warrior to flee for his life?"

The young Titan evaluates his demonic opponent with caution. If ever they were to fight, their battle would reshape the balance of power across Heaven's battlefield.

Part 154: The Birth of Evil

The Archangel of Courage sizes up his demon opponent warily. Unlike the last time Michael fought Diablo, his former captive has explosively increased his power after advancing to the rank of Emperor. Dangerous energy emits from Diablo, causing Michael's cockiness to waver.

Diablo glances past Michael toward Belial, still in her True Succubus form, gagged and bound by Uzziel's vines. "I should have known you wouldn't just kill her, Michael. You're a sick monster."

"I like to play with my food," Michael counters. "Besides. If this succubus dies, she'll only become fodder for the Reaper's army. I can't allow that."

"Valac?" Diablo asks. Immediately, his eyes dart around. "What the hell are you talking about? Satan killed Valac. The Reaper is dead, Michael."

Hercules, still controlling Uzziel's body, narrows her eyes. "It seems I was right. The demons have yet to discover that Valac has returned. He's not working with them."

"How unfortunate," Michael says with a smile. He takes a step toward Diablo and raises his sword. "Perhaps if every demon in Heaven worked together to kill me, they might succeed. All thy kind have are tricks and deceit. Thou shalt perish before comprehending the futility of standing against Heaven."

"Don't get cocky," Hercules warns Michael. "Never underestimate the demons. Your arrogance will be the death of you!"

Michael turns his head back to peer at Uzziel from the corner of his eye. "Don't mouth off to me, *Titan*. After I finish with this demon, thou art next."

Diablo watches warily as the two 'Archangels' converse with each other. A second later, he spots Uzziel's glowing eyes.

What? Why did Uzziel allow the Titan to take over her mind? Did he overpower her? Not only that, but why is Michael antagonizing him? Maybe there's a way I can turn their enmity to my advantage.

Michael returns his attention to Diablo. Belial wriggles in the background and tries to use her incredible strength to break free of Uzziel's vines, but the Titan controlling Uzziel merely coils them tighter. "Don't even think of escaping, wench. You stay right there and watch."

* * *

Diablo and Michael size each other up for a few moments. As they prepare for their battle, something darts around in the chaos of the surrounding battlefield. A nearby demon, Agares, hides behind a small rock and flattens himself to the ground. He suppresses his breathing, and cautiously wipes his forehead.

"Tch," Agares mutters under his breath. "Finally, I have enough mana to re-enter my reptilian form. But then what? There are two bloody Archangels! How am I supposed to rescue Belial with Uzziel guarding her?"

Something breezes against Agares' back. He stiffens and jerks his eyes around. A moment later, Vepar's voice whispers to him on the breeze. "Calm down; it's just me. I scoped out the situation. The Archangels didn't notice me at all. The stuck-up pricks have their heads so far up their asses they didn't-

"Yes, yes, get on with it!" Agares hisses through his teeth. "How do we get to Belial?! I can't fight an Archangel, let alone two of them! Michael nearly killed me!"

The faint green gas comprising Vepar's body shifts in the air, then transforms into a faint apparition of her displeased face. "You think I don't know that? The last thing I want is to die saving *Belial* of all people. Still, if we can free her, we might be able to overpower Uzziel. With two Emperors on our side, we should be able to win. However..."

Vepar trails off. Her whispering voice carries a hint of uncertainty.

"What? What's wrong?" Agares asks. He strains to look at her barely visible gaseous face, but he can't pick out her expression from the chaos visible through her body.

"It's Uzziel. She's been acting very strange. I could be wrong, but I think her eyes were glowing."

"Oh."

Agares swallows his saliva.

"Do... do you think... it's the Titan?"

"Possibly. If Hercules is controlling her, anything can happen. You weren't around when he and Zeus last attacked, but I saw his cunning in action. He can instantly realize someone's true battle potential if he takes over their mind. Satan's power was two, possibly three times higher than anything I've seen before or after that day. We're lucky we didn't all die."

Agares grits his teeth. "And now he has an Archangel in his possession."

"Exactly."

Both demons go quiet. As they watch Michael and Diablo banter, the Emperor and Archangel eventually prepare to battle, sending pangs of worry through Agares' heart.

"We can't let Diablo fight Michael alone. He'll die! Michael is supposed to be the deadliest Archangel."

"Everyone has a weakness," Vepar hisses. "You took out Michael's arm with your venom when you ambushed him. He's not a god. Diablo has a chance."

"He won't survive if Uzziel gets involved," Agares replies. "Not only that, but Michael has a healer on his side. Diablo doesn't."

"Mmm. Fair point."

Suddenly, Michael leaps at Diablo. "Too scared to make the first move? Then allow me!"

The two combatants crash against each other! Immediately, Michael unleashes a dizzying series of stabs, slices, and jabs, overwhelming Diablo with his speed. Diablo manages to reflect a few of Michael's attacks with his kinetic shielding, but he can't maintain it for long. Michael quickly overwhelms him and begins driving him backward.

"We have to help!" Agares squeaks. He peeks out from behind his rock and stares in horror at the battle taking place between monster and demon. "What do we do?!"

"I have an idea..." Vepar mutters. Her gaseous form shifts slightly, and her eyes settle on Uzziel. "Listen carefully. I'm only going to say this once..."

Agares' eyes widen as Vepar relays her plan.

"That's suicidal! Are you crazy?!"

"No, but I'm desperate. Unlike Satan, I don't think attacking Heaven was a smart decision. Since we're here, we'll have to make the best of the situation. Are you with me or not?"

Agares locks eyes with Vepar's cloud-like body, barely visible in the breeze. He bites his lip and nods.

"Of course. I won't leave Belial behind, not after she saved my life. I owe her."

"That's what I wanted to hear. Follow me."

Agares nods. He motions with his hands, transforms into his lizard form, and begins slinking around behind Uzziel, using his camouflage ability to become nearly invisible.

Recommended Listening

Michael attacks Diablo with the fury of seven hurricanes. He batters and slaps Diablo with the flat of his blade, toying with his opponent and wearing him down while occasionally nicking Diablo's skin now and then.

Gashes spread across Diablo's body. The Emperor of Annihilation attempts to summon his kinetic barrier, but Michael continuously shatters it an instant after it forms, turning Diablo's defense into a paper tiger.

"Gaugh!"

Diablo cries out in pain as Michael's enchanted sword slices across his chest, spraying blood to the side. Michael cuts slightly deeper than before, then flaps his wings and retreats a few steps to smirk.

"Hahaha! Thou art the same weakling as when we last spoke, little bloodskin! Soon, I shall bind thee with chains and cast ye into my dungeon! Torture and pain shall define the rest of thy miserable existence!"

Diablo staggers backward and gasps for breath. His vision reddens as he refocuses his eyes on Michael's cackling figure.

"Tch. Laugh it up, bird-brain. I didn't spend the last few thousand years sitting on my ass. I trained, day and night... all so I could bury your corpse in the mud!"

Diablo's eyes flash. He motions with his hands and casts a prepared spell. Suddenly, Michael stops laughing. A tremendous sensation of weight slams down against his body, nearly yanking him to his knees.

"What?!" Michael gasps. He quickly plants his feet against the ground and stares at Diablo, startled by this new development. "What... what invisible... attack...?!"

Yeah, that's the trick, Diablo thinks to himself. *I need to distract him. My gravity magic works best over long periods. I need to exhaust Michael and slow him down a bit. Once I soften him up, it'll only take one punch to lay him out.*

Diablo stares at the Archangel evenly. Rather than answer Michael's question, he flicks his eyes toward Uzziel. "I can't believe you'd sell your sister to Hercules, Michael. You're a real piece of work."

"Nonsense!" Michael yells. He takes one heavy step forward, and his foot plants several inches into the soft dirt like an anvil crashing into a lake. "I'd never do such a thing! Don't try to test me with wordplay, bloodskin!"

"I'm not playing around," Diablo replies. "Trust me. I've never been more serious in my life!"

He quickly begins building kinetic power in his body. As Michael struggles to escape the increased gravity pulling him into the dirt, Diablo begins powerwalking toward the Archangel. His eyes flash as he rears back to smash Michael right in the face.

"Dodge, you imbecile!" Uzziel shouts. "Don't let that demon hit you!"

Michael spots Diablo's incoming attack. Despite the immense pressure on his body, he throws himself backward and dodges as Diablo swings his fist toward him.

FWOOOOM!

Diablo's punch detonates in the air like a stick of dynamite. A wave of scorching wind fires from his fist and passes over Michael's stomach as the Archangel lays on his back. The Archangel of Courage stares wide-eyed as Diablo's kinetic energy ignites the air and shoots like a missile into a crowd of demons and angels. The searing hurricane gusts send warriors from both sides tumbling away, but unlike his mightiest punch, it doesn't end up killing anyone.

Damn! Michael dodged! Diablo curses. He flicks his eyes to the Archangel laying on his back. *It's a good thing I held back, or I'd have killed a bunch of demons!*

"Too close, bloodskin!" Michael snarls. Before Diablo can retreat, Michael lunges his left arm out and grabs Diablo by the ankle. "Don't even think of retreating!"

With a vicious glint in his eyes, Michael squeezes Diablo's ankle, *hard*.

Crunch.

"Ahhh!!" Diablo cries in agony as Michael crushes his bones. He quickly yanks his foot out of Michael's grasp but ends up tumbling backward and landing on his ass.

"As I said, bloodskin! Retreat shall be an impossibility for thee, today!"

Michael gathers strength in his arm, legs, and wings. A moment later, he shoves off the ground and leaps into a standing position, acting as if the increased gravity doesn't affect him.

"A most splendid parlor trick, as expected of thy people!" Michael laughs. "It may have slowed me down a bit, but I've encountered worse! Uriel possessed a similar ability, but her gravity exceeded thine!"

Michael cracks his neck and stretches to increase his circulation. His smile vanishes as images of his deceased sister come rushing into his mind.

"Bastard. Thy people murdered Uriel. I will ensure thou endureth a long, painful life in my prison. None who enter may ever leave. That is my promise!"

Diablo grits his teeth and pushes his still-functioning leg against the ground to escape Michael. His right foot bends awkwardly from its snapped bone, leaving him unable to walk. At that moment, he turns to look at Belial, hoping she might be able to heal him, but what he sees startles him.

A faint, shimmering mirage slinks across the ground. It passes Belial and heads toward Uzziel. The Archangel of Creation stares at Diablo, oblivious to the threat creeping toward her.

Agares?! Diablo thinks. I thought only Belial and I were here! We still have a chance! I have to distract the Archangels!

Immediately, Diablo averts his eyes from the captured Succubus. He turns to gaze at Michael and watches as the Archangel takes a few ponderous steps toward him.

"I... I think I've figured something out about you, Michael!"

The Archangel of Courage stops and raises an eyebrow. "Oh? And what might that be?"

"You're a chicken-shit. You posture like you're a mighty warrior, but all you do is look for opponents weaker than you to bully and push around. Your Archangel title is a crock of shit. What kind of courageous warrior picks fights with weaklings?!"

Michael's pupils shrink. "Do not mock me, bloodskin. Thou art testing my patience."

Diablo continues. "I understand, now! Hahaha! That's right, you call demons tricksters and schemers, but in the end, you're no better than us so-called 'bloodskins!' You're the same as us!"

"Don't let him goad you!" Uzziel yells. Hercules scowls angrily as Diablo brazenly pushes Michael's anger further and further. "Hurry up and capture that demon! We've other Emperors to worry about!"

Michael ignores him. "I am no coward, red rat. How *dare* thou disparage my battle feats. Thou shalt PAY for those words!"

Michael raises his sword above his head and flaps his wings. He lunges toward Diablo, still on the ground, and swings his blade down, intending to lop off one of Diablo's arms.

Diablo watches Michael rushing toward him. *Yes! Perfect!*

Michael swings his sword down with all his strength, but Diablo releases a prepared magic symbol as a wicked glint appears in his eyes. Michael's sword slams against the Emperor's kinetic barrier and instantly reverses direction with ten times its original force. Michael yelps and stumbles awkwardly as his sword flies out of his grasp and sails into the sky. "Gah! What?!"

Diablo motions with his other hand and shoves off the ground with his left leg. He balls his hand into a fist and punches Michael right in the stomach before the Archangel of Courage can react.

THUCK!

All of the oxygen inside Michael's lungs bursts from his lips as Diablo's super-dense fist bashes him in the gut. Diablo knocks the wind out of Michael and flings him several feet backward, allowing the intense gravity to yank him into the dirt with violent force.

"Tch," Diablo grunts. "Didn't have time to add a kinetic factor. Still, that'll buy me a few moments. What about-?"

"Ahh!" Uzziel cries out in alarm as Agares pounces at her from behind, catching her off-guard. The Duke of Reptiles releases his Camouflage ability and instantly wraps himself around the Archangel's back. He mimics the same attack he used on Michael thousands of years previously and bares his fangs to lunge at Uzziel's shoulder.

However, Hercules, still in control of the Archangel, immediately recognizes the incoming danger. Before Agares' fangs can pierce Uzziel's skin, the Archangel flicks a finger, and a vine shoots out of the ground in front of her, shapes itself into a fist, and races toward her shoulder.

Agares gasps as he spots the incoming counter-attack. "OH, F-"

He doesn't get a chance to curse. The earthen fist strikes his face with the might of a cannonball, tears him off Uzziel's body, and sends him rocketing backward. He grinds into the dirt and shudders as his vision whirls like a typhoon.

The Archangel of Creation spins around to face her attacker. Several deep, bloody gashes on her arms and legs, caused by the ripping of Agares' claws from her body, begin flowing freely. She heals herself with a wave of her hand and scowls at the Duke.

"Tch. Annoying little lizard. This area lies within my field of vision, you fool! Sneak attacks are pointless when my servant's gazes fall upon each other!"

After scowling at the momentarily stunned Duke of Reptiles, Hercules fires off a quick command to several nearby Undying to move in on his attacker. The mind-controlled angels grin gleefully and fly toward Agares as their thoughts begin to race.

Our master has given us an order! Truly, he is benevolent to allow us to fight!

All will hail Hercules, the Infinity King! Our master treats us lovingly and assures us of victory!

If only I had accepted the rapture of Hercules' embrace sooner, I might have experienced the joy of his touch! Quickly, I must dispatch the one who means him harm, post-haste!

The thoughts of all these controlled angels swirl in Hercules' mind, but he ignores them. His mind control is unlike Valac's, in that those who submit to him feel unending pleasure. They fight for him willingly and are unable to resist any of his orders. Indeed, resisting is not something they would ever dream of since they immediately fall into rapturous love with their mighty king!

...However.

The Archangel of Creation, Uzziel, does not fall under his sway.

Foul monster, Uzziel's voice hisses inside her mind. *For my brothers and sisters to praise thee in such a fashion... thou hath corrupted their minds beyond recognition!*

Quiet. Hercules replies. His thoughts carry a commanding presence that immediately suppresses Uzziel, but still, he cannot gain control over her. **Your soul is unthinkableably powerful. I must thank you for revealing a previously unknown weakness of mine to me, but in the end, I still fully control your body. I will make use of your powers as I like.**

Even as Agares regains his senses and jumps to his feet, Hercules releases a belated sigh. He sits cross-legged upon a boulder three miles from the massive warfront and touches his temples.

"It seems that if someone possesses a powerful soul, one stronger than mine, they can partially resist my soul manipulation. I never knew that was the case. But... that does bring a question to my mind. Why is Uzziel's soul unusually powerful? Is it merely because she is an Archangel?"

Thirty Undying angels stand in a defensive circle around Hercules, protecting him while he focuses his efforts on the battlefield. None of them reply to his spoken question, though they wouldn't even if they knew the answer.

"It is a mystery I must solve," Hercules mutters. "Perhaps, if I take control of the other Archangels, I will have similar difficulties. Controlling Michael might be more difficult than keeping his timid little sister in check. Still, considering Uzziel's demure demeanor, I can't help but wonder why she gives me such a sense of foreboding..."

Hercules returns his attention to the little demon runt, the one with the scales. Agares tenses up as several mind-controlled Cherubs and Seraphs surround him. The former unsheathes their swords, while the latter begin preparing spells to annihilate him.

"Damn!" Diablo yells. He stares in horror at his friend, now surrounded by Hercules' minions. Never did he expect Agares' surprise attack to go so wrong! "Run, Agares! You can't beat an Archangel!"

"Run *where?*!" Agares cries out in exasperation. He quickly flicks his eyes toward the nearest cherub and immediately forms an escape plan.

I'll have to break through! The Duke of Reptiles reflects. *Uzziel might be an Archangel, but the others are only low-ranked angels. They can't defeat a Duke!*

In the blink of an eye, Agares formulates a plan and attacks! He pounces at the nearest Cherub and raises a claw to tear off the angel's head.

Once this one is gone, I'll camouflage and flee!

Agares' desire to escape causes his heart to pound like a drum in his chest. He swings his claw down and blinks in surprise as two Cherubs rush him from both sides. One slams the Duke with a shield and knocks him to the side, while the other aims a sword at him and stabs at his stomach. Both of them move in tandem without wasting a single movement.

Gahk! How-?!

Agares winces as the Cherub's sword glances off the scales protecting his gut. It slices a small gash across his midsection but doesn't cut deep enough to injure him grievously. Agares's body drives into the cherub on his left, thanks to the impact of the other's shield, and both go tumbling to the ground. A split-second later, the first cherub raises his sword and swings it toward the Duke's neck.

Shit!

Agares jerks a claw up and catches the blade, preventing himself from suffering a grisly death.

"Hoho," The cherub says, as Hercules speaks through his mouth. "You're not half-bad, scaled one. Where were you when I nearly killed all of your people?"

"I was busy!" Agares snarls. He flicks his tail against the ground and uses its muscles to fling himself into the air. His strange movements catch Hercules by surprise. Before the Titan can react, Agares severs his target's neck, then slaps the head right off the cherub's shoulders. "Eat my ass, Titan!"

Hercules doesn't flinch as one of his pawns perishes. He speaks through the mouth of a nearby Seraph. "Fool. I'm only probing you for the moment. Have you already forgotten?"

With those words, Hercules' control shifts to Uzziel. The instant Agares' feet touch the ground, Uzziel motions with her hands, and brambles soaked in holy energy burst out of the dirt and grab hold of Agares like prison shackles.

"Ahh!" Agares gasps as the holy-energy-infused barbs press against his scales and find a few gaps in his defense. "Fucking hell!"

Diablo starts to move toward his friend, but before he takes two steps, Michael jumps to his feet. "Going somewhere, bloodskin?! I did not permit thy departure!"

Michael's eyes flash, and a beam of light fires from them. Diablo reacts instinctively and ducks the deadly attack, causing Michael's eye-laser to fly past him and strike a boulder instead. Diablo quickly spins on his one functioning ankle, before leaping to the side to avoid the laser chasing after him.

Damn! I can't move properly with my ankle all fucked-up! Diablo yells internally. And with Michael back on his feet, I can't help Agares! He's on his own!

Diablo lands in a crouched stance, with the toes of his broken foot barely touching the ground, while his palms and other foot form a tripod-stance to allow him to evade Michael's laser.

"Stand still," Michael orders. His voice crackles with killing intent. "I will remove thy limbs, one at a time."

"Try me!" Diablo yells. He leaps to the left as Michael's gaze sweeps toward him. The Archangel's laser cuts through a crowd of demons and angels fighting in the distance as he aims for Diablo, but it doesn't harm his brothers and sisters, only the demons. Several of them scream in pain as his powerful attack severs their waists and causes them to fall to the ground. The nearby angels quickly finish off their foes and smile thankfully at their brother.

However, Michael ignores them. He focuses all of his attention on the surprisingly nimble Emperor of Annihilation.

"Even with a hobbled leg, thou art quite the spry little grasshopper!"

Diablo dodges Michael again and begins summoning kinetic energy to his right hand. Magical power condenses in his palm, and instead of dodging Michael a third time, Diablo leaps straight at his opponent, catching Michael off-guard.

"Eat shit, dickwad!"

Michael's eyes sweep toward Diablo, but he only lands a glancing blow as his laser tears across Diablo's back. The Emperor of Annihilation grunts as the holy energy scorches his flesh, but he doesn't retreat. Diablo rears his fist back and swings it at Michael's chest.

I can't dodge! The Archangel realizes. Too late, he tries to block the attack, but Diablo's fist finds its mark.

CRACK!

Diablo transfers most of his body's mass to his fist, enhancing the ten-times kinetic energy already build up inside of it. Three hundred pounds of weight combines with his kinetic potential to deliver hundreds of tons of force to Michael's ribcage.

The Archangel goes flying.

Unlike the glancing blow from earlier, Diablo's second attack is a near-fatal one. Michael's head hits the ground first. It drags across the dirt and transforms his flight into a tumbling, twisting mass of devastation. The Archangel of Courage loses his ability to think as he careens helplessly across Heaven's surface like a rock skimming across a pond. After several seconds of uncontrolled tumbling, he collides with a group of demons and comes to a stop, sending them scattering like bowling pins under the force and weight of his body.

Diablo lands on the ground and stares in disbelief at Michael's prone form half a mile away.

I... I did it! I got that spawn of a broodmother!

Hercules, still trying to take care of the pesky little Duke, but unable to land a killing blow, flicks his gaze toward Michael. "What?! Worthless Archangel! That's why I told you not to toy with your food!"

"Outstanding!" Agares yells. "Now, help me with this broad!"

A female voice speaks up from behind Uzziel. "You want assistance, eh? Allow us to accomodate your request."

Uzziel flinches. Hercules quickly turns one of the cherub's heads to look at the Archangel and gasps as he spots Belial standing not ten feet away. Behind her, a thick, green mist swirls in the breeze. It coalesces into a faint face wearing a huge grin.

"You did it!" Agares yells. He laughs and echoes Vepar's grin as he eyeballs the ten cherubs remaining around him. "Two Emperors, a Duke, and a Baron. You're about to lose your mightiest pawn, Hercules!"

Fury erupts on Uzziel's face. "Insolent shit! I can't believe I fell for your distraction!"

"You'd better believe it," Belial says. No longer is she in her True Succubus form. Already, she has regenerated her missing arm. She glances over at Diablo and nods. "I'll be there in a second."

"Take your time," Diablo mutters. He shoots a hesitant glance toward Michael, still lying in the dirt. The Archangel hasn't moved since his landing, but it's unclear to Diablo whether he lived or died.

Hercules' focus turns laser-sharp as his cherubs quickly size up the situation unfolding. Belial, Vepar, and Agares coil their muscles to attack, and the Titan's mind begins to race.

My Omni-Vision might be incredibly versatile, but a sizable distraction can cause me to lose focus. Had I left one cherub to guard the succubus, that other demoness couldn't have freed her. I put too much attention on the damned lizard! Tch, and now Michael is down for the count, too! I have to crush my opponents before they attack!

Immediately, Hercules's soul manipulation begins digging into Uzziel's psyche. In the blink of an eye, he searches through thousands, perhaps even millions of years of memories to find information about her powers.

This female is not adept at fighting. She is a peaceful creature, yet the further I dig, the less I find. It's almost as if...

Hercules continues poring over the contents of Uzziel's mind. Suddenly, a massive, unthinkable vast void emerges in her memories. Like an all-encompassing black hole, Hercules freezes as he gazes into it. A palpable sense of terror grips his heart as he eyes the sudden barrier stopping his progress.

By the ancestors! What unholy demonic construct might this be?! It's as if the contents of Uzziel's most distant past have been swallowed by some all-powerful being! This is no ordinary mental block... but something created by a magical power beyond anything I've ever seen!

Hercules pauses.

The Titan gazes into the abyss, and it gazes into him.

I should not tear down this wall. The consequences might prove too devastating for life itself. But... rather than destroy the void... perhaps I can pass beyond it, even if only for a moment. Just one look, that's all I need. A hint from Uzziel's past might guide me in defeating the enemies surrounding her!

Still, Hercules hesitates. It takes all his willpower to start moving again. After half an eternity, his body begins to fly toward the void. The closer he draws, the more a sense of foreboding and dread takes him.

Evil... damnation to all still living... the fate of the universe... turmoil... obliteration...

Hercules shudders as he begins to fall into the void. Almost immediately, a light appears at its center.

Ah! There it is! A passage beyond this blackened void!

Hercules' physical body tenses up as he grits his teeth. He shifts his soul into the shape of a bullet and begins rushing past the aperture guarding Uzziel's memories.

I must see what lies in the distance! I MUST!

The further Hercules travels, the more his very soul begins to contort and twist. Where before, it started as a plump and healthy ball of light, it quickly molds itself into a strand thinner than a hair, nigh-infinite in length.

Hrrrgh!

Hercules concentrates with all of his willpower and continues pressing toward the rapidly expanding pinprick of light.

SHOW... ME... YOUR... SECRETS... ARCHANGEL!

All of a sudden, the pressure engulfing him vanishes.

Hercules breaks through the wall protecting Uzziel's ancient past, and his soul reverts to its original form.

The dread inside Hercules's heart swallows him whole.

Oh... ancestors... what have I done? No... this can't be...

Uzziel's memories unfold before him, like a symphony of death.

Tears begin to fall from Hercules' eyes. His sanity slips.

How could I be so naïve? I must leave at once. Nobody must know. When I finish in heaven... I must... I must kill Uzziel. She cannot be left to live. Oh, ancestors, how could you sign such a deal with Raphael? How could you allow this fiend to go on living after the blood she's shed?

Hercules pulls away from Uzziel's memories. As he does, an overwhelming sense of emptiness swallows his heart.

I gained the power needed to defeat my enemies... but at what cost? How can one continue existing after witnessing such vile atrocities?

Megara. I wish to feel your embrace one last time.

One last time...

* * *

Hercules finishes retracting his mind from Uzziel's memories. Time returns to normal, and he stares listlessly as Belial's bladed arm lashes toward the back of Uzziel's neck.

I should allow this Archangel to perish.

The weapon flicks toward Uzziel, but Hercules doesn't react.

I should... give up... my dreams.

Belial's blade cracks the air as it passes the speed of sound.

Hercules waits.

I need only stand by, and the demons will kill Uzziel. I could save the universe just by allowing her to perish.

But... will I? Can I allow my mightiest pawn to perish?

Belial's blade arrives within a foot of Uzziel's back.

No. I need her, still. I must first accomplish my goals. Only after that... only afterward... can I allow her to die.

Hercules smiles.

That's right. I cannot give up now, not when victory is within my grasp. What other purpose can I live for, aside from achieving my one goal?

Uzziel's eyes begin to glow.

I will kill the demons. Then, I will kill Uzziel.

That is my purpose.

Uzziel jerks her head to the side, causing Belial's blade to miss by the slimmest of margins.

The Archangel of Creation motions with her hands and quickly prepares a skill she hasn't used since the Primordial Era.

Hercules speaks through Uzziel's lips. "My apologies, demons. I cannot allow this one's death. She is essential to my plans."

A chill goes down Belial's back. "Agares. Stay back. Get away from her!"

"It's too late," Uzziel murmurs. "I've seen the darkness. Now, I must bring out the light, or risk being swallowed, forever."

Hercules unleashes all of his mental control and suppresses Uzziel's soul with all of his might.

"The light of Creation; appear! Give me the power to defeat the demons!"

Belial gasps.

Agares pales.

Diablo's blood chills.

"What is this power?" Vepar whispers. The poisonous-gas demoness immediately turns to flee, but an invisible force grabs hold of her and prevents her escape.

Fire ignites in Uzziel's eyes.

"You're not going anywhere!"

Part 155: The Zhurm's Rampage

Many miles from the battlefield, far from the sounds of angelic steel and demonic magic clashing, the recently vacated city of Nirvana stands like a jewel cast among the pearls of Heaven's landscape. Like many other cities in Heaven, lavishly designed stone houses sit along a carefully developed road, one formed from flat stones placed together in simple geometric shapes. Despite the simple design of all the houses, each one has an elegant air to it.

With curved, oval-shaped roofs, and doors big enough for Gabriel to step through without stooping, each house seems designed for the Archangel of Power enter, even though no other angels come anywhere close to his stature.

A foreboding wind blows through the vacated city. All of its residents, now engaged in battle with demonkind, have left their possessions and belongings behind, unaware of the secret strike force dispatched to destroy their homes.

The ground explodes! A Burrower-type demon jumps out of a freshly-dug hole in the dirt and lands in a crouch. He quickly scans the area, turning a wary eye toward the nearby windows.

"Chee-chee! I don't see anyone..."

Behind him, several orcs emerge from his tunnel. All of them ride atop Hellhounds, but after a dozen pop out, one particularly nasty-looking fellow riding atop the biggest hound of all makes his appearance. Without the slightest hint of fear, Sheol, the first Orc Zhurm, king of his people, crosses his arms and sits proudly atop his mighty steed — a three-headed Hellhound that puts all the others to shame.

"How pathetic. Look at you lot, sneaking around like thieves in the night. Disgraceful. Raise your chins. Stop pissing your pants and get ready to work."

The Orc Zhurm gazes upon the Burrower-demon with disgust. Unlike the Demon Lord cowering in fear, Sheol sits atop his hound like a conquering leader, who's come to visit his subjugated land. His clothing, formed from the pelts of various predator animals, is also adorned with hundreds of bones from the angels and humans he's killed over the centuries. Compared to the lesser beings surrounding him, Sheol stands atop a mountain of bodies; all of which have earned him his aura of rulership.

"I-it can't hurt to be careful," The Burrower replies. He glances up at Sheol as if to search for a hint of understanding. Despite his rank of Demon Lord, the Burrower appears quite frightened of the Zhurm. "What if one of the pigeons jumps out and-"

"Quiet," Sheol growls.

His words instantly silence the Burrower. Afraid of angering the Zhurm, the Demon Lord quietly backs away and dives into his burrow. He disappears without saying another word.

"Coward," Sheol mutters.

Several seconds pass. Sheol and his orcs stand silently and survey the surroundings, taking a few moments to get a feel for a city they've never stepped foot inside.

Sheol sniffs the air. "Mmm. Smell that? That's the stink of loot. There's treasure hiding around these parts."

"Oooh, *treasure!*"

A goblin jumps out of the Burrower's tunnel. Within seconds, dozens of others follow him and spread out like a plague of locusts. They run to the nearest houses and peer inside or crouch at the doors, readying themselves to break inside.

One goblin licks his lips. "Oy! Some'un say tree-sure?"

"That's-hut I heard!" A drunken-sounding goblin gurgles. He stumbles over to the nearest house and peeps in the window. "Oooh! This'uns got sum nice-ies!"

Ten other goblins follow his lead. They run over and throw the door open, then rush inside. After a few seconds, one of them cries out in frustration. "Grrrgh! Damn you, Mogin! There ain't nothin' in this dump but cups and crockery! Yer a damn shame to your kin! You got the eyes of a slug!"

The drunken goblin shrugs. "Pft. They looked pretty nice t'me."

"Skeee! Stinkin' codge-fondler! We'll let Jobi take the lead! He always sniffs out the best shrakh!"

Sheol watches silently as the goblins do what they do best —appropriate loot.

After the goblins fan out and leave the orcs in their dust, Sheol grunts to his comrades nearest him. "Hmph. Those gobby's aren't worth five pinches. Follow me. Let the runts grab that worthless shrakh; we're here for twinkle-metal."

Unlike the wild and seemingly carefree goblins, the Orcs wait for their leader's orders before moving to action. His First Commander, Krugna, pumps his fist. "Aye! We follow *Zhur'm* Sheol to riches and glory!"

One of the lesser orcs, a low-ranker wearing only a few bones on his tribal necklace, grunts questioningly. "Any good meat here?"

Immediately, a higher-ranked orc beside him slaps his junior's head. "Stupid *kupa!* Forget meat! We here for twinkle-metal! Need move fast before pigeons come flapping home!"

Sheol flicks his gaze toward the direction they left. A small mountain blocks his vision, preventing him from seeing how the War in Heaven is unfolding. With a shrug, Sheol uncrosses his arms and pets the hairy body of his freakish, mutated Hellhound. The monstrous animal growls softly as its master strokes it.

"Now now, there's no need to get excited, Cerberus. Ain't nothin' here but a breeze."

Cerberus's middle head jerks to the left, knocking aside the hound's leftmost head. Neither one seems to care, because they both lock eyes on a humongous cathedral in the distance.

"Grrrgh... graarr! HAROOO!"

The vicious animal's eyes turn bloodshot as its keen sense of smell detects something inside.

"Somethin's got Cerberus spooked," Krugna says. He walks his hellhound ahead a few steps to peer in the direction Cerberus alerted. "Think some'uns over there?"

Sheol hesitates. "Hmm. It's probably nothing... but just in case, let's take a peek. Cerberus ain't the type to mess around. Besides, that *heza* looks a little off from the others. I bet there's loot hidin' inside."

* * *

The pack of Hellhound riders rushes through the town of Nirvana. They move like the wind as they scale the two-story stone houses with ease and pounce from rooftop to rooftop. Despite the immense bulk of the Hellhounds and their riders, the monsters' talons produce frighteningly little sound as they leap toward the Holy Haven.

The riders slow to a stop before the massive monastery. Their eyes widen as they take in the sight of the ten-story building towering over them.

"Bloody hell!" One of the higher-ranked orcs gasps. "It didn't look this big from back there!"

Even Sheol gapes at the massive stone structure. "How'd the angels make something like that? It better have twinkle-metal inside, or my name ain't Sheol."

The lowest-ranked orc raises an eyebrow. "Huh? Your name not Sheol? When it change?"

His superior officer slugs him in the back of the head again. "No, stupid! Sheol make funny! Why you so dumb?!"

The junior rubs his head and whimpers. "Oww... you so mean to me..."

"Only 'cause you stupid like chicken!"

While the juniors grumble at each other about minor things, Sheol narrows his eyes. "You're too loud. I smell some pigeons inside."

That shuts his lackeys up. The youngest orc's eyes widen as he jerks his head toward the cathedral. A look of hunger appears on his face, and he licks his lips. "Oooh, we get fight?"

Sheol smirks. "Yeah. You go first — time to earn your bones, *kupa*."

Krugna, the First Commander, flinches. He doesn't say anything out loud, but a look of worry passes over his face. *Sheol wants a kupa to go in first? That means he expects a trap.*

Despite the First Commander's wariness, the youngest orc doesn't realize the danger awaiting him. He smiles greedily and pulls out his weapons — a pair of sharpened bone-claws that fit over his hands. He adjusts their fit in the blink of an eye, then guides his Hellhound to take a few steps forward. "Me honored, Zhurm Sheol! Me go first and leave only blood behind!"

Despite his concerns, Sheol says nothing to dampen the youngest orc's enthusiasm. *Every warrior must earn their bones*, he thinks to himself. *Without facing danger, no orc can obtain glory! True warriors face their enemies head-on, without any fear!*

The youngest of his troops leads the charge. With his comrades behind him, the *kupa* charges into the Holy Haven with his claws at the ready. After the small group of elites arrives inside, the orc's sense of

smell, far keener than any human's, finally picks up the scent Cerberus noticed from earlier.

"Shrakh..." Krugna growls. "There must be a hundred chickens in this coop."

Sheol nods, but his worries fade away. "Aye, but guess what I smell? Blood. These 'uns are weak. They ain't fit for battle."

The Zhurm's eyes turn ruthless as he finally indulges in his primal instincts.

"Kill 'em all. Don't leave a scrap o' flesh behind."

"Aye!" All of the orcs roar! Their hellhounds howl in rage and quickly fan out to attack as many places at once as they possibly can. Throwing caution to the wind, they smash down doors and burst into rooms where sickly, injured angels lie on their beds, recuperating from various illnesses. Several cherubs and seraphs, having heard the Hellhound's howls only seconds prior, scream in fright as the terrifying monsters rake them with claws and teeth, ending their existences before they have a chance to fight back.

"Hahahaha!" The youngest orc cackles in delight. "Me get many bones today! Me become full-blood!!"

Unsatisfied with his Hellhound taking his kills, the youngest orc leaps from his mount's back and lands atop one female angel trying to run away. Because of her injuries, she can't make it to a window in time, and dies silently, unable to scream, as the *kupa* rips out her throat with his claws. He crushes her brains and quickly shoves a meaty handful of angelic blood and bone into his gullet. Unlike demons, who suffer immensely when they come into contact with the holy energy inside angel bodies, the youth feels little more than a warm tickle, further increasing his battle rage.

Suddenly, from out in the halls, five seraphs burst out of an inner chamber. These warriors, a select few who stayed behind to protect their injured brothers and sisters, activate multiple spells and begin lobbing fire and fury upon a pair of unlucky orc elites who didn't notice them in time.

"Foul monsters! Perish in flames!"

The lead cherub, a male named Peter, casts a wide range of powerful amplification spells to boost his allies, while also unleashing chaos magic upon the orcs to weaken and debilitate them. Both orcs start violently writhing and lose their focus. With their minds spinning and their vision wavering, they nudge their Hellhounds off-course and cause the beasts to flounder. The four-legged creatures quickly realize their riders aren't fighting correctly and go berserk. Using their animal cunning, they target Peter and pounce at him, but that proves to be exactly what he wants!

The seraphs behind Peter finish their hastily concocted trap magic and form a magical circle in front of their leader. The Hellhounds, while intelligent, are unable to comprehend the glowing runes etched into the ground and charge directly into it.

Shik, shik, shik!

Hundreds of knives, formed from holy energy, fire out of the circle toward the ceiling. In the blink of an eye, both warriors and their mounts perish before they can react. The monsters fall to the ground and slide to a stop only inches from Peter's feet.

Peter flicks his eyes to the left and right. The sounds of other Hellhound riders scrambling toward his position drenches him in sweat. "Watch out! They're coming from the right!"

The Holy Haven's hallways, once beautifully etched with gems and rhinestones, now sizzle with green orc blood. Peter and his group put their backs to a window and quickly summon additional spells to entrap the incoming orcs.

Crash!

Before the seraphs can react, the window behind them explodes! Sheol and his First Commander leap through the stained-glass and land atop three seraphs in the back. Peter and his second-in-command whirl to face the threat, but they're too late. Sheol and Krugna rip apart their three brothers and immediately prepare to attack the remaining cherubs.

However, Peter and his final-remaining comrade prove much swifter of mind. They work together to activate a dual-spell and fire a hail of holy daggers at Sheol's First Commander. Krugna screams in pain as the rain of blades rips him off his steed and flings him against the wall, where the magical weapons impale him a hundred times in the blink of an eye. He slumps forward, dead.

"Krugna!" Sheol howls. Animalistic rage engulfs him. He leaps off Cerberus and jumps at the seraph beside Peter, impaling him with a small bone-dagger holstered at his side. Peter gasps and summons a confusion spell to addle Sheol's senses. The Orc Zhurm growls and swipes at Peter, but his vision blurs, and he misses his target.

Sheol screams at his angelic opponent. "Stand still! I'm gonna gut ya like a RAT!"

Peter doesn't reply. He summons a spear of holy energy and rears back to impale Sheol's fumbling form. Even as he does, the Seraph flicks his gaze to both of the Hellhounds.

I cannot slay these beasts! But, the least I can do is kill the orc's leader!

Slash!

The young orc *kupa* appears behind Peter and gashes out the back of his neck, catching the Seraph off-guard.

Ahh! How... where did he...?!

Peter falls forward, the life in his body having fled to the Great Beyond. A moment later, Cerberus and the other Hellhound pounce atop him and rip the Seraph leader to shreds.

Sheol grunts. He clutches his face and shakes off the dizziness plaguing him. It only takes a few seconds for Sheol to regain his senses, and when he does, he eyes the youngest orc with great reverence.

"Keegol. You saved your Zhurm's life. Today, you no longer call yourself *kupa*! You took revenge for Krugna's death! That makes you a full-blooded warrior!"

The adrenaline in the youngest warrior's body threatens to overwhelm him, but he forces himself to nod along to the Orc Zhurm's words. "Me big thanks give to Zhurm Sheol! Zhurm guide me! Zhurm honor me!"

Sheol nods along to Keegol's enthusiastic words. However, after a moment, he flicks a regretful eye toward his deceased First Commander.

"Krugna died honorably. He fought hard and earned great glory. Keegol, you give the Rite of Blood."

Keegol's excitement dampens. He stares at the body of his fallen comrade, and finally cools the blood boiling in his veins. "Rite of Blood. Yes. Me understand."

With a heavy sigh, the young orc walks toward his ally and pulls him off the wall. He strips the armor off Krugna's body and begins systematically ripping chunks of flesh out of the orc, devouring him with very little enthusiasm. The mood turns somber as Sheol watches his former First Commander disappear into the maw of his youngest elite warrior.

By the time Keegol finishes, the other orcs arrive. Blood covers them and their mounts, and they watch without judgment as the youngest orc devours their comrade, not even leaving the bones behind.

"What happen Krugna? How he die?" A mid-grade elite asks.

"Killed by chicken," Another orc replies. "See? Bodies there and there. *Kupa* avenged him."

"Not kupa anymore," A different orc mutters. "See? He perform Rite of Blood. Now he mighty."

Once Keegol consumes every last piece of the First Commander, a shocking change occurs! The young orc leans back and howls in pain as his body begins to glow with light. He falls to his back and writhes on the ground as a single magical rune etches itself into his scalp, then heals over, leaving no traces behind.

Several moments pass.

Keegol, now a full-blooded warrior, staggers to his feet and kneels before Sheol. He places one fist on the ground and bows his head respectfully.

"This warrior bows before *Zhurm* Sheol. It is this orc's honor to serve as Zhurm's First Commander."

With his speech having improved dramatically in the blink of an eye, Keegol cuts a different figure from before. His muscles ripple with strength, and his eyes possess a new vitality from only minutes earlier. After completing the Rite of Blood, he ascends to the next plane of orc power and awaits his Zhurm's instructions.

"Good, good," Sheol replies. He turns to look at one of the other orcs. "Are all the chickens dead?"

"Aye."

"We shouldn't stay long. Take the chickens' twinkle-metal and keep moving. Keegol will lead."

"Aye, Zhurm!"

"Aye, Zhurm!"

All of the orcs nod in agreement and fall in line to allow Sheol to bark orders from the rear. The group of orcs loads the loot from their deceased enemies onto the Hellhound's backs, but the monstrous wolves barely notice the hundreds of pounds of extra weight tied to their muscular bodies.

* * *

Half an hour later, Sheol and Keegol lead their warriors down a long pathway toward the edges of Nirvana. Having scouted dozens of houses along the way, they meet up with the goblins to plan their next moves.

"How are the demons doing against the chickens?" Sheol asks. "Are they winning? Losing?"

A mangy-looking goblin scurries over and rubs his palms together. "Nyehehe! Me thinks it's a bit of a back 'n forth, oh, mighty Zhurm! Them chickens're puttin' up a good fight, but the demons ain't doin' bad either!"

The little goblin, scarcely two feet tall, gestures toward ten other goblins dragging giant sacks filled with valuables. Despite their skinny arms and legs, the goblins possess incredible strength proportionate to their sizes.

"Look at all the goods we've stolen! Them stinkin' pigeons ain't gonna have nothin' left by the time we've picked this place clean!"

Sheol appears unimpressed. "Fancy cutlery and pretty gold won't win us a war, stupid gobbys. Where's all the twinkle-metal? Where're the weapons? Armor? We need better equipment to fight against the chickens, not fancy cups 'n plates!"

The goblin cowers slightly as the wrath-filled eyes of the Zhurm fall upon him. "W-we looked everywhere, your nastiness! There ain't nothin' good here! The chickens took all their swords 'n shields with 'em when they went to fight!"

"As if!" Sheol snorts. He flicks his eyes to the left and right as he scans the city. "What group of proud warriors would only have one set of weapons and armor? There's bound to be more here!"

From the rear of the goblins, a little runty fellow slinks forward. Standing barely a foot tall, the little guy seems like a child compared to his peers. He fiddles with his pointy ears and clears his throat. "Ahm... ahem... y-your nastiness? This... this *lowly* creature sawed somethin' scary... it no far from here... but me no wanted go there!"

Sheol's eyes snap to the newcomer. "You found something? Where? Out with it!"

Not only Sheol, but his hellhound, Cerberus, snarls viciously at the goblin, startling the little fellow and turning his dark-green skin into a pale, moldy color.

"B-big place! Fire! Hot! It s-stinked of chickens! R-right up that hill!"

He extends a trembling finger toward the lightly forested mountain blocking their view from the war unfolding several miles away. Sheol follows the goblin's finger and gazes at the trees, only to grin evilly as he spots a single building, barely visible among them.

"Ohoho, that stone-hut looks different from the rest. I bet it's got some good shrakh hiding inside! Let's get a move on, you little runts! We've other cities to plunder after this'un!"

All of the orcs and goblins nod and raise their fists. "Aye! We follow Zhurm!"

Like a horde of rats, the orcs and goblins begin rushing out of Nirvana toward the circular building in the distance. It doesn't take long for them to travel half a mile and arrive at the strangely-shaped forge,

but when they do, all of the monsters slow to a halt to gaze at it.

"You no kidding," One of the orc elites mutters to the little goblin who mentioned the building. "It hot like lava, here. Why so hot? Where heat come from?"

For once, Sheol doesn't charge toward the stone structure. He gazes at its top and spots thin trails of smoke streaming from its top. "There's a fire cookin'. Why light the inside on fire? Maybe there's a chicken at home, eh?"

Immediately, Sheol jabs a finger at the wimpy goblin who brought him here. "You; gobby! Go'n take a look! Open the door'n see if there's anyone inside!"

The goblin turns pale. "Eee! It scary! Me no wanna go in there! Big danger!"

"My foot up yer arse is the real danger!" Sheol snarls. He reaches for a club at his waist and grins evilly. "Either I kill ya here, or you get yer lazy arse over there and hope there ain't no chicken inside! You got no choice, gobby!"

Terrified out of his mind, the goblin simply nods and scurries forward. He runs past the orcs and turns to face them, keeping one wary eye on Sheol as he shambles backward toward the stone hut.

As the goblin shuffles backward toward the heated forge, he periodically jerks his head back to see if any angels are about to jump him, but not even a fly stirs. The heat increases to sweltering levels, causing the goblin to sweat like crazy.

"Oh geez, oh no, oh geez..."

His teeth chatter. His elbows click. Finally, the goblin arrives at the entrance. Since the forge lacks any windows, the goblin can only stare nervously at the door. He wrings his hands as incredible streams of heat pour from a crack beneath it.

"Get a move on, gobby!" Sheol bellows. "I ain't got all day, ya little rat!"

Prodded by the Zhurm's orders, the little goblin reaches up to the wooden door handle, only to frown as he realizes it's well beyond his reach. He glances around, and spots a long, straight branch on the ground. The goblin quickly takes it and sticks it through the door's handle, then pulls with all his strength.

"Hrrrgh!"

With a mighty heave, the goblin's heart skips a beat as it swings wide open. A ghastly wave of heat spills out of the forge and washes over him, turning the goblin's thoughts to mush.

"Nnn! H-hah... hot!!"

He quickly jumps back and scurries away, leaving the forge behind him as he runs for the safety of his fellow goblins.

"You little shrakh-head! Coward!" Sheol howls. He readies himself to kill the goblin, but pauses as Heaven's Light illuminates the interior of the forge. "Ohh, wait a minute! Keegol, d'you see what I see?!"

"Aye!" The First Commander replies. His eyes brighten with excitement as various weapons and armor hang from the walls inside the forge. "Twinkle-metal! Lots of it!"

Sheol's anger at the goblin disappears. "Hoho! We've done it now, boys! Ain't no chickens inside, and lots o' loot for the plunderin'!"

Greed swallows the goblins and orcs. The orcs dismount their Hellhounds and leave them behind, then hurry over to the open door. As they draw nearer, all of them wince under the immense heat.

"Bah! It's hotter than Satan's anus in there!" Keegol cries. "Why's it so stinkin' hot inside?!"

"Damned if I know," Sheol replies. A familiar sensation of danger creeps into his mind, but the Zhurm's greed overwhelms and suppresses it. "Tch, tell the hounds to knock down some o' the walls! That'll let the heat out!"

"Smart thinkin' boss!" Keegol says. He grins at his leader, proud that his Zhurm is so wise and all-knowing. "Get on it, warriors! You heard the Zhurm!"

Five of the orc elites hop back on their mounts and run to the side of the building. While the heat does intensify the closer they draw, it's nowhere near as unbearable as at the front door.

"Ready! Hup!"

The highest-ranked among the five barks out a command. All five hellhounds charge at the reinforced stone walls, and their massive paws tear out the rocks sealed together with primitive angelic mortar. In the blink of an eye, five gaping holes erupt in the building's structure, sending heat pouring out from all sides.

The hellhounds flinch at the hundreds of degrees of hot air blasting them in the face. "Arrrooo! Eeyii?!"

Instinctively, the monstrous animals jump backward and paw at their faces, nearly sending their riders tumbling from their backs. The orc elites scowl as their mounts whimper like beaten dogs. "Stop whining; ya damn pups!"

Sheol flicks his gaze toward Cerberus, and the three-headed hound nonchalantly averts its gaze, as if to say, *Well, I wouldn't mind the heat. Don't lump me in with weaklings.*

Despite the frantic cries of the hellhounds, they eventually recover from their shock and retreat to a safe distance. Sheol stares at the forge and waits. Sure enough, after ten minutes, the heat inside dies down noticeably.

"Alright. Let's sneak a peek. Grab anything you can stuff in a sack 'n pick the place clean!"

* * *

The orcs and goblins slink toward the forge. Even with most of its heat diminished, their discomfort intensifies once they arrive at the doorway.

"I might last five minutes 'fore I pass out," The third-highest ranked orc says. "Let's make dis quick. In an' out."

The moment the orcs step inside the forge, their desire to flee the heat begins to battle with their greed. Dozens and dozens of priceless, powerful treasures line the walls. Swords, clubs, shields, gems, bows, and other assorted valuables catch their eyes one after the other. The elites quickly get to work, grabbing

everything in sight and throwing them out the door, where the goblins, with their much weaker constitution, snatch the items and throw them in knapsacks.

Sheol's entire body covers itself in sweat, giving his skin a slug-like appearance. The sweat dries up rapidly from all the heat in the air, only to repeat the cycle, sucking all the moisture from his body.

Damn! Sheol growls inwardly. Am I gonna die, while looking for twinkle-metal?! What a shit way to-

Suddenly, his thoughts go silent. Sheol's eyes flick to a single sword laying on an anvil. The weapon, a blackened blade coated in coal-dust, appears pathetic compared to the other artisanry on display.

However...

As Sheol gazes at it, his eyes waver, unable to look at anything else.

Somethin' about this sword... I sense magic in it... strong magic, too...

The Zhurm licks his dry, chapped lips. The heat in the forge sucks the moisture from his tongue, but he barely notices.

"Oy, Zhurm! We've picked the place clean! Let's git outta here!"

One of his elites grabs him by the shoulder, but Sheol swats his hand away. "No, no... I want... I want this 'un, Georg. Lemme just..."

Sheol's heart palpitates. His hands tremble as he reaches toward the blackened blade. His eyes absorb more of its qualities, causing him to notice its razor-sharp edges, faded gold hilt, and an inscription going down the blade.

Excalibur.

Unable to read the language of the angels, Sheol hasn't a clue about the might of the weapon before him. His elites stumble deliriously toward him and try to pull him out the door, but he shoves them away and grabs for the blade.

"It's mine! MINE! You can't have it!!"

Confused, his soldiers stare at the ordinary-looking weapon with disinterest. They cannot begin to fathom the power contained in the weapon, nor their Zhurm's ability to detect its aura.

Sheol grabs Excalibur's hilt. He raises the weapon above his head, and cackles wildly.

"Mine! My sword!! With this weapon, I can-"

Suddenly, the Zhurm's voice catches. His chest shudders as an incredible amount of holy energy floods into his bloodstream. His neurological pathways seize up, causing him to freeze in place and tighten his grip on the weapon. Terror engulfs him! He tries to unclench his hand, but he can't let go!

"H-hnn! Grrrgh!"

Sheol's voice trembles. He fights against Excalibur's power with all of his strength, but nothing he tries saves him from the horrible agony tearing through his body.

One of his elites balks as their leader's body begins to glow with a brilliant light. "Zhurm! What happening?!"

"Ahhhh!!!"

Sheol screams as waves of agony and ecstasy collide, threatening to detonate his heart like a bomb!
"HELP MEEEE!!!"

The agonized cries of their leader freeze the other orcs in place. Their eyes widen as his skin and muscles start to bulge. Sheol's unending screams draw the attention of the goblins outside, who quickly peep into the forge's openings, curious about the commotion.

FWOOOOOOM!

The holy energy inside Sheol's body finally reaches its limit. He explodes violently, sending beams of light firing in a million directions. Each one rips through the orcs and goblins nearby, turns their skin and bones into mist, and kills them instantly. The light continues to grow, obliterating the forge and everything around it.

In the blink of an eye, every orc and goblin perishes, unable to withstand Excalibur's incredible power.

Where Heaven's Forge once stood, now only a fifty-foot-deep crater rests. Half a dozen Hellhound bodies lay scattered around, with large chunks of their bodies vaporized. The rest slowly bleed out from their injuries.

However.

One Hellhound, the meanest, baddest, most sharp-witted of its kin, stands atop the crater. Cerberus sniffs the air in search of its master, but finds nothing.

"Rooo..."

Cerberus lets out a pitiful whimper. It descends into the pit and sniffs at the scraps of blood and skin scattered here and there, but despite its best efforts, the monstrous creature finds no traces of Sheol, nor his elites. It paws the ground and tries to dig for bodies, but after several minutes, the three-headed hellhound finds nothing of note.

Eventually, Cerberus spins in a circle and plops down in the center of the crater. It stares at the bodies of its dying and dead brothers and sisters, as a sense of regret engulfs its heart.

Cerberus has nobody left.

As for the ultimate weapon, the god-slaying blade known as Excalibur, no traces of it remain behind.

All that remains is a crater, the lone evidence that a terrible calamity unfolded here.

Cerberus... is alone.

Part 156: The Search for a Master

Recommended Listening

"Verily, though I stand against the shadow of death... I do not fear his evil!"

Camael swings Mjölfnir against Valac's chest, shattering one of his clones into a thousand pieces. Its bonemeal sprays out in a fine mist, coating Heaven's soil with his putrid essence.

Camael whirls to face the Reaper's two remaining clones.

"Whether one enemy or a thousand, so long as the Creator's will exists, no servant of evil shall ever force me to my knees!"

She charges the Valac on her left and slams her shield against him, sending the ten-foot-tall Reaper clone tumbling to the ground. An instant later, Mjölfnir crashes against his face, splattering his flaky remains into a shallow pit.

However, Valac's remaining clone merely watches.

"Hehehe... what strong principles you have... I admire how you would never betray your precious Creator, even if such a notion is foolish nonsense."

A sinister grin crosses his face as Camael backflips and crushes him into dust where he stands.

Five more clones emerge from Heaven's soil, surrounding Camael again. The Archangel of Divination grits her teeth in rage as she instantly evaluates the newcomers.

"Again, and again, and again! I crush one snake, only for two more to take its place! No matter how venomous thou mayest be, all serpents have their limits, Reaper!"

Valac's gaze flicks toward the battle unfolding against the Hydra in the distance. His eyes shimmer meaningfully, but he quickly returns his gaze to the little Archangel before him. Despite the thin, scraggly form of his clones, his height dwarfs Camael, making her appear as little more than an ant in his shadow.

"Limits? Your thoughts are muddled as always, little sister. Your toy hammer may crush me over and over, but in the end, it can do little more than cause a blister. What use are weapons of war when my might can shake the heavens? None will stand against me; once I finish crushing the Archangels, seven."

Camael raises her hammer to the sky. "Thou speaketh too much, Reaper! I have not stood idly by for three thousand years! Behold, the might of Heaven which thou hath belittled!"

A stormcloud surges into existence above Camael. In the blink of an eye, powerful electric energy materializes in the sky. A bolt of lightning fires toward Camael and electrifies Mjölfnir, startling Valac and wiping the grin off his clone's faces. With a wave of her arm, Camael sweeps her hammer in a wide arc, causing millions of volts of electricity to blast three of Valac's clones.

CRASH!!

All three clones explode into ash. Their remnants scatter into the wind, making the others quickly jump backward in surprise.

However.

Camael gasps for breath. She raises her hammer again, and when the next bolt of lightning electrifies Mjölnir, she tries to sweep her arm in a reverse arc toward the remaining two clones, but her body shudders! She stumbles awkwardly and sends the lightning careening toward the ground, where it dissipates into the dirt harmlessly.

"Hnngh!"

Camael staggers and barely manages to catch herself by landing on her left palm. Mjölnir slips from her grasp and impacts Heaven's surface with a *thud* while her right arm turns numb. The bolts of lightning prove too powerful for the Archangel to control, and thus, she loses control of her body for a moment.

"Ehehehe..." Valac chuckles. "You worried me, Camael, my fellow diviner. A trump card like that could prove quite nasty, but luckily the threat was minor. What good is a weapon that harms oneself, when our battle involves life and death? Your power is fleeting, while mine is an abyss; infinite in depth."

Three more clones rise to take the other's places. Camael's breathing turns into gasps as she turns her head to gape at the five enemies surrounding her once again.

"Why dost thou toy with me, Valac?! If thou art invincible and capable of slaying me, why persist with thy mind-games?! Are all thy actions merely for thy sadistic pleasure?!"

Valac pauses. The nearest clone cocks its head. "Hmm. Not quite. Actually, when it comes to you, there has always been something bothering me..."

"Quiet!" A different clone yells. It snaps at the first clone, startling Camael as it counters the first's words. "We aren't to speak of that!"

"You worry too much," Valac's first clone mutters. "Camael is weak. We've overestimated her from the beginning."

Camael frowns. She eyes the two clones with great caution. Her sense of touch returns, allowing her to snatch Mjölnir from the ground before jumping to her feet.

What's going on, here? Why do the Reaper's copies argue amongst one another? Is this a new ploy to provoke me? Is he trying to present some false hope so that he might break my mind, or has he turned insane?

Mjölnir trembles in Camael's grasp. The Archangel glances at her hammer for a moment, but quickly returns her attention to Valac.

"What secrets dost thou clutch, Reaper? Bah! As if I care! I've long since resolved to kill thee... no matter the cost! I've crafted divine artifacts purely for this day! Thou shalt never threaten my people again!"

Camael motions with her hand, causing a single ring on her finger to ignite with white light. Suddenly, two beams of energy laser into the sky from half a mile to the west, and another two from the east. They

travel at ten times the speed of sound, and in the blink of an eye, join together to circle above Camael, only to crash into the ground around her.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

With thunderous crashes, four angelic women explode into existence. Catherine, Hyacinth, Penelope, and Sophia jump to their feet, weapons at the ready.

"The time has arrived!" Camael yells. "I cannot defeat the Reaper alone! Assist me, Valkyries!"

Each Valkyrie wears an identical ring on their hands. They quickly summon their magical weapons and form a defensive perimeter around Camael, and nod in unison.

"Right!"

Valac's clones take a step back. The cockiness on his face wavers.

The first clone speaks. "Tch. I knew you had a trump card. As I suspected, such a hole did exist in my plans."

The second clone shoots a look of fire and brimstone at the first one. "Shut your mouth! Insolent soul! Know your place!"

Both of them drop their rhyming as their voices waver. Camael's eyes flick between them, as hints of doubt appear in her eyes.

Again! Why do the Reaper's clones quarrel amongst one another? Surely, if his divine vision can see beyond mine, then he must have predicted my Summoning Ring's activation. Why does he feign surprise?! It must be a trick!

Valac's five clones resolve their differences within seconds, but they give the Valkyries enough breathing time to reorient themselves.

"I'm sorry, Camael!" Sophia yells. Her voice is more high-strung than usual. "I witnessed something unbelievable when I tried to find Raphael. Satan defeated him! I couldn't get close at all!"

"What?!" Camael gasps. Her eyes widen as shock strikes her spine like electricity. "The Devil has stolen my brother's soul?!"

"No, no," Penelope clarifies. "I saw, as well. There was a traitor, Hiraldo, who assisted Satan. The two of them merely subdued Raphael. Before thou recalled us, Valac appeared, and Hiraldo was about to assist Satan in fighting the Reaper."

"Impossible..." Camael murmurs. "Hiraldo, turning his back on us? Never, not in a million billion years, would I believe such a-"

Suddenly, Catherine uses her sword to trace sparkling letters of holy energy in the air.

LOOK OUT!

The first Reaper lunges toward Sophia. He summons his bone scythe and spears it toward her gut, but Camael quickly jumps in his path and blocks it with her shield. "Gah! Damned snake!"

"Talk is cheap!" Valac hisses. "No more plotting allowed, Archangel!"

Catherine smirks. To herself, she thinks, *agreed*.

The Valkyrie of Fire dances toward the clone who attacked Camael and Sophia. Her Sword from Heaven swishes and swirls as it slices through Valac's bones. He tries to block her with his scythe, but she proves too fast for him.

"Gaugh!"

The Reaper's clone cries out in dismay as it crumbles to ash, leaving the other four behind. The remaining clones lunge toward Catherine and her comrades. Valac's scythe jumps from one's grasp to another, teleporting between them thanks to the shared control of their master behind the scenes.

Camael batters clone after clone. Her hammer rips through their bones and scatters them to ash, but every time she crushes one, another emerges from the ground to take their place.

"Aaah!" Penelope yells in rage. "Just die already, ugly demon bastard! How many worthless copies can't thou toss at us?!"

Unbeknownst to the Valkyries and their eldest sister, a single clone hovers hundreds of feet above in the sky. This one hides in plain sight, just out of range of any nearby cherubs and seraphs. He gazes upon the war from his tremendous height and narrows his gaze.

"Worthless clones, are they? Tch. The Valkyrie of Earth isn't wrong, but her words provoke my anger. Ever since Samael's attack, my manipulation skills have deteriorated. What a pitiful thought; The almighty Reaper might have to unleash his greatest power, all so he can stifle a few winged do-gooders. I suppose my shame will endure, so long as everyone here falls under my control. Heh, heh, heh..."

* * *

Back inside Valac's cave, the Grim Reaper coughs into his fist. He summons another five clones, but when they appear, he holds up a palm. "Kah... hurgh... wait... wait a moment."

He coughs continually for several seconds. Faint wisps of dust spread from between his teeth as he struggles to breathe normally.

Finally, he reaches into his lantern and pulls out five golden souls, far shinier than those he's used before.

"Worthless angels. Camael still possesses the principles and willpower to resist me. How pitiful. I must quash her beliefs. You, five. Take these Titan souls. Their purity is the highest I've managed to refine. Need I tell you how to use them?"

The golden souls float through the air. Each one lands in the palm of one of Valac's clones. They roll their eyes and scoff at their creator. "Do not patronize us. Of *course* we know what purpose they serve. We *are* birthed from you, after all."

With a grunt of annoyance, all five clones fall into the ground and disappear, leaving Valac alone in his cave.

"Worthless rats. They only dare to speak back to me because my control has weakened. Bah. So long as I live, they will never regain their sanity. Come, Camael. Your Valkyrie of Fire defeated my Ultimate Form

once... but I wonder how she will fare when five appear at once?"

Valac chuckles to himself.

"Heh heh heh heh..."

* * *

"Sister, look! The Reaper's clones haven't replaced themselves!"

Sophia cries out in joy. Even though only a minute earlier, Valac summoned ten clones to try and stifle Camael and the Valkyries, they number only four, now.

Penelope leaps at one clone and crushes its head with her greatmace. She instantly swings it around to strike another, but a wind-arrow takes that one's head off, sending the clone toppling to the ground as it turns to ash.

"Nice shot, Hyacinth!"

"Thanks."

Hyacinth grunts out a single word before flying a little higher and taking aim.

WHIFF! WHIFF!

Two enchanted bolts of wind slam into the chests of the two remaining clones, pulverizing them into the ground. Each of Hyacinth's shots contains the destructive power of ten cannonballs.

None of the gangly-boned clones survive.

"W-we did it!" Sophia yells excitedly. "They're dead! All dead!"

Catherine and Camael flick their eyes around warily, unable to believe Sophia's words.

"What good fortune we have," Penelope laughs. She sighs and pats Sophia's head, smiling as they revel for a few moments in their victory. "It seems the Reaper has weakened greatly over the last few thousand years! Perhaps the rumors about Satan defeating him were partially true, eh? All we had to do was finish off his ashen bones!"

No.

Catherine's sword traces through the air, summoning letters into existence.

The Reaper. Temporary retreat. He cannot overwhelm us. Below us. I sense darkness.

"As do I," Camael whispers. "Where is he? Where has the Reaper gone?"

"Heh heh heh..."

A sinister chuckle whispers on the wind. Instead of emerging from the ground, five clones slowly shimmer into view, appearing like mirages in a desert. Once their bodies become visible, Sophia sighs.

"Haahhh! I should have known it wouldn't be that easy! I suppose thou hath returned for a second beatdown, eh?"

Sophia flaps her wings to lunge toward the nearest clone, but Camael's face turns pale. "No, Sophia! Don't!"

Sophia tries but can't stop her momentum in time. Valac's clone raises his palm to reveal a shining marble of golden light! Sophia gasps as she spots it, and her momentary distraction gives another clone the opening he needs.

WHUMP!

With one punch, Valac's second clone swings his arm down and batters Sophia face-first into the dirt, knocking the daylights out of her and paralyzing her body.

"Sophia!!" Penelope screams. She lunges toward her sister and sweeps her greatmace in a wide arc. Valac dodges easily and cackles as he takes a step back.

"Foolish angel, your friend rushed over to savor the taste of mud, but instead, I've given it the flavor of blood!"

As the Reaper taunts Penelope, he viciously lunges out his foot and kicks Sophia in the stomach, sending her flying into her sister's arms. Both Valkyries stumble and fall under the Reaper's surprise attack, causing him to laugh maniacally.

Camael charges over and quickly intervenes, positioning herself between her sisters and the Reaper's clones. Catherine follows a moment later, while Hyacinth stays in the rear and takes aim with her bow.

The Archangel of Divination narrows her eyes. Her gaze falls upon the brilliant golden light shining in Valac's clutches.

"A radiant soul? What new trick art thou planning this time?!"

Valac's teeth chatter. "It's a familiar ability of mine, one you've seen during another occasion. The last time I used this technique, it surely left a lasting impression."

Valac slowly, deliberately, opens his mouth. The other four clones echo his movements, and they quickly place the five radiant souls into their maws.

Gulp.

An audible noise resounds from their throats. Camael's pupils shrink to pinpricks as repressed memories reappear in her mind.

No, gods, no! It can't be... is this that same ability Valac demonstrated when we first fought?!

"GAAAAHHH!"

All five of Valac's clones scream and howl, their voices a mixture of agony and ecstasy. Within seconds, muscle, veins, and skin begin materializing on their bodies. The scraggly bones quickly regain the appearance of life, transforming the Reapers from terrifying specters into ghastly demonic monstrosities.

Sophia staggers to her feet. Her head spins as she reorients her eyes. A moment later, she jerks toward Penelope in fright! Valac's body grows from ten feet to twelve feet tall, fully doubling the height of the tiny Valkyries beneath him. Once his skin finishes forming, it begins to harden, transforming into thick, natural armor; something akin to pleated metal.

"Haaaahahaha!"

The nearest of Valac's clones crows with glee as he finishes his transformation.

"Look at those faces! Oh, your expressions are a beauty to behold! I've always foreseen this day's arrival, but the ecstasy surpassed my hopes sixfold! You believed me dead not once, not twice, but three times in the past! Now my power is at its peak, but you can only gaze upon me; aghast!"

Valac's clones sweep their arms in a grand gesture to the angels before them, the sky, and the ground as well. Their braggadocious words echo throughout the nearby area, only for waves of dark energy to surge out like black clouds of death and destruction. Several weak angels and low-ranked demons scream in terror and lose their will to fight. The pipsqueaks, barely a force among the battlefield, flee in every direction, only for their stronger-minded enemies to pounce upon them and cut them down.

Camael and the Valkyries retreat several steps. All of them shudder as they evaluate Valac's massively empowered clones.

Hyacinth lowers her bow. Her complexion darkens as self-doubt begins swirling in her mind. "Oh, Creator! How can we defeat such a monster?! His power has tripled! Quadrupled! Nay, it may have even increased tenfold!"

"C-calm down," Camael replies. The Archangel's voice catches as she swallows saliva. Mjölnir rumbles in her grasp, but she ignores it. "W-we are the mightiest of our people! If Valac could have brought out such a powerful fighting force from the beginning, why didn't he? There must be some restrictions on these improved clones!"

Catherine traces words into the air. *Valac's main body. We must kill it. More will come. Endless numbers.*

Penelope, the largest of the Valkyries, straightens her posture and stands tall, at seven feet high. "Catherine is right. We cannot back down! If Valac could summon a thousand of these... these monsters, he would have done so already! Let's crush them, then hunt for his main body!"

Sophia trembles. "W-what if... if... if that doesn't work? What if there *isn't any* main body?"

Her words send a chill through her sister's hearts.

"If the Reaper can copy himself endlessly, then our deaths are a foregone conclusion," Camael mutters. "If these are copies, each one derived from the main body, seperate but equal, then we are doomed. If, however, they are clones, containing only a portion of the original's battle power..."

"...Then we can still win!" Penelope finishes. The giantess forces out a smile and wraps both of her hands around the handle of her greatmace. "Great! Let's flatten him!"

Before the angels can make a move, Valac's shoulders lift up and down. He raises a palm to his mouth and chuckles into it.

"Ehehe... hehehe... oh, whoops. I accidentally laughed. Your words just now were so absurd that I... couldn't control myself... ehehehe..."

He chuckles for a few more seconds before regaining his composure.

"In truth, I will tell you that I've had a few suspicions for a while. Our earlier battle, though lengthy, was little more than a trial. Fate guides many to their death, to glory, and to fame. For one whose vision pierces the future, over my soul, Fate holds no claim. However, there is a loophole, an error, caused when two beings peel back the curtains of time. Should they see two different paths, which future would ultimately fall in decline?"

The Valac clone speaking crosses his arms and flashes an arrogant gaze. However, the four behind him scowl angrily.

"Shut your mouth, idiot! What are you thinking?!"

However, much like the other clones who spoke out of turn before, this one continues, ignoring his siblings' words.

"It doesn't matter. Even if our visions intersect, we will not know what will happen in the end. We cannot predict Camael's actions, but once we kill her, our divinations will ascend! She is our only obstacle, our last hurdle, our test by the Creator. Once she dies, our strength will become far greater!"

Suddenly, in the back of Camael's mind, pieces click into place.

No... it can't be...

Her thoughts transform into a typhoon! Millions of memories surge together, creating an uncountable series of interlinking chains.

By the Creator! All along... I was never able to predict Valac's movements. I never knew when or where he would strike! He always caught us off-guard, even during this very battle! But, at the same time...

Mjölnir rattles in Camael's grasp. She tightens her grip on the weapon, even as her heart begins beating at explosively faster speeds.

Why couldn't I perceive Valac's actions, before? Because he is a diviner, like me! He, too, can peer into the future! All beings have their fates set in stone! But, if someone should gain the power to peer through the veil of fate itself, then that would mean they can change the course of time! No longer will they casually ride the river of time, but will instead swim against its currents, going wherever they please!

But! Similarly, what if two such beings should encounter one another? Then, simply put, they would not be able to see each other's actions, only the repercussions of those actions! I cannot know where Valac will appear because he manipulates the hand of fate just as I do. However, that also means he cannot predict my future either!

Camael's vision turns red. Unbelievable, explosive rage begins to boil her blood. Despite only a second passing in real-time, the Archangel's thoughts travel at lightning speeds, answering countless mysteries that have plagued and befuddled her for millennia.

That bastard! He lied to me! He claimed his vision was greater than mine, but it was all nonsense! How could I have been so blind?! Demons lie as easily as a fish swims in the sea! Because of him, I

doubted myself, and I doubted the Creator! My vision of our people's extinction could only happen if I didn't interfere with the Reaper's plans!!

Once again, Mjölnir rumbles angrily in Camael's hands. She struggles to hold it, but before she can collect herself, the hammer suddenly tears from her grasp. Camael stumbles and wheezes as Mjölnir strikes the ground, then leaps into the sky!

What? Mjölnir...?!

Camael stares, flabbergasted, as her control over Mjölnir severs. The divine weapon soars over Valac's head, leaving the Reaper startled at Camael's unexpected 'attack.'

"Trying to pull a fast one on me, eh?!"

Camael blinks.

"M-Mjölnir...? Why did it... leave me?"

Another shocking thought rumbles through Camael's mind.

Oh, gods! What am I thinking?! I've always believed my people's extinction was the Creator's will! Never have I failed to carry out that which the Creator ordered, but now, in this time of crisis, has my conscience wavered? Have I lost sight of my principles?!

Valac motions with his hand. "This will be the day your people take their final breaths, Camael! Behold... my undead army!"

The ground explodes! Hundreds, thousands, and even hundreds of thousands of undead creatures burst from Heaven's soil. All around the battlefield, at every corner of the field, demons and angels alike yelp in surprise as horrific, undead monsters emerge from beneath their feet and begin attacking the closest enemies. Soon, their numbers reach into the millions, touching every battle in every region.

The Valkyries quickly begin whirling and attacking the dozens of undead monsters that surround them, but Camael stares, transfixed, at the pinprick in the distance.

"Mjölnir..."

UNWORTHY.

Mjölnir, a legendary artifact forged during the Primordial Era, soars over millions of angels and demons. Its energy output immediately draws attention as dozens of angels and demons salivate at the power leaking from it.

MY MASTER IS UNWORTHY.

Deliberately, the hammer begins releasing waves of power tens of times mightier than before. This move attracts the envious gazes of thousands of spectators.

I MUST FIND A NEW MASTER.

The waves of energy triple, calling out to those who gaze upon Mjölnir. The hammer crashes into the dirt, near a tremendous clump of demons, angels, and newly-arisen undead.

COME. TEST THY MIGHT. ONLY THOSE I DEEM WORTHY MAY WIELD ME.

The hammer's soundless voice travels into the minds of all those nearby. Immediately, all the angels and demons begin furiously rushing toward the divine artifact. Greed engulfs their minds as they try to push each other away.

"Mine! It's mine!"

"Demon bastard! It's Camael's! I won't let thee lay a hand on it!!"

"Forget Camael! That old hag has always hoarded her best weapons! This one is MINE!!"

"How dare thou speaketh of our sister in such a way?! I shall seize it and return it to her at once!"

"Bastards! You angels are all liars! You just want it for yourselves!!"

Throwing all caution and battle strategy to the wind, the demons and angels begin fighting not only each other, but themselves as well. Brother raises sword against brother, and sister against sister. Their eyes turn bloodshot as overwhelming greed floods into their minds.

COME. I REQUIRE A WORTHY WIELDER.

Finally, the first person, a young male angel, slams through the others using a shield of holy light. He charges toward the hammer, now laying head-first in the grass, and grabs hold of it with his hand.

"I got it!!"

Mjolnir's energy surges into his body. The divine artifact immediately probes the young one's memories, thoughts, and emotions.

A NEW MASTER! STRENGTH... WORTHY! WILL... UNWORTHY! DISCIPLINE... UNWORTHY! HONOR... WORTHY! PRINCIPLE... UNWORTHY!

Mjöltnir's voice screams in the youth's mind, causing terror to emerge within his heart.

THIS ONE IS NOT WORTHY! BEGONE!!

The youth tries to release his grip, but he fails. A fraction of a second later, every cell in his body overloads from Mjöltnir's power. He self-detonates on the spot, sending countless atoms scattering across all of Heaven's four corners.

However, his detonation doesn't dissuade the others, not even for a second.

A young Demon Lord grabs the handle with both hands.

"Stupid pigeons!! This'uns mine! Nyehehehe!!"

STRENGTH... UNWORTHY! WILL... UNWORTHY! DISCIPLINE... UNWORTHY! HONOR... UNWORTHY! PRINCIPLE... WORTHY! THIS ONE IS UNWORTHY! BEGONE!!

The Demon Lord also self-detonates, spraying blood and gore in every direction. Rather than deterring the rest, his death only excites their bloodlust.

"Such a powerful weapon! We must take it for the glory of demonkind!"

"NAY!! This weapon belongs in the hands of the angels, not filthy red rats!"

One after the other, angels and demons greedily seize the handle of the divine weapon, only for it to judge them unworthy. Their remains coat the nearby soil with hundreds of gallons of blood and gore.

When the last one perishes, the hammer rumbles in the dirt. As if unsatisfied, it pauses for a moment before lifting into the air and flying away.

...ALL OF THESE BEINGS ARE UNWORTHY. I MUST FIND A CAPABLE MASTER!

The half-sentient hammer soars through the sky. It crashes into the ground near a hundred other candidates, but within minutes, all of them become a river of blood and carnage.

Over the next hour, the unbounded weapon lands among twenty different battle-zones. Nobody, be they living or undead, can resist its pull. Tens of thousands of demons and angels perish while trying to obtain the legendary weapon.

Eventually, the hammer soars through the sky and finds a few potential wielders on the outskirts of the battlefield. Two of them fly through the sky, while one runs on land.

"Uwaaah!" Bael cries as he runs. "Stop pickin' on me, you big bullies!"

Azazel and Azog fly overhead, laughing as they pelt Bael with harmless fireballs. Azazel, the one in the pink outfit, flips his hair back haughtily. "♪Slow down, Bael! We've got business with you, so let's stop and chat!♪"

"♪You act like we're meanies, but deep in your heart, you know we're not like that!♪"

Bael continues to blubber as he runs. His thundering footsteps crash against the soil, leaving a trail of deep footprints behind him.

"Where's Satan when you need 'im?! Of all the rotten luck, uwaaaah!"

Mjölnir soars half a mile above. It observes the situation, and pauses to consider whether it should test these three simpletons. A split-second later, the hammer trembles.

ALL DESERVE A CHANCE, BUT ONLY ONE WHO IS WORTHY MAY WIELD ME.

Bael continues running, but he pauses for a split-second to grab a rock and hurl it toward Azog. The fire-type demon easily manipulates his flames to dodge to the left, evading Bael's attack.

"♪Hey! That's not nice! What gives you the right to attack me with your heart's cold ice?!♪"

"♪How dare Bael throw a stone at you!♪" Azazel yells. "♪He needs to pay the price!♪"

Despite their lilting voices and funny way of speaking, both brothers frown in consternation. Their eyes lock onto each other, and a secret series of thoughts pass between them.

Azog telepathically transmits his thoughts to his twin. *Valac wants us to get Bael away from Camael, right? Is that all?*

Yes! Azazel replies. *But he did tell us to try and push Bael toward that one big fellow- ah! What the Devil?!*

Azazel jerks to the left in surprise as Mjölnir surges past him. It crashes into the ground twenty feet in front of Bael. The blubbing Duke doesn't see it in time due to the tears in his eyes.

Thuk!

Bael trips over Mjölnir's handle and goes flying! Thanks to his incredible speed and momentum, Bael tumbles to the ground and swallows a huge mouthful of dirt before finally grinding to a stop.

"Ptuh! Pahhk! Hey, what's the big idea?!"

Bael spits dirt like a professional tobacco chewer, then jumps to his feet, uninjured. Behind him, a familiar weapon sits on the ground; its handle pointed to the sky.

Waves of power surge from Mjölnir's core. The divine weapon calls out to those around it.

COME. TEST THY MIGHT! ONLY THE WORTHY MAY WIELD ME.

However.

Where, before, all nearby would surge toward it as fast as they could, the Sunshine Brothers instead itch their ears, while Bael stares at the hammer dumbly.

"Did... did you hear something, just now?" Azog asks.

"Uh... maybe?" Azazel replies. Both of them shoot curious looks at the hammer, but neither makes a move toward it.

Bael frowns. "Aw, c'mon. You mean ta' tell me Grandma threw her hammer all the way over here just to trip me? Sheesh! That bitch! What kinda jackass trips a guy who's tryin'a run away?!"

Bael grumbles to himself and casually strolls over to the hammer.

"Wait," Azazel says. He doesn't lilt his voice in a sing-songy manner as he gazes at the hammer with fear and trepidation. "D-don't touch that weapon, Bael. I sense a tremendous amount of holy energy inside it."

"Yeah, me too!" Azog says. He cocks his head to the side and scrunches up its face. "You're a tough guy, but we don't want to see you die or anything! You mean too much to us!"

Bael scowls. He wipes away his dried tears and grinds his teeth. "Oh, yeah?! I've got a better idea! Hows about I shove this hammer right up both of your asses?! You're both awful, terrible, no-good bullies!"

Without hesitation, Bael grabs the hammer and raises it to point it at the Sunshine Brothers.

"Huh. It's kinda heavy. I'm surprised Grandma could lift this."

A moment later, Mjölnir's energy begins to search Bael's body.

STRENGTH... WORTHY! WILL... WORTHY! DISCIPLINE... UNWORTHY! HONOR... WORTHY! PRINCIPLE... WORTHY!

Even with only one quality missing, the hammer still immediately rejects Bael.

THIS ONE IS UNWORTHY! BEGONE!!

A light as bright as the sun envelops the hammer. One second later, a nuclear bomb's worth of holy energy explodes in Bael's palm.

"Eeyowch!!" Bael howls.

The Duke of Pain drops the hammer and yanks his hand away to examine it. His skin hisses and bubbles with a vengeance, only to quickly flatten out a moment later.

"W-what the fuck?! That hurt! You little bitch! What the fuck did I ever do to you?!"

Mjölnir rumbles on the ground. It begins to rise and fly away to look for a new master, but it doesn't levitate more than a few inches before Bael grabs it again.

"You fuckin' bitch! How dare you burn me! Asshole hammer! I'll show YOU who's boss!!"

The Sunshine Brothers stare in utter disbelief as Bael throws the hammer against the ground. Dirt explodes in every direction with the force of ten tons of TNT, sending heat and hurricane-gale winds away from the impact zone.

"STUPID! FUCKING! HAMMER! BITCH!"

Bael begins ruthlessly punching the hammer into Heaven's soil. His fists strike Mjölnir's surface like a weaponsmith pounding an anvil. Each blow rattles Mjölnir's consciousness, causing the weapon's soul to tremble.

UNWORTHY!! I WILL NEVER SUBMIT-

The hammer's words cut off as Bael continues punching it. He unleashes all the pent-up aggression from his chase with the Sunshine Brothers over and over. For five straight minutes, he treats the divine weapon like his punching bag.

As Bael strikes it, something begins to change. The ancient magic forming the weapon's consciousness degrades, morphing its iron-like will into that of a humbled warrior.

NO MORE. NO MORE! I WILL SUBMIT! THOU ART WORTHY!

However, due to his incredible lack of mental functions, Bael doesn't hear the hammer's words. He continues ruthlessly smashing it with his fist, over and over again.

Azazel and Azog watch the scene silently for several seconds.

"I don't believe my eyes."

"Bael... is punching a hammer."

"I never thought I would see such a sight in my life."

"Should we intervene?"

"How should I know? I fear his mind may already have faded. He's gone insane."

"Aye. That much is evident."

Finally, Bael stops.

His punches cease abruptly, and he falls to his ass, plopping on the ground with a resounding *thud*.

"Bloody hell. That felt good. Had ta' get that anger out of my system. Hoo, boy."

The Duke of Pain wipes the sweat off his brow. He smiles at the hammer as if it's the greatest thing in the world.

"Damn. Grandma really put some work into this hunk o' metal, didn't she? I didn't even dent it! Might even do some damage if I swung the little piss-fucker around."

Mjölnir's surface and physical form appear undamaged. However, its soul is a different story.

Please... no more... I will do anything for thee, master... do not strike me again... please...

Like a beaten dog, the hammer shudders, lifts off the ground, and quietly lands beside Bael.

The Duke of Pain smirks.

"Yeah, that's right, bitch. Bout time someone figured out who wears the pants around here."

He gently grabs the hammer's handle, only to frown.

"Hmm. Though, not gonna lie, a hammer ain't that great. My fists do plenty of damage. I wish this thing was a better weapon."

A chance to please my master! I will take it!

Mjölnir, once a haughty, proud weapon of divine power, immediately seeks to placate its new master. Its handle and head both turn white, startling Bael.

"Oh, you'd better not be about to burn me again!"

However, despite his worries, Mjölnir doesn't burn him. Instead, it shifts its form into a two-handed greatsword. The bright light fades away, leaving a brand-new weapon type, where before the weapon was a hammer.

Bael blinks. "Oh. Hey, not bad! With a blade like that, I can finally cut me some tomatoes! I was gettin' a little tired of crushing 'em into pulp with my fat fingers."

My master is unsatisfied. I will try a different form!

This time, the weapon morphs into a long, spiked club.

Bael shoots an annoyed gaze toward the Sunshine Brothers, still levitating in the sky.

"Eh... something with a little extra range would be nice. I'd like a way to swat some pests."

The hammer shimmers once again. This time, when it finishes morphing, Bael's eyes widen.

"Ohhh! Now that's useful! A big, spiky death ball with a chain! Hahaha... looks like you ain't useless after all, ya Big Bonker."

Bael climbs to his feet. He begins swinging the newly formed spiked ball and chain around to test how it works.

As he does, Azazel and Azog turn pale.

"H-hey, brother? What do you think the reach is on that thing?"

Azog swallows his saliva.

"Enough."

Bael grins.

"Heya, fuckos! Either of you hungry for some steel?"

Azazel and Azog glance at each other.

"Run."

Part 157: All Is Fair in Love and War

"Nerissa?!"

Satan's eyes bolt open in shock. The woman he's come to Heaven in the hopes of reviving now stands beside Valac, her body no longer a vibrant, lustrous red. Instead, the pale grey of undead skin clings to her like maggots to rotting flesh. She stares at the ground, her eyes downcast and anxious.

The Grim Reaper chuckles. "Hehehe... oh, Satan, how do you like my gift? You've spent a few years trying to revive your woman, but your efforts went adrift. She's here now, alive and well; all because of me, who brought her back from Hell. Now, if you please, I do believe thanks are in order! I brought her here for your tearful reunion, but it was never my job to escort her."

Satan's emotions crash around in his mind like a tsunami. Guilt, anger, and disgust all swirl and mix with fear and suspicion.

Davook, you idiot! Satan screams internally. I told you to keep an eye on Nerissa's crystal! Bah, who am I kidding? He didn't stand a chance against Valac. Lords can't fight Emperors on equal grounds, ever.

Despite the thoughts smashing around inside Satan's skull, the Devil forces himself to keep calm. "What do you want from me, Valac? You wouldn't reanimate Nerissa for no reason. Is she part of some plot to control me? To take control of demonkind?!"

Valac waves his hand flippantly. "Of course not. I care little for the foibles of angels and demons. Why take control of the living, when the dead have come into season? This war has multiplied my troops quite deliciously; proof that my rule is already underway, unofficially. No, my appearance today is for a reason I find quite plain! I love to torture you, and your love for Nerissa proves a most useful chain."

Nerissa raises her head to gaze at Satan. She flinches as Valac's magic starts pressuring her mind. "No! I won't fight Satan, not even if you force me!"

Valac frowns. "Once before, you dared to disobey me. I told you to attack Satan, but instead, you betrayed me! It took only one icicle through your gut, and your life came to a stop; but now you're undead, so you must submit to me or *drop*."

"Aaahhn!"

Nerissa cries out in pain as her soul battles against Valac's. However, it only takes a few breaths before he subdues her, and her body begins to move. She motions with her hands, and two blades of ice materialize. She snatches them out of the air and dashes toward Satan, putting him on the defensive.

Valac laughs like a lion. "Ahahaha! Go, now, my little demoness, and strike Satan down! You can't kill him, but I long to see his frown!"

"I'm sorry, Satan!" Nerissa yells. She grits her teeth and swings her blades, sending a spray of razor-sharp icicles flying at him. "Don't you dare let me kill you!"

Satan smashes his fist into Heaven's Soil. A pillar of stone bursts out of the ground and blocks the ice attacks, but a moment later, Nerissa leaps over it and slashes toward him.

"Don't worry about me!" Satan replies. He dives to the side, narrowly evading her swords. "I've got a few million lives left! Hades, you take on Valac! I don't want that bastard hitting me from the back!"

Hades nods. He grabs Raphael's limp figure off the ground and wraps his arm under his waist. "Leave it to me."

While Satan and Nerissa battle, Hades eyeballs Valac. The Reaper meets his gaze, causing Hades to shudder.

"Oh, Samael, I've watched you for quite a while. With your memories unlocked by that dragon, you've yet to crack a smile! It's hard, I know, bearing the weight of Raphael's transgressions. Hand him over to me, and I'll be sure to teach him a lesson."

"Don't call me by my old name. I no longer associate with the angels. Even so, Raphael will still serve a purpose for me. I won't hand him over. If you want him, you'll have to kill me first!"

Valac's expression turns ominous. "Two Archangel souls earned in a single battle? You drive a hard bargain, but I'll deal with the hassle! Prepare yourself, for I never hold back; you'll find that your frail little host cannot handle my attacks."

"Hmph."

Hades snorts derisively.

"I've fought dragons, Titans, and even Archangels. I'm not afraid of a half-dead dragonspawn."

"Hehehe... you will be. I've foreseen how our battle ends."

Valac's scythe materializes in his hands, and he lunges toward Hades!

"Join me in eternal rapture! There is no greater joy than serving an all-powerful god!"

Hades' Vectors activate. Two of them grab the scythe and tear it out of Valac's hands, but the weapon disperses into ash and reforms in his grasp once again, forcing Hades to counter with a different set of invisible arms.

"Behind you!" Valac laughs, as three more clones pop out of the ground and rush Hades from behind.

"Gah! Thou art a craven cur! Only a coward refuses to fight one-on-one!"

Hades and Valac battle each other with ungodly fervor. The Archangel trades blows, always managing to stay one step ahead of the five Reaper clones by carefully manipulating his Vectors to block every incoming threat. Unlike when he and Satan shared control of the Vectors, Hades's solo Vector manipulation skills prove ten times more efficient. Thanks to his recollection of ancient, long-forgotten memories, his battle skills rise impressively, allowing him to keep up with the Reaper. Despite his body being that of a simple Cherub warrior, it doesn't hinder him in the slightest.

* * *

"Can you resist Valac's control?" Satan asks. He backflips and summons a fireball in midair, then lobs it at Nerissa. However, his attack lacks killing intent. She deflects it with the barest of effort and scowls at him.

"Of course, I can't! Valac's worm allowed him to seize control of my soul when I died. I'm a pawn, now, tossed to and fro by his wishes! I can't control my body at- ah! On your left!"

Nerissa hurls one of her ice swords toward Satan's right shoulder, but just before he dodges left, she barks out a warning, causing him to jump backward instead. Her sword-throw misses by a millimeter, but the followup to Satan's left, a ferocious blast of ice shards, might have ended him on the spot if not for her warning.

Satan grunts. "Thanks for the heads-up, toots! Look, I hafta getcha out from under his thumb! If I do that, I've got a friend who can revive you!"

Nerissa goes silent. She summons a razor-sharp disc of ice, jumps into the air, and flings it at Satan's neck, but he ducks and punches it from below, fragmenting it.

"You can't keep worrying about me, Satan," Nerissa says. "I'm dead, now. The best thing you can do for me is free me from Valac's control."

"I'm tryin', dammit!" Satan punches the ground, and two stone-hands jump up under Nerissa to grab her legs and bind her in place, but she easily tears them apart with her bare hands. "Prying Valac's fingers off your soul is easier said than done!"

"No, that's not what I mean. You have to kill me. Let me die! Let go!"

Nerissa sweeps her hand toward the ground, causing a wave of ice to blast across Heaven's Soil. It charges at Satan like a tsunami, but he ignites flames under his boots and leaps into the sky.

I won't kill Nerissa, Satan thinks. I just got her back. My best option is to subdue her! If I can bind her in place, she won't be able to attack me, or follow Valac's orders!

With that thought, Satan motions again, and summons the power of Poseidon's Octopus Form. Eight watery limbs spring out of his back and lunge toward Nerissa. Each one grabs for Nerissa's arms and legs; intent on pinning her in place.

"That won't work, Satan!" Nerissa yells. She immediately sees through Satan's plan and groans. "You can't use a water-based ability against me!"

The succubus swirls both hands in front of herself. By the time Satan's aquatic limbs draw within ten feet of her, Nerissa creates a magical circle in midair and fires eight concentrated blasts of ice at each incoming tentacle.

SHKRIIIK!

Her ice impacts the water and instantly freezes it solid. Satan's technique falls apart, and he quickly detaches the tentacles from his back before Nerissa's freezing effect can reach their core.

"Stupid woman! You always do things your way!" Satan yells, scolding her. "I still haven't forgiven you for killing yourself! Stop acting so bloody suicidal! I'm immortal, dammit!"

"Don't yell at me!" Nerissa counters. "I did what I had to! I'd never hurt you willingly!"

The Emperor of Ice motions again, and within seconds, a massive cloud of icicles begins revolving around her. Satan stares in surprise as a hundred, a thousand, and even ten thousand begin rapidly whirling like an ice cyclone.

"Uh, baby, you ain't mad, are you?"

"I'm not controlling my actions!" Nerissa hisses. "I've said this ten times, already! Now, get ready to dodge! This trump card isn't one you can block!"

Satan glances toward Hades and Valac for a brief second to confirm his comrade is still alive, but with five Reaper clones surrounding him, Hades isn't in the best shape.

"Fine! But I'm not killing you!" Satan says, returning his gaze to Nerissa. He starts to say something else, but a moment later, she fires her massive flurry of icicles. "Shit!"

Hundreds of steel-rending, ultra-hardened icy daggers fly at Satan. He ignites fire under his boots and jumps into the sky, but under Nerissa's adept control, the hailstorm locks on and chases him everywhere he goes.

"Spawn of a broodmother!" Satan growls. He uses wind magic to try and accelerate, but no matter how fast he moves, the ice continues gaining on him. "My fire and wind magic are only at Lord level! They can't compare to Nerissa's ice manipulation, since she's an Emperor! Damn, if only I had magic that didn't rely on others!"

Satan formulates a plan. He summons his aqua-tentacles again and tries using them to swat a few of the pursuing icicles out of the sky. Despite succeeding, the swarm continues to grow as Nerissa continually summons and fires more.

Up and down, left and right, Satan dodges and weaves, but still, he can't escape.

Shik!

One icicle pierces his calf, right above his ankle.

"Gahhh!"

Satan cries out in pain. The fire shooting from his right foot cuts off, causing him to lose his balance and plummet toward the ground in a free-fall. His final remaining fire-boot does nothing to slow his descent.

From below, a hundred icicles suddenly appear and fly up at him, intercepting his fall.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck!!!"

Satan shoots fireballs from his fists, but the pitiful bursts of heat only manage to knock a few of Nerissa's attacks away. The rest continue rushing at him, unimpeded.

Nerissa shrieks in terror. "Satan! No!!!"

Too late, Satan closes his eyes as the icicles tear through his body, flinging blood and gore in every direction.

"Guhk..."

Satan gurgles out his last breath and smashes into Heaven's soil. Moments later, the pursuing icicles from behind rain upon him like a meteor shower, skewering every millimeter of his frame with countless ice bolts.

"Oh, devils! Oh, devils!!"

Nerissa stands, unmoving, even as she tries desperately to force her body toward Satan's mangled, mutilated corpse. Valac's magic freezes her in place, preventing her wishes from becoming a reality.

However...

After half a minute, bloody miasma begins to materialize in the air above the ice. It transforms into a miniature tornado of gore and rapidly congeals into Satan's body, causing him to shudder into existence. Satan immediately summons fire from his feet and flies into the air, preventing himself from landing on the bed of jagged ice.

"Oh, my days! I'm so sorry, Satan!" Nerissa yells. "Forgive me! I tried to stop it, but-"

"It's fine, it's fine!" Satan yells as he flies into the sky. The now-naked Emperor scowls at Nerissa in annoyance as he grumbles to himself. *I told my girl I was immortal. Why doesn't she ever listen? Sheesh, it's just one soul lost. Making a big huff over nothing...*

Satan frowns to himself as Nerissa immediately begins summoning another deadly froststorm to chase after him.

I can't lie, dying ain't fun. The phantom pain haunts me even when I come back. Not only that, but I still don't have any idea how I can pin Nerissa down. My powers are too weak! The Octopus Form would be ideal, but she'll freeze it before it gets close!

While Satan thinks to himself, a strange presence emerges in his mind.

"Heh heh heh..."

Satan flinches. He flicks his gaze toward Hades and Valac on the battlefield below. "Hades? Is that you?"

"Hahaha..."

The voice laughs again, as if mocking him. Satan strains to listen, but the best he can tell is that it isn't Hades's laughter, nor is it Valac's.

It's someone else — a male's voice.

"Look at the pitiful Demon Emperor now, subdued by his love for a woman."

The voice speaks again, taunting Satan.

Satan frowns.

"You sound familiar. Who the hell are you? What are you doing in my head?"

"Pahaha..." The voice snorts derisively. "That's quite the jest, coming from a soul manipulator. I'm not the only one here. By my count, there are a few million of us."

Satan's frown deepens. Nerissa's icicles shoot from the ground below, causing the Devil to turn around and fly away, but he focuses almost entirely on the voice in his head.

"You're one of my captured souls, eh? Forgive me if I don't 'member you, I've lost track of all the poor saps who ended up in there."

"No doubt," The voice replies. "Most of the poor, broken beings I've found are your fellow demons. For a Demon Emperor, your bloodthirst toward your people might be greater than toward mine."

"Towards yours?" Satan grins. "Ahh, so you're an angel."

"No, you *fool*," The male replies. His voice turns into a low growl. "I'm disgusted that you cast aside your memories of me so easily. After all, I should be your proudest accomplishment, your greatest victory. You managed to defeat a legendary Titan King, and yet you have the gumption to pretend we're strangers. Disgusting wretch."

"A Titan King? Poseidon?"

The fog vanishes from Satan's mind. He finally pieces together the voice speaking from his memories and smiles.

"Oh, hey! Long time no chat. I didn't know I could talk to my souls."

"I am not *your* soul, impudent bloodskin. I am a proud warrior! Do not treat me like a disposable pawn to be cast aside in one of your schemes! Hmph! The reason we've never spoken before was due to interference from that damned Archangel. His power suppressed all of us, preventing us from seeing past your spiritual boundary! With him gone, I am now the strongest!"

"Nice," Satan replies. He summons Poseidon's Octopus Form again and quickly starts batting Nerissa's icicles from the air as they chase after him. "It must piss you off, seeing me use your powers as much as I want."

"Pahaha!" Poseidon guffaws. "You call this pathetic technique 'using my powers'? Hah! These pitiful water strings stuck to your back are hardly a tenth as impressive as when I summoned them! Look at how thin and frail they are! It's as if I'm watching a toddler try to swat a fly!"

Satan's grin vanishes. "Oh. Is that why you've been laughing?"

"I have many reasons to mock you. Watching the mighty trickster Satan getting chased by some frozen daggers is also quite the treat! I'd never have imagined you might fall so far."

"If I wanted to kill Nerissa, it wouldn't be difficult," Satan grunts. "I'm trying to subdue her. It's a lot easier said than done."

Poseidon continues to taunt Satan. "Naturally, when your technique is so limp-wristed and frail! If other demons saw your sorry performance, you'd become a laughingstock!"

Satan rolls his eyes. "Are you here to offer help, or are you going to run your mouth all day?"

"Help you? Not a chance. Nothing delights me more than seeing my killer toyed with by the Grim Reaper! I'm a big believer in karma, you see. You've earned your just desserts by toiling on the path of

blood, foolish red rat! Now that you've ensnared my soul, I'll never be able to enter the Ancestor's Realm! Your suffering is the only thing that gives my existence meaning."

Satan aims his hands to the side and quickly begins rotating his body. He transforms into a spinning wheel of fire, which increases his flight speed and allows him to stay slightly ahead of the deadly, murderous icicles.

"If you aren't here to help, then shut your flapjacks," Satan grumbles.

From inside Satan's mind, a female voice suddenly speaks up. "Oh? Who's talking? Hello? Is anyone there?"

Poseidon's voice softens. "It is I, Poseidon! Who are you?"

"Poseidon? Father?! Is that really you?!"

Poseidon pauses for half a breath.

"By the ancestors! Megara? The Devil has devoured you, as well?!"

"Oh, Father! Long has it been since I heard anyone's voice! This infinite blackness has proven overwhelming! I tried to end my existence, but no matter what I did, I couldn't kill myself! My mind has begun to weaken as the centuries passed!"

"Damn you, Satan!" Poseidon growls. "I forgot that you were the one who slew my daughter! For trapping her soul inside this infinite darkness, I curse you for all eternity!!"

Satan groans. "Bloody hell, it's a whole family reunion in there. Would you morons shut up for ten minutes?! I'm trying to think!"

"Poseidon? Megara?" A new female voice speaks. "It's me, Selene! Satan stole my soul, as well!"

"And mine!" Another female says. "Selene, what good fortune for us to speak again!"

"Astarte, is that you?" Selene asks. "By the ancestors! I've spent so long in darkness; I nearly forgot who I was!"

The four Titans, all former enemies whose heads Satan crushed, continue excitedly babbling amongst one another. Satan's eyes turn bloodshot as he loses his ability to reason.

"SHUT UP! YOU FUCKERS ARE DRIVING ME INSANE!"

However, his words don't silence them. Instead, when the Devil screams in anger, Poseidon laughs evilly. "Hahaha! Satan cannot silence us! Without Samael's presence, we can cause this Devil-bastard endless misery! Come now, my children... make yourselves heard!"

"You damned blackheart!" Megara yells. "Because of you, I can't see my husband anymore! A thousand lifetimes of suffering awaits you!"

"We would have gone to the Ancestor's Realm if it weren't for you!" Astarte adds. "Now, our souls are stuck inside your disgusting, wretched, putrid little body!"

In addition to the four Titans, countless angels and demons begin screaming and yelling. They hound Satan mercilessly, mocking him with the rage of those who have departed with countless grievances.

"Emperor Satan, you tricked us! You said you nullified the blood contracts, but the damn things had a secret condition!"

"Heartless Devil! I can't believe our leader would be so shameless!"

As the demon voices add onto the Titans's, Satan's entire body trembles with rage.

"Filthy Titans! Stupid, shitty angels! Worthless demon grunts! You're all a bunch of loud, noisy bastards! You're under my control now! MINE!! So shut your fucking mouths, or I'll make you regret it!!"

"Hahaha!" Poseidon cackles. "You can do nothing to us, fool! We're here for good! We will always be here, ready to torment you! Suffer and writhe, you insipid cretin!"

Satan's teeth grind together with a fury he's never felt before in his entire life.

Nerissa's icicles draw within inches of his feet as the Emperor tries desperately to stay ahead of them.

"You think you can insult me and get away with it?! I'm Satan! I'm the mightiest of all demons! I don't take lip from nobody!"

Satan focuses his mind on Astarte's soul. She continues to laugh at him, only to stop abruptly. The others don't notice her silence.

A burning, festering pain wells up in Astarte's soul.

"Ahh... ahhh!! It hurts! It-"

Suddenly, a massive flood of energy surges through Satan's body. The fire blasting from his feet doubles in power mere seconds before Nerissa's icicles can cripple him. Satan blasts forward, shrieking in surprise as his speed increases by an order of magnitude.

"HOLY HELL!"

The Devil, mightiest of all demons, gasps as his mana reserves temporarily double for a full thirty seconds. He completely outpaces the pursuing ice shards, only for his mana to slowly return to normal as his reserves normalize.

"What happened?" Poseidon asks. "Did anyone see that?"

"W-where's Astarte?" Selene asks. The Titan female's voice shakes in fright. "A-Astarte? I can't hear her anymore."

Satan's expression transforms into a crazed grin.

"So THAT'S what happened!"

Pure ecstasy explodes across the Devil's face. His grin turns maniacal as the voices in his head fall silent.

"Not so talkative now, are you?! Astarte is gone! Dead! I erased her soul from existence! There isn't a trace left!"

Satan laughs. "Hahahaha!!! Did you notice? I ignited her power to boost mine! I shut her up and doubled my power, killing two birds with one stone!"

Poseidon speaks again, but this time, his voice trembles. "By the ancestors... thou art truly a servant of the darkness..."

Satan closes his eyes. He focuses on Selene. She cries out in pain, alarming Poseidon. "No, no! Blackheart! Don't do it!"

Selene whimpers as a sensation like lava presses against her soul. "Ahh! No! My soul-!"

Her voice vanishes. Once again, the fire igniting from Satan's feet doubles in size and gives him another insane speed boost, allowing him to pull even further ahead of the icicles.

Megara's voice trembles. "Selene?! Oh, ancestors... father... what do we do?"

Satan ignores the weakened voices inside of him. Already, the cacophony of enraged souls has vanished, as none wish to suffer his wrath. Instead, Satan backflips, spins around in midair, and aims his palms at the icicles flying at him.

"Da! Da! Da-da-da-dadada!!"

He launches fireballs like a machine-gun at the incoming ice attacks. Each one possesses startling firepower, allowing him to melt and shatter Nerissa's snowstorm effortlessly.

Nerissa blinks in surprise. She gazes into the sky in awe. "When did Satan's flame attacks become so strong?"

Satan quickly forms more magic signs. This time, instead of summoning water-tentacles, he alters Poseidon's octopus form into one that uses the power of fire. Eight flaming hands burst out of the Devil's back, giving him a horrifying, spiderlike appearance.

Poseidon gasps. "Gah! What is happening? How can Satan refine my ability into a fire-based technique? That shouldn't be possible!"

"Maybe not for you," Satan laughs, "but I am the mightiest Demon Emperor! I am a paragon of brilliance! Never underestimate me!"

Satan lunges toward Nerissa, half a mile below him. The succubus doesn't move, and instead begins summoning a wall of ice in front of and above herself. The curved wall forms a shield that offers 180 degrees of protection.

However, Satan's eyes flash, and he quickly ignites five more souls inside his body. Low-level demon grunts scream in pain and vanish from the millions of other souls, offering him only a moderate boost compared to the Titans from a minute before.

"If only I'd remembered earlier I could do this! The stronger the soul I burn, the more it boosts my power! Bahaha, sometimes my awful memory makes me laugh!"

As Satan hurtles toward the ground, his eight fiery limbs expand and grow to monstrous sizes. He smashes into Nerissa's ice barrier like a freight train tearing through a wall of cardboard boxes. Nerissa screams in fright, but an instant later, Satan slaps the ground, and powerful, rocky limbs shoot out to yank her down and pin her in place.

"Yes!" Satan yells. "I did it!"

Nerissa fights to break free, but Satan keeps his hand pressed against Heaven's Soil. The powerful magic flowing through his veins reinforces the earthen bonds holding Nerissa in place, preventing her from escaping.

Nerissa breathes a sigh of relief. "Yeah, you did it. But now what? I'm still under Valac's control!"

Satan nods. He summons a soul contract and hastily jots down a hundred words, all of which amount to giving him control of Nerissa's soul.

Satan thrusts the contract at his girl. "Here! This is a blood contract! If you sign this, Valac won't be able to control you anymore!"

Nerissa's eyes widen. "Really? Will that work?"

"Don't know, but I have to try!"

Satan grabs an icicle, lowers to Nerissa's side, and nicks her thumb. Fresh blood begins to flow, and he holds the contract beside her so she can sign it.

"Press your thumb here," Satan says. He points to a spot on the contract. "That will activate it."

Satan's earth magic continues to hold Nerissa against the ground, but he allows her enough slack to move her arm. However, after several seconds, nothing happens.

Nerissa shakes her head. "I can't move at all. Valac still has full control."

"Dammit! Fine, then I'll just..."

Satan presses the contract against her thumb. Her bloody thumbprint embeds on the paper, but to Satan's surprise, after five seconds, her blood vanishes. The papyrus scroll returns to its pristine state as if her blood had never stained it.

Satan scowls. "No, no, shit. Shit! Your soul is willing, but my contracts require consent from your mind and body. Since Valac controls your movements... my contract won't work!"

Nerissa sighs. She closes her eyes and takes a few moments to think. "It's settled then. Like I asked you before, Satan... I want you to kill me."

"Fucking hell, woman!" Satan yells. "Not this again!"

"Yes. *This* again."

Nerissa opens her eyes. Her blood-red irises fixate on Satan's, and for a moment, the rest of the surrounding war melts away.

"Satan. I love you, and that will never change. But... you have to let go. I can't stand to be one of Valac's pawns. Valac can only reanimate someone once. After that, their soul will crumble to ash. Once I die, my soul will disintegrate. I won't go to the Great Beyond."

Satan meets Nerissa's gaze. For once, he recognizes a deep, overwhelming sadness in her eyes. Total defeat pervades her spirit. She struggles to act strong for his sake, but inside, Nerissa has already given up all hope.

The Devil flicks his gaze to the left. Hades persists in battling Valac's five clones, but he appears much weaker than before. Valac continues to overwhelm him with sheer numbers, driving Hades to the edge of his strength, but still, the Archangel holds on.

"I can't just give up..." Satan growls.

Valac's voice whispers from the ground. "Kekeke, why not?"

Satan jerks in surprise and quickly jumps to the side. He stares wide-eyed as another of Valac's clones emerges from Heaven's surface, a glowing golden soul in his hand.

"I've saved this soul for you, my former nemesis. If you defeat me in battle, I'll release the soul of your favorite demoness. It's a good deal, wouldn't you agree? Heaven will fall today, so I'll have a supply of lackeys."

"You're lying!" Nerissa yells. She glares daggers at Valac, trying to kill him with her gaze. "Don't trust him, Satan! Valac is a con artist! A sham! He's never stuck to his word in the past, and he won't start today!"

Satan hesitates.

Self-doubt enters the Devil's heart as he glances at his lover, bound behind him, and Valac, the one promising her freedom.

Poseidon chuckles. "Hehe, what's there to think about? Just go for it, Satan. I'm sure Valac will keep his word. If he doesn't, it's only one less bloodskin in the world."

Satan gnashes his teeth. "Say another word, and I'll *burn Megara's soul to ashes*."

Poseidon falls silent. He doesn't continue prodding the Devil.

Valac ignores Satan's self-rambling. "Come, now, Satan. I don't have all day. We could work out a deal, but I know your mind will not sway. This is my offer, the only one on the table. Agree to my fight, and your lover's life will once again become stable."

Hades cries out in pain as one of the Valac clones smashes him across the back and sends the Archangel tumbling to the side. Immediately, he jumps to his feet and resumes defending, but already, his willpower has reached its limits. His body isn't holding up to the continuous, torrential attacks of the Reaper.

Satan nods. A light ignites in his eyes as he comes to a decision.

"Fine. I'll-"

"No!" Nerissa yells. "Don't even think about it, you stupid ape! You big, dumb, hairy baboon! Here's a better idea! Crush my head and take my soul back! That will show Valac you mean business!"

Valac's cocky smile vanishes. "Tch. Your soul is under my control, foolish little girl! If Satan did such a thing, your soul would unfurl!"

Satan blinks twice. "Ah! Why didn't I think of that? If I take Nerissa's soul, you won't be able to control her anymore!"

"It won't work! It won't!" Valac yells. His demeanor transforms from arrogance to panic as he watches the gears turn in Satan's eyes. "I'll kill her now, with a snap of my fingers! Do you think you can outwit me?! Nobody can defeat the Reaper!"

Valac raises his hand. Nerissa's eyes widen as she comprehends the fate awaiting her. "S-Satan! Hurry! Before he-"

Snap.

Satan's heart catches as Nerissa stops mid-sentence. Valac snaps his fingers, and all the life disappears from her body.

"Hehehe..." Valac chuckles.

"She's dead."

Satan jerks his head back to look at Nerissa. Her eyes roll toward the sky, and their vision comes to a rest upon nothing at all.

"Nerissa?! Nooo!!"

Anguish swallows Satan's heart. His body turns numb as countless emotions engulf him from head to toe.

"Ahhh!" Hades cries out in pain, as the Reaper punches him in the face and rears back his scythe to impale the Archangel of Change.

The world slows to a crawl around the Devil as everything falls to pieces around him. His victories, his failures, all of them fade into the background in the face of this single, unstoppable enemy, one who will do everything in his power to torment those who've opposed him.

What do I do?

How do I save Nerissa?

Have I already failed?

Is there... any hope left?

Valac swings his scythe toward Hades' chest.

Shik!

The weapon, forged from Valac's bones, pulses with energy as it absorbs the holy mana inside the angel's body. Valac cackles. "Hahaha! One Archangel soul down, and one to- hm? What's this?"

The Grim Reaper stares intently at his skewered prey. A moment later, he gasps.

"WHAT?! Hades' soul isn't here?! How is that possible?! Did he perish the moment before I struck?!"

Suddenly, a faint apparition catches Satan's eye. It hovers over Nerissa's body for a split second, then rushes at Satan's face.

"Ah!"

Satan yelps in surprise as a strange, almost uncomfortable feeling engulfs his mind.

Poseidon yells. "No! No! He's back! That damned Archan-"

Other souls cry out in alarm, but they all fall silent. Five seconds later, a familiar face materializes in Satan's mind's eye.

Hades.

"Well, *that* battle ended differently from my expectations."

The Archangel grunts in annoyance.

"Hmph... to think, my brother's cherub body was too weak to handle my power. I had to abandon him before Valac struck the final blow. Oh, well, at least we've reunited. Eh, Satan?"

Satan stares blankly at Nerissa's body.

"Hades? You're alive?"

"Indeed."

The Archangel speaks only one word, then pauses for a breath's time.

"Oh, not just me. On my way over, I took a little detour. Wouldn't thou like to hazard a guess as to whom I found?"

Satan's heart jumps.

"No way! It can't be! Did you... did you save-?!"

"Aye," Hades replies. His spiritual body grins like a madman. "I saved her soul an instant before Valac erased her. Sadly, I only managed to recover half. The rest seared to ash before I could intercept Valac's thoughts. Here, take a look."

Samael raises his hand. A faint, shimmering, pale red soul hovers in his grasp. It slowly molds into a shadow of Nerissa's body, but her eyes remain closed, unable to open.

Satan almost jumps for joy! "Nerissa! She's alive!"

Valac balls his hands into fists. "What?! Impossible! I felt her soul evaporate! Do not take me for a simpleton!"

Satan whirls to face the Reaper. As he does, eight invisible limbs materialize behind him, slowly transforming into Samael's signature technique.

"Hahaha! She's alive, and so is Hades, you bone-brained dirtbag! You've failed! Completely! Entirely!"

Valac's gaze flickers. His baffled expression fades away, and he gestures toward the five other clones.

One of them holds Raphael's limp, defeated body in its hands.

"Ehehe, I wouldn't call today a *total* failure."

"NO!" Hades yells. "Satan! Don't let the Reaper devour Raphael's soul! If he gains the power of an Archangel, it will be the death of us all!"

Valac doesn't hear Hades' words, but he still grins at the shock on Satan's face.

"You cannot outrun Fate, my dear, Devil, brother."

Valac's soul scythe materializes in the clone's hands. In the blink of an eye, he plunges it into Raphael's gut.

Shik!

Hades howls in rage. "NOOOO!!! KILL VALAC! KILL HIM NOW!!"

Valac starts to cackle. "Ahahaha-!"

Suddenly, he stops.

Raphael's body explodes into a puff of smoke, leaving Valac grasping the air.

Valac stares at his hands for several long, painful seconds.

"What."

Hades echoes Valac.

"I... ah... Raphael's body was only an illusion? But... how?"

Slowly, Satan curls his lip into a huge grin.

"That sly spawn of a broodmother. Grandpa, you did it again."

The Devil grins at Valac. All of his worries melt away as he finally comprehends his new and improved battle situation.

"Heh. So, what was that about you and me, going mano-a-mano?"

Part 158: Reanimation

Valac gapes at the spot where, only moments before, the eldest Archangel hung limp in his grasp.

An illusion? How could Raphael have achieved such a feat?! I watched the battle from above and below! He was unconscious for the entire fight! He never had a chance to awaken!

However...

In a different realm of the universe, a portal seals shut behind Raphael. The old man clutches his chest and coughs. His entire body aches with fatigue.

"I... barely... escaped..."

Raphael's eyes tear up as the mental pain ripping through his brain threatens to overwhelm him. He squints as the overwhelming light from the Cosmic Realm, his ultimate trump card, and guaranteed refuge, welcomes him with open arms.

My memories are a jumble. The last thing I remember was preparing to battle Satan. After that, a dark figure appeared. He defeated me... somehow. He attacked my soul. What technique did he use? Was he a demon? An unknown soul manipulator on par with the Reaper and Devil?!

I don't know!

My brain throbs. My muscles weep. I feel as if I've fought the greatest battle of all my existence, yet I don't remember more than a few fleeting seconds of it.

Raphael blinks.

The Reaper. Just before I opened the portal, I saw Valac standing mere feet from me. It appears he survived. Hercules' report was false. Nay, not false, but perhaps too hasty. The Titan King's son may have looked into Satan's memories too briefly. Likely, he did not obtain the full story.

Damn. DAMN! If the Reaper has returned, then my injuries are of no consequence! I must summon a portal and rejoin my brothers on the battlefield. I cannot wallow in pain while attempting to recover my twisted memories.

Raphael eases himself into a cross-legged position. He plops down on the glowing ground of the Cosmic Realm and inhales deeply. Powerful, ancient energy enters his nostrils.

Seconds pass.

The remnant mana of the Cosmic Realm rapidly repairs the hideous injuries plaguing Raphael's body. After many long, tense moments, he exhales.

"Alright. I have healed myself. Now, I must-"

Suddenly, Raphael doubles over in pain! The Archangel of Wisdom gasps as several memories return to his mind!

"Oh, Creator...!"

Raphael presses his hands against his face.

"I fought the Devil. I tried to destroy him, but that... that *black specter* appeared. A horrifying ghost unlike any I've ever seen! Was it a monster? A demon?! I know not its identity!"

Samael's magic, the ability to change the fundamental nature of the universe, permeates Raphael's mind. The old man quickly connects false dots to true, filling in the gaps in his memory with imagined terrors ten times worse than those he's suffered.

Despite his inability to erase Raphael's memories, Samael's alterations prove even more horrifying. Raphael's eyes widen as he stares blankly into the distance. Phantoms and apparitions appear in his mind's eye.

"Could that specter have been Morva, the Ancient Titan King of Darkness? No! We slew him thrice to ensure his death! Perhaps Aldun, the Crazy Dragonslayer? Milrut, the One Who Gazed Upon Death? No! NO! It couldn't have been them! Those ghastly, reprehensible monsters perished during the Primordial Era! T'would be impossible for them to return!!"

Drops of sweat form on Raphael's forehead. They slide down his face, flow into his beard, and drip onto his crossed legs.

"Oh, Creator. Oh, Creator! What horror from the Primordial Era managed to defeat me? No demon could achieve such a feat, no matter how much they grew! Only an ancient dragon might lay me down to rest, but they have all perished! I cannot imagine what sort of being would leave me in this poor of a state."

Slowly, Raphael pushes himself to his feet. The Archangel of Wisdom blinks several times, then motions with his hands.

A portal appears in the air before him, revealing the chaos unfolding in Heaven.

Raphael motions again, and his staff reappears in his hands.

"No matter what foul hellspawn may have defeated me, I cannot leave my family to die!"

The Archangel of Wisdom pauses for several moments. He activates several magic signs, causing the scenery inside the portal to change.

"Tch. Camael and the Valkyries struggle against Valac, while Gabriel battles a monster with fifty heads. Hercules stands outside the battlefield, influencing the war from afar, while Uzziel-"

Raphael's words come to a screeching halt.

"By the Creator! This ominous energy! Could Uzziel have awakened her ancient memories?! No... no, that cannot be. I reinforced the seals with the powers of ten ancient Titan Kings. She accepted my seals willingly, so not a single crack could have formed. But if so, then what could have awakened the power of Yggdrasil?!"

Raphael chews on his lower lip.

The old man motions with his hands again and quickly re-evaluates the scenes of war unfolding.

"Camael... Zeus... Uzziel... Hercules... and even the Devil. Damn. I cannot appear in five places at once! Where should I direct my effort?!"

Several tense seconds pass.

Raphael stares at the portal silently, his thoughts churning like a whirlpool.

"Fine. I will go there, then. I cannot afford to waste my energy."

The Archangel of Wisdom hesitates for a moment, as fear threatens to paralyze him. However, he eventually relents and steps through the portal.

After the Archangel's portal closes, the Cosmic Realm falls into silence.

Recommended Listening

Satan laughs as six Valac clones form a half-circle in front of him. Enraged at his loss of two Archangel souls, Valac's eyes transform into scorched firestones.

"Chrrr! I don't know how you managed it, Satan, but nobody gets the drop on me! I'm not the same Reaper you defeated a few years ago! A sprinkle of good luck won't be enough to save you this time!"

"Hahaha..." Satan laughs even harder. "You pissed, pal? I'm in a great mood! Got half my girl's soul, my Archangel buddy's safe and sound... and you? Well, you're about to turn into a *pile of ash*!"

Satan raises his palm above his head. A small fireball appears in his grasp and rapidly balloons into the size of a beach ball.

The Devil grins like a madman. He extinguishes several low-level demon souls within himself and gains a massive burst of mana. The Fireball triples in size and expands into a tank-sized meteor.

Valac stares at the fireball. "Pah! Your hot-rock may have gained both power and size, but slaying an immortal will always prove impossible, no matter how hard one tries!"

FWOOM!

Without replying, Satan hurls the fireball at Valac!

Valac's clones drop into the ground and disappear beneath its surface. A moment later, the fireball strikes Heaven's Soil and detonates with a tremendous *bang*, sending solar radiation blasting outward. Satan winces as the fallout scorches his skin and flings him backward. Within two breaths of time, Hades' Vectors stab into the dirt and anchor Satan, preventing him from crashing onto his back.

"Watch out!" Hades barks. "Don't just fire off giant attacks recklessly!"

Satan immediately activates a few other souls. His water magic proficiency multiplies, allowing him to heal his wounds in the blink of an eye.

"Heh, good point. Where'd Bone Boy go?"

Satan flicks his gaze around. The inferno dies down within moments, leaving only residual fires to scar Heaven's surface.

"Gotcha!" Valac yells. The Reaper jumps out of the ground behind Satan and grabs his legs. Satan yelps in surprise as three Reaper clones leap at him from his front and sides. The one on the left summons his scythe, but instead of slashing at Satan, the scythe teleports to the clone on the right.

Hades snorts. "Feeble tricks."

His eight Vectors rip apart all four clones effortlessly, scattering their bones in a sphere around the Devil. Satan grins at the instant carnage.

"Nice one!"

With his legs freed, the Devil reaches down and picks up Nerissa's body.

"Can't leave my girl laying around. If I did, Valac might get grabby."

As Satan mutters to himself, the two remaining clones appear. This time, Valac's expression turns solemn. One of the clones raises his hand, revealing the golden soul from earlier. "I didn't want to use this, since doing so might end up a waste. However, what use are my souls if not to save face? If I allowed you to win, it would prove a tremendous disgrace! Prepare yourself, for your reputation is about to be profaned."

Valac tosses the soul into his mouth.

Glomp.

A moment later, he swallows it. His body rapidly transforms into a muscular, armored brute, standing twelve-feet tall. Much like the five super-clones battling Camael, he towers above Satan like a mountain over an ant.

"Unlike Camael, your existence will never be my match! I see into the future; so a victory, you cannot snatch!"

Valac rapidly-fires dozens of soul from his palms. Each one tears toward Satan at frightening speeds, closing the twenty-foot gap faster than Satan can react.

Skree! Skree! Skree!

The souls scream with a combination of fright and joy, terrified that their existences are about to end, yet overjoyed that they will no longer have to suffer under the Reaper's control.

BOOM!

Satan's body shudders as each explosion tears apart not his body, but his soul. "Ahhhhh!!"

The Devil winces, but a moment later, Hades begins extinguishing hundreds of lesser demon souls to reinforce Satan's. Before Satan's soul crumbles to ash, Hades rebuilds it ten times stronger than before.

This solution is only temporary! It won't defend thee against someone like Raphael, nor will it protect against the Reaper's attacks! Dodge them!

Satan instinctively leaps into the sky, narrowly avoiding ten more of Valac's souls as they detonate in midair. Valac continues firing others at Satan, but the Devil counters by firing water-lasers downward.

Both combatants engage in a rapid-fire duel, using their mightiest powers in an attempt to overwhelm the other.

Suddenly, Valac drops down and falls inside Heaven's Soil. Satan blinks in surprise.

"He left?!"

Hades scowls. "No! I still sense him!"

Valac re-emerges, but this time, nine other clones flank the super-clone. Each of the new arrivals holds a variety of souls in their grasp. Some clones hold only two or three, while others hold as many as ten. All of the souls swirl around in Valac's grasp, trying desperately to break through unseen barriers so they can escape his control. None succeed.

"I'm out of golden souls, but that's just fine. After this battle is over, I'll have plenty of time for more souls to refine."

Valac's new clones all begin swallowing souls one after the other. The clones who only have two or three to devour start transforming first, while the others follow up only moments later.

Satan watches silently as nine of Valac's clones rapidly morph into horrific abominations. One of the clones becomes a freakish eight-legged spider creature with seven heads, while another grows into a twenty-foot-tall Goliath. The giant monster's skin hardens into rocky armor, while Valac's four arms morph into two. Dozens of eyeballs litter its head, and Valac's legs transform into an Anaconda-like tail.

All traces of intelligence vanish. Each of the clones mutates into a different horror, but none of them resemble anything seen on Earth, nor Lucifer's monsters.

Valac's super-clone grumbles to himself. "Tch. Without additional golden souls, the best I can do is morph into Lesser Aspects. At least their battle power will make up for their lack of wits."

One mutant, a tentacled-butterfly with a chestful of teeth, flaps its wings rapidly and races toward Satan. Its chest opens up and screeches angrily as it attempts to devour him.

Satan jerks back. "What the shit-fuck?!"

The Devil tightens his grip around Nerissa's waist and dives to the ground. He narrowly sweeps past the creature by maneuvering with his fire magic, but the butterfly-carnivore reverses its wing-flapping and darts after him. Agility-wise, its movements resemble a hummingbird's.

"SKRAAAAW!"

Satan shivers as the ten-foot-tall carnivore flaps after him. The seven-headed-spider on the ground fires venomous mucus-balls up toward Satan, but Satan uses his free arm to blast himself to the side with fireballs.

The gigantic brute monster, towering over all the others, coils its tail like a spring.

Fump!

It pounces at Satan as he dodges to the left.

The Devil's heart shivers.

Like a cat knocking a vase off a table, the giant creature swings its four-clawed hand down and swats Satan out of the air. The Devil tries to block its attack but fails.

"Shiit!"

Satan cries out in alarm as Heaven's Soil rushes at him. He impacts the ground with a dense thud, but instead of perishing on the spot, he unleashes his Earth Manipulation and treats the hardened rock like a swimming pool.

The Devil swims underground like an Olympic athlete. He bursts out from behind the brute and summons a windblade while enhancing it with his soul-power.

Fwing-fwing-fwing!

The razor-sharp blade, hardened by his mana, spins through the air like a boomerang. It slices through the Brute's armored body, severs it in half, and sends its rocky armor spraying out of its front.

"Graaaagh!"

The monster topples to the ground, only for its body to grow back from both halves five seconds later.

Satan doesn't have time to evaluate the situation. He spins on his heel, devours twenty souls inside himself, and unleashes a stream of fire upon the seven-headed spider and another creature.

"Nooo!"

One of the spider's heads screams with a woman's voice. Its pitiful death-cry causes Satan to flinch, as tears roll down the monster's face.

"Behind you, ehehehe!" Valac laughs. His super-clone jumps at Satan from behind and grabs his shoulders, intending to rip his arms off. Samael unleashes the power of his Vectors to beat and batter Valac, but the Reaper's strength proves unrelenting!

Crack!

Valac tries to tear off Satan's arms, but only succeeds in shattering his shoulder-blades. Satan howls as unthinkable pain floods through his body. A moment later, he kicks off the ground and tears out of Valac's grasp.

"Y-you ain't gettin' me that easy, chump!"

Satan inhales air, absorbs the power of several souls, and then blows with all his strength. A hurricane gust of wind slams into the ground thirty feet below, immediately grinding all of Valac's summoned creatures into pulp. The immense pressure from Satan's attack nearly compresses Valac's super-clone into bonemeal, but Valac persists.

"Again!"

Nine new Valac clones jump out from Heaven's Soil. They swallow dozens of other souls and rapidly mutate into horrible new creatures. One becomes a cross between a cave bear and a tiger, while another grows bat wings and four snakes to replace its arms and legs.

The winged monster flies toward Satan. Its venomous limbs snap toward him, trying to deliver a fatal blow, but Satan merely smirks and sucks in another gust of air.

Fwooom!!

Another hurricane gust fires from Satan's mouth. The snake-bat gets thrown backward and tumbles from the sky. It smashes into the tiger-bear at half the speed of sound, killing both of them instantly.

Valac's eyes turn bloodshot. "Chrrr! So you like blowing hot air, eh?! I've plenty of wind manipulators in my lantern!"

Three dozen undead demons burst from the ground. Each one, merely at the Lord level, poses no threat to Satan. However, all of them combined slightly shift the balance of power.

"Screw you, Valac!" One of the demons screeches. "I'll never follow you! I hate you! I hate you!!"

His words prove ineffective. Mere moments after cursing his master, the demon begins attacking Satan, unable to stop himself.

Satan grimaces. "Tch. Hunter, one of the Lords who died when Bael transformed into the Balrog. To think Valac stole his soul. Unforgivable."

The Devil motions with his hands, and a giant ball of lava appears above his head. Before he can hurl it at his enemies below, ten wind-element undead hit him with their attacks, knocking him off-balance. Satan tries to regain his bearings, but the lava ball falls out of his grip and drops to Heaven, below. It strikes the soil with a *plop*, causing nobody any damage.

* * *

Half an hour later, Satan destroys another platoon of undead demons. Even when Valac sends a hundred elite angels to battle him, Satan manages to slaughter them as well.

"Is that all you've got?!" Satan asks. He taunts Valac from the sky. "I can do this all day, bone-brain!"

Valac fires a wave of souls up at Satan, but despite his fierce salvo, Valac's interest in battling Satan wavers.

Today is not about killing Satan, nor the others. I need only concern myself with the Archangels; their sisters and brothers. True, I've lost more than I find tasteful, but once I kill Camael, I will surely feel grateful. The others will fall after her powers fade; giving me control of the rest, once my sight pervades.

Valac hesitates as he debates whether he should stay or retreat. Several thoughts cross his mind, including the possibility that he isn't Satan's match.

Before Valac can come to a decision, a flash of movement above his head catches his attention. Valac raises his eyes and jerks back in fright. A massive golden boot falls from the sky!

THOOOOOM!

Gabriel's foot crashes against Valac, stomping his so-called super-clone into bonemeal. Satan quickly puts distance between himself and the Archangel of Power as he gazes up at the battle between giants.

Gabriel barely manages to stay on his feet as thirty Hydra heads snap and tear at him from every direction. Sometimes they vomit fire, while other times, they expel poison and ice.

"Holy shit!" Satan yells. "How many heads has that thing got?!"

Seventy. Gabriel and Zeus have long since given up on killing the creature. No matter how many times they try, the Titan King and Archangel of Power only manage to make the beast grow additional heads. Now, they fight at their limits to try and slow it down.

"Ancestors, guide me!" Zeus howls. He flies around the Hydra at the speed of sound, occasionally clanging his metal poles together to grab the monster's attention. The best he can do is divert the attention of twenty heads. The others lash out at angels and demons on the ground and the air, or they attack Gabriel; the slowest-moving target.

Gabriel pants frantically. "Zeus! I cannot hold on much longer! My Cosmic Form is at its limit!"

"I am not faring much better!" Zeus pants. The Titan King's eyes narrow as bitterness and rage threaten to swallow him.

Will I perish here and now? Must I use the forbidden magic to defeat this monster?! I have no guarantee it will work, and I don't wish to lose my place in Ancestor's Hall!

"Father."

Zeus flinches as an angel with glowing eyes suddenly flies toward him. The angel deftly avoids the snapping fangs of the Hydra's heads, using his tiny figure and exceptional agility to outmaneuver the monster.

Zeus quickly puts two and two together. "Hercules?! How dare you use those accursed powers once again! Have you learned nothing?!"

"Do not patronize me," The angel replies. His expression turns from annoyance to joy as he revels in his father's predicament. "I noticed you struggling to fight this monster. I will assist you now that I've amassed enough of an army to change the battlefield."

Zeus scowls. "Petulant child. You cannot conceive of the wrongs you've wrought! Becoming a Soul Manipulator means giving up your place in Ancestor's Hall! The Ancestors will not allow the unworthy to-

"

"Silence. I don't care about old tales or myths. I am alive, while the Ancestors are dead. Once I take control of Titankind and Angelkind, I will rebuild the world anew. Save your superstitions for the gullible."

Hercules dismisses his father's concerns without any hesitation. Zeus pulls away from the Hydra and grinds his teeth together. "Superstitions? Myths?! Damn you, boy! When I get my hands on you, I will beat the blasphemy from your lips!!"

The young Titan laughs wryly at his father's silly beliefs. Without another word, he sends a command to three thousand seraph warriors. The tiny beings fall like gnats upon the Hydra's back and quickly begin creating a combined magic barrier formed from holy energy.

The Hydra spots them. Ten giant heads, each one the size of ten angels put together, screech in rage and rush at the pests on its back. However, the temporary shield endures under the beast's pressure.

Thoom! Thoom! Thoom!

Thunderous crashes echo throughout Heaven as the Hydra breaks several teeth against the nearly-impenetrable defensive barrier on its back.

One of the angels nods. "Success."

Another one speaks. "Now, I will destroy the Hydra from the inside-out. My father is an old fool. He continued attacking the heads, despite knowing his actions would only strengthen the monster. Stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result."

All of the Seraphs maintain the shield by funneling mana into it with their right hands, while their left hands begin forming new signs.

"Combination Magic: The Heavenly Sword of Dragonslaying!"

A faint apparition appears above the Hydra. A gigantic sword, nearly a hundred-feet-tall, points straight down at the monster's back.

"SKREE?!"

The monster howls in confusion. It senses a colossal amount of divine energy building as the sword continues materializing.

After thirty seconds, the Seraphs finish summoning the divine weapon. Without hesitation, they all kneel and slap the Hydra's back.

"Destroy this abomination!"

The heavenly sword yanks to the ground as if there were a magnet pulling it. It drops hundreds of feet in an instant and smashes through the angelic barrier, pierces the Hydra's back, and impales the ungodly creature straight through as if it never had any defenses in the first place.

All of Hercules' seraphs perish, but they succeed in their mission.

The Hydra unleashes a heart-wrenching scream of agony. It desperately wriggles to try and break free of the sword, but its strength ebbs and flows, along with the blood gushing from its lower regions.

"Skreeeeeeee...!!!"

Finally, the light vanishes from all of its eyes. All seventy of its heads lose their life and plummet to the ground, impacting it with the force of a meteor storm.

Thousands of demons and angels perish under the rain of Hydra heads.

All goes still.

Gabriel gasps for breath. "In... incredible. The Seraphs did it."

Little does he know, but the Seraphs were not fighting under their wills, but Hercules'. The young Titan breathes a sigh of relief and returns his attention to Uzziel, his mightiest pawn.

Agares pounces at Uzziel and tries to tear her head off, but his camouflaged attack fails! Hercules' will intercepts the attack in time, so he sends several cherubs to take care of the Duke of Reptiles.

"Hoho, you're not half bad, scaled-one. Where were you when I nearly killed your people?"

"I was busy!" Agares yells. "Eat my ass, Titan!"

* * *

While Hercules battles the Duke of Reptiles, Zeus lands atop the Hydra. He flicks his gaze around and groans as he eyeballs the thousands of lives lost under the rampage of the nigh-undying monster. "Haaah! Gabriel, do not strain yourself anymore. With the Hydra dead, we must reinforce the others at once! Camael needs our assistance!"

Gabriel wipes his forehead and nods. He closes his eyes for a moment, then reverts from his Cosmic Form into his normal, eight-foot-tall body.

Once he demorphs, Gabriel's energy drops precipitously. He flops onto his ass and gasps for air.

"Haah... wheeze... *strenuous*. I don't remember fighting that hard in my whole life. If my brothers hadn't come at the last second, I might have perished. I owe them my lives."

Gabriel raises his gaze to the gigantic defeated body of the Hydra. Like a mountain of flesh, it lays inert and unmoving, a reminder of the lives it took.

"I can only hope the seraphs escaped at the last second. That attack was not something they could have easily- hmm?"

A sound, like a drum, reverberates in the air. Gabriel flinches. He gazes at the Hydra in disbelief.

"What? This sound..."

Gabriel lowers his gaze to one of the Hydra's heads, laying a few hundred feet away. His breathing ceases as he strains to listen to the faint sound.

Lub-lub. Lub-lub. Lub-lub.

Gabriel's expression turns ashen. "No... no, no, no... a heartbeat?!"

Suddenly, the nearest head shifts its weight. The Hydra's eye opens, revealing a pitch-black pupil.

Two seconds later, all seventy of the Hydra's heads jerk upward. Life returns to their eyes, and a figure appears only thirty feet from Gabriel.

"Ehehehehe! Oh, Gabriel! You foolish Archangel! By killing the Hydra, you've gifted it to ME!"

Valac, the Grim Reaper, cackles maniacally. With his presence on the battlefield, all souls end up in his possession once they perish. He reawakens the defeated Hydra mere moments after the Heavenly Blade pinning it to the ground fades away, leaving the Hydra unrestrained.

This time, when the Hydra awakens, it does not go on a rampage. Instead, a cold, ruthless light emerges in the monster's eyes.

The light of intelligence.

Before, it was an angered lion, capable of only instinct and base desires. But now, with the Reaper manipulating it, the Hydra gains the power of rational thought.

Snap! Snap! Snap!

Three of the Hydra's heads lunge down and bite at the necks of other heads. It releases no cry of pain as six new heads expand to take the place of the former three.

"By the Creator!" Gabriel shrieks. "It's mutilating itself to grow more heads!!"

"Aahahaha!!" Valac cackles. "So it is! With such a powerful pawn in my possession, the war is over! I've WON!!"

Valac sucks into the ground, leaving Gabriel panicked and alone.

I can't activate my Cosmic Form again! I consumed far too much energy! Zeus and I barely contained this beast before... how will he handle it alone?!

...High in the sky, having flown up over a thousand feet, Zeus stares at the reanimated Hydra in disbelief.

"Oh, Ancestors... what now? I cannot defeat the Hydra with my power alone. Even when Gabriel was at his peak, the two of us could do nothing to this monstrosity! What actions must I take? Must I tap into the forbidden power?!"

Tears well up in Zeus's eyes. One of the Hydra's heads raises to the sky to stare at him. An evil expression crosses its face, one that predicts it will defeat him.

Zeus turns his head to gaze into the distance. Far away, on the other side of the battlefield, he senses the faintest trace of his son's mana. Hercules sits cross-legged, manipulating his warriors from a distance.

"Hercules... my beloved son... my boy..."

Tears roll down Zeus's face. He clenches his fists in anger.

"I warned you. I told you the folly of becoming a soul manipulator. One may never enter the Ancestor's Realm if they commit such a heinous act. Yet, you did not listen. You lost your seat at the Great Table. You gave it up, unknowingly, all because you did not heed my words. If I go there now, without you, what sort of father would I be?"

The Titan King, a steadfast warrior who has never shown emotion to his family since losing his memories, weeps openly, unable to control himself.

"What point is there in eternal bliss if my family cannot enjoy it?! Why must I choose between darkness and sin?! Oh, Cronus, my father... was this your plan all along? Did you wish for your son to betray you? Did I, unknowingly, teach Hercules a lesson which he took to heart?"

Zeus hangs his head. Grief fills his heart.

"Evil begets evil. I see it now. I see where I failed. I betrayed my father, and thus, my son betrayed me. I do not deserve the glory of the Ancestors. However... my son, who walked the path of evil due to my actions... he does not deserve death. I must stay and protect him. I must live on so that my people can

survive. If I perish here, what redemption will I earn?! How can I go to the grave with such grievances dwelling in my heart?"

The Hydra licks its lips. A moment later, all seventy heads lunge at Zeus!

The Titan King watches. To him, who walks with thunder, who thinks at the speed of light, the monster's movements are like those of seventy slugs.

"No longer will I hesitate. I may die a hypocrite... but I will never allow my son to fall! I love him more than life itself! I love him with all my heart!!"

Zeus's tears scorch his face. His inner rage accumulates in a single, ancient tattoo on his left arm. The ink engraving, an image of a fist raised to challenge the sky, begins to glow with a blood-red light.

The Titan King raises his fist.

"I will never surrender! My pride means nothing! My life means nothing! I give it all up, in the name of the Great Ancestors! Ancestors, come! Save your children! This young fool gives his blood so that others may live!"

A powerful aura of blood summons itself and engulfs Zeus. His arm tears from his body, leaving only a bloody stump behind, then fires into the sky like a cannonball. Two seconds later, all of the Hydra's heads crash upon Zeus's blood barrier, like eggs shattering against concrete. The Titan King stands, unmoving, while a blood-red light fires into the sky. A portal materializes, revealing millions of giants!

"HAH HAH HAH!"

A chorus of disgusted laughs erupts from within the portal.

"WHAT PEASANT DARES OPEN THE ANCESTOR'S REALM?!"

Zeus bellows at the top of his lungs. "It is I, Zeus the Thunderwalker, son of Cronus the Mad Titan, son of Iron the Unchained, son of Hrothgar the Divine!"

Silence.

Four seconds pass.

Suddenly, a hand reaches through the portal and grabs hold of it like a man stepping through a manhole. The giant's hand dwarfs Zeus's entire body.

"OH? DO YOU DEMAND OUR AID? DO YOU GIVE UP YOUR BLOODRIGHT?!"

Zeus replies immediately. "I do!"

"HAH HAH HAH..."

The giant's laugh echoes throughout all of Heaven.

"SO BE IT. NO LONGER WILL YOU HAVE A PLACE AT THE TABLE!"

Tears slide down Zeus's face.

"I know."

Part 159: The Might of Valhalla

Beyond the portal in the sky, hundreds of indistinct figures sit at a grand table and gaze upon Heaven's battlefield. They watch as endless hordes of demons crash against angels, each side ripping one another to shreds. Beyond that, their eyes fixate on the enormous figure of the Hydra, a seventy-three-headed desolate beast whose power is enough to suppress the Archangel of Power.

Inside the portal, several Titans, each one standing hundreds of feet tall, appraise the situation in Heaven.

A male Titan adorned in elaborate Mythril armor chortles to himself. "Hah. Look at how weak the angels have grown. To think they were once our greatest enemies. Now, a single beast with only a hundredth the strength of an ancient dragon can make them quiver in fear."

Hundreds of Titan Kings and Queens sit at various chairs, each one placed at different positions on the left and right of an unfathomably long and tall table. It stretches out for thousands of feet and sits adorned with many delicious cooked delicacies, allowing the Titans to stuff themselves to their heart's content.

"Hmph!" A female Titan growls. "This young one calls himself Zeus? The little runt hardly reaches my kneecaps! How can he be the leader of Titankind? Have our standards plummeted into the abyss?"

"Heimdall. Vidar. Quiet."

A female Titan towering one thousand feet tall sits at the head of the table. Compared to her, the others appear like children bowing meekly before their mother.

"Zeus possesses the Seal of Ordün. He has chosen to give up the Seal in exchange for our help. Naturally, I have eliminated his place at the High Table. However, one of us must go and assist him. Whoever does must be of his blood, and must be equal to him in stature. If they succeed in clearing his trial, they will elevate themselves ten positions."

A murmur goes up among the Titans seated at the High Table.

"Ten positions? Isn't that a bit much for killing one measly dragon hatchling?"

"Nay, 'tis no dragonspawn. Take a look at its backside. No wings!"

"Oh, good eyes, Hod!"

"What is it, then? A mutant?"

"Who cares! Ten positions won't change much for any of us. Save the effort for a desperate fool."

The Titans bicker amongst each other. Some harrumph at Zeus's weakness, while others can only lower their heads and laugh at the absurdity of the current Titan King standing a mere forty-feet-tall.

One of the Titans nearest the head of the table raises his head to the matriarch. "Odin, you stated that only one of Zeus's bloodline might assist him. Who here qualifies for such a lowly task?"

Odin, the mightiest of the Titans, crosses her arms. She turns up her nose at the portal opened above the High Table. "Cronus was the last to join us from Hrothgar's bloodline. Where is he?"

"Cronus has yet to take his place at the High Table," A dark-skinned Titaness replies. "Neither has Hrothgar shown himself, today."

"Bah! The Hrothgar line is a stain upon our glory!" Heimdall yells. The Titan King, formerly known as He Who Stomps on Bones, grimaces in disgust. "Lazy dullards who think only of meat and mead! Hardly any accomplishments to their names!"

"Heimdall. I told you to keep quiet," Odin says. Her calm tone sends a chill through the dining chamber. "In my hall, we do not insult those who have ascended."

Heimdall falters. "A-aye, Allmother."

Several Titans stifle their pent-up anger. Some, however, spin on a dime and pivot to other matters.

Vidar slams her fist on the table. "Bah! Forget the others! This Zeus is too pathetic! He would rather beg us for assistance than fight that creature to the death! Has he no sense of responsibility? Does he care nothing for the shame his actions will bring upon us?"

Odin sighs.

"The situation in the mortal realm is more complicated than you imagine, Vidar. Have you failed to notice the number of Lowborn arriving in Valhalla? The Titans have been perishing en-masse for the last few thousand years. Something, or someone, of unimaginable power, has extinguished their lives."

To Odin's right, a male Titan wearing delicate white robes raises his hand. "Ah, I know of whom you speak, Allmother — the Grim Reaper. I've spoken to those who perished, and they say that those who arrived in Valhalla were only a fraction of the dead. The Reaper has captured the souls of the others, preventing their ascension."

Odin's expression darkens.

"Ah. So, this mortal, this spawn of Yggdrasil... he has profaned the name of the great Titans. The Grim Reaper has desecrated their souls to promote himself, and in doing so, has insulted our brethren in the worst way possible."

The white-robed Titan nods. "It is as you say, Allmother."

Odin's eye flinches.

"I understand. Very well. No matter how disgraceful Zeus's actions, we must help our children. If we do not, then how will we live with our shame? A Titan never kneels. A Titan never acquiesces."

Odin uncoils her arms and slowly, deliberately, points to someone at the end of the table.

"Ivaldi. You sit at the lowest position at the High Table. You might be the weakest of us, but you are still far mightier than the descendants of Hrothgar's line. Go and clean up this mess. Strike fear in the heart of He Who Looks Down Upon Titans. Remind those in the mortal realm of the glory of the Immemorial Era."

A tiny Titaness, scarcely fifty feet tall, climbs up and stands on the High Table. Like a toddler walking among dinosaurs, she appears diminutive and pathetic. Her golden robes ooze with regality, and her silver scepter holds a brilliant aquamarine gem possessing nearly limitless energy.

Ivaldi bows at the waist to her matriarch. "Allmother, Odin! Despite the shameful nature of this task, I accept! If Hrothgar's line will not answer the call, then I shall take their place at the High Table!"

Several Titans murmur to one another.

"Hmm? Did you notice Ivaldi's phrasing? She believes her actions to be worth two hundred positions!"

"Aye, she is quite daring. Then again, I would take a thousand puny Ivaldis with hearts of fire over the lazy, ungrateful children of Hrothgar."

"Your words ring true. Ivaldi may small of stature, but her heart is like that of the sun."

Odin glances around the table. In the blink of an eye, she registers dozens of Titans nodding in approval.

Hmph. Ivaldi might be the weakest of the seated Kings, but she possesses a sliver of the Ancient Light. If I were to send someone at a higher seat, the shame would be unbearable. Nobody would agree to such a trifle without making a ridiculous demand.

Odin points her fist toward the portal. There, Zeus's face appears frozen in place, as he shouts in slow-motion toward Ancestor's Hall.

"Go, Ivaldi! Leave no evil standing! Your soul will only be able to sustain itself for a short period. Make good use of this opportunity, and redeem the shame Hrothgar's descendant has brought upon our name!"

Ivaldi stands tall and nods. "Allmother!"

A moment later, Ivaldi transforms into a flash of light and rushes toward the portal. She zips through it, leaving the others behind.

Heimdall throws a swig of mead back. "Pah. Odin. I will not speak ill of Hrothgar again, but as for his descendant..."

Odin closes her eyes. "Aye. He has abandoned his people. You must wipe his name from the Hall of Heroes, on the double."

"Good. So it should be. But what of his son, Hercules? Have you heard the rumors?"

Odin cocks her head. She opens her eyes and blinks. "I have not. You know I care little for news regarding those who have yet to ascend."

"Naturally. Some of our most recent arrivals claimed that Hercules unleashed the energy of the soul. I wonder if that might be why Zeus gave up his birthright?"

Odin's expression turns solemn.

"Mmm. Indeed, that may be so. In any case, the deed is done. Let us return to the feast! When Ivaldi returns, we shall give her a grand welcome!"

The hall erupts in a single cheer. "Aye!"

Recommended Listening

Zeus gazes at the portal thousands of feet above him with a look of awe and bewilderment. The only details he knows of the Ancestor's Hall came from his father, Cronus, when the Mad Titan was still alive. However, Cronus's knowledge was limited by Raphael's mind-wipes, and thus, he only knew a few details regarding the Titan Kings of yore.

A bright flash ignites inside the portal. Moments later, a tiny beam of light bursts forth and rushes toward Zeus. Ivaldi, the Queen of Divinity, zips past Zeus nearly as fast as his accelerated perception can follow. Her movements prove swifter than the Hydra can react.

Ivaldi grasps her enchanted scepter firmly. Her golden robes flutter behind her as she travels from the portal to the ground thousands of feet below in only a breath's time.

"For Valhalla! For the glory of Titankind!"

A bright light erupts from her body. She crashes into the Hydra's back and sends a wave of energy blasting outward. Five of the Hydra's heads tear off from the impact, and the necks of a dozen others fracture in multiple places; unable to withstand Ivaldi's sheer power.

"Skreeaaaah?!"

The giant monster flicks its gaze toward the lump of light stuck to its back. Valac's control guides it into attacking, and it snaps toward her with the rage of a Reaper about to lose his newest prized weapon.

Ivaldi watches. She waits for twenty Hydra heads to snap at her, then activates a spell.

"Barrier!"

Light engulfs Ivaldi's body. It transforms into a shield that expands to cover her entire frame, then balloons outward in a fifty-foot half-sphere.

Unable to stop their momentum, the Hydra's heads crash against her barrier and snap even more of their necks. Five of its heads flop to the side uselessly, while the teeth of a dozen others shatter in their mouths.

One of Valac's clones, hovering in the sky nearby, screams in anger. "Who is this?! Where did the she-Titan come from?! She's far stronger than Zeus!"

Ivaldi raises her staff. "Sever!"

Ten beams of light fire from Ivaldi's scepter. They swing outward and slice through the Hydra's necks like hot knives through butter. Thirty heads separate from the main body and crash into Heaven uselessly.

Zeus's blood-shield dissipates, leaving him exposed. However, with the Hydra's attention locked on Ivaldi, the threat to his life disappears. "Watch out, my Ancestor Queen! The Hydra's heads grow back!"

Ivaldi narrows her eyes. She flicks her gaze toward Zeus, then back to the Hydra. "Oh? Do they, now?"

Ivaldi watches as, indeed, over a hundred heads rapidly regrow from the Hydra's severed and crushed appendages. The moment it regains its appendages, Valac manipulates the Hydra to bite off the broken necks as well, allowing it to regrow those.

"Hmph, what a troublesome ability," Ivaldi mutters. "To think such a monstrous creature lacks even a trace of draconic energy, yet still possesses such a fearsome skill. However! It has a weakness, as do all beings formed from Yggdrasil's energy!"

The Queen of Divinity raises her staff above her head. High in the sky, far beyond the height of the portal to the Great Hall, a ball of light materializes. The lustrous globe increases in size from one hundred feet in diameter to over a thousand! Powerful waves of energy engulf it as it rapidly accelerates its growth.

Moments later, a magnetic beam of light fires from Ivaldi's scepter and yanks the pulsating sphere toward the ground! The unthinkable huge and powerful ball of light tumbles toward Heaven at meteoric speeds, threatening to annihilate the Hydra instantly.

Valac narrows his eyes. "No! I won't allow this!"

The Hydra, now an undead monster under his control, screeches in rage. All one hundred of its heads coil up and lash downward toward Heaven's Soil. Like a humongous scaled mole, it chews into the dirt and rapidly burrows underground.

Ivaldi gasps. She quickly leaps off its back as the monster disappears underground; her heart tightening like a vice. "What! How can a monster of that size possess such excellent tunneling skills?!"

Too late, she raises her head to the sky and watches in horror as her massive light-ball threatens to slam into her.

She cannot stop its momentum.

Rage appears on the Titan Queen's face. She transforms into a flash of light and darts into the air, narrowly avoiding death as her artificial meteor crashes into Heaven.

"THOOOOOOOOOM!!"

Thousands of angels and demons perish in an instant, unable to flee the blast zone. An impact like a nuclear bomb flings the few survivors away, sending them tumbling across Heaven helplessly.

Half a minute after Ivaldi's meteor detonates, Heaven finally goes still. The Hydra bursts out of the newly formed crater and screeches defiantly, daring the Titan queen to attack it again.

"Monstrous wretch!" Ivaldi howls. "Hah! Had the others known how powerful you were, they might have volunteered to battle! At least now, I can fight without any regrets! It has been far too long since my heart pounded as hard as it does now!"

Zeus stares in disbelief as the Titan Queen disregards the deaths of countless observers to focus on the Hydra. Despite trying his hardest to avoid excess casualties, all of Zeus's efforts go out the window thanks to her crazed attacks.

"Oh, Ancestors... what battle maniacs were you to create such a fearsome warrior? Long have I wondered what the ancient wars entailed, and after seeing the feats of the one before me now, my curiosity has only intensified!"

Ivaldi summons another barrier around herself. The hardened mana swirls angrily, as if seeking out an attack worthy of testing its might. She flies at the Hydra and aims for its back once again.

"Acceleration!"

With a single word, Ivaldi releases a blast of light magic from her feet. Her speed quadruples, and she transforms her body into a biological meteor. The Hydra jerks back in surprise, but fails to dodge in time.

Kathoom!

She crashes into it once again while intentionally attacking the same spot as before. The Hydra's spinal cord cracks under her attack, while its legs press against the hardened dirt inside the newly formed crater.

Snap!

All four of the Hydra's legs shatter under the weight of Ivaldi's impact. It screams in pain and slams onto its belly, unable to move.

"Hoho?" Ivaldi chuckles. "Your heads might grow back, but I wonder about your legs?"

Her question goes unanswered, but the Hydra still howls like a pissed-off banshee.

"Skreeeoooo!!"

Valac summons his scythe. He eyeballs Ivaldi from the sky and grins creepily. "Forget the monster; forget the hundred-headed beast. If that she-Titan becomes mine, all the other souls will be my feast! I've toiled too long, I've worked too hard; I would be a fool if I let slip a chance at seizing this trump card!"

Valac rushes down from the sky. As he does, he motions with his hands and turns his body aetherial; intending to pierce Ivaldi's defenses.

Suddenly, from somewhere two miles away, a thin, green, laser-bolt of energy fires at the Hydra.

Valac jerks his head toward it. "What? Who dares-?!"

A moment later, the beam strikes the Hydra.

The monster's vitality vanishes. All of its blood evaporates. Its bones crumble to ash. The formerly nigh-unstoppable creature melts into a pile of goop within seconds, perishing in the blink of an eye.

"What...?!"

Valac stops abruptly. He stares at the Hydra's ashen corpse with a mixture of disbelief and trepidation.

"M-my Hydra perished? In only one hit?!"

Ivaldi jumps off the Hydra's back. Her expression turns ugly.

"By the gods! No, no, never in a thousand lifetimes did I imagine I would see the Creator's Touch again! Where is she? Where is Uzziel?!"

Upon hearing Ivaldi's words, Valac raises his head to look to the south.

"Uzziel did this?"

Satan cradles Nerissa's body in his arms. Having retreated to a safe distance, he stares with widened eyes toward the south.

"What is that awful power I sense? It churns my stomach."

Several low-ranked demons huddle around him. Each one shivers in terror.

"Aauu... scary... scary monster..."

"Run away... we need to run very far..."

Hundreds of Goblins flee from the south. Their eyes bulge from their heads as they skitter past demons, angels, and Valac's undead as well. They ignore all the threats around them and bolt for Heaven's Gate; intent on fleeing for their lives.

Satan doesn't stop them. His heart pounds like a drum, giving him a single warning.

If I do not leave; today might be my last day among the living.

Recommended Listening

A minute earlier.

"The light of Creation; appear! Give me the power to defeat the demons!"

Hercules manipulates Uzziel like a veteran puppetmaster. Using his soul-manipulation, he searches her memories and unravels the keys to summoning the ancient magic locked deep inside her soul.

Uzziel falls unconscious, unable to combat the pressure welling up in her mind. Hercules flinches as her primal, earthly magic fights against his control.

"What is this power?" Vepar whispers. The Lord of Poison transforms into a cloud of poisonous gas and tries to flee, but Hercules grabs onto her with Uzziel's newfound magic.

"You're not going anywhere!"

A formless hand, invisible, made of compressed mana, freezes Vepar in her tracks. The Lord of Poison shrieks in fright as terror washes through her veins. "No! Stop! Leave me alone!"

Uzziel summons a hundred vines. They fire from her hand, dive into the ground, and burst out from under Vepar's feet.

"You will be my first meal."

A second later, Vepar's muscles contract reflexively. Her bones tremble, and her blood vessels constrict as Hercules uses Uzziel to drain the mana directly from Vepar's aperture.

"Ahhh! Oh, hell! Someone help!! She's sucking me dry!"

Vepar tries to transform into a cloud of gas, but her mind goes blank. She loses control of her magic and wriggles around helplessly.

Suddenly, Belial jumps toward her. Her arms transform into bone-swords and lash out, severing the vines binding the Lord of Poison in place. Vepar stumbles forward, unable to control her body. Just before she flops into the grass, Belial grabs her and leaps into the air.

"Vepar! Are you alright?"

Vepar's vision blurs. She blinks deliriously and slurs her words. "I... I yam... can't... mooove..."

Belial lands a short distance away and whirls to face Uzziel. As she does, she takes a step back in surprise. "What in the name of...?"

Uzziel, the Archangel of Creation, looks very different from only a minute before. Her beautiful dark skin now appears rough and cracked. An earthen aroma wafts from her body, like a mixture between roses and a secluded pond.

Hercules raises Uzziel's hand. He examines it for a second before returning his attention to the Emperor of Passion.

Uzziel's memories did not lie. I can activate Yggdrasil's power, but only by draining the vitality of other beings. Since that is the case; so be it. The demons will serve as fuel for my mightiest pawn.

Uzziel motions with both hands, causing dozens of roots to sprout from her feet and dig into the ground. She freezes in place, using her power to interface directly with Heaven's Soil.

All around Heaven, tufts of grass rapidly sprout and form. The combatants from both sides, too engaged in battle to notice the greenery beneath their feet, stand on the grass as they slash and bash each other. Moments later, the movements of hundreds of thousands of demons and angels slow noticeably as their energy drains from their feet, passes through Heaven's Soil, and flows into Uzziel's body.

Immediately, the most perceptive combatants glance down and notice the glowing grass beneath their feet, each blade pulsing with the energy of Creation.

One fire-type demon yells out in alarm. "What the Devil! The fuckin' grass is glowing! Burn it! Burn it to ash!"

Confused by the new development, the angels take flight and leap into the sky, leaving the demons to burn the regrown fields to cinders. However, even with all their powers combined, the demons gasp as the grass regrows only seconds later, always aiming for wherever they stand.

Meanwhile, Uzziel's body continues to change. Her skin hardens and morphs into tree-bark. Her muscles bulge, and her blood turns to water. Mystical magic swirls around her, while tremendous pressure emanates from her body.

Suddenly, in the skies above, a hurricane appears! A typhoon of unfathomable power springs into existence as the terrifying forces of nature converge on the Archangel of Creation. Volcanoes erupt and tornadoes form all across Heaven as the power of Creation envelops her.

Uzziel's nature energy multiplies tenfold, causing Belial and Diablo's expressions to turn ashen. Agares takes several steps back and winces as his reptilian blood begs him to flee. His animal instincts plead with all their strength, but he forces himself to stand his ground.

"Spawn of a broodmother! Diablo, what the hell's going on?"

Diablo shoots a bewildered expression at Agares. "How should I know?!"

Hercules, sitting cross-legged on a flattened boulder several miles from the battlefield, winces as Uzziel's earth energy swirls in her body like a raging whirlpool.

"Curses... I knew Yggdrasil's power would be monstrous, but I didn't expect it to strengthen the Archangel's soul! If this keeps up, I'll lose control!"

He bites his lip and concentrates. Even with Uzziel's energy reaching unexpected heights, Hercules isn't satisfied.

"I haven't unlocked more than one percent of Uzziel's power! Five percent... five percent should be enough to erase demonkind's existence! Not even Satan will be able to withstand Yggdrasil's power!"

Uzziel creases her brow and concentrates on adding more mana to her body, but before Hercules can gather another percentage of nature energy, a flash of light ignites in the sky.

Far above the newly formed typhoon, past the portal to the High Table, a spherical ball of light materializes. Ivaldi, the Titan Queen of Divinity, hurls it at the Hydra with all her strength.

Hercules' vision wavers for a moment. He transfers his consciousness to one of his observer angels and gasps as he spots the makeshift meteor hurtling toward Heaven's Soil. "Gods! Who could have summoned such powerful, concentrated mana? It's beyond belief!"

Transferring his consciousness back to Uzziel, Hercules summons a barrier made of nature energy. Moments later, Ivaldi's meteor strikes Heaven's surface.

THOOOOOOOOOM!

Like a nuclear bomb formed from holy energy, the divine meteor detonates with cosmic power, killing thousands of angels and demons instantly, while sending tens of thousands flying. The subsequent shockwaves slam into Uzziel's barrier and cause no damage, but the four demons surrounding her scream and howl as they go flying to her left.

"Aaaah!"

"Spawn of a-!!"

Belial loses her grip on Vepar. The two demonesses spin through the air and smash into the ground with such force that, were they mere humans, they would have ended up as meat paste. Instead, Belial fractures and breaks several bones, while Vepar's skull caves in partially, putting the already-dazed Lord in a coma.

Diablo summons a kinetic barrier. He crashes into the ground and lands without any injuries, but his shield transfers the impact into Heaven's Soil, creating a low-level earthquake throughout the nearby battlefield.

Agares crashes into the dirt but only receives a few minor bruises thanks to his powerful lizard form.

Both Emperors and Agares climb to their feet. Belial heals herself and Vepar, then hoists the injured Lord over her shoulder.

"What happened? Did Uzziel cause that explosion?"

Diablo rubs the back of his head. He stares at Uzziel, now a speck in the distance, nearly five hundred feet away. "I don't think so. It might have been Lucy's Hydra. That thing is crazy strong."

"Yeah. Maybe..."

Belial appears unconvinced, but she doesn't press the issue. All three demons fixate their gazes on Uzziel, as she retracts her nature-energy-shield. The faint green shimmer of light disappears around her, revealing that several branches have grown from the Archangel's skin. Her tree-like image mixes with her angel wings, giving her a hauntingly beautiful appearance, like that of a dryad or a nymph.

Hercules, still miles away from the battlefield, coughs blood violently.

"Kahk! Gah! Damn, the energy from that ball of light went straight into Uzziel's aperture. I wasn't prepared to handle it. Luckily, I still have control. Uzziel is... she's at about two percent, now. I don't think I can increase her strength much more. If I do, she will surely regain control."

With nothing but a dozen mind-controlled cherubs surrounding him, Hercules talks to himself, verbally walking through his battle strategy.

"Right now, the biggest threats are those two Demon Emp- WHAT?!"

As the Hydra emerges from underground, Hercules finally spots the one who summoned the ball of light; the Titan Queen of Divinity, Ivaldi.

Hercules' heart trembles. He stares through one of his cherub warrior's eyes at the previously unknown figure.

"Who is that? I know all the remaining members of my Earth-Walking cousins. She is even taller than my father, yet I have no recollection of her!"

Hercules flicks his eyes toward the humongous portal in the sky. He pauses to reflect on the words spoken by the thunderous voice and quickly makes a connection.

"She must be a Titan Queen. Perhaps, one of my ancestors? Nonsense! They're all dead! How could she come here, now?!"

Hercules struggles for a moment but continues to watch as Ivaldi pummels and beats the Hydra. She shatters its legs and slices off several of its heads but appears unable to eliminate it.

"If she is one of the ancestors, then my father and I must have a long talk later about why he didn't summon her before. Damn! With someone of her power, we could have eliminated the demons ages ago! For now, I'll help her out."

Hercules transfers his consciousness back to Uzziel. Uzziel turns her head to the right. There, she spots the screaming figure of the Hydra.

"No longer does that beast walk among the living. Valac captured its soul, and thus, it has stepped through the door of life and death. The best method to defeat a being born from death energy is via life energy. And so, that is what I will use to slay it."

Uzziel raises her hand. She summons a tiny ball of green light in her palm, holds it up to her face, and puffs on it.

As if blowing a kiss, Uzziel sends the tightly condensed ball of life energy hurtling toward the Hydra. Despite the few miles separating her and the behemoth, the condensed mana traverses the gap instantly.

Fwip.

Uzziel's spell gently caresses the Hydra. A breath's time later, the beast convulses, unable to control its movements. The Hydra gasps out a pathetic cry of pain as all of its internal organs turn to mush. The formerly unstoppable behemoth falls into its own shadow and melts into a tar pit, leaving only a blackened swamp of filth where it once stood.

* * *

Ivaldi balls her hands into fists. The forty-foot Titaness glowers in Uzziel's direction as ancient rage boils in her veins.

"Uzziel... you monster. Never have I forgotten the humiliation you wrought upon me... the lives you ended... my brothers you slew. And now, here on this battlefield, where the sole purpose of my existence is to slay a great beast, you *dare* humiliate me once again? The Hydra was mine! Mine to kill! Mine to crush! How can I show my face at the Ancestor's Hall, now that *you* have stomped my warrior's pride once again?!"

Ivaldi's forehead veins bulge as her anger reaches a boiling point.

"It was you who killed me! I swore to exact revenge with my dying breath, and now nothing can stop me!"

Swoosh!

Ivaldi activates her divine magic and rushes toward Uzziel from a standstill, creating a sonic boom! All around her, angels and demons gasp as dense bloodlust bursts from Ivaldi's soul, sending the weakest-minded combatants into convulsions.

"A trillion lifetimes of damnation await you, Yggdrasil! Scourge of the universe! Plaguebringer!!!"

Hercules senses Ivaldi incoming. He blinks in bewilderment as, moments before her arrival; he notices the incomprehensible rage etched into her face.

"What? Why does my ancestor gaze upon Uzziel with such hatred? Wait, could it be-?!"

He quickly sifts through billions of years of Uzziel's memories, but Ivaldi's first attack comes too quickly.

"PERISH, ARCHANGEL!"

Ivaldi invokes the power of divinity around her fists. An instant before her right fist strikes Uzziel, she enhances her speed with a burst of light magic through her feet, accelerating herself to ten times the speed of sound.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

A shockwave comparable to the meteor strike from a minute earlier blasts outward as Ivaldi's fist, nearly the size of Uzziel's entire body, pounds the Archangel with all her strength.

All the nearby grass rips out from its roots. Boulders go flying and hurtle in every direction. The typhoon swirling in the sky gets blasted away by the hurricane gusts formed from Ivaldi's strike, and the

three demons get launched a second time, only to reorient themselves in midair and land without suffering any injuries.

"Bloody hell!" Diablo yells, as he lands in a crouched stance. "*Now* who's here to cause trouble?!"

"Some She-Titan," Agares mutters. He turns to Belial. "Give me Vepar. I'll take her to safety."

Belial stares at the dust cloud shrouding the impact zone for only a moment. "Right. Here."

As the demons exchange words, Ivaldi stares in disbelief at Uzziel.

"M-my attack... did nothing?!"

Uzziel's roots flow from her feet deep into Heaven's Soil. They travel miles beneath the surface, giving her the foundation to resist even the mightiest attack.

Ivaldi's fist presses against a dense green barrier surrounding the Archangel's body.

"Stop attacking me," Uzziel says, her voice very different from Ivaldi's memories. "Uzziel is under my control. I know not what grievances you have with her, but she is no longer your enemy."

Ivaldi takes a few steps back and evaluates the Archangel of Creation with caution.

"You've taken over Yggdrasil? Does that mean you are the one known as Valac, the Grim Reaper?"

"No. I am your descendant, a fellow Titan. My name is Hercules."

Uzziel bows. Her oddly-deep voice causes a sensation of wariness to build in Ivaldi's mind, but the Titaness doesn't attack.

"Hercules? Ah! You must be Zeus's child."

Uzziel straightens her stance. "Yes, I am. It seems you have some history with the Earthmother, but I assure you, she is not-"

"You're a soul manipulator."

Ivaldi interrupts Hercules. Her tone drips with disgust.

"Titan brat. Tch. Because of you, I lost my chance at glory! You slew the Hydra, and now I cannot return to the High Table! Have you any idea what you've cost me?!"

Uzziel's expression turns to confusion. "I, ah, do not. What is the High Table? I don't understand what you're referring to."

"Of course, you don't!" Ivaldi yells. She stomps her foot and sends dirt spraying in every direction. "You contemptible little shit! You've ruined everything, and to top it off, you're an accursed soul manipulator! Gah! Forget the Hydra. After I slay you and Yggdrasil both, the High Table will have no choice but to promote me a thousand positions! No, with such an accomplishment, they might name me the new Allmother! Not even Odin came close to slaying an Archangel!"

Uzziel grits her teeth. Anger builds in Hercules' mind, but he continues to try and deescalate the situation. "Please, calm down. Look around you. You've stepped into a warzone. There are hundreds of thousands of angels and demons dying every hour. This is no time for you to turn against a fellow Titan and-"

"Piss off!" Ivaldi yells. "I don't give a dragon's scale about my 'fellow Titans'. Especially not a descendant of Hrothgar, the greatest blot on Titankind's honor! Killing you will earn me exaltation among those in Valhalla!"

Hercules tries to interject, but Ivaldi ignores him. The Titaness summons divine magic around her body and engulfs herself in light. Her bones stretch and expand, along with her skin and internal organs. Soon, she balloons in size, growing from fifty-feet tall to over seventy.

"Giant's growth! Strength enhancement! A tiny mouse like you hasn't any idea what a pale shadow of our former glory the Titans have become! I might be the weakest of the Titan Rulers, but I'm still several echelons mightier than anything your soul manipulation can unleash!"

Hercules snarls. "Damn you! I have a plan to regain the glory of the Primordial Era! If you won't stand alongside me, then you're in my way! I knew the Ancestors were a bunch of empty-headed dullards; that's why you all perished!"

"Bastard! I'll make you eat those words!"

Ivaldi and Hercules reach their tipping points. The Queen of Divinity swings her fists down and rapidly pummels Uzziel with all her strength, unleashing a hail of blows against the Heaven-rooted Earthmother. Uzziel responds by activating her earthen barrier and releasing a portion of Nature's Wrath.

Thousands of sharpened pieces of wood emerge from the flattened soil around Ivaldi. They fire at her like a hail of ancient artillery, but the monstrous Titan quickly summons her own barrier and blocks them all.

"Foolish brat! Your control of Yggdrasil is pathetic! At her apex, Uzziel wiped out millions of Titans effortlessly! How can any soul manipulator ever unleash the full power of Yggdrasil's former glory?!"

Uzziel grits her teeth as she stands in place and activates additional spells. "Simple! I don't need Uzziel's full power to eliminate you, only a small portion! The rest is meant for demonkind, you maggot-brained mutt!"

Uzziel completes her spell. The essence of living energy seeps into Heaven's soil and mixes with the holy energy imbuing all of Heaven. A moment later, all of the recently deceased bodies laying across Heaven — those not yet taken by the Reaper — suck into the ground and travel toward Uzziel.

Shortly afterward, as Uzziel endures a bombardment of fists and magic, the bodies resurface. Their minds reform and shift, transforming the formerly dead demons, angels, and Titans into mana-controlled puppets.

Ten thousand beams of light fire from Uzziel's body and attach to the reanimated corpses. The energy lines turn invisible and stick between the host and slave like mana-borne spiderwebs.

Ivaldi growls as she notices the newly risen puppets. "Bastard! How dare you desecrate the dead! You're no better than the Reaper!"

"I do what I must to win!" Hercules counters. "Nobody must stand in my way. I am the one who will bring about peace between Heaven and Earth!"

"That's the biggest crock I've ever heard! You're a tyrant-to-be, little whelp! I eat your kind for breakfast!"

Ivaldi uses her magic to retreat several hundred paces. At the same time, she begins summoning hundreds of tiny balls of energy above her head.

"If you want to play the puppetmaster, then I'll just have to cut your strings!"

Ivaldi's balls of energy fire all at once. Each one unleashes the destructive power of a stinger missile as they slam into the corpses. However, after the dust clears, thousands of Uzziel's puppets still remain.

Hercules manipulates each puppet with his mind. *Attack!*

A stampede of angels, demons, and low-level Titans charges at Ivaldi. The Titan Queen grimaces as they unleash powers identical to what they possessed during their lives. Some of the demons deliver a hail of fireballs, while others fire bolts of lightning and still more slash at her feet with their bladed limbs.

* * *

Not far away, Belial and Diablo grit their teeth as they ponder what to do.

"We should go and help Bael," Diablo says. "Last I heard, he was fighting Camael. Leave Uzziel here. If we're lucky, that she-Titan will take her out."

Belial frowns. "And then what? We'll still have the Titan to deal with!"

"Do you have a better plan?"

Belial shakes her head. "I guess not. Let's go, then, and-"

"Belial!"

Not far away, Satan flies toward his woman while keeping a wary eye on the incredible sight of Ivaldi and Uzziel exchanging blows.

Satan lands beside Belial and Diablo. "Cripes. Finding you two was harder than I expected. What's going on with that Titan broad and the, uhh, angel-tree?"

"The tree is Uzziel," Belial replies. "No clue about the Titan- ah! Is that... Nerissa?!"

Belial's gaze falls upon the limp form of her sister floating behind Satan. The Devil nods. "Yeah. Let's just say I had a pretty good time in my battle against Raphael. Valac showed up; he brought Nerissa along- turns out he had her soul the whole time."

Belial opens her mouth to ask a question, but Satan waves his hand.

"No time for chit-chat, sweet-cheeks. We need to get out of Heaven. I'm gonna sound the evacuation order 'soon as I can. If fifty thousand demons survive, it'll be our victory."

Diablo scrunches up his face. "Yeah... our victory..."

The Emperor of Annihilation slowly pans his eyes across the battlefield. Piles of bodies lie here and there; the corpses tossed aside casually like garbage. Undead monsters and demons lie interspersed with angels and Titans.

Diablo shakes his head.

If Satan considers today a success... I never want to see a loss.

The three Emperors quickly turn their backs on the Archangel of Creation and run away, leaving her behind.

However, a moment later, a single mind-controlled cherub flies overhead and spots them.

Hercules receives a signal from his pawn. He transfers his consciousness for a split-second and scowls as he spots his prey escaping.

"You damned red rats. How *dare* you run away. Do you think I will let you escape so easily?"

The Undying cherub sweeps his gaze around the battlefield until he spots a single badly-wounded angel lying amidst the field of bodies.

"Michael. Naptime is over."

Part 160: A Messenger's Appearance

A single Demon Lord, weaker than many of his kind, yet stronger when compared to the vast majority, skulks about Heaven's battlefield while keeping his head low.

This solitary demon keeps a sharp eye on his surroundings. His clothing, little more than matted-together grass and dirt, contrasts with the mud rubbed all over his red skin. He scurries around on his hands and feet, and whenever an angel flies overhead, he falls flat on the ground to blend in with the grass.

"Sheesh. Zuzu's power is pretty useful. Never thought sensing the wind would come in handy. Hehe..."

The Demon Lord watches silently as twenty cherubs soar overhead, land a short distance away, and proceed to slaughter over a hundred demons. Five of the angels end up perishing, but the other fifteen survive with light to moderate injuries.

"Art thou alright, sister Malial?" One of the males asks. "Thy chest is bleeding profusely!"

The female cherub, Malial, nods. "I-I'm fine! Don't worry about me! We have to reinforce Gabriel! He's battling the Hydra all by himself!"

"Nay," Another cherub replies. "I heard Zeus is with him. Between the two of them, no puny monster will stand- gah!"

Before the male cherub can react, three burrower demons burst out from under the contingent and collapse the ground beneath their feet. A pit filled with earthen spikes opens up like a shark's maw, and all the cherubs fall inside.

"Ahh!"

Shik, shik, shik!

All fifteen of the angels perish instantly, unable to save themselves from the pitfall trap.

The Demon Lord stares at the pit in silence. After several seconds, he grunts and continues scrambling forward. All the while, his eyes focus on the skies and the ground before him.

"Oy! Who's that?"

A questioning demon voice rings out, startling the Demon Lord. He jerks his eyes to the left and curses inwardly as one of the Burrowers from before strides toward him.

"Davook? Izzat you? What the hell are you doin' scamperin' around like a rat? Are you tryin'a make the rest of us look bad? Get off yer knees and fight, ya lazy bastard!"

Davook scowls. "Shut up, Glimpo! Moron! You'll ruin our cover!"

"Oh, there ya go with that 'our' crap again. What cover? All you ever do is make crap up!"

"Stuff it!" Davook growls. "We're looking for Satan! Have you seen 'im? We gotta find him as quick as we can!"

Davook's eyes scan the skies, but no cherubs meet his gaze.

"Satan? He's busy, ya dumb lunk! How many gobby's have been chewin' on your prick to make you think you deserve the big boss's time?!"

Davook glowers at Glimpo. "Never mind! Go away, stupid, or we'll knock your block off! It's top-secret need-to-know info, and you don't need to know!"

Glimpo glares daggers at Davook. "Now, you listen 'ere, you rat bastard! I've been out here choppin' wings off these here chickens all bloody day while you run around playin' cat 'n mouse! I've half a mind to-"

Before Glimpo finishes speaking, Davook reaches into his bag, pulls out a purple gem, holds it in his right hand, and snaps his fingers.

Fwoooooosh!

Violet colored light fires from Davook's eyes. The beam travels instantly between him and Glimpo, enters Glimpo's eyes, and infects his brain.

"Go away, Glimpo. Now."

A commanding tone pervades each of Davook's words. Glimpo stumbles backward as the command overrides each of his logic centers. A moment later, he nods, blinks, and waves. "O-oh, alright, then! I'll be seein' ya, Davook! Have a great fockin' day!"

Glimpo turns and dives underground, leaving Davook to curse internally.

Gah! Stupid Glimpo! He made us waste one of Master Orias's amethysts! We only have two of them!

Two? No, dumbass! Now we only have one! Can't believe we wasted a pure mind-control gem on a blubbering whale like Glimpo!

I was talking about past-tense! Past! We HAD two; now we HAVE one! Sheesh, and here I thought we could count!

Davook's thoughts battle amongst each other. Two voices, both identical, yet embroiled in permanent conflict. Each one vies to control his movements, though he tends to pick between their advice and guidance at random.

Nobody knows where Satan is. What're we gonna do?

Ooh! I know! That Hydra thing sounds crazy powerful. I bet he'll be somewhere nearby!

No he won't! Satan wouldn't waste time attacking some monster. Besides, if the angels and titans are fighting it, that means it's on OUR side.

Mmm, alright, you got me there. Maybe somewhere else, then?

Yeah. Obviously.

Davook hides under his makeshift camouflage and continues scurrying across the grass, keeping as low to the ground as possible.

"Sheesh, wish we'd copied something more useful, like a stealth skill. We're gonna need one hell of a bath when we get home."

"No way. Baths suck. Nothing worse than the feeling of ice-cold water freezing our demon-bits off."

"Oh, don't be like that. Baths make us clean. Not only that, but swimming is fun! Once we get used to the cold, it's awesome when we snatch helpless fishies and stuff 'em in our chaw."

"Mmm. Fishies."

"Yeah! ...Shit. Now we're hungry."

Davook's internal thoughts become external as he slithers past mounds of dead bodies, burning pits filled with demon and angel remains, and muddy battlefields soaked in the blood of the deceased.

"Oh? Is that Satan over there?"

"Naw, it can't be. That guy's too skinny. Shit. You know Satan's gonna kill us, right? We lost his girl!"

"That's your fault, not mine! I told you to keep an eye on her crystal!"

"Stupid, we're the same person! If Satan kills one of us, we'll both die! We need a good alibi."

"You think he'll buy some random excuse? How were we supposed to know that if we took a piss for three minutes, the popsicle would vanish? That crystal must've weighed a ton! He can't blame us! Let's just tell him the truth!"

"The TRUTH?! You might have a death wish, but I don't! No, sirree. Nope- SHIT!"

Davook jumps backward and backflips out of his camouflage as two female angels, a cherub and a seraph, smash into the ground in front of him.

"Look! A straggler!"

"Perfect. One less red rat, and a nice, easy target!"

The women pounce at Davook, giving him no time to prepare. Davook snarls at them. "Gah! Fucking pigeons! Leave me alone!"

He swings his hand at the ground, and when his fingers touch the soil, a blast of dirt sprays in their faces, blinding and choking the women.

"Kah!! Little scoundrel!"

"Protect thy back, sister! Demons always strike from behind like cowards!"

The women press their backs together and use their free hands to rub their eyes, but focus their hearing on their surroundings.

"He's a burrower. Keep thy senses trained on the ground!"

Davook scurries backward, pulls out a tiny pearl from the bag at his side, and snorts. "Tch. Silly ladies. We ain't no stinkin' earth-pusher. We're *everything*."

Davook licks his lips in anticipation. As he clutches the pearl in his hands and snaps his fingers, he coils power in his arms and legs.

Charge.

Davook bursts from his standing spot and rushes straight at one of the cherub ladies. She opens her eyes just in time to see his hand pointed at her chest.

"Ah-!"

Davook stabs straight through her heart into the back of her sister behind her. Both women cry out in shock, but before they can yell for help, Davook slaps his other hand against the cherub's chest.

Whump!

The power of the pearl enhances his physical strength far beyond his limits. Her chest explodes like a grenade, sending bone-shrapnel deep inside her sister's back.

The cherub and seraph perish immediately. They flop to the ground and fall silent, leaving Davook gasping for breath.

"Hnngh... shrakh... two gems in ten minutes. We ain't Orias, that's for sure."

"Yeah, no kidding. Our limits ain't a tenth of his."

Davook inhales and exhales for a moment, then quickly leans over the women and sniffs their warm, fresh corpses.

"Damn shame. These two are cuties."

"Aw, c'mon! Gross! Are you gettin' all chubbed up over pigeon chicks? Nasty."

"What? They got faces, tits, and asses just like demon girls."

"Yuck! The wings are disgusting! I thought we'd at least be into the same kinks. You'd go nuts over a dead log if it looked like a woman!"

"Oh, shut up. You're too picky. That's your problem, not mine!"

Davook reaches down and presses his hand against the seraph girl's face.

"Heh. Yoink."

A faint emanation of mana sucks from her body into Davook's palm. A moment later, he jumps over to the other girl and presses his hand against her face too.

"Hope this one's got something nice."

Again, a faint pulse of mana flows into Davook's palm. The little Lord grunts in satisfaction, then motions with his hands.

Schwing!

A dagger of light materializes in his palm. The holy energy immediately starts scorching Davook's skin, causing him to yelp in pain.

"Yeow! Shit-poop!"

Davook drops the weapon and curses internally as it dissipates in the air.

"Dumbass! Angels have holy magic! If we go around stealing their powers, we'll only hurt ourselves. You know what they say about curiosity and the hellhound..."

Davook scowls at the dead bodies. "Damned, scheming bitches! First, you blow our cover; then, you don't even give us anything useful. Stupid, worthless, *mumble grumble*..."

After regaining his wits, Davook grabs his grass camouflage and quickly flees the scene of the crime, leaving the dead angel women behind him.

"This is all your fault. We should've just run away and left all this madness behind. But nooo! You wanted to be a do-gooder and tell Satan all on your own."

"Oh, don't pin the tail on me, you stinkin' fox! You were all scared that if we ran, he'd come and chase after us! It's your fault for being so indecisive."

"Nuh-uh!"

"Uh-huh!"

"Nuh-uh!"

* * *

Davook continues arguing with himself for an hour as he slowly loops around the outskirts of the battlefield. Occasionally, despite his best efforts, cherubs and seraphs spot him. Still, the stragglers on the outside of the battlefield never manage to one-up him.

Davook pounces at one male cherub, slides under his legs, and grabs his enchanted steel boots.

"Zap-time!"

Electrical energy flows from Davook's hands and electrocutes the cherub, seizing his body up at a crucial moment. Davook continues his attack by jumping on the cherub's back and snapping his neck.

Skrik!

"Ooh, that looked like it hurt."

The angel collapses to the ground, dead. Davook flips him over and presses his palm against the angel's face.

"Geez, we've gotta thank Hidan sometime. His ability has to be one of the most useful powers we've copied in a while."

"Pft. Can't thank a corpse. What makes you think Hidan would survive this war? He's a total dummy!"

"Sure, he might seem dumb, but he's smart enough to pick fights with weaklings. No way he'd do something stupid like going fist-to-fist against someone bigger'n him."

"Yeah, true. Guy's a total scoundrel. Extorted us for half a pig just to let us copy his power!"

"It's fine; we got the tastier half. Hehe..."

Davook slinks away from the dead angel and continues slithering around the outskirts of the battleground.

Soon, Davook arrives at a scene of pure chaos. He hides behind a giant rock and watches in disbelief as hundreds of undead angels and demons charge against a desperate group of still-living angels and demons. Forced back by Valac's servants, the living temporarily unite in the hopes of killing their shared undead enemies.

"I'm sorry, brothers! Sisters!" One Undying angel shrieks. She swings her sword at one of the living and beheads her former ally. "I cannot control myself! Oh, Creator! Spare me from these horrible deeds!"

"Do not blame thyself, Jarael! 'Tis not thy fault! We will banish thee from this realm! No longer shall thou fight for that damned Reaper!"

One of Jarael's seraph brothers motions with his hands and fires a blast of energy at her, killing his undead sister. Tears well up in his eyes, but he forces himself to continue fighting the other undead. Eventually, more of Valac's servants burst from the ground and overwhelm the demon and angel resistance.

"No! Noo!! I don't wanna die! I don't-"

A Demon Lord perishes as two blackened blades impale his back. He falls to the ground and rises only a moment later. His body gains a ghastly death aura, and his eyes turn pure black.

Now an undead, he immediately begins fighting for Valac. Within a minute, all of the living perish under the might of the undead.

Davook shivers. *Ah, shit. Shit! Valac's back?! You've gotta be kidding us!*

We need to make like a rabbit and hop the frick outta here.

What about Satan?!

Forget him! Valac's gonna win. Look! Every time one of his minions kills someone, the victim becomes another undead! How can Satan deal with a big badass like Valac?

I don't know. But, hell, you're right. We need to scram. It's way too dangerous here.

As Davook thinks of running away, Valac's undead minions swivel their heads toward the giant rock he's hiding behind. "Aaah! Whoever you are, run away! Valac senses you!"

Davook's eyes widen. Three hundred undead come charging toward him, giving him only seconds to react. "No, no, no!"

Without taking time to think, Davook plucks a ruby from his pouch. The tiny little gem shines with a brilliant red light, and he immediately snaps his fingers after clutching it in his palm.

"Firepower!"

Heat shoots out from under Davook's feet. He blasts into the air, leaving the undead demons in his dust, but the undead angels take flight and chase after him.

One of the cherubs snarls and draws his sword. "Come back here! I might be under Valac's control, but I have no qualms with slaying a demon!"

"Agreed!" One of his sisters yells. The thirty undead angels give no pause to the thought of killing a living demon, even if it reinforces Valac's power. With their lack of mental resistance, their flying ability improves dramatically.

Stinkbugs! Davook thinks. We need to fly back to the portal and get out of Heaven!

No way! It's too far! Even if we had ten rubies, we couldn't make it! We should fly to the outskirts and try to hide.

The outskirts? There's nobody there! These undead maggots will surround and kill us.

What's our other option? Flying deeper into the battlefield? We'll be sitting ducks!

Fwish-fwish-fwish!

Bolts of corrupted holy energy laser past Davook as he pushes his rapidly diminishing firepower to the limits. He weaves around from left to right, but the undead cherubs prove far swifter and quickly gain ground on him.

Screw it! Inner battlefield, here we come! Let's hope someone's able to help us. I doubt we can kill twenty of these gobby-munchers by ourselves.

Davook hard-pivots to his right and aims to fly deeper into the chaos. He flies past several living angels, all of whom gasp in surprise and immediately give chase.

"Look, up there! A flying demon! Kill him! Don't let the red rats gain an aerial advantage!"

"Hold on! There are Undying chasing him! Ahh! Stay away!"

Several of the Undying in pursuit of Davook break off to attack the cherubs in the sky, but ten continue to follow after him.

Sweat builds on Davook's forehead. "Crap. The ruby's about to wear off. What, now?"

"Can we burrow?"

"No way! We haven't practiced enough. The undead will rip us to shreds."

"Look! It's Tulwar, one of the High Orcs! We can use him as bait!"

Davook's eyes laser onto a single Orc barking orders at his warriors. He keeps a steady eye on the skies and ground, always remaining aware of his surroundings. As fireballs smash into the dirt around him and bolts of holy energy narrowly miss their marks, Tulwar never loses his focus.

"Goro! You use big sword; aim for back! Kilpor, you too tired! Step aside; let Früg fight!"

Tulwar senses the fireball in the sky heading for him. He quickly turns around and gasps as he spots Davook rushing toward him. "What! No, go away! Stupid demon! Don't bring nasty dead-heads here!"

Davook ignores Tulwar's order. He uses up the remaining burst of the ruby's power to slow his descent, but his fire-power runs out a moment too soon.

"Oh, *shrakh*."

Davook falters in midair and plummets to the ground from thirty feet high.

Whump.

The Demon Lord slams into the dirt and grinds his face hard enough that he nearly breaks his nose. He slides to a halt and quickly jumps to his feet, but his head spins from the impact.

"L-look out, orc-guy. We brought some friends."

Tulwar's face turns pale. "You stupid lunk! Now dead-heads attack me! Ahh!"

The orc commander unsheathes a giant sword on his back, but when the ten undead cherubs land, his face turns pale.

"Ohh... me no gonna win this..."

Davook pauses for a moment. He plucks a pitch-black onyx from his bag and smirks. "Heh. Not our problem. Go get 'em."

The Demon Lord snaps his fingers, and a wave of darkness spreads from his body, engulfing the area in a pitch-black fog that not even Heaven's Light pierces.

Davook's eyes turn black as the night. The auras of hundreds of angels and demons around him morph into bright white and red, giving him the power to see through the shadow-fog.

"Hehe, we should've used that from the start. Time to make a getaway."

Davook quickly runs through the fog, using its concealment to hide, while staying as quiet as possible. He says nothing and walks like a feather on the wind, putting several hundred feet between himself and his pursuers. Behind him, Tulwar cries out in pain as the undead cherubs rip him to shreds.

By the time the fog vanishes, Davook has already slid under the dead body of another demon and used his former ally for cover.

Lucky break. This fatso's got enough guts to cover both of us.

Yeah, but we can't just play hide and seek under a dead body! Someone's gonna find us, eventually!

Maybe, but this is our best bet for survival right now. Let the orcs soak up a little damage. After that, we can return to the portal.

* * *

Several minutes pass. Davook's confidence starts to erode as the battles around him intensify.

"What the hell? The pigeons and demons should be dying, not multiplying!"

"Look, over there! There's a big battle happening! It's pushing everyone toward us."

"Aw, hell. We have the worst luck today, man. Is that Valac? Why are there five of him? And why is he so friggin' HUGE?"

"Looks like he's fighting a bunch of girl angels. Wait, ain't that old lady one of the Archangels?"

"Yeah. Cammy-hell, I think. I heard she's a real sourpuss."

"Eugh. Look at her face. She could curdle milk with an expression like that. Seems like Valac's got her on the ropes. Probably won't last long. Wait... what's-"

"Spawn of a broodmother! What is that power?! She just-"

"Sweet devils! We've gotta get the heck out of here!"

Camael and Valac intensify their battle, driving Davook away, but as he leaves, Davook's heart trembles.

"Oh, man. If we get out of here, we are going to eat SO many fishies! I can't believe how strong Archangels and Emperors are! We ain't even ants compared to them!"

"Yeah, you said it."

Davook frantically runs away, ducking and weaving between embattled demons and angels. Most of them give him a passing glance, but neither side has the time to spare chasing after one cowardly-looking little Lord.

"If we get out of this alive, we need to find a nice girl and settle down somewhere away from the others. Too much danger for our liking."

"Forget the girl. She'll just slow us down."

"Whatever! Stop blabbing and get those feet moving!"

As Davook flees, he barely escapes a flash of godlike holy energy, one which wipes out the lives of hundreds of demons in an instant.

Little does he know, but had he stayed nearby, his life would have been forfeit.

As for Camael...

The Archangel of Providence smirks at Valac.

"Thy reign of evil is over. I shall hold back, no longer."

Part 161: Cherished Memories

Camael's heart thumps painfully in her chest. She stares in disbelief at the sky where her divine weapon fled her grasp only moments before. With Mjölnir gone, Camael's power drops precipitously, leaving her vulnerable to her greatest enemy: The Grim Reaper.

Valac sighs. "How unfortunate that Mjölnir has left your embrace. You betrayed your beliefs, so it sees you as a disgrace. Without a weapon, you can only fight me by playing defense. That won't be enough to stop me, so let's put an end to this pretense."

Camael quickly raises her shield. The instant Valac's fist strikes her; she goes flying backward. Camael twists in midair, flaps her wings, and lands on her feet, but the Grim Reaper bullrushes her at top speed.

"Thinking of putting distance between us? Such a move is hardly the mark of a genius!"

Valac uses two of his arms to grab hold of Camael's shield, then tears it out of her grasp. The Archangel of Divination stumbles forward, only to fall straight into his other two fists.

FUMP!

The super-form-Reaper punches Camael in the face. His armored fists and reinforced muscles give him nigh-Herculean strength, allowing him to toy with the defenseless Archangel, acting as if her Belt of Orion means nothing.

"Hahahaha!"

Valac laughs giddily. Camael tries to punch him, but he deflects her fist and rears back for a downward strike.

CRACK!

Valac pounds Camael's helmet with all his might. His vicious strike punts her into the dirt with the energy of a jackhammer, sending her helmet flying.

"Ohh, never did I imagine our final confrontation would end with such a whimper! I hope you don't mind if I relish the moment; I'd hate to see you embittered!"

Camael's eyes twitch. Her vision dances around, creating copies and illusions before her eyes. She tries to move, but Valac's last attack knocked much of the fighting spirit from her body. She coughs weakly. "Kuh... d-demon... bastard..."

"No hammer, no shield, no chance of winning at all! You're only one Archangel fighting a dark god; a little birdie adrift an atoll! No matter how you struggle, no matter how you strive, our battle will only allow one of us to survive! Which one will thrive? Which one has the drive to stay alive? That's easy to answer; whichever of us is grander! Me!"

Valac's voice cracks with joy as he laughs giddily. Finally, with Camael at death's door, all of his plans have reached their final phase. Once she perishes, his view of the future will never suffer a setback. He will be able to manipulate and twist the river of fate as he pleases.

The Grim Reaper lunges his hand down. He grabs Camael by the neck and lifts her limp body into the air, causing her survival instincts to kick in. Camael grabs at his thick, muscular arms and tries to pull herself out of his grasp, but the Reaper's strength proves too mighty for her beaten and battered body.

Valac reaches out with a second arm and grabs one of Camael's legs, holding her in place. Then, slowly, deliberately, he summons his Soul Scythe. The veiny, boned weapon pulses with hunger as Valac's eyes meet Camael's.

"It took me ages, but now I will possess my first Archangel soul. Long have I waited for this day, and now I have reached my goal. Hampered once, twice, and even three times today, no longer will my ultimate power need to delay."

Camael's eyes widen. Fear strikes her heart as Valac's hands tighten around her throat. She flicks her eyes toward the Valkyries, but with four of Valac's super-clones oppressing them, none of them stand a chance. With all their powers united, they can barely hold on to hope that their eldest sister might save them.

A tear falls down Camael's face. *I'm going to die! The Reaper will claim my soul, and then my sisters and brothers' too! I cannot let it end this way! I have to fight back! But... what chance do I have?! He's too powerful!*

Valac rears back his scythe. A look of bloodlust enters his eyes as he licks his lips. "You're mine now, Camael. For all of eternity."

Far in the distance, at a place distant from the battlefield of the War in Heaven, a faint pulse of energy detonates like a bomb. Camael's entire body spasms slightly, causing her eyes to tense up from an overload of magic.

Nnngh! What? This power... ah! I forgot! My forge! I left it undefended! I-

THOOOOM!

A blast of heavenly power explodes, sending rays of light lancing into the sky. Wind whips up from the direction of Nirvana, sending hurricane gusts sweeping outward in every direction. By the time it strikes the six Reaper clones, it has died down to a mere breeze.

Camael recognizes its sensation immediately.

Excalibur?! Someone tried to steal it!

Valac flicks his gaze toward the distant hill blocking his view of Nirvana. "Hm? What was that?"

Camael grits her teeth. She releases her grip on Valac's arm and gasps as his fingers immediately crush her windpipe.

Gahk! I'm about to die!

Camael can't breathe. Despite this, she motions with her hands and forces herself to perform a rite of summoning.

By the time the explosion of holy energy dissipates in the distance, Camael has already finished her incantation.

Excalibur! Help me!

Far in the distance, over ten miles away, a pulse of energy ripples through the air. Excalibur, Camael's greatest weapon, detects her call.

For three seconds, the weapon does nothing. It evaluates her command with disinterest; like a fattened cat too lazy to chase after a mouse.

However, after those initial few seconds, a new emotion enters the weapon's consciousness.

Curiosity.

What is my purpose?

The weapon opens its senses to the world around it.

A land of colors, hills, and trees appears.

Excalibur examines the world, the mortal realm, and the plane of existence surrounding it.

Life. I am alive. Not dead, not asleep. Something calls to me. Someone. But whom? And to what end?

Beneath the weapon, a massive crater filled with traces of blood and bone opens up. A single three-headed Hellhound lies curled in a ball beside its dead allies.

Demons: They are my enemy. Evil: I live to destroy it. Blood: I thirst for it. Justice: I must deliver it. Power: I bequeath it.

Excalibur's mind expands. Within seconds, it extends its consciousness across all of Heaven. It watches passively and learns the positions of all the angels, demons, Titans, and monsters, as well as their allegiances, goals, and ambitions.

Evil pervades this realm. Blood coats the ground. Demons stomp the fields into mud. My power exists to exact justice. I must go to my wielder. Only when my purpose has been fulfilled may I rest again.

Suddenly, the sword flashes with divine energy!

Excalibur transforms into a bolt of light and flashes toward Camael.

Valac swings his scythe toward her chest. "No tricks from you, Archangel!"

Camael watches. She loses her ability to fight as the bone-scythe moves to impale and transform her into the Reaper's puppet.

The instant before Valac's scythe connects, a brilliant flash of light flies toward him. Excalibur slams into the Reaper's Scythe like a freight train, tearing Valac's arm off. Before the Reaper can react, his arm and scythe travel three miles into the distance, propelled by the strength of the divine blade's attack.

Camael's vision wavers. She hovers at the edge of consciousness; barely able to perceive the world around her.

Excalibur presses into her limp palm, and immediately, a powerful aura of divine energy bubbles around her body!

FWOOSH!

Valac's hand loses its grip. The unexpected burst of holy energy bathes his palms in agonizing pain.

"Ahhh!!"

Valac jumps backward. He blinks several times in confusion. "M-my arm! My scythe! What happened?! What did you do?!"

Reflexively, Camael's hand tightens around Excalibur's handle. She falls to the ground and lands on her rear, unable to stand.

"Kuh! Huhk!"

Camael gasps for breath and coughs repeatedly. Excalibur's power surges into her like adrenaline, revitalizing her life force and healing her wounds.

"I'm... alive! I'm alive!"

Camael jumps to her feet. She glances at Excalibur for only a moment before sighing deeply.

Perhaps 'tis fortunate for me that the divine blade is incomplete. Once matured, a weapon this powerful would never follow the commands of one as weak as I.

Valac ogles Excalibur with trepidation. Deep worries cover his face as he quickly regenerates his severed arm and resummons his scythe. "What is that sword? Its energy is endless! How did you procure such a blade out of nowhere?! Why didn't I sense it?!"

Camael purses her lips. Already, her throat has fully healed.

"Thou asketh many questions, Reaper. Perhaps, 'tis fear I detect in thy voice?"

"Don't screw with me, *woman!*" Valac roars. "If you had such a powerful weapon, why did you wait to bring it out?! Don't think you can toy with me! I won't allow it!!"

Camael sighs. She closes her eyes and concentrates on Excalibur's overwhelming mana, a vast ocean threatening to drown her with its power.

After a moment, she opens her eyes and smirks at Valac.

"Enough questions, Valac. Thy reign of evil is over. I will hold back, no longer."

Artwork for Camael and Valac's battle!



Recommended Listening

Catherine presses her back against Sophia's. The two of them parry a vicious flurry of blows from two of Valac's super-clones. Both clones cackle with glee as their armored hands slash and punch with the sharpness of swords and power of hammers. Sophia's staff repeatedly rattles as she deflects one lethal attack after another. Catherine, on the other hand, only manages to land a few glancing strikes on Valac's armor with the Sword From Heaven, while also parrying his attacks with her tower shield.

I can't hold on much longer! Catherine thinks. With both of her arms occupied, she has no way to communicate with Sophia. *My stamina is running out! Sophia must be in even worse of a situation compared to me!*

Sophia pants like a beaten dog. Sweat drips from her body and tears roll down her face as she narrowly deflects and dodges one attack after the other. "I... I can't... oh, Creator... I c-can't hold out..."

Not far away, one of Valac's clones chases after Hyacinth. The Valkyrie of Wind uses her manipulation of air currents to increase her flight speed and control, but she, too, appears exhausted. She has to deal with not only one of Valac's mightiest clones, but a dozen undead angels as well, all of whom encircle and try to pin her in place.

Penelope, the hardest of all the Valkyries, faces off against another of Valac's super-clones. She spins and twists, using her surprising agility to evade his armored grip, while occasionally slamming her warhammer against his chest.

"Filthy undead wretch! When I finish with thee, I'll crush thy bones into paste! Nobody shall recognize thy deformed bonemeal!"

Valac swings four fists at her face and chest, but Penelope jumps backward and flaps her wings to rush him.

Thuk!

Penelope drives her knee into the super-clone's chest, using her strength and size to catch him off-guard. Despite standing nearly eight feet high, she's nowhere near as tall as the 12-foot super-clone, but still, she holds up better against him than her sisters.

As Penelope delivers a gut-busting knee-kick to Valac's armored stomach, she cries out in pain. An undead brute bursts out of the ground and turns her attack against her. The massive demon swings his fist against her left shoulder, dislocates it, and sends agony coursing through her arm.

"Eeyaah!"

Valac laughs. "Oh, dear, I hope that didn't hurt! I'd hate to knock you down and soil your cute little skirt! Ehehehe!"

Penelope dives to the ground and rolls. Her tremendous, bulky armor causes Heaven to tremble. Immediately, she leaps to her feet and takes a few steps back to clutch her shoulder. "Taunt me all thou

wish, Reaper, but thy punches are like those of an imp! That was the first decisive blow thou hath managed to land! Once I heal it, I'll-"

"You won't heal anything, silly woman! Haven't you looked around? Your airbending sister is quite preoccupied with falling to the ground!"

As Valac says this, the super-clone chasing Hyacinth jumps above her and swings down, battering her with his fist. Hyacinth's left wing breaks, causing her to tumble and crash into Heaven's Soil. "Ahh!"

Hyacinth crashes into Heaven's Soil. Valac's undead angels rain upon her as she summons a wind-cyclone to knock them aside and protect herself.

Penelope's eyes widen. "Hyacinth! No!!"

Catherine hears Penelope's scream, but with the Reaper continuously battering her from the right and left, she can't spare a moment to evaluate Penelope's predicament.

Oh, Creator! Do not let us succumb to this abomination's evil! If I must, I will unleash Jörmungandr's Dragonfire! I'll do whatever it takes to turn the Reaper to ash, even if it costs my life!

Suddenly, as Catherine's desperation reaches its highest level, the super-clone assaulting her jumps back and whirls his head to look in a different direction.

Valac screams in rage. "No!!"

Surprised by Valac's sudden change of heart, Catherine tenses up. Her exhausted muscles plead for a moment of relief, but she doesn't drop her guard.

Then, Sophia's voice reaches Catherine's ears. "Heaven's Light! What sword is that?!"

Catherine jerks her head to gaze in the same direction Valac's super-clone is looking. There, an awe-inspiring sight fills her vision.

Excalibur. The demon-slaying blade! Camael said she hadn't finished it, yet. Why would she summon it now? What about Mjölnir?!

A few hundred feet away, Camael stretches her legs into a wide-stance, taking advantage of Valac's confusion as he evaluates the monstrosly powerful blade humming with holy energy.

"Come at me, Reaper! Excalibur shall rend thy puny clones in half! Nothing can stand against it!"

The super-clone opposite her clenches his fists and howls in rage. "Screw you, Archangel of Lies! If you had a weapon like this, you would have brought it out earlier! It's a fake! A phony!"

"Hahaha! Perhaps it is! Let us find out!"

Camael charges at Valac. The ordinarily calm and collected Demon Emperor scrambles backward in fright, only to summon his scythe a moment later.

"I-I'm not scared of you! You're nothing but a weak, old-"

"EXCALIBUR!"

Camael raises the divine sword until it points straight up. A flash of light races from Excalibur's hilt to the tip of its blade and fires into the sky.

"Valac!! If thou art a true warrior, I dare thee to take this attack head-on!"

Camael's speed multiplies by several factors. Her body gains the aspect of lightning as she swings the divine blade straight down in a vertical slash. Valac dodges at the last second, allowing the cosmic power to miss him by mere inches.

FWOOOOOM!

The beam of light transforms the sword into an infinitely long blade. As Valac evades it, the holy beam continues for a seemingly infinite distance, slicing through mountains and hills in its path. A trench cuts straight across Heaven, all the way through Nirvana and into the horizon where even the angels' acute eyesight can't perceive.

Valac's fleshy body, for the first time since its creation, begins to feel cold sweat running down its skin.

Unholy devils! If that attack had struck me, I would have perished instantly!

Camael laughs. "Ahh, if only I had done this sooner!"

Despite usually being a strategic-minded fighter, Camael loses her self-control as Excalibur's power floods into her mind and overrides her critical thinking skills. The weapon's nigh-infinite reservoir of mana enhances her speed and strength to godlike levels, transforming her into an angelic warrior on par with the primordial Archangels of yore.

Before Valac can decide on a course of action, Camael lunges at him!

Swish!

She slashes horizontally at the Reaper. He tries to deflect the attack with his scythe, but a moment later, the clone's mind rattles as the holy blade slices through his defenses effortlessly.

W-what? I'm... I'm...

The first of Valac's super-clones falls in half and plops to the ground, dead. His body turns to ash, leaving the other four stunned.

"Camael defeated Number One?!"

"That divine blade! Why didn't we learn of it sooner?"

The super-clones shoot each other looks of terror. A second later, they begin making hand-motions.

"Hold nothing back!"

"Kill that filthy Archangel of Deception!"

Camael's smile turns maniacal as dozens of Valac clones, all of them ordinary compared to the super-clones, begin jumping out of the ground and rushing at her. Valac's scythe appears in their grasp, one after the other, jumping between each one randomly.

However, unlike when Valac summoned only a few clones, the undying horde loses their focus. Several clones scream obscenities, while others charge at Camael recklessly without any concern for their lives.

Valac's teamwork between his clones vanishes. Camael stands in place and swings Excalibur around at blinding speeds, slashing and slicing clones two and three at a time. Some of Valac's clones come close to

impaling her with the scythe, but none land a decisive blow.

Catherine gazes upon Camael's furious counter-attack, and a spark of hope ignites in her heart.

Camael is incredibly powerful! She can defeat Valac! She can do the impossible!

As Catherine stares at Camael, a faint warning bell rings in the back of her mind. She turns to look at the super-clone she was fighting a minute earlier, only for her heart to skip a beat.

Valac's scythe swings toward Catherine's chest.

No! I was too distracted! I-

SHIK.

Catherine gasps as Valac's super-clone impales her chest. With her body weak from battle and her stamina drained, even if she had been ready for his attack, she might not have dodged it in time.

"Heh, heh, heh. A Valkyrie's soul will do just fine," Valac chuckles.

Camael, still entranced with her battle fever, spots Catherine out of the corner of her eye. Time slows to a crawl as a bolt of realization hits her.

Oh, gods! No!! These weakling clones were only a distraction! While my attention was diverted, Valac must have...!

Catherine's strength vanishes. Her body slumps as Valac's scythe starts to rip her soul out.

No... no... I lowered my guard. Oh, Michael... Michael... brother... I've failed thee...

A tear falls down Catherine's face as she closes her eyes. Darkness seeps into her mind, and Heaven melts away.

Valac's super-clone falters. *Hm? What's this? Catherine's soul is... resisting? How?! She's not even an Archangel!*

Despite the scythe plunged into her ribs, Catherine doesn't immediately perish. Instead, Valac's scythe rips open a powerful, ancient seal placed on her mind.

Eons of memories flood into Catherine's consciousness. Countless battles of unbelievable scope and scale clash with tender moments of love and compassion.

Michael will hate me when he finds out how I died.

Catherine's lip trembles. Images of her brother's face pressed against hers appear in her memories.

What...? I do not remember this scene...

* * *

Michael places his hand on Catherine's shoulder and smiles at her. His overwhelming affection threatens to render her senses immobile.

"That is why I love thee, Catherine. Thou art the hardiest of all of us. If thou should take enough souls, thy ascension to the rank of an Archangel will become an inevitability."

The memory clears up. Catherine and Michael float in the infinite abyss of space, the eternal void. Catherine blushes as her brother's words reach her ears.

"Me? An Archangel? Oh, but how many will I have to kill, brother? How many more souls must I consume before the Creator deems me worthy?"

Michael pulls his hand away. "Does it matter? We are cherubs. So long as the souls thou taketh belong to Seraphiim or Ophaniim, 'tis none of our concern. Continue killing, and thou shalt attain the coveted position of Archangel. The final battle draws near. If thou should fail, Jörmungandr may kill us all."

"But... there are only nine positions among the Archangels. For me to rise..."

Michael chuckles. His eyes narrow, and darkness creeps into his gaze. "Worry not about such trivial matters. I have a plan. I will ensure thy ascension. Once thou dost become the fourth Cherub, we will easily overthrow the balance of power."

"Alright. I'll do it... for thee."

Michael's countenance brightens. He traces his fingers across Catherine's lips. "For us."

Catherine nods. "Aye."

* * *

The memory fades away, and inside of Catherine's heart, a burning rage ignites.

These memories... they're from the Primordial Era... before Raphael's memory wipes!

She opens her eyes and meets Valac's gaze with the fury and wrath of an ancient warrior at death's door.

The Reaper... he must have returned my memories! By the Creator! I'm about to die, but I've never felt more alive in all my life! How can I perish here?! How can I live without Michael? How could I forget the love we once shared?!

Valac pulls back his scythe, and an agonizing tremor rumbles through Catherine's soul.

Aaaugh! No! NO! I won't die here! I can still fight back! If the Reaper thinks my soul is an easy mark, he's in for a big surprise!

Catherine's eyes suddenly ignite with pure white light. Two seconds later, an invisible, ethereal hand fires from her soul and races toward Valac's super-clone.

Valac's eyes widen. "W-what is-?!"

The Reaper doesn't get to finish his sentence. Catherine's soul grabs onto the Reaper's, and the two begin a vicious round of tug-o-war.

"Aaaaugh!!!"

Valac screams in pain as the Valkyrie of Fire presses his scythe deeper into her chest. Catherine ignores her agony and focuses on her task at hand. Her soul tugs twice as hard, yanking Valac's with the strength of a thousand cave-bears.

Panic overwhelms Valac's clone as he tries desperately to hold onto his soul. *No! Nooo!! How is her soul so powerful?! I can't fight back at all! It's like a vortex is pulling me- aaaaaahhh!!*

Catherine leans her body backward. Her last burst of physical effort finally tears Valac's soul from his clone. The Reaper screams in terror as his soul flies into the Valkyrie's aperture, only to land in a burning, fiery abyss where none have ever escaped.

As Valac falls, his vision begins to dim. The last thing he sees are countless, untold, tens of billions of other souls. All of them scream in agony and beg for mercy, but their cries go unheeded as Catherine seals them in the depths of her mind, never to be seen again.

* * *

Time returns to normal. Valac's super-clone loses all of its strength and slumps to the side. With his soul gone, the clone loses its grip on the scythe and flops to the ground, allowing Catherine to tear the demonic weapon from her bosom and cast it aside.

"Haah... haah..."

Catherine gasps for breath. When she raises her head, she spots one of the other super-clones staring at her; a look of panic etched into his face.

"The Valkyrie tore the soul out of number three! How? HOW?!"

Catherine doesn't answer. Her mind whirls as billions of years worth of ancient memories collide with her existing ones, causing her brain to flex and compress under the newfound pressure.

I... I... who am... I...

"Catherine!" Sophia yells in fright. "Oh, Creator! How did'st thou survive?! I thought the Reaper killed thee! Art thou alright?! Art thou injured?"

Sophia grabs Catherine's shoulders and tries to get her sister's attention, but Catherine's thoughts travel elsewhere. After a few breaths of time, memories from Valac's captured soul appear in her mind.

My god! Of course! Why didn't I notice before?!

Catherine ignores Sophia's cries of distress and focuses on the downed super-clone laying before her.

I may have only obtained a few hours of Valac's memories, but those are enough to tell me his location! Valac's real body isn't in Heaven; it's somewhere on Earth. If we intend to defeat the Reaper, we have to kill his original body; not his clones!

As dozens of thoughts careen around in Catherine's mind, she almost doesn't notice as Valac's fallen super-clone begins to stir.

"Ngghh..."

Catherine snaps her gaze toward it. *Ah! He's still alive!*

Catherine summons her sword and shield to her palms. Ignoring the blood flowing from her chest, the Valkyrie of Fire pulls away from Sophia and takes a quick step toward the clone, only to pause and stare at him in confusion.

Hm? Something's different. This clone doesn't have the same aura as the others.

Valac's three other super-clones stare in disbelief as their former comrade rises to his feet and rubs his head.

"Ohh... ancestors... where am I? What's happened?"

Catherine hesitates for a moment before using her sword to trace letters through the air. *Art thou Valac? Someone else?*

The super-clone gasps. "Valac?! No! Of course not! What would give you that idea, angel woman?"

The being, one with a mind of his own, finally swivels his head around to examine the battlefield.

"Demons and angels fighting en-masse? Ancestors! What is happening here?!"

Catherine doesn't answer him. Instead, she counters with another question. *Tell me thy name. Who art thou?*

The Valac clone lowers his head to scowl at her. "Hmph! Don't you recognize me? I am Neptune, Poseidon's firstborn, second mightiest of the aquatic Titans! More importantly, who are you to think yourself worthy of interrogating me?!"

I am Catherine. The Valkyrie of Fire. Neptune, I recognize thee. Thou didst perish. Reaper's scythe. Six years have passed. Thou art deceased, now. A soul inside Valac. An undying soul-clone!

Valac's other three super-clones turn pale as death itself. They read Catherine's words in disbelief and shoot glances amongst each other. "The Valkyrie of Fire knows too much!"

Penelope hurries over to Catherine's side. She holds Hyacinth's broken and battered body with her left arm while keeping her greatmace in her right hand's grasp - just in case.

"Hey! What art the two of thee doing! Stop chatting with the Reaper and fight! We can't let Camael do all the work!"

Sophia, having observed the conversation between her sister and Neptune, shakes her head. "Penelope, thou shalt not believe this! Catherine did the impossible!"

Penelope pauses. Her bloodlust lowers slightly as she evaluates the Reaper standing opposite Catherine. Unlike the others, his posture is cool, calm, and collected. He shows no fear toward the Valkyrie of Earth, as one of his perceived allies.

"Oh? Tell me more."

* * *

Camael tears through thousands of Reaper clones, one after the other. Each time she kills one, those who follow after appear noticeably weaker. Their movement turns sluggish, and their responsiveness drops drastically.

Within a few minutes, Camael begins annihilating them by the dozen. Valac eventually calls off his onslaught and recalls his clones, giving the Archangel of Divination a moment of respite.

Camael flies over to Neptune and the Valkyries. "What's happening? Why art thou chatting amiably with the Reaper?"

Penelope breathes a sigh of relief as her sister's divine aura enshrouds the Valkyries. "There's no need to worry, eldest sister. Catherine defeated one of the Reaper's bodies and revealed its inner soul. 'Tis none other than Neptune, son of Poseidon!"

Camael immediately deduces the hidden meaning behind Penelope's words. "Neptune? Ah! So, the Reaper must be using stolen souls to craft these false bodies!"

"Indeed, so it seems," Penelope replies. She returns her attention to Catherine and Neptune's conversation.

Catherine traces letters in the air with her sword. *Reaper's lair. Where is it? Dost thou remembereth? Exact location unknown. I can only guess! Somewhere underground?*

Neptune shakes his head. "I don't know. The last thing I remember was sitting at a remembrance altar with my family. We were mourning my father's death at the hands of Satan, the Devil, shortly after I informed King Zeus of Poseidon's passing. My vision went dark, and I appeared here. I... I never realized..."

The Titan's voice turns hoarse as waves of realization strike him one after the other.

"My wife... Eris. Where is she? Has she, too, fallen to the Reaper?"

Catherine flicks her eyes toward the three super-clones. The three of them whisper to one another in agitated voices, then dive underground, leaving the angels behind.

I know not. Eris's survival; unlikely. One hundred Titans remain. Atlantis fell last year. Nobody left to defend.

Neptune, still trapped in Valac's ghastly body, begins to tremble as grief overtakes him.

"Oh, ancestors... why have you forsaken us? We gave sacrifices every year! We prayed and kowtowed for your protection, yet... in the end..."

Sophia walks over to him and hesitantly rests her hand on the giant undead half-Titan's arm. She cringes inwardly, but forces herself to look at him not as one of Valac's clones, but as a poor, broken soul.

"There, there. The Titans can repopulate. Thou art one of the strongest left alive. With Zeus's blessing, thy people will survive this war, and-"

Speak no falsehoods, Catherine says. Her sword dances in the air furiously, tracing dozens of letters, one after the other. *Titans might not survive. Angels may die, too. This war isn't over. We must slay Valac. Focus! Help me find his lair!*

Despite usually being a cold and emotionless woman, Catherine becomes ten times fiercer than usual. She does not reveal her newly obtained memories, but in secret, her rage begins to build. Millions of ancient struggles appear in her mind's eye, one after the other. Each contends with her current self-image, causing her to doubt her actions and convictions.

No time to weep! No time to cry! Valac will flee. He'll uncover my plan. If Valac moves, we lose. Save thy tears for later.

Sophia takes a step back from Catherine. Her eyes lose focus as she struggles to understand Catherine's callousness. "B-but, Neptune doesn't know anything! We can't blame him for becoming distraught! The poor fellow hasn't yet-"

Catherine turns away from Sophia and slashes her sword at the ground in rage. *I don't care! Forget Neptune. More important matters to attend!*

Several miles away, on the opposite side of the battlefield, a star-like object plummets from the sky and crashes into Heaven's Soil. Catherine watches as it detonates against Heaven's Soil and releases thousands of joules of holy energy. The Valkyrie of Fire stares at the scene of carnage and clutches her sword even tighter.

Damn. Damn! What do we do?! I only have a fraction of the information needed to track Valac down!

As Catherine ponders her next course of action, a flash of light beside her catches her attention. Catherine turns to the right and watches as a portal materializes in midair, and Raphael steps through.

"Camael. Valkyries. I'm here to help."

The old man smiles for a moment, only for his eyes to darken as he spots Neptune, still in Valac's clone body.

"Gah! By the Creator! Why is everyone just standing around?! The Reaper is right there!"

Penelope sighs. "He's not what he appears to be, brother."

While Raphael pauses to reflect on Penelope's meaning, Catherine's gaze fixates on the innocent-appearing figure of her eldest brother. Her eyes turn icy cold. Without motioning with her sword, Catherine growls inwardly.

Raphael.

Part 162: Michael's Wrath

Ivaldi continues pummeling Uzziel with ferocious, unending blows. Over and over, blasts of holy energy collide with the power of Nature, detonating explosively in the air and creating chaotic windstorms, tornadoes, and hurricanes throughout Heaven's battlefield.

"All soul manipulators must DIE!" Ivaldi bellows. "Not only the angels, but you disgusting, bastard Titanspawn as well!"

Uzziel's face remains impassive as she summons a wall of vines to block one of Ivaldi's punches. "I'm sorry you feel that way."

Hercules manipulates Uzziel from a distance. However, his thoughts cut in half as he forces himself to multitask.

I cannot allow the Devil to flee from Heaven. If he escapes, he will go into hiding, and I may never find him again. Once he amasses more power, he will resurface and pose a significant threat to my rule. There is only one pawn who might stand a chance against the united strength of three Emperors. Luckily for me, the worthless wretch has yet to perish.

As Uzziel deflects Ivaldi's attacks one after the other, she twists her foot slightly and sends nature energy pulsing into Heaven's Soil. Several mana tendrils surge through the dirt and rush half a mile away to where one angel's body lays among half a dozen others.

Michael, the Archangel of Courage, rests in a puddle of blood. Thanks to several broken ribs, the Archangel's breathing comes in ragged gasps.

No... strength... left in my body. Can't see anything. Darkness in all directions. Is this the end? Is this how I will perish? Defeated by... a single... bloodskin...?

Having fallen to a fluke punch from Diablo, his former prisoner, Michael's pride crumbles to ash. He gazes at the sky, feeling nothing but disbelief at how his supposed 'unstoppable' power allowed him to fare against the Emperor of Annihilation.

Several thin, wispy vines stretch out of the ground. They curl around Michael, reaching into the chinks and gaps of his armor before resting against his skin. One vine wraps lightly around his throat, then glides up his cheek to touch his forehead.

As Michael barely grasps onto life at Death's Door, Hercules's voice materializes in his mind.

Hahaha. Look at you now, Michael, a being everyone calls the 'mightiest Archangel'; a battle-fanatic whose bloodlust puts all of his family to shame. You lay here like a beaten dog, ready for death. Is this all your effort was worth? You wasted time toying with your food, only for it to choke you in the end. Disgusting.

Michael coughs weakly.

"Kuh..."

Don't... patronize me... Hercules. I know why thou hath come... my power... thou dost plan... to heal me... and use it against the demons...

Of course, Hercules replies. I'm glad you're quick on the uptake. Using Uzziel's power, I can heal you in seconds. However, I won't do so unless you pledge your loyalty to me.

Michael closes his eyes.

I'll... never bow... to a soul-manipulating... Titan bastard.

Oh? Never, you say? That's a strong statement. Let's put it to the test. You might be half-dead, but I'm sure, even now, you can sense the power flowing out of Uzziel. As a supposed traveler of the Virtuous path, you must have strong feelings for your family members. It would be a shame if I were to use Uzziel's power to give the demons a total victory today, wouldn't it?

Michael shudders. *Hng. Do not... threaten me... thou dost desireth a victory. Thy hatred for the demons-*

Is nothing at all, Hercules replies, finishing Michael's sentence for him. Do you think I care who wins this war, anymore? I have only two goals, little birdie. The first is to defeat demonkind and establish an order of mighty warriors to keep peace across the world. However, if that should fail, my second goal is petty revenge. If I cannot rule everything, why should I allow those who scorned me to walk among the living? Better to let your kind perish in the eternal flames of judgment than live to mock me.

Impossible. Thou wouldst't never... allow the demons... to win...

Hercules chortles. *Hah. Try me. I'm giving you an easy solution, Michael. Join me willingly, and I'll allow you to take revenge against those who left you for dead. Decline, and all of your brothers and sisters will suffocate under my thumb. I am not a cruel person. Once the demons perish, and once I establish my era of peace, the world will have room for the smiles and laughter of those you care about. Even those like... Catherine.*

Michael's face twitches. *Catherine? Why bring her up? She is nothing to me.*

I wasn't born yesterday. Even now, in your final moments, I sense the feelings resting atop your mind. Images of your beloved sister float around like a log in the sea. You care deeply for her. Imagine how heartbroken she will be when she finds out her brother fell in a most humiliating manner — defeated in a single punch by a bloodskin! Oh, the horror.

Michael clenches his jaw. *Leave Catherine out of this.*

Hahaha. Do not believe for a moment that you may order me around, Archangel. You are putty in my hands. I need you now, yes, but I have another option on the table; one which will prove quite fatal for the others of your kind. You, however, have none.

Michael says nothing. His eyes flutter open, but still, he sees only infinite darkness.

Hercules' inner voice softens. *Worry not. I am a man of my word. Uzziel begged me to help, and so, I did. Your battle instincts have dulled. With my hand guiding you, you will become a weapon capable of*

cutting through any demon. You have grown soft ever since Raphael's mind-wipes, but when I am through with you, you will understand once again what it means to possess true, unfettered power.

Hercules' voice coalesces into a faint apparition in Michael's mind's eye. The Titan holds out a hand and waits.

*The clock is ticking, Michael. Your people need you. **Catherine** needs you. What is your answer?*

Michael swallows a chunk of hardened blood.

I... curseth... thee...

A few minutes later, the Archangel of Courage soars through the sky. With his body fully healed and his soul firmly in Hercules' control, he emits dangerous killing intent as Hercules uses him to pursue the three fleeing Demon Emperors.

Liar.

Michael's soul trembles angrily.

My sister did not joineth thou willingly. Like a coward, thou used thy soul manipulation most deceptively! Treacherous bastard!

With his attention divided between Uzziel's battle against Ivaldi and Michael's ambush of the Demon Emperors, Hercules doesn't have time to trade words with the Archangel of Courage.

"Quiet. I'm busy."

Thy words are poison. Thy goals are genocidal. I will not stand idly and let-

"Didn't you hear me the first time? I know what will shut you up."

Hercules growls at the Archangel of Courage. After a moment, he adds a little extra force into his willpower and suppresses Michael's soul with all his strength. It takes several seconds, but soon, images of various violent acts begin appearing in Michael's mind. Scenes of angels being murdered and ripped apart by demons consume his thoughts, forcefully turning his attention away from Hercules' betrayal and toward the demons.

One moment, in particular, catches Michael's attention.

Michael's eyes widen. *What... what are these images?*

Hercules laughs. "Haha. Don't you know? My minions can share their vision. What you're seeing is a display of the demons ravishing your sister. They captured her not long ago. As you can see, they're doing whatever they please to her helpless form."

Michael's eyes tremble as a scene of horror plays out in his mind. Catherine screams as the demons hold her down. They rip off her armor and drool as lust-filled looks appear in their eyes.

No... Catherine?! What are they doing to her?!

"Oh, don't play dumb, Michael. The demons are doing what they do best. Now that they have captured Catherine, they'll torture her and perform all manner of vile acts, then kill her and eat what's left."

No! NO!! Not Catherine! I have to stop them!!

Hercules nods. An evil grin spreads across his face. "Aye. Don't disappoint me, Michael."

Catherine! CATHERINE!!

Rage explodes in Michael's mind. Little does the Archangel realize it, but the visions Hercules shared with him were fake, made to confuse him, and boil his blood.

Hercules aims Michael's eyes to the ground. There, about half a mile away, Satan and his two fellow Emperors tear through a line of undead cherubs. Several low-ranked demon Lords support them, but Diablo handles most of the killing while Satan aims for the cherub's heads.

"I'll rip him apart! I'll kill that bloodskin if it's the last thing I do!"

Michael flaps his wings. He shoots from a standstill position to over a hundred miles an hour as he divebombs toward Satan from above. Michael draws his sword and aims it at Satan's heart.

"SATAAAN!!"

Michael's screaming turns delirious. His eyes become bloodshot as they bulge in his face. Hercules' emotional nudges dial Michael's rage to the max as he imagines the demons doing unspeakably vile acts to his sister.

Satan hears Michael's warcry. He jerks his head to the sky and gasps. "Oh, shit!"

The Devil doesn't have time to react. He raises his arms at the last second, only for the hawk-like Archangel to smash him into a bloody pulp.

BOOM!

Michael crashes into Satan like a runaway tank hitting a sandcastle.

Belial screams. "Ahhh!! Satan!!"

Diablo scowls. "Spawn of a broodmother. He sprayed the Devil all over the damn place."

Satan's bloody remains coat the ground in every direction for over twenty feet. However, Michael jumps to his feet, unhurt. He swivels his head toward Diablo and screams at the top of his lungs, "Where is she?!"

Diablo flinches as the Archangel charges him. "Who the hell-?!"

Unable to wrap his mind around the Archangel's rage, Diablo can only go on the defensive. He puts every bit of strength into his kinetic barrier, summoning it over and over again as the Archangel of Courage attacks him with a hundred sword strikes every second. Michael's arm becomes a thousand buzzsaws pressing against Diablo's kinetic barrier, and within a few seconds, he tears through and gashes Diablo's chest, arms, and neck to pieces.

"Gurk!"

Diablo gurgles in his throat as blood escapes from all of his pores. The moment before he dies, a bone-hammer smashes into Michael's back, blindsides the Archangel, and sends him careening to the side. Belial jumps over to Diablo and immediately heals him, pulling him back from the brink of death.

"Are you okay?!" She asks.

"Y-yeah..."

Diablo staggers to his feet as phantom pain wracks every inch of his body. Despite Belial fully healing him, the sensation of Michael's sword leaves a lasting impression, making Diablo doubt his eyes.

I nearly died! Michael is way more vicious than before!

Diablo and Belial take up defensive stances. By the time Michael jumps to his feet and flaps his wings to rush them, both Emperors are ready.

Swish-swish, clang clang!

Michael's sword furiously pounds Diablo's barrier, but Belial diverts many of his attacks to herself by using her superior speed and ability. She creates multiple bone-blades to counter his swordsmanship, which has grown far more ferocious than during their previous fights.

"Why is Michael so pissed?!" Belial asks. She jerks back in fright as she finally notices Michael's glowing eyes. "Ah! Hercules must be-"

"I know!" Diablo says, cutting her off. He tries to activate a three-times-multiplied kinetic punch, but Michael's flurry of attacks don't give him a moment of breathing room. "You saw what Hercules did to Satan! He makes his goons fight at their peak! We can't handle this Archangel alone!"

Satan speaks up from behind them. "Don't worry. You won't have to."

Having regenerated his body, Satan's bloodlust ignites as he and Hades begin planning to destroy the Archangel of Courage.

Michael never displays this much emotion, Hades says. I don't know what Hercules did, but he must have angered my brother like never before.

"I'll tell you what he did; he pissed in Mikey's tea, and now I'M pissed. Let's clobber him."

Satan motions with his hands. He summons thirty souls from deep within himself and burns them to ash. His mana capacity and magical power multiply by a factor of thirty, providing him a giant leap in his battle aptitude.

"Hey, Deebs! This one's for you, pal!"

Satan aims his hand at Diablo. A jet of water fires out and encircles Diablo. It transforms into a spiraling water barrier, one that protects Diablo from Michael's attacks. The Archangel strikes his swirling shield repeatedly, but the motion of the water deflects Michael's attacks to the right and left, preventing him from dealing substantial damage to Diablo.

Next, Satan aims another palm at Belial. Heaven shakes as dozens of pounds of soil jump up and wrap around her. The dirt and rock harden into a reinforced earthen armor, protecting her while affording her a decent degree of movement.

Michael screams in rage. His voice turns hoarse as he realizes what Satan is doing. "EVIL BLOODSKINS! I shall burn thee to ASH!"

Michael's glowing eyes double in luminosity. He fires a blast of holy energy at Satan, catching the Devil off-guard.

"What the-?!"

Satan jumps to the right. The laser sweeps through the spot where, an instant before, his neck stood. Satan dives to the ground and yelps as Michael not only continues following Satan with his eyes, but intensifies his attacks against Belial and Diablo. Several low-ranked demons perish as the beam cuts them in half. The others flee for their lives.

Slash-slash-slash!

Michael swipes his sword across Belial's earthen armor with such fury that it starts to disintegrate. With her movement slowed by the hardened mud on her limbs, Belial can't keep up with Michael's speed. She retreats while he pushes his advantage.

"Today, I will kill ALL of thy wretched kin!!"

Michael's sword shines as he imbues it with holy energy. A moment later, his sword starts rapidly sending waves of mana firing when he swings it. As Belial retreats, she gasps as fifty crescent-shaped magic blades shoot at her.

"No!"

Belial tries to block them, but the energy waves tear through her bladed arms as if they don't exist. Belial's armor shatters, and deep gashes slice across her body, spraying blood in every direction. Both of her arms and her left leg sever from her body. She staggers back and flops to the ground as incredible pain tears through her entire frame.

"Guhuk..."

Michael's eyes continue firing holy energy at Satan. Diablo finally finishes building up enough kinetic energy to unleash a twenty-times-enhanced kinetic punch, and as Satan's barrier finally falls apart, Diablo swings his fist.

"Eat SHIT!"

Diablo aims for Michael's chest. Ten feet separates the two warriors, but Diablo doesn't try to close the distance. Instead, he punches the air, sending a blast of superheated wind from his fist. It pounds Michael like a hurricane and flings him off his feet. Finally, with his footing lost, Michael goes flying. He twists and spins through the air before crashing on his back over five hundred feet away.

Satan immediately comes to a stop as Michael's laser stops chasing after him. "Belial! No!"

Ignoring a possible counter-attack, Satan rushes over to Belial. She lays on the ground, covered in blood. Three of her limbs lay tossed around here and there, while blood pours from her stumps. Her eyes flick from left to right as her brain tries to cope with the pain.

"Hnn- nuhh..."

Satan splashes water on her wounds and uses Poseidon's power to heal her wounds and regenerate her missing limbs. "Stay with me, girl! Come on, baby! Don't die!"

Even as Belial's wounds close up, her mind fails to reconnect with reality. She writhes around on the ground and clutches her regenerating arm and legs. "Nnn... hurts... hurts..."

Satan nods. "I know it does, baby. Come on; we've gotta get out of here before Michael-"

"He's back!" Diablo yells. Satan jerks his head toward Diablo and scowls as the Archangel returns to whaling on the Emperor of Annihilation.

Michael screams wildly as he thrashes Diablo's failing kinetic shields. "I WON'T LET YOU TOUCH HER! SHE'S MINE!!"

Sweat drips from every pore in Diablo's body. He continually reinforces his kinetic shields as fast as he can, but they fare poorly against sustained rapid-fire attacks.

Satan bites his lip. *Michael is too fast. I can't keep up with him at all. If I slip up for even a second, he'll kill the other two!*

Suddenly, from behind Michael, the ground explodes. A gigantic Hellhound, fifty-percent bulkier than others of its kind, leaps out of a burrowed hole and pounces on Michael.

"FILTHY ARK-AN-JELL! NOBODY HURTSH MY MAN!"

Lucifer, the Emperor of Providence, catches Michael completely off-guard. Her wolven mouth, resembling a wood-chipper, snaps onto Michael's wings and bites with the strength of a crocodile.

SKRRIIK!

Lucifer tears several meaty chunks out of Michael's wings. Her claws rip across his back and legs, spraying blood in every direction.

"Aaaugh!!"

Michael shrieks in pain and jumps forward to try and shake the vicious monster ripping him to pieces, but he can't escape. Lucifer howls at him with her wolf-voice and pounces again.

However, before Lucifer can land the killing blow, Michael falls forward and sucks inside Heaven's Soil! The Hellhound Emperor lands on the grass and claws at it furiously as she tries to dig him out.

"COME BACK, FILTHY AN-JELL! COW-WERD!"

She rips the grass to shreds, but despite her best efforts, Michael escapes.

Ten seconds later, Michael bubbles out of Heaven's Soil a few hundred feet away. His body radiates power thanks to Uzziel's healing energy.

"That was a close one," Michael says, his rage gone. His voice turns monotone as he examines at his arms and legs. "You almost killed my second strongest pawn. It seems that when Michael stops toying with his food, he also loses sight of his surroundings. Imbecile."

Diablo and Lucifer raise their heads to glower at the Archangel.

"Hercules..." Diablo mutters. "What's the matter? Is Michael too out of control for you?"

"The less effort I have to put into manipulating Michael, the more focus I can put on Uzziel," Hercules replies. "Splitting my mind between two Archangels is mentally draining. However, since I've temporarily

immobilized Ivaldi, I can put the four of you down myself."

Satan helps Belial to her feet. The succubus shakily leans against her husband and shudders as Hercules' cold gaze falls on her. "L-love? What do we do?"

The Devil wraps one arm around Belial's waist and balls his free hand into a fist. "Easy. We kill the bastard. Nothin' to it."

Michael doesn't move. His glowing eyes evaluate the four Demon Emperors with the coldness of an eagle gazing upon a field hare.

Even Michael has his limits.

Hercules sighs inwardly.

I'll have to tap into his memories. Perhaps my newest pawn has a few tricks up his sleeve he's forgotten. I hope I don't regret this.

Having suffered immensely under Lucifer's ambush, Michael's soul slumbers restlessly as Hercules uses his strength to subdue the Archangel.

It's a good thing I let the Demon Emperors weaken Michael's psyche, first. I'd be having one hell of a time trying to control him, otherwise. Uzziel is already a pain in my neck. She might seem sweet and innocent, but she lacks Michael's emotional weaknesses.

Hercules's main body takes a deep breath. He focuses his mind and probes deeply into Michael's memories.

* * *

Falling, falling, falling.

Hercules plunges into a magical black hole, one identical to Uzziel's, yet different in innumerable ways. As he falls, the power of Raphael's memory seal tugs and pulls at him from a million different directions. Hercules winces as he senses his soul ripping apart, but within seconds, he arrives at the center of the seal.

Michael. What secrets are you hiding?

Having experienced the memory bombardment once already, Hercules braces himself in advance. A moment later, the onslaught begins.

Aaaaaunugh!!!

Molten memories drip from the endless void and land on Hercules' brain. His main body shivers and shudders as he forces himself to endure the excruciating torment.

Half a minute later, Hercules exhales. His soul breaks through the barriers protecting Michael's mind, allowing him to access the Archangel's memories.

Ancestors, protect me. Michael's recollections are just as numerous as Uzziel's... but the emotional trauma is a thousand times worse! Gods! How could Raphael allow this monster to live?!

Hercules pants like a dog.

Uzziel slaughtered billions, but her actions were like those of a child crushing bugs. Michael's genocide was personal and based on blood-grudges! My god, perhaps Raphael had the right idea in trying to erase the memories of his fellow angels! If I had a choice, I wouldn't have let any of them live, but there's no way he could kill these monsters on his own!

As Hercules searches Michael's memories, he finds not only the things he was looking for, but things he wasn't, as well.

The Angels are all monsters. Demonkind, evil though they be, are nothing compared to the butchers and battle-maniacs comprising angelkind's forces. When I become the Infinity King, I will not allow a single one of them to survive.

I must kill every last living and undead angel.

* * *

Satan, Belial, Diablo, and Lucifer all stand together and watch as Michael closes his eyes and trembles for several long, painful seconds.

"Hish guard ish down! KILL HIM!" Lucifer roars. She takes a step forward, but Diablo grabs her.

"No! Don't! It's a trick! Hercules would never give us such an easy opening. If we attack, we'll fall into his trap."

Lucifer growls at Diablo, but her animal mind pauses to consider his words.

"Tch... we will shee..."

Diablo returns his gaze to Michael. Despite his misgivings, the Emperor of Annihilation secretly ponders if his intuition is wrong.

I might be thinking too highly of Hercules. If Michael is vulnerable, we have to take a chance and attack!

Belial shakes off the last bit of dizziness wracking her brain. She turns to Satan and shoots him a questioning gaze. "Where's Nerissa's body?"

Satan smiles. "Somewhere safe. Don't worry. I have a few Warper souls in me. I stashed her where not even Valac can find her."

"Alright. Are you ready? We'll need all of our power to defeat Michael."

Satan smirks. "I ain't afraid of some winged moron. Mikey caught us off-guard a few times, but he ain't shit. What can one Archangel do against the four strongest demons?"

Michael opens his eyes. He speaks in Hercules' voice, and his words carry an ominous tone. "More than you can imagine."

Hercules flicks his gaze to Heaven's Soil. He sends a quick command to Uzziel, and a vine leaps from the ground and attaches to Michael's right arm's stump. Within seconds, it morphs and shifts until it becomes a pseudo-limb capable of emulating the strength and dexterity of a flesh and blood arm.

Hercules flexes Michael's newly created vine-based arm. After satisfying himself with its capability, he rapidly performs a series of hand-signs.

Diablo tenses up. "Watch out! Hercules is about to pull something!"

FLASH!

Michael's entire body explodes with brilliant light. Holy energy erupts from every inch of his skin, turning him into a dazzling star on the battlefield. The four demon Emperors all recoil in horror as the sudden burst of light destroys their retinas.

"Aaugh!!" Belial screams. She pulls away from Satan and falls to the ground. Despite pressing her hands to her eyes, Michael's holy energy bombards her skin and cooks her alive.

Satan and Diablo recoil in horror, unable to shield themselves from the radiant mana erupting from Michael's body. Satan turns his head away and swoons as his mind falls numb. "Shit! Shit! Fucking hell!!"

Only Lucifer remains standing. Thanks to her half-hellhound form, her monstrous body becomes resistant to the effects of Michael's holy energy. However, the bright light still makes her fifty Hellhound eyes flinch.

"I KNEW YOU'D TRY SHUMTHING! TIME TO DIE, MICHAEL!!"

Closing her eyes, the Hellhound charges Michael and pounces at him with the intent to kill.

Two massive wolf legs spread out their claws as Lucifer lunges for Michael's chest. Hercules doesn't flinch as the giant beast jumps at him.

"Too little, too late."

Michael grabs his sword and instantly dices Lucifer apart.

Slash-slash-slash, SHIK!

After cutting through Lucifer's massive front legs, Hercules uses Michael's sword to impale Lucifer through her animal heart. The Hellhound stops in midair and gasps.

"GAHK! H...how...?!"

With a shrug, Hercules flicks his sword down. He flings Lucifer's diced body to the ground, where she lands amidst her severed limbs in a rapidly spreading puddle of blood.

Diablo, still blinded, senses something amiss. He forces himself to look at Michael, only to gasp as he spots the image of Lucifer's limp corpse lying defeated in the grass.

"Lucy!! NOOOO!!"

Satan and Belial hear Diablo, but even while trying to heal their wounds, their eyes don't function well enough to let them see what happened. Diablo charges at Michael and raises his fist.

"YOU'RE DEAD MEAT!"

Even with his eyes barely functioning, Diablo charges toward Michael like an enraged bull. The closer he gets, the more intense the dynamism of the holy energy radiating from the Archangel becomes. Soon, Diablo's movements turn sluggish. A sensation like molten quicksand engulfs him. The heat of the midday

sun blasts against his face, chest, and arms. He leans forward and places one foot in front of the other, but his skin turns black as coal as all of his nerves continue to fry and fizzle.

Diablo's determination falters.

I can't... can't get any closer. My whole body is numb. I need to retreat. I'll die if I keep going...

The Emperor of Annihilation battles with himself. Only twenty feet separates him from Michael, but his body refuses to listen to his commands.

I can't give up. Lucy is dead! I have to avenge her. I have to kill Michael!!

Diablo takes another step, causing the intensity of Michael's holy aura to increase further.

Hercules watches the Emperor slowly advancing toward him. For a moment, his cold demeanor falters.

Hmph. Diablo and Lucifer. These two are mates, much like I was with Megara. In a way, I understand the emotions he's experiencing right now. Watching the woman I loved perish destroyed me. Diablo's heart must be in tatters.

Hercules sighs.

Ah, well. Such is life. We lose those we love to those we hate. To be born is to suffer.

A glint appears in Michael's eyes. Hercules sends a command to the Archangel's body. A moment later, Michael rushes at Diablo.

SLASH!

Before Diablo can react, the Archangel's blade sweeps across his neck. Diablo's thoughts falter as the world spins around him.

What? M-Michael... cut... me...?

Like a rock landing in the mud, Diablo's head falls from his neck and slaps against the ground with a moist *splurt*. His headless body teeters for a moment, before falling over.

Michael's eyes sweep toward the two remaining Emperors.

"Well. It's time to kill the other two. Come, sister."

Hercules' mind travels to a new pawn, one he acquired only in the last several minutes.

Satan, still blinded by the Archangel's radiant energy, forces his eyes open. Through the narrowest crack possible, he peers into the blinding star standing fifty feet away until he can faintly make out the remains of Diablo's corpse.

"Sh-shit! Deebs? No... no!!"

Satan grinds his teeth together. He turns his attention inward, to the Archangel within his mind. "C'mon, Sammy-boy! Tell me we've got something that can kill this worthless..."

Samael remains impassive. *Thy demon body has its limits. Using magic will be nearly impossible with my brother's aura suppressing thee. If we're lucky, we might be able- ah! SATAN! Look out!*

A series of massive stomping noises rushes toward Satan. He jerks his head to the right, but with his terrible vision, he doesn't see anything coming.

"What's that noise?"

Thump, thump, thump!

Heavy footsteps, like trees crashing into the dirt, travel toward Satan.

A moment later, an invisible foot bigger than Satan's entire body falls from the sky.

SPLURT!

Satan perishes before he can react.

A Titan, much taller than Hercules, and nearly as tall as Zeus, crushes the Devil into pulp. After a moment, a shroud of invisibility wears off from the giant, revealing a Titaness with braided brown hair and glowing eyes. Her body stinks of the blood of a thousand dead demons.

The woman nods. "Haha. Oh, my beloved little brother. I cannot thank you enough for this opportunity."

Hercules' thoughts transfer into his newest minion's mind. *No, I must thank you, Chantis. Remember the plan. When Satan revives, crush him again and again. I will deal with the Succubus Emperor myself.*

Chantis, a Titan female who once lost several of her sisters to Nerissa's ice blades, nods. "Nothing would please me more."

Belial reels in pain. She hears the sounds of the other three Emperors' last moments, but she does not witness their fall. Unlike the others, her control of healing magic only cripples her under Michael's holy aura. Every time she tries to heal herself, her magic backfires, causing more damage to her internal organs.

The succubus curls up in the fetal position and shivers uncontrollably as Michael slowly walks toward her. Each step he takes causes his aura to press against her more intensely than before. Soon, her spasming becomes uncontrollable. Belial's thoughts careen helplessly as she begs heaven and hell for a savior.

Satan... Satan... Satan... save me... it hurts... hurts...

Tears roll down Belial's face. She chews her tongue into pulp and gurgles blood as the holy aura kills her in the slowest, most agonizing way possible.

Hercules sighs. "You were a worthy opponent. I am neither heartless nor cruel. I will kill you now. A swift end is the best your kind can hope for."

Michael raises his sword. He aims it at Belial's neck, but before he swings the blade down, a strange thought enters the back of his mind.

"Hm. Strange. It smells like something is burning."

A faint odor reaches Michael's nose. Hercules puts his assassination of the succubus on hold to turn and gaze at Lucifer and Diablo's fallen bodies.

What he sees next shakes him to his core.

"What... what is... this demonic mana...?"

Diablo's beheaded body lies motionless in the dirt. However, blood-red energy begins dripping from his skin like juice through a sieve. As the liquid lands on the grass, Heaven's Soil loses its luster. The nature energy emanating from Uzziel turns inert, making the grass turn black as night.

The ghastly demonic mana sends a shiver up Michael's spine.

"My god... oh my god..."

Hercules watches in disbelief as Diablo's arm twitches. His fingers flex slightly and begin tip-tapping across the grass to reach for Lucifer's corpse.

"Lu... cy..."

Diablo's head, separated from his body, breathes out a single word. He stares at his wife, while an ungodly fury blooms in his eyes.

"Kill him... I have to kill him. Now!" Hercules yells. Michael lunges toward Diablo and swings his sword a thousand times. Instantly, he dices the Emperor of Annihilation into a pile of gore. Diablo's blood sprays across Heaven's Soil, and wherever it strikes, the grass fizzles and dies.

"Lu... cy..."

Diablo's voice speaks again. This time, it hangs in the air like a ghost on the wind.

Hercules turns pale.

"No... no... what is this? What's going on?!"

As Hercules focuses all of his attention on Diablo's blood-red mana, he stops paying attention to the minds of his other servants.

* * *

Hercules' main body trembles in terror. His teeth chatter, and his mind becomes disturbed as he senses the immense power building up where Diablo, the Emperor of Annihilation, fell.

"What do I do? What do I do?!"

Distracted by the condensing blood-red mana, Hercules fails to notice a shadow silently shimmying underneath rocks and behind trees toward his main body.

Berith, the Emperor of Backstabbing, peeks out from the boot of one of Hercules' guardian angels.

Hehehe... Once I eliminate this thorn in his side, Master Valac will reward me greatly. Truly, his vision defies Fate itself.

Part 163: Heaven and Hell Hate Hercules

"Tch. This is all your fault. Chasing after Satan, making us run around like chickens with our wings cut off..."

"Hey! Don't blame me! It was your idea to enter the battlefield. The outskirts are way safer! Ain't nobody fighting out here!"

"Sure, but if one of them pigeons spots us, we won't have anywhere to run."

"Then I guess we'd better be extra sneaky."

* * *

Davook argues with himself continuously. Having retrieved his woven-grass camouflage, he sneaks around the outside of the battlefield while staying low to the ground and moving at a snail's pace.

The Demon Lord's eyes flick from left to right. Occasionally, he'll spot an angel flying overhead and go still, pretending with all his might that he's nothing more than a lumpy piece of grass, something no angel should bother investigating.

"Sheesh... is this even the way back to the portal?"

"How should I know? I got turned around too many times because of you. Left is right and right is left. If we make it outta here alive, I'm gonna knock your friggin' block off."

"You *can't* knock my block off, stupid. We're the same guy."

"Bullshit! Don't lump me in with the likes of you! You're a creep who has a fetish for pigeon girls. Disgusting."

"Quiet. Stop yelling, moron. You'll draw attention to us."

"Don't call me a moron, *stupid*. I blame you for everything."

"Piss off."

"No, *you* piss off."

"No, *you*!"

"You!"

Like two unruly children, Davook argues with himself over and over. He weaves back and forth from a civil conversation to one of absolute stupidity without missing a beat.

"Oy. Hold on. What's that, over there?"

"Don't go changin' the subject, you lousy-"

"Nah, I'm serious. Look!"

Davook slows to a stop and narrows his eyes as he spots a dozen angels with glowing eyes all standing in a circle around a solitary figure sitting cross-legged on a large, flat rock. Hercules, the Infinity King,

stares emptily forward as his mind stretches out to see through the eyes of his two mightiest pawns.

His hands sit pressed together, and he splays his fingers out like a pair of spiders dancing with one another. Every so often, the Titan moves his hands to cast one or two spells.

"Who's that?" Davook asks.

"Dunno," Davook answers. "Seems like someone important. Must be why them pigeons are protecting him."

"Mmm... let's get a closer look!"

"What?! No way! He's dangerous! That sucker's at least fifteen-feet tall! If he decides to attack us..."

"Right, but think about it this way. He's sitting in the middle of nowhere, half a mile away from the battlefield. There ain't nobody else out here, so this must be a safe spot. If we hide behind that big rock over there, we can wait until this war is over, then sneak out of the portal and go home."

"Holy crap. You're dumber than I thought! The portal's probably on the other side of the battlefield! How do you plan to sneak past the pigeons to reach it?"

"Meh. We always find a way."

"No, we don't! If you even think about taking a single step toward this Titan, I'll- hey! Are you listening to me! Knock it off!"

Davook ignores the voice of dissent. He sneaks toward a large boulder several hundred feet from Hercules' meditation rock. Once he hides behind it, he breathes a sigh of relief.

Nice. We made it.

Made it WHERE?! If that Titan so much as sneezes in our general direction, we're dead meat! Why do you always decide where we go? Now we're going to die because of you...

Due to his proximity to Hercules, Davook suppresses his voice and keeps his two selves inside his mind. He peeks around the side of the boulder and watches as Hercules' eyebrows curl together in concentration.

Relax. The big guy's harmless. If he starts moving, we'll just lay low. There ain't nobody who will bother us here.

Suuure... biggest bunch of shrakh I ever heard...

Oh! What's that?

One of Davook's voices cries out in surprise. His eyes narrow onto a pale shadow shifting along the ground. It darts under the boot of one of Hercules' guardian cherubs, then stays still for several seconds.

What are you looking at? I don't see anything.

The shadow! How did you not see that?! It was like a long spindly spider-leg. I saw it jump from that tree over there under a pigeon's boot.

Great. Now you're hallucinating. I always knew I was the only sane one, but I didn't expect you to stray into a fantasy-land.

I'm not lying! I saw the shadow move! I swear!

Suuure.

Davook bickers with himself even more as he locks his eyes onto the cherub's boot. The armored warrior flicks his eyes toward Davook's rock and spots the strangely shaped lump of grass hovering slightly off the ground.

Shrakh! You imbecile! That big-ass pigeon sees us!

Uh, oops.

Davook turns pale as the cherub reaches for its sword. However, at that moment, Berith, the Emperor of Backstabbing, makes her move.

* * *

Berith coils strength into her body.

This Titanspawn nearly wiped out all of Lucifer's forces singlehandedly. I won't stand a chance against him in open combat. My only hope for victory is to end this with a single, decisive strike!

Hercules sits perfectly still and focuses on manipulating his mightiest pawns, the two Archangels of Courage and Creation. With his mind elsewhere, he gives no thought to the signal from one of his cherub guards regarding the weak little Demon Lord peeking out at him from across the field.

Suddenly, Berith lunges!

Her body transforms into a spear of darkness. Using every ounce of her Emperor-level strength, she pounces from her hiding spot and aims for Hercules' head.

At the last millisecond, Hercules detects the bloodlust aimed at him. He turns to search for its origin, only to recoil in surprise as blinding pain detonates in his brain.

SKRIK!

"AAAAUGGHHH!!"

Berith's attack tears out a massive chunk of Hercules' skull. Chunks of his cerebellum fire off in every direction, causing his glowing eyes to return to normal. Berith sails into the distance and reverts to her demonic form, then lands in a crouch fifty feet away.

"Shit! I missed! I almost killed the fucker, too!"

Hercules jumps up and grabs hold of his head. Blood and brains squeeze through his left hand as he clutches the gashed-out chunk of his skull. "GAAAUGH!! AHHHH!!!"

Unable to control his powers, all of Hercules' guardian cherubs fall to their knees and howl in pain. The twelve angels and their Titan master stumble around and thrash like rabid dogs as his injury transfers to all of them.

Berith narrows her eyes. "He's weakened! I have to try again!"

Once again, she enters her shadow-form and morphs into a spear of darkness. The Emperor of Backstabbing lunges at Hercules and aims for his head, but the Titan falls forward at the last second while

howling in pain. He inadvertently dodges Berith's attack, causing her to sail overhead and land on the ground less than fifty feet from Davook's hiding position.

Berith reverts to her demonic form and screeches angrily. "Shit! I can't hit Hercules' head when he's thrashing about like that!"

She turns her gaze toward the Titan youth while ignoring the presence of the weak, pathetic little Demon Lord huddled behind a boulder not far from her.

Davook's eyes widen in surprise.

Whoaaa! Is that Berith?! Spawn of a broodmother, she's FINE!

Stop thinking with our demonhood, you damned sex-maniac. Berith just pissed off that Titan! Once he regains his senses, he'll come for us next!

No way! Did you see that attack? She blew off a chunk of his fuckin' head! That Titan's dead meat. Just you watch. Berith is Valac's second in command. There's no way she'll lose to some muscle-head.

* * *

Oblivious to Davook's raucous thoughts, Berith runs at Hercules and begins motioning with her hands. Countless shadows fall from her body, enter the dirt, and rush toward Hercules from underground. As the Titan youth thrashes around, dozens of shadow-spears burst out from under him like a pitfall trap.

Shik, shik, shik!

Each spear skewers the twenty-foot giant as if he were a mammoth, one which was being hunted by several Cro-Magnon warriors. Hercules gasps as his battle instincts take over. A realization hits him.

Someone is attacking me! I'm about to die!

Hercules' eyes jolt open. Despite the crippling pain coursing through his brain and body, his eyes swing toward the Demon Emperor leaping at him. Berith wields a shadow-blade summoned from darkness. She pulls back to swing it at Hercules' neck, but at that moment, her gaze meets the Titan's.

Both warriors stand, transfixed, for the slightest breath of time.

Berith's soul trembles. *Oh, no.*

Without skipping a beat, Hercules swings the flat of his hand at the tiny little demon woman.

SLAP.

Like a rhinoceros stomping an ant, Hercules' demi-god-level strength batters Berith with soul-crushing power. The Emperor of Backstabbing flings backward, unable to stop herself.

Crack! Thump!

Berith strikes the ground with such force that her spine snaps in half. She bounces off the dirt and smashes into Davook's boulder with the speed of a jet airliner.

CRUMPF!

The hardened obelisk explodes into powder. Berith's neck snaps as she comes to a stop. Her movements cease, and all her energy disappears.

Davook's heart pounds like the drums of war.

Oh... oh devils... he killed her... that Titan killed Berith.

Davook's second voice speaks in a whisper. *I told you he would. We'll be next.*

I don't want to die.

Neither of us do.

Hercules gasps for breath. Despite the incredible feat of strength he pulled off only a moment before, his body sags under the agony of all the crumbling shadow lances piercing his vital organs.

"H-healing... I need... healing..."

With Berith's defeat, the shadow-lances melt into nothingness, unable to sustain themselves under Heaven's Light. Hercules flops to the ground and clutches his head.

"Uzziel... forget... the Titan woman... come to me... heal me... I'm dying..."

As Hercules' breathing comes in ragged gasps, Davook slinks toward Berith's body.

Maybe Berith is still alive.

Probably not. We should get out of here while we still can.

But that Titan is weak! If we could take his power and kill him...

Idiot! He killed a freaking Demon Emperor with a single slap! Let's go. We'll die if we hang around here!

Alright, alright! But... wait... before we go...

Aw, c'mon, now what?

Davook creeps toward Berith. When he arrives at her side, he's surprised to see her chest moving. She swallows several shallow breaths, one after the other. She stares ahead, wide-eyed, at the ground, seeing nothing at all but a vast emptiness.

Whoa. Berith's alive?

Barely. She's taking her last breaths.

We should help her. I wouldn't mind a beauty like her owing me a 'favor,' if you know what I mean. Belial can heal her.

She'll die soon. Forget it. Better to look out for ourselves.

Ugh. You're such a spoilsport. Fine! At the least, I'm going to copy her power.

WHAT?! Lords and Barons and Pigeons are one thing, but she's a Demon Emperor! If the others find out... they'll kill us!

Maybe. But... even if they try, so what? Her power is awesome. She can turn into shadows and shit. Imagine if WE had that ability. Sneaking around would be the easiest thing ever.

...Hm. Well, when you put it that way...

Davook smiles. As Berith chokes out her last breaths, the Demon Lord places his hand on her face.

"Hehehe... we thank you for the meal..."

Davook doesn't offer a drop of compassion for his fellow demoness. Ties, bonds, loyalty, none of those words mean a thing to him. Only his selfish desires dictate his attention.

After a moment, a fountain of mana rushes into Davook's soul. His eyes widen as he stares in disbelief at Berith.

"Spawn of a- I can't believe it! This... this synergy! It's perfect!"

"Wow! We've never experienced anything like this before! It's not like our other powers! I always thought Master Orias's power was best suited for us, but his isn't even an afterthought!"

"Shadow manipulation... it's perfect! Incredible! Hahahaha!!"

Davook displays his teeth as he grins evilly at Berith's beaten, broken body.

"If you weren't about to die, we'd love to show our... *appreciation*. We'll never forget your gift to us. Have a wonderful sleep, beautiful. Hehehe..."

Davook leans over Berith. The last sensation she feels is a sharp pain entering her eye. Davook impales her with a shadow spear, instantly killing her.

"Nice. Let's make like a bird and fly the frick outta here. Reaching the portal should be a cinch, now."

"Damn straight. Hell, since Berith's dead, I bet nobody would mind if we took her body. It's not like she can fight back anymore, right?"

"Ugh. I should have known you'd talk about that shit again. Leave the dead to rest!"

"Aww, c'mon! I'll take the top half, and you take the bottom!"

"What does that even MEAN?! We're the same demon! Wait... hold on. Is Berith... moving?"

Davook's eyes flick to Berith's corpse. Despite the brains gushing from her skewered eye, Berith twitches her hand. Suddenly, she jumps to her feet. Her left eye morphs into a pitch-black onyx as death energy radiates from her body.

"Gah! You despicable little shit! You killed me!"

Davook shrinks away. "You're alive?! Uh oh."

"Only because of Valac! Worthless little wretch! I'll make you regret-"

Suddenly, Berith stops. Her eyes lose focus. She stumbles forward and clutches her chest.

"What? No... no... Master Valac! He's-"

Before the words leave her mouth, Berith falls forward and flops lifelessly onto Heaven's Soil. Her body ceases its movement, and a moment later, scatters into ash.

Davook's eyes become as wide as saucers.

"Um..."

"I think she's dead."

"Should we...?"

"Yeah. I don't know what killed her, but let's not let ourselves be next."

"Fine by me."

A shudder runs down Davook's spine. He flees the scene of the crime, leaving her ashes to scatter into the wind.

Uzziel... forget... the Titan woman... come to me... heal me... I'm dying...

Hercules' command comes to Uzziel like a whisper spoken in a sleeping woman's ear.

The Archangel of Creation blinks slowly. A profound sense of drowsiness fades from her mind. She raises her head to see a seventy-foot Titaness trapped inside a transparent green chrysalis.

"Huh?! Who is this?!"

Uzziel jerks back in surprise, only to stumble as she finds her feet rooted in Heaven's Soil.

Unsettling confusion befuddles her mind. She looks down and gasps as she realizes her entire body has partially turned into the form of a giant oak tree. Her delicate feminine hands now creak and crack from the bark continuing to grow. If left unchecked, she might fully transform into a tree and leave her angelic body behind.

Apprehensive and anxious, she quickly motions with her hands and suppresses the nature energy flowing from her spirit. Within moments, her natural energy diminishes to nothing, and she reverts back into her angelic form.

However, she does not release Ivaldi.

"Who is this Titan woman? What happened to Michael? My last memory was... was..."

Uzziel falls silent. She tries to remember what happened to Michael and the demons, let alone who the Titan before her is, but she can't remember. Ever since Hercules transformed her into Yggdrasil, the power enveloping her body forced her consciousness into a deep sleep. Only once his control waned has she regained her alertness.

Suddenly, a powerful command erupts in her mind.

COME TO ME! I AM DYING!

Uzziel clutches her chest as nausea hits her in waves.

"Aaaaa... it's Hercules... I cannot ignore his commands. Nnn..."

Uzziel disregards Ivaldi. She dives underground and begins swimming toward her Titan master. Despite several miles separating the two of them, Uzziel arrives at his side within half a minute. When she does, she jumps out of Heaven's Soil and lands in a crouch only a few feet from the fifteen-foot giant. Hercules rests on his knees and clutches his head as he swoons back and forth.

"Hurry... there isn't... much time left."

Uzziel stares at Hercules for a moment. Despite his command booming in her ears, she resists his weakened soul with her own, using her superior Archangel lineage to stand against him.

"I know not what thou didst, Hercules, but I am not thy slave! I am an Archangel! However, I will never allow someone to perish while I can still heal them. In exchange for my services, I will take away thy mightiest weapon. No longer shall thou ordereth me around like a beaten dog!"

A spark of anger and humiliation ignites in Uzziel's eyes. She motions with her hands and then grabs Hercules' face. Within seconds, the damage to his body, skull, and brain reverses. He returns to peak condition as if Berith had never struck him.

However, something else disappears.

Hercules staggers backward and lands on his ass. Despite his supreme ability to keep his emotions in check, the Titan's eyes bulge as he searches his soul.

"W-where is it?! Archangel whore! What did you do with my divine power?!"

"I sealed thy soul manipulation," Uzziel replies, her voice as cold as ice. "Thou cannot perish, today. Thou shalt survive to atone for thy sins! However, I will not allow thee to control the minds of anyone else ever again!"

Hercules gnashes his teeth. He jumps to his feet and clenches his fists. "Ignorant wench! Without my control, what do you think will happen to the Undying?! They will return to Valac's side!!"

Hercules gestures toward his twelve Undying warriors. As he does, he lowers his gaze to look at them, and then pauses.

"Wait... what is this? What happened?"

All twelve of his former minions slump against the ground, dead. Their bodies fizzle into ash, leaving nothing behind.

Hercules snarls at Uzziel. "You! What did you do?!"

Uzziel shakes her head. "I have nothing to do with their deaths."

"Liar!!"

Hercules swings his fist at Uzziel, but she quickly raises her hand and summons a wall of vines to protect herself. His fist impacts the plants like a baseball landing in a catcher's glove. His strength does nothing against their defense.

"I must go," Uzziel says, coldly. "I need to find my brother."

"Your brother? Ah! Michael!"

Hercules jerks his head toward the horizon. A faint blood-red mist continues to solidify in the distance. Slowly, but surely, it congeals into a tower of demonic mana.

"Forget everything! Michael is over there," Hercules says. He points at the demonic energy in the distance. "That one Demon Emperor... Diablo... I killed him, but he... he... something happened. We have to stop him!"

Uzziel evaluates Hercules for a moment. "I'll do what I can."

The Archangel falls backward and lands atop Heaven's Soil. The grass envelops her like a giant water-bed, and she travels underground again, leaving Hercules to his thoughts.

The young Titan presses both hands against the sides of his head. "That damned Archangel! She fought me the whole time, and now she's sealed my soul manipulation! Damn! My victory was supposed to be guaranteed! Now that it's come to this, I need to leave Heaven."

Hercules shoots a glance toward Berith's corpse. Nothing remains of her body but a pile of ash, identical to the ones left behind at Hercules' feet.

"I lost everything. Megara is dead. My people are nearly extinct. My ultimate power has been sealed. What can I do, now? Without my Army Manipulation, I only possess the strength of one Titan. I'm vulnerable. I won't be able to rely on any bodyguards to protect me."

"Bah! I don't need bodyguards. I don't need anyone! Even among the Titans, my strength is ten times greater than those still walking the mortal plane. Not even my father could defeat me if our fists collided! I will not fall prey to another assassination attempt as long as I keep my eyes peeled for trouble."

Hercules turns his head to the west. The battlefield continues to clink and clang with the sounds of steel and bone striking one another, but everything sounds distant, like a faded memory scattered to the winds of time.

"Father... why did you keep Valhalla's existence a secret from me? Why did you hide knowledge of the surviving Ancient Titans? Only by combing through the memories of the Archangels have I learned what I've lost. If I die, I will not enter the Great Hall, nor will I see Megara and the others who have perished to the demons. Is this my punishment? I only wished to save our people from extinction and ensure our survival. Why do you hate me, your only son, with such a fiery rage?"

The young Titan takes a minute to reorient himself. His thoughts and plans, now scorched to ash, leave him no option but to retreat.

"I could stay and fight. At the least, I might be able to help push the demons back... bah! I care not whether the demons or angels perish! The only beings who matter are Titans! Our blood is not tarnished with vile atrocities and genocide. If I am to continue reigning as king, I must first defeat Ivaldi, dethrone my father, and take my people to- hm?"

Hercules pauses.

A sensation of danger sweeps over him. From the south, a sound like thunder reaches his ears. Rapid footsteps kick up a cloud of dust. Bael, the Duke of Pain, chases after Azazel and Azog as they fly through the air.

Hercules blinks in surprise. "The Duke of Pain? Ah! That little rat... he's the one who ruined everything for me. If it weren't for him turning into that damned monster, I would have held demonkind's fate in the palm of my hand! Hah! At the least, I should thank the Creator for delivering him to my fists today! If I cannot rule Titankind, I can at least exact my revenge against the bastard who humiliated me!"

* * *

Meanwhile, Bael charges toward Hercules, but he doesn't notice the Titan standing amidst a field of ash. Instead, Bael's eyes fixate on the two Demon Dukes flying overhead, weaving and dodging his attacks.

"Stand still, ya little slippery cunts! Hiyah!!"

Bael twirls his newly created mace over his head. The one-ton flail jumps into the air and swings toward Azog. Azog's blue dress flutters crazily as the Duke dives down and to the left, narrowly evading Bael's attack. Mjölfnir strikes Heaven's soil with enough force to blast half a ton of rock and dirt into the atmosphere.

"♪C-come on, Bael! Stop! There's no need for us to fight!♪"

Azazel follows after Azog. "♪We'll stop teasing you! Put down the flail, and we'll talk, alright?!♪"

"No more talking!" Bael screams. "I'll flatten you little pricks into mulch! C'mere!"

Suddenly, Bael's eyes flick toward a flash of movement. He barely catches sight of a massive Titan falling from the sky as Hercules leaps at him and raises his fist.

BOOM!!

Hercules slams his fist into Bael's chest and pounds the Duke of Pain backward into Heaven's Soil.

"Hahaha!! I get to rip apart the fabled Balrog with my bare hands! What an excellent gift Fate has given to me!"

Bael stares into the sky. A small crater formed around him obscures his vision, but his breathing remains steady.

"...What just hit me?"

Bael grunts for a moment, grabs the side of the pit, and pulls himself out of the ground — when he spots Hercules, his demeanor shifts. "Oh, hey! It's you! That, uh, big guy! The tall one! Tall-guy!"

Hercules stops laughing. "Aye, we meet again, and today I'm going to kill you, little demon. No more tricks. Now that I know about your incredible power, you won't catch me offguard like you did before! I want you to transform into that monster again, so I may give you a taste of my fury. I won't lose this time!"

"Monster? You mean... my uh... Balrog Form?"

Bael scowls.

"Hell no! I ain't morphing ever again! Nuh-uh! Not even once, you little squirt! I don't need to become a Balrog to beat you!"

Hercules punches his palm. "Do not disparage me, Bael! I won't be satisfied unless I crush you at your peak!"

"Hah! I don't even need to pee, dumbass!"

"I said 'peak,' you little..."

"Stop talking about my pee-pee!!"

Azog and Azazel hover a hundred feet above. Azog shoots a look of disbelief at his pink-wearing brother. "♪I believed it absurd when Bael punched a hammer into submission, but that wasn't the end of his limited cognition!♪"

Azog nods. "♪We've done enough for today; we've followed Valac's orders. We brought Bael here, so we must leave him to create disorder!♪"

"♪Master Valac sees all, for everything is a part of his plan. Hercules stood in his path, so Valac made Bael his hitman!♪"

"♪How wise he is, how far his eyes pierce! Master Valac is a reliable leader, a warrior truly fierce.♪"

"♪Hm, but I cannot sense Master Valac anymore. Perhaps he's withdrawn from Heaven, since he finds the battle a chore?♪"

"♪That might be the reason, yes, it might be the case, so perhaps we should return home and visit our master's cave!♪"

Satisfied with the fight brewing below them, both brothers take to the skies, leaving Bael and Hercules to settle their differences.

"I'm not going to transform," Bael growls. "Last time, I lost my cool. This time, I'm in control."

Hercules lunges at Bael. He swings his fist at him and bashes Bael with his godlike strength, forcing the Duke of Pain backward. Bael catches Hercules' fist and grinds his feet into the ground, preventing himself from flying away. Even at eight-feet-tall, Bael is still a toddler compared to the fifteen-foot giant towering over him.

"Don't mock me, demon! You stand no chance of defeating me without transforming! I'll make you pay for ruining my plans!"

Bael rolls his eyes. "Hit me all you want, chump. You can't hurt me. I'm tough as hell. This is one fight you ain't winning."

"We'll see about that!"

Hercules rears his foot back. Before Bael can react, Hercules kicks the Duke with all his strength, transforming Bael into a fleshy football. Bael vanishes from Heaven's surface and rockets into the air.

"Oh, fuck, fuck, fuuuck!"

Bael careens helplessly through the sky. Without any flying abilities, he can only watch as the ground rushes at him.

Crash!

Bael plows into the dirt like a heaven-bound missile. He kicks up a massive wave of soil before coming to a rest on his back.

"Ptuh," Bael spits dirt out of his mouth. "Alright, asshole. That does it. No more Mister Nice Bael."

Bael jumps out of the dirt. Half a mile separates him and Hercules.

"Alright, Big Bonk! I need you!"

Bael holds up his hand. Mjölfnir senses his call and immediately jumps away from Hercules to rush toward its master.

Slap!

The flail's handle lands in Bael's open palm. A second later, Bael condenses power into his legs.

"Hup!"

Bael leaps toward Hercules. Despite his lack of wings, Bael's muscles give him incredible leaping abilities.

"Eat shit, Titan-pup!"

Bael swings Mjölfnir over his head. The one-ton spiked wrecking ball soars into the sky and plummets toward Hercules like a metallic meteor.

Hercules raises his arms to shield himself.

"You don't scare me!"

THOOOM!

Mjölfnir slams into Hercules at the speed of sound. A hundred bones shatter in Hercules' body. He falls into his shadow under the weight and power of the divine weapon; pulverized into mush.

Bael lands a few feet away. He skids to a stop and grimaces as he spots the young Titan entrenched in Heaven's Soil. Both of Hercules' arms lay splattered across his chest, with Mjölfnir resting atop them. Several ribs stick out, and his legs lay bent at an awkward angle.

"Hng... gnn..."

Hercules groans as waves of pain flood through his body.

"Hu... happ...en...ed?"

Bael winces. "Spawn of a broodmother. Jeez, sorry, kid. I didn't mean to hurt'cha that bad. Shit. Are you gonna die? Here, lemme pull Big Bonk offa ya. I don't even know my own strength, sometimes."

Bael grabs Mjölfnir's chain and pulls the one-ton flail off Hercules' chest. The Titan groans in relief as the immense pressure vanishes. However, blood begins to seep from his freshly opened wounds.

"Kuh... hurts... you... bastard."

Bael rubs his head sheepishly. "Dude, seriously, I'm sorry! Didn't mean to hit'cha that hard. I just wanted to teach ya a little lesson, ya know?"

After a moment, Bael frowns.

"Hey, come on. Don't give me that look! It's your own damn fault for takin' a swing at me! You had a smackdown coming; I'm just the guy who gave it to ya!"

Bael grumbles to himself. But as he watches the life ebb from Hercules' body, a sense of pity overtakes him.

"Alright, alright. I'll see if I can find someone to heal you. Ain't no sense in having me be the only strong guy around here. Besides, it's not like- what was that?"

Bael's attention wavers. He swivels his head toward the battlefield, where the sounds of battle have faded away. No longer do the clashes of swords and claws meet with the screams of pain and death. Instead, the two sides come to a standstill to gape at an enormous, bloody cloud of demonic energy gathering around the center of the battlefield.

"What... the... hell?"

Bael, a demon who has never sensed or controlled magic even once in his life, feels a chill descend on him. Unimaginable waves of magic power radiate from a single spot in the center of all the combatants.

"Okay. That can *not* be good. We'll talk later, big guy. I've... gotta go."

Hercules whimpers pitifully. He watches, unable to stop Bael, as the Duke of Pain leaves him behind.

"No... please... don't... leave me... here..."

* * *

The Archdemon awakens.

Part 164: The Unending Flame

Camael, Raphael, the four Valkyries, and Neptune scrutinize each other for a few moments. Eventually, Camael turns to look at her brother.

"We must pursue the Reaper. Time is of the essence. I've narrowed down his hiding place to a mountain range not far from Sinai. It seems Valac hid under our noses for millennia."

Raphael nods. "A sound suggestion, I will open a portal there. We must overwhelm the Reaper with our collective might. Give me the location."

Camael nods. She motions with her hands and summons a marble-sized ball of light, then tosses it to Raphael, who absorbs it into his spiritual energy.

"Hm. Hm, yes, I see — the Niflheim mountain range. 'Tis scarcely five miles from Sinai, as the crow flies. Hmph. No wonder the Reaper was capable of sending his clones to us at such high speeds."

"I know not the Reaper's exact location," Camael says, "but I do know he is somewhere underground. We mapped out the nearby caves after we first arrived on Earth. 'Tis a vast, intricate system of tunnels and underground streams. Of course, once we draw near, we should be able to follow Valac's death energy. He will not stay hidden for long."

"Indeed," Raphael replies. He flicks his gaze to the Valkyries. "Hyacinth has yet to recover from her injuries, and Uzziel is preoccupied with assisting Michael. We will have to exert extreme caution to prevent casualties. I want the three of thee to follow after Camael and- hm? Catherine? Is something the matter?"

Raphael's eyes flick to his sister, the Valkyrie of Fire. Catherine glowers at him with fury-filled eyes, sending a pang of shock through his body.

Why does my sister gaze upon me with such anger? Have I done something to offend her?

Catherine traces her sword through the air to form letters.

Raphael. We talk. Privately.

Her words carry an ominous tone. Raphael shoots a questioning glance at Camael, but the Archangel of Divination merely shrugs.

"Ah... very well, then. We haven't much time to spare. Let us chat behind that rock over there."

Raphael gestures toward a few trees torn halfway out of the ground only a few hundred feet away. A giant boulder lies nestled among the shrubbery, offering a moderate level of privacy. Here, on the southern edge of the battlefield, few demons have the time or luxury to bother with the Archangels and Valkyries.

Catherine nods. *This won't take long.*

* * *

A minute later, Catherine and Raphael arrive at the rear of the rock. Raphael's expression betrays his internal struggle to guess what's distressing his younger sister, but his shock triples when she finally speaks.

I'll fight the Reaper. Alone.

Raphael takes a step back in surprise. "W-what?! Dids't thou pulleth me aside merely to speak nonsense?! What self-destructive thoughts have addled thy brain, Catherine?"

Catherine sets her jaw. *I remember everything, Raphael. All of it. Thy half-cooked lies. Thy failed promises. Eternal peace, thou predicted. What peace? Only war. Look around us. Death and suffering. Your fault.*

Raphael's shock shifts to discomfort, and then to anger. "I see. What happened? How did my seal break?"

Valac tried to kill me. I fought back. Thy mental seal shattered. Nothing remains.

Raphael's anger dissipates. He closes his eyes and sighs. "Haah... so it was like that. I... I'm sorry, sister. Of all the Cherubs, thou were the one who argued most in favor of the memory-wipes. I... I never expected things to reach the point they have today."

But they did. How have we changed? Millions of years, passed. Our bloodthirst remains. We continue to enslave. We continue to kill. Thy seals did nothing! This war is thy fault!

Catherine clenches her hand into a fist. *Thou hads't one job. End the bloodshed. End the violence. Thou were our guide! I've recovered my memories. What if Michael follows? What if Uzziel does?!*

Raphael's eyes harden. "I won't allow that."

Of course not. Thy 'heroics' are limitless. Slaughter Michael, butcher Uzziel. Do as thou always have. Continue failing, until-

"That's enough."

Raphael waves his hand at Catherine.

"I won't hear another word. Come, sister. I will reinstate the seal. There is no need to dwell on our past mistakes."

Raphael takes a step toward Catherine, but her sword suddenly dances through the air, tracing letters in the air rapid-fire.

No! Our failures have returned! Open thy eyes, Raphael! Look around! Thy promises meant nothing! The demons rampage. Our people fall! Thou have failed. Now, I will take over. I must complete this journey. I will kill Valac, alone.

Raphael falters. His confidence dissipates as he tries to make sense of Catherine's request.

"Tis impossible for thee to defeat the Reaper by thyself, Catherine. Stop speaking nonsense. Camael and I will go with thee, and-"

No. Thou will not.

Catherine opens her palm. A small flicker of fire appears above her hand. It hovers for a moment, before dissipating.

I require no assistance.

Raphael's eyes widen. A look of horror spreads across his face as he realizes what Catherine intends to do.

"No... no! I won't allow it! I've lost too many brothers and sisters today! Thy plan is suicidal! Imbecilic!"

Catherine closes her eyes. A single tear squeezes from them.

*I remember, Raphael. I remember everything. What Michael **did**. He **killed them** for me. I was to ascend. To become an Archangel. Did Michael love me? Did I kill for him? For me? I tried to love him. I murdered anyone he ordered. But... Michael used me. I was his weapon. His tool. Nothing more.*

Raphael falls silent. He watches as Catherine struggles to suppress her emotions. She fails, and tears stream down her face.

Muriel and Cassiel perished. Why? Because of my selfishness. Jörmungandr should have slain me. I cannot continue living. I must sacrifice myself. For them. For everyone I hurt. I will kill Valac. I will save our people. That is my last act.

Raphael lowers his eyes.

"Oh, sister. If only I had known how much pain thou felt. To blame thyself to this extent..."

Catherine sucks in a deep breath. She wipes her eyes and clenches her sword with both hands.

Raphael. Promise me something. Michael must never remember. He mustn't revive his hatred. His anger. We don't deserve love. We should both perish. However, I can't accept that.

Catherine continues. *I will suffer Michael's sins. I will remember for him. I will redeem him.*

Raphael opens his mouth to protest, but the words don't come out the way he wants. He watches as Catherine sheathes the Sword From Heaven, unbuckles its belt from her waist, and hands it to him.

This blade, useless. Take it. Give to someone deserving. It won't harm Valac. Only my dragonfire will.

"Damnation, Catherine," Raphael mutters. "Why must thou act so stoic and hard of heart? Thy path is lonely, but to walk it is thy choice. If only thou were to reach out thy hand, a hundred of thy brothers and sisters would grab hold of it and fight whatever ails thee. Don't do this. Don't give up thy life for some futile... worthless notion of redemption."

Catherine shakes her head. She lightly tosses the Sword From Heaven forward and allows it to clink at Raphael's feet.

My redemption is impossible. I will act selfishly again. I will protect my family. That is all. After all... I am a monster.

Raphael stares numbly at the Sword From Heaven. He squeezes his hands into fists and sighs. "Thou art wrong, Catherine. Never once did I look upon thee as a monster. If thou art unworthy of living, then what am I? A hypocrite. A fool who chose the path of bloodshed for the sake of convenience. Even after abandoning my former ways, my sins remained. Those I killed will never gaze upon the mortal realm ever again."

Catherine nods. *Likewise.*

"Thou art a better child of the Creator than I," Raphael mutters. "Hmph. My sisters and brothers call me the Archangel of Wisdom... but I am a fool. A coward. I never had the resolve to give up my life for the greater good. I am neither as wise nor as compassionate as thee... a genuine warrior of the light."

Catherine shakes her head. *Aye. We are both monsters. Don't compare us. Inevitably, genocide is genocide. Please, Raphael. Reflect on my sacrifice. Find peace. Thy will is iron. I couldn't accomplish thy feats. Shielding our family; while remembering our past. I'd have buckled eons ago.*

Several seconds pass. Silence fills the air.

Catherine gestures away from Raphael. *Summon a portal. I must leave immediately.*

Raphael's expression turns crestfallen. "Have I lost all chances of changing thy mind? Camael wields Excalibur. Surely, she could..."

That weapon is incomplete. I won't rely on it.

"But..."

Raphael. Open the portal.

Catherine hardens her heart and stares at her brother with defiant eyes. No matter how he tries to plead with her, she does not back down.

Defeated, Raphael conjures a portal to Niflheim. The other angels don't notice as Catherine nods and steps through.

Raphael watches as she motions with her hands and conjures words into the air.

Farewell, brother.

Sounds don't pass through Raphael's portal. Nevertheless, he mouths his reply back to Catherine, allowing her to read his lips.

"Farewell, my beloved little sister. Thou art... truly... a saint."

Recommended Listening

Catherine strides toward the cave's entrance. Her boots press against the soft, fertile grass of Earth. No longer does the clanking of metal and bones meet her ears. Instead, the boundless, peaceful aroma and sounds of nature greet her as she heads toward Valac's domain.

Her heart beats weakly in her chest. Self-doubt and despair cloud her judgment.

Am I doing the right thing? Is it worth giving my life to kill the Reaper?

After a moment, she nods.

Of course. What use is my existence to this universe? My time is over. Were the Creator to see me today, he would question why I had survived this long. He would ask me why I had not yet succumbed to fate.

I have lived a life most heinous. I deserve the worst of endings. Despite this, my brethren will surely look upon my death favorably. They will call me a hero. They will look upon me as if I were a most righteous figure; one who lived without reproach.

...And they will be wrong.

Cassiel. Muriel. They died due to my inaction. Had I opened my eyes sooner, I might have grasped Michael's evil schemes. I might have saved countless lives. Instead, I killed, and I allowed others to kill.

I am a demon.

A Devil.

Catherine raises her hands and presses them to her eyes. Magical energy surges through her eyelids. A moment later, she lowers her palms and opens her eyes to reveal a feral, animalistic gaze. Like a crocodile, two slit-pupils of pure blackness mix with a blood-red cornea to give her the eyes of a dragon. The colors of nature fade away, transforming the life energy of the animals and bugs around her into a rainbow.

Catherine sweeps her gaze in a wide arc. She takes a moment to swallow the scenery around herself for the last time.

Jörmungandr's eyes. The key to her power. I possess her flames, and her fiery gaze. Once, my brother Samael believed her to be a peaceful creature; one that wanted nothing more than to slumber for all eternity. Perhaps, in the beginning, he may have been right. But, in the end, during our final battle... there was nothing but limitless fury contained in her bosom. Were it not for Michael, Cassiel, and Muriel working alongside me; the Original Serpent might have slain us all.

Perhaps t'would have been for the best.

Catherine's slit-eyes focus on the small opening in the side of the hill. Pitch-black death energy flows from within, exposing the presence of the Reaper and his minions. Jörmungandr's eyes give Catherine the clarity to trace his energy as if it were a part of herself.

Dragons were fearsome monsters in appearance, but... as I recall, one of them was particularly endearing to Samael. Bah. I cannot help but think of my fallen brother at times like these. How tragic for him to perish while fighting his flesh and blood. If he could see what we'd become, I wonder what he would say.

Catherine slowly walks forward. As she enters the cave, she ignites a small plume of flame in her grasp and holds it aloft to reveal the cave's layout. Her draconic eyes pierce the darkness, but she takes no chances when it comes to the Reaper.

Valac has yet to flee. In such an enclosed space, he may feel at ease knowing his clones can ambush me from any direction. Sadly, their power will prove lacking against my Dragonfire.

After a minute of walking, the cave opens up before Catherine into a vast expanse. The ground slopes downward while the ceiling curves into a dome. Catherine's eyes flick toward several small cave entrances, each of which heads off in different directions. An underground brook bubbles silently, passing over rocks and around stalagmites as it heads from north to south.

Catherine examines each of the different nooks and crannies leading to different chambers and passages. Within seconds, she locates the one from which the most death energy is radiating.

There he is.

The Valkyrie of Fire flaps her wings. She rockets toward the passage at a frenetic speed while stomping her feet. Her footsteps echo into the distance, warning Valac of her arrival.

Come to me, Reaper.

As if summoned by her thoughts, a single Reaper clone leaps out of the ground at Catherine. She turns her head to look at it, causing fire to erupt from her eyes.

FWOOOSH!

Valac's clone jumps back and screams as the mana-infused flames scorch not only his bones, but his soul to ash. A moment later, he falls to the ground, unmoving.

Catherine flinches. Her eyes water from the stinging pain of Jörmungandr's dragon magic, but her heart remains resolute.

A small amount of suffering will not deter a sinner like me. This pain is the least I deserve.

Two more clones leap at her from the right and left. They pounce from the walls like deranged ghosts trying to spook a little girl. However, Catherine slaps her chest, causing a wave of fire to explode from her body. Both clones shriek and slam against the wall, then crumble to ash.

Such pitiful attacks. The Reaper must be probing my abilities.

Catherine continues walking. The attacks from Valac's clones intensify. Three clones attack her, then four, five... soon, twenty clones ambush her with ferocious killing intent, but Catherine never falters.

The Valkyrie of Fire traces words in the air. *Sending mindless monsters, Reaper? Thy defeat is inevitable.*

Catherine spins on her heel and sweeps her hand in a wide arc. A torrent of flames bursts out of her palm and engulfs all twenty of Valac's clones. They fall to the cave floor while shrieking and wailing. Within moments, they melt away, leaving nothing but ash behind.

Catherine sets her jaw. Her body aches and burns as Jörmungandr's mana sears her nervous system to the point of no return. Her breathing comes in ragged gasps. The heat in the cave threatens to overwhelm her, but still, she presses on.

Come, Reaper! Unleash thy power! I'll show thee how weak thy pitiful soul manipulation is, compared to a monster from the Primordial Era!

Valac's death energy thickens into a dense, black fog as Catherine walks. Eventually, she returns her eyes to normal. Jörmungandr's eyes prove unable to see through Valac's evil aura.

Finally, the passage enlarges. A small room appears before Catherine, one illuminated by a sickly green light. Valac's lantern sits atop a two-foot-tall pedestal, with a rock placed nearby for the Reaper to rest.

Valac sits inside the cave and watches as Catherine appears.

"Ehehehe. Oh, you foolish little girl. You've come alone, thinking you could defeat the Reaper? Your bravery is commendable; so I suppose that makes you a keeper. I'd love to chat, but you've forced my hand. I'll battle you now, and kill you where you stand."

Valac motions with his hands. His three remaining super-clones bubble out of the ground and appear before him, creating a shield of hardened flesh and bone.

All three clones clap their palms together and spread out their arms. A powerful force field, one formed from death energy, spreads from one wall to the other, then encircles the three of them and Valac's main body.

Valac coughs. "Kuh-huh... to achieve my power, I gave up my mobility. I may sit here trapped, but killing you is well within my capability."

Catherine narrows her eyes. Internally, she questions Valac's words. *The Reaper is trapped? Is that why he hasn't fled? He can predict the future. So, surely, he knew I would come for him.*

Catherine motions to summon her dragonfire, but she falters as a sensation of danger appears from behind her. She turns around and gawks as horrible mutated aberrations stride out of the darkness. Created from Titan souls mixed with the bodies of powerful demons, angels, and monsters, these beings lack the purity of Valac's super-clones. Still, each one possesses frightening levels of raw power.

"Gehehe!" Valac laughs. "You silly fool! You've entered the serpent's lair! With your escape route cut off, you haven't a prayer!"

Catherine's shoulders lose their tension. A faint smile crosses over her face.

And here I thought he would present a challenge. I understand, now. The Reaper intends to protect his main body while overwhelming me with low-quality souls. I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint him.

A cave bear and Titan mixture lumbers toward Catherine. In the cramped hallway, the giant beast engulfs the space, making it appear truly monstrous.

"GRAAAAAAAHRRR!!!"

A wild howl erupts from the animal's lungs. Electricity spirals around its claws. It hunches down and coils strength into its limbs to charge at Catherine, but she doesn't give it a chance to attack.

Fire spear.

Catherine motions with her hands and summons a Dragonfire-partisan. The seven-foot weapon scorches her hands, but she ignores the pain, rears back, and hurls it at the beast.

Swish!

As if the animal were nothing more than an illusion, Catherine's javelin pierces straight through its body and sails into the distance. Several monsters behind it scream in surprise as her attack impales them before they can react.

The cave bear lowers its head. It gapes for a moment at the bowling-ball-sized hole in its chest. Then, it stumbles forward and collapses into ash.

Valac stares, stunned.

"Wha... what are you waiting for?! Attack her, imbeciles!!"

Panic creeps into his voice. Valac orders his minions, and a fierce battle commences. Freakish monsters of all types rush down the hallway toward Catherine. She summons swords, spears, axes, and hammers, all of them created from Dragonfire. One by one, she spins and twists to execute each monster as part of a dazzling dance of death.

Valac's glee turns to rage. He watches as dozens of Titan souls crumble to ash, many of which he had planned to make into new super-clones once he refined them. In a fit of rage, he grabs thousands of souls from his lantern and throws them to the ground. They transform into low-level clones and rush through the death energy shield toward Catherine's flank.

"Kill her! Kill the Valkyrie!!"

Catherine spins on her heel like a ballet dancer. Flames spiral around her and smash aside any clones daring enough to enter melee striking distance. Once she builds up enough spiral firepower, Catherine stomps her foot down and comes to a screeching halt. With a flap of her wings, she sends the fireballs flying in every direction up and down the halls.

Hundreds of agonized screams echo throughout the caves. Valac's clones and minions perish one after the other.

Suddenly, Catherine stumbles forward. Her legs seize up as all of their nerves melt together. She loses her ability to walk and flops to the ground. Her hands tremble, and nausea rumbles in her stomach.

Oh, Creator... Jörmungandr's flames are devouring me alive... I can't... can't... fight... for much longer...

Valac cackles as the Valkyrie falls to the ground.

"Ehehehe! That's right! Your flames are a double-sided blade! Using them against me will only result in your death! Stupid, pathetic woman! This is why you'll never measure up to ME!"

Patches of Catherine's skin turn black as the fire cooks her alive. Bubbles and boils spread across her body, creating unimaginable agony in her soul.

As her movements stop, the undead monsters suddenly rush forward and pounce at her.

Catherine shivers. She gazes into the eyes of Death as the Reaper's hordes fall upon her.

It's now or never!

Catherine closes her eyes. A moment later, the wounds on her body begin to regenerate rapidly. Her injuries dissipate, and powerful mana swallows her mind.

I am one with the eternal flame! I give myself to the dragon's might! I renounce my angelic heritage! Oh, great Phoenix, give me the strength to slaughter this demon!!

Catherine's wings transform from white to red. Flames swallow them whole. The moment one of the monsters bites onto her arm, molten lava discharges from her veins and enters its mouth, causing the Sabertooth-Titan to leap backward and scream. "Kaaarruuugh!!"

The Valkyrie of Fire leaps to her feet. Flames scorch away her clothing and armor, leaving her completely naked. The cave becomes an oven and jumps to five hundred degrees, seven hundred, and even a thousand.

None of Valac's monsters dare to come any closer. They fall back, unable to withstand the sun-like radiation discharging from Catherine's body.

As the flames engulf Catherine, one thought materializes in her mind.

I'm cold. So... cold.

I cannot come back once I unleash the power of Camael's Phoenix. The sliver of her artifact she gave me is too much for my body to handle. 'Tis now or never.

She spins on her heel and whirls to face the three super-clones. All of them gasp for breath as her body emits over a thousand degrees of heat. Catherine aims her palm at the barrier and fires a blast of radiation at it.

KSSSSEEEEW!

Her strength, the supreme power of Sol, battles Valac's death energy. All of Valac's clones shriek as their bodies melt and liquefy under ten thousand degrees of solar energy.

"No! Noooo!!"

A moment later, Catherine's radiation attack punches a hole through the barrier. It slams into one of the super-clones and fries him into ash before he can react. A light as bright as the sun emits from her palm and blinds the remaining two. They try to look away, but only seconds later, two more radiation attacks punch through their barriers and annihilate them.

Catherine closes her eyes.

I've only a minute left.

The death energy shield dissipates into ash, unleashing the full force of her power against Valac's original body.

Valac stumbles off his stone stool and falls to the ground. Panic appears in his eyes.

"Wait! Wait, please! Stop! You're supposed to be the good guy! An agent of the light! Can't we talk things out?!"

His pitiful cries for help cause immeasurable rage to build up in Catherine's heart.

She opens her eyes. Her gaze fixates on Valac's.

Catherine takes a step forward and opens her mouth.

"N... nnnn... nnoooo... mer.... cyyyyy..."

Her voice, cracked and broken, breathes through her lips like a whisper from the clouds. Tears of fire flow freely, giving Catherine a bone-chilling demonic appearance.

"D... d... diiiieee...."

Valac's eyes widen. He watches as she raises her palm and aims it at him.

"No! Please! Nooooo!!"

THOOOOOM!

Catherine's attack fires from her palm like a cannonball at point-blank range. Valac's main body explodes into a million, billion specks of ash. He scatters all over the cave, while Catherine's radiation blast pierces through ten miles of the Earth's crust, leaving a massive tunnel in its wake.

"Skreee!"

All of Valac's monsters scream in pain, only to transform into ash moments later.

Several seconds pass.

Catherine's life energy disperses. She stares at the Reaper's ashes and waits for him to pull off a last-second trick. However, as she waits, the Reaper's death energy fades away, giving the air a clean, refreshing feeling.

Catherine's will to fight disappears. She falls forward and slumps to her knees.

Nnn... it's... almost over... for me...

Liquid lava falls from her eyes. Sadness and anguish overtake Catherine as her memories slowly fall away, bit by bit.

It's so cold... so cold... is it winter? Why am I here? Who am I?

The fire flowing from Catherine's body loses its luster. Eventually, her skin shifts from bright red to a faded, dullish grey color.

Michael... Michael... what does that word mean? Why does it seem... so important to me?

Catherine's eyes turn blank. Her body heat evaporates, turning her into an ashen statue of a lonely warrior who died fighting for what she believed.

All the while, Valac's lantern continues to burn with a faint, green light.

Part 165: Angels and Titans United

Satan opens his eyes. His head throbs, and his vision blurs as he forces himself to stand up. Distant screams tickle his ears as he tries to reorient his senses.

"W... where... am I? What happened?"

Hades answers Satan's question, but his tone is quiet, and his voice trembles. *Oh, thank the Creator, thou hath finally awakened. Listen carefully to what I'm about to tell thee, Satan. Thou hath died nearly fifty times. It's been an hour since that damned she-Titan started stomping thy body into blood paste. I barely saved us by... never mind. It doesn't matter.*

"She-Titan? Huh?"

Satan blinks deliriously. He slowly turns around to see hundreds of cherubs and demons lobbing fireballs, spears of light, and many other projectiles into the distance. It takes Satan a second to realize that the angels and demons are no longer fighting one another, but something else.

*I don't know exactly what that... that **thing** is... Hades whispers. But 'tis the vilest deity I have ever seen; the reincarnation of Morva. Nay, not even Morva possessed such limitless... hatred... rage...*

Hades falls silent. Terror creeps up Satan's spine, starting from his toes and working its way to his ears. The Devil shudders as he turns around and raises his gaze to the sky above.

"Wha... what the hell is... is THAT...?!"

Satan's blood turns to ice, and his pupils shrink to pinpricks. He stands in place, rooted to the spot, as he gazes upon a monster standing over one thousand feet tall. A laser-like plume of flame ignites in its mouth and fires into the distance. One of Heaven's tallest mountains shatters under the attack, sending thousands of tons of rock, dirt, and natural deposits spraying into the atmosphere. Seconds later, lava falls from the sky as the superheated rock and stone plummet back to Heaven's Soil. Countless angels and demons perish in an instant, unable to avoid the falling meteor shower.

Hades swallows a gulp of breath. *That thing... that creature... is a dark god.*

One hour earlier.

Camael watches as Raphael steps out from behind the large boulder. After he walks forward, her eyes widen.

"Brother! Where is Catherine?"

Raphael shakes his head. "Our sister made a choice; one intended for the betterment of angelkind. She will kill the Reaper herself."

"Nonsense! Open a portal to Valac's lair at once! What purpose dost thou believe my sword serves, if not to slay the one who has wrought death and destruction upon our brethren?!"

Raphael flicks his gaze around the group of angels. Already, Hyacinth has recovered somewhat. She sits on the grass and rubs her head. Her eyes tell a story of exhaustion countered by her will to fight. She struggles to stand up when Raphael walks closer, but Sophia pushes her back down.

The Archangel of Wisdom's eyes next flick to Neptune. His undead appearance sends a pang of disgust through Raphael's body. Raphael shivers as Neptune's glowing red eyes fixate on him. Even so, the young Titan's gaze is anything but sinister. He somehow manages to resemble a confused dog; one whose master has left him at the side of the road. Occasionally, he looks toward the battle in the distance.

"Demons assault Heaven, yet here we stand, twiddling our thumbs. Have you any plans, Archangel of Wisdom? My father respected you greatly, yet seeing two of the hailed Archangels standing on the sidelines without fighting does little to inspire me."

Raphael nods. "Thou art correct, Neptune. We must leave Catherine to her devices. I have little doubt she will lay waste to the Reaper's machinations. Our task is to return to our brothers and assist them in driving out the demons. Come! We mustn't dilly-dally. Catherine's sacrifice will give us the edge to win this battle."

Camael stares at Raphael in disbelief. "We cannot leave her behind! The battle has nearly ended, Raphael! After we clear out the riff-raff, we will only have to deal with a few remaining Demon Emperors! How can'st thou act so heartless toward our sister?!"

Raphael smiles, but his expression lacks all traces of happiness. Instead, his eyes exude distress and longing. "I tried to persuade Catherine, but she would not stand for it. After all... she regained..."

The Archangel of Wisdom trails off. He sighs and looks away from Camael, toward the battlefield in the distance.

"Do not let Catherine's death be in vain. Thou may see her as a mere Valkyrie, but once, she possessed the potential to become an Archangel. Valac will fall before her might. Of that, I have no doubt."

Camael opens her mouth to argue, but Raphael's wings twitch, causing her to fall silent. She lowers her head and sighs.

"So be it. We will honor Catherine in the Hall of the Fallen. We will etch her name atop the Creator's Slab."

"Aye. That, we will," Raphael murmurs.

The two Archangels fall silent. Neptune flicks his eyes between them, then over to the other three Valkyries.

Sophia's expression becomes crestfallen. "Oh... Catherine... I didn't even get to say goodbye..."

Tears well up in Penelope's eyes. The giantess sniffles and looks toward the boulder where they last saw their sister. "I never imagined a day... where we wouldn't see Catherine again. Oh, Creator... why must thou taketh her from us?"

Hyacinth rubs her arm. Her body aches from the brutal beating she took earlier, but her expression remains tranquil. She closes her eyes and exhales. "Catherine always was the most resolute of us. Of all

the ways for her to fall, giving up her life to defeat a mighty foe is the one I know she'd pick. Every time."

Sophia and Penelope nod along to Hyacinth's words, but their agreement appears to be only surface-level. They try to rationalize her decision, but their emotions spiral within themselves, making them want to wretch.

"Cast aside all thoughts of Catherine," Raphael says. He grits his teeth and turns to face the Valkyries. "We are angels! We are the Creator's greatest warriors! Our task today is to wipe out demonkind and restore righteousness to the world! Come! Do not languish in sadness! There will be a time for tears, but it will not be until after today!"

Penelope wipes tears from her eyes. She straightens her stance and nods at Raphael. "I... I understand."

Sophia wraps an arm around Hyacinth and helps the Valkyrie of Wind to her feet. "We won't give up, brother."

Hyacinth nods. "We'll fight to honor Catherine's legacy."

All of the angels flick their gazes toward Neptune. The undead Titan shrugs with all four of Valac's arms. "I didn't know your sister, but sure. I'll fight for her."

The angels flap their wings and rise into the sky. Neptune focuses his mind and levitates off the ground, using the Reaper's residual energy to follow after them. Sophia and Hyacinth follow behind him, but only because of Hyacinth's weakened condition.

* * *

"I say, Raphael!" Neptune calls out. He increases his speed to catch up to the eldest Archangel. "Do you see that plume of red mana over there? It's faint, but..."

Raphael nods. "Aye. 'Tis quite abnormal. Its energy signature is demonic in origin."

"Should we investigate it?"

Raphael shoots a suspicious glance toward the Titan. He keeps his expression calm and placid, but evaluates Neptune's Reaper-like appearance with discomfort. "We should keep our distance, for now. We will go to assist Gabriel."

Neptune doesn't notice Raphael's paranoia. "Why keep our distance? With my father passing, I am now the mightiest of the Atlanteans! I am their rightful king!"

Raphael shakes his head. "It is as we told thee, Neptune. The Reaper slaughtered the Atlanteans. If any still exist, their numbers-"

"Pah! Don't speak of matters you know nothing about, old man!" Neptune snorts at Raphael derisively. "The Atlanteans are second only to Cronus's bloodline. When battling underwater, the Mad Titan's lineage never held a candle to ours! I am certain the rumors of our demise have been greatly overblown. You may not know this, but the depths of the seven seas are incomprehensively vast compared to the plains of the surface world. The Reaper couldn't possibly have found all of us!"

Raphael avoids Neptune's gaze and looks toward the battles unfolding on Heaven's surface. "Thy father perished to Satan the Devil, while thou fell to the Reaper's scythe. I know not how many Atlanteans lived within the seas before the Reaper slew thee, but I do know that very few come to this battlefield."

Neptune's confidence falters. He stares at Raphael's face for several seconds without replying. Eventually, he lowers his eyes to the world below. "...My people are not dead. They are too mighty. Too... stubborn..."

Raphael doesn't reply.

The angels fly in silence. Suddenly, Neptune's eyes ignite with rage.

"That damned Satan! He killed my father! He's here, isn't he?! Somewhere, amidst this field of bloodskins, Poseidon's murderer lurks! I must find him! I must take my revenge!"

Raphael flicks his eyes back to Neptune. The young Titan appears angered beyond belief. He snarls and sweeps his gaze around Heaven, using all of his senses to try and deduce the Devil's position.

"Calm down. If thy father's might exceeded thine in life, then even with that undead body, thou shalt perish to the Devil as well."

"Hmph! We won't know until I try!"

Neptune shakes his fist at Raphael.

"Never underestimate the strength of an Atlantean! Forged by the undercurrents of the sea, we train under millions of tons of pressure to achieve bodies the surface-dwelling Titans could never dream-"

Suddenly, Neptune falters. His voice cracks, and a strange burst of pain explodes in his chest.

"Gahk! Hnnn!!"

Raphael's suspicion doubles. He stops in midair and whirls around to watch as the Titan suddenly stops flying. Like a puppet with its strings cut, Neptune loses control and plummets to Heaven's Soil below.

"Aaaaugh!"

Having been tailing her brother and the undead Titan, Camael's gaze flicks from Raphael to Neptune. "Gods! I'll catch him!"

Raphael hesitates. The worry in his heart grows further as Neptune tumbles to the ground below, but eventually, the old man relents. He swoops down at half the speed of sound and reaches out his hand to grab the cloth wrapped around Neptune's waist.

Poof!

The undead Titan explodes into ash in midair. His body disperses and scatters into the wind, leaving Raphael to grasp uselessly at nothing!

The Archangel pulls up at the last second before slamming into the ground. The g-forces tug at his body, but he effortlessly resists them and swings his cane at one particularly grabby demon who tries to land a cheap shot.

Fwap!

Raphael's staff batters the Demon Lord senseless and sends him flying. Raphael flaps his wings and rises into the sky. He intercepts Camael, who gives him a look of incredulity.

"By the Creator! What just happened?!"

"I don't know," Raphael replies. "However, if I had to guess... I believe Neptune may have died."

"Died?! How?"

Raphael meets his sister's gaze. He stares at her with a look that says, *you already know the answer*.

Camael squeezes Excalibur's hilt. Her eyes widen as she meets Raphael's gaze. "Catherine...?"

"Aye. 'Tis unfortunate, but Catherine must have defeated Valac, and thusly, Neptune... dissolved."

Raphael glances in every direction. All across Heaven, countless angels and demons cry out in surprise as the undead around them fall to the ground and dissipate into ash.

The Valkyries arrive a few moments later. Sophia keeps one arm wrapped behind Hyacinth's back while using the other to wave at Camael and Raphael. "Hey! Hey! What happened to Neptune? Is he dead?!"

Raphael nods. "Aye. It seems that Catherine finished her task and slew the Reaper. With his death, all of the undead-"

Hyacinth gasps. Despite the pain wracking her body, she jerks a hand out to point at the ground. "Ah! What is that?"

Raphael follows her finger. His eyes fall upon the place where Neptune's ashes scattered. There, a flash of light ignites in the air. Neptune's soul, unconstrained by the Reaper's powers, glows with a light like Heaven itself. An embryo appears on the ground, levitates a few feet into the air, and begins rapidly expanding. Wind sucks toward it, increasing in intensity as the seconds pass.

Camael gasps. "What is this? Rebirth?"

Raphael's gaze hardens. Rage fills his eyes as the embryo transforms into a small child, continues gaining mass, and rapidly accelerates into the figure of a young man.

"Is this another of the Reaper's tricks?" Penelope asks. She grabs her mace and holds it with both hands, but waits for the Archangels to order an attack.

After half a minute, Neptune's embryonic body begins not only to rapidly age but to gain size as well. He increases to six feet in height, then eight feet, ten, twelve...

Soul manipulation! Raphael howls internally. With his knowledge of the past, and his boundless experience with soul manipulators of all types, his eyes turn bloodshot as he witnesses the spectacle unfolding beneath himself. *I don't believe it! Where are all of these souls coming from? If Catherine killed the Reaper, then what is happening to Neptune?*

Neptune's rate of growth explodes. Not ten seconds later, his body reaches thirty feet in height, then fifty, eighty, a hundred...

Soon, the rate of acceleration slows to a crawl. Neptune tops out at over one hundred and fifty feet tall. Towering above even Cronus at the Mad Titan's peak, Neptune's silky-smooth skin gives him the appearance of a humongous child. Soon, however, his appearance settles, and his skin hardens into that of an atypical Titan. Hair grows on his chest, in his armpits and groin, and even in other scattered spots across his body. His muscles swell to levels rivaling Hercules, and a look of excitement ignites in his eyes.

"Hah... hahaha! HAAHAHA!!"

Neptune, a giant towering over Raphael and the others, cackles with glee at his new body.

"Oh, what a stroke of good fortune! What a bountiful blessing the Creator has bestowed upon me; the rightful heir to the Atlantean lineage! Fellow Titans, bow before me! Your king has arrived to crush these filthy bloodskins!"

A dozen nearby Titans, all of whom stand only twenty to thirty feet tall, turn to gape at the mountain towering over them.

"Who is that? He seems familiar!"

"Is he one of Zeus's children? No! He's Atlantean! Could he be Poseidon, reborn?"

"Look! The cut of his chin! The shape of his hair! He must be Neptune!"

"That's impossible! Neptune perished to the Reaper's scythe!"

The Titans furiously debate amongst themselves who Neptune might be. He grins greedily at them and laughs.

"Oh, my brothers and sister, how long have you wept for me? I have returned from the hell that was Valac's grasp! Tortured and mutilated, the Reaper toyed with me endlessly! However! All he accomplished was strengthening my soul! I am no longer the child I once was! Behold, the new king of the Titans; Neptune! God of the Seas!"

Neptune sweeps his hand out. Far in the distance, one of Heaven's many lakes bubbles in excitement and leaps into the sky. It transforms into a flying river and rushes toward Neptune at frightening speeds, covering tens of miles in mere seconds.

Neptune laughs as the water slams into him like a bull plowing into a styrofoam castle. He shrugs off the power of the water, absorbs it into his body, and summons magically enchanted armor to protect himself.

"Behold! My birthright! The might of the ocean!"

His performance sends bolts of shock through thousands of demons and angels battling nearby. They all raise their heads and gape at the overwhelming mana flowing through the Titan King's body.

However, Raphael appears unmoved.

Accursed little shit! If Catherine defeated Valac, then somehow, Neptune's highly refined, undead soul must have absorbed Valac's leftover power! It has been many an eternity since I saw the might of Soul Transference rear its ugly head! What a stupid, worthless Titan brat! The Reaper must be using him!!

Raphael forces himself to calm down. However, his thoughts continue to spiral out of control.

Neptune was once one of Valac's captive souls, and one of the highly-refined golden ones, at that! Perhaps, when Catherine tore out Valac's soul from Neptune, she freed him from some of the Reaper's power. But, if that is the case, then why has he absorbed all of these souls? Could it be? Has he taken the souls Valac once possessed for himself?!

What else could be the case? That must be it! Neptune is nothing more than a pawn in the Reaper's plans!

Raphael opens his mouth to protest. He intends to howl obscenities at the Titan, but before he can speak, Camael interrupts him.

"Ah! How fortunate! Neptune has rebirthed as a mighty Titan King! With his power, the demons will surely fall today! Not even I was able to predict this occurrence! The Creator is on our side."

Raphael immediately swallows his words. A tinge of horror appears in his mind, along with a newfound realization.

What can I say? If I make an enemy of Neptune, he'll simply kill me on the spot. I'm far too weak to battle him. Even if all the Archangels were to unleash their might, we might kill him, but the demons would overrun us during the battle! We'd all perish. I don't have any proof of my suspicions. Ah! Perhaps if Camael used Excalibur she could... no! Even if Excalibur has the power to slay this Titan, I can't make any rash moves! A Titan exceeding one hundred feet tall is far too powerful for the angels of this era to handle. If I overestimate Excalibur's power, we'll all suffer gruesome deaths!

Raphael's lip trembles. He fights to hold in his rage and humiliation, but his vision begins to blur with tears.

My family now gazes upon him as a beacon of hope. What hope is there in a young Titan with the power to oppress all of us? Even if he should ally himself to our side and annihilate the demons, what recourse will we have once the battle concludes? Just one Titan King of his size is enough to wipe out legions of battle-hardened cherubs!

"Brother?"

Raphael pauses his thoughts to turn toward Camael. Her joyous expression fades as she recognizes the distress on his face. "Is something the matter?"

"No!" Raphael yells. "I... I didn't expect this development. With... with Neptune on our side... the battle will surely... surely..."

Camael's expression brightens. She misunderstands Raphael's emotions and claps her palm against her chest. "Aye! This is the opportunity we need to annihilate the demons! Come, brother! Let us stand alongside Neptune to defeat our foes!"

Camael flaps her wings and flies over to Neptune's shoulder, but Raphael lags behind her. His lethargic movements reveal the bitter battle entangling his mind.

I know not what path to take. Was this, perhaps, Valac's plan all along? Did he intend to forge himself a body capable of annihilating all of us effortlessly? Or was this an accident, perhaps something he did not foresee?

Neptune waves his hand, and water fires from his hands. The highly-pressurized liquid rushes toward a troop of Demon Lords and Barons on the ground, all of whom don't react in time. The water smashes into and pulverizes them into mulch, leaving only a smear of waterlogged blood and bone in their wake.

"Hahaha! Come now, little bloodskins! Which of you thinks they can hold a candle to me?!"

With a few more waves of his hand, Neptune systematically annihilates ten thousand demons. Panic and terror flood their ranks as they turn tail and flee.

"Get out! Run like hell!"

"That Titan is too strong! We're all gonna die!!"

"Eeeyaaaugh-"

The last voice cuts off as hyper-compressed water crushes him into meat paste.

Neptune laughs. His ecstasy only grows as he easily dominates one demon troop after another.

"Like a whale crushing ants, look at how the bloodskins fall before me! None of them can- hm?"

Neptune pauses to look to the north. There, only half a mile away, the ominous, bloody energy continues to rise into the atmosphere. However, now it has thickened into a tall spear of demonic energy surging into Heaven's upper boundaries.

Neptune's cockiness melts away. His smile disappears as he evaluates the new threat.

"Hmph. So the bloodskins have performed a demonic ritual, eh? They might think magical energy of that level would scare me, but they would be wrong!"

Neptune turns all of his attention toward the savage plume of mana surging into the sky. Hardly has he taken a step toward it before his wariness turns to concern.

"It's still intensifying in power! What... what sort of unholy abomination..."

"HAAAAAAAAARRRUUGGHHH!!!"

A mighty roar, like a volcano exploding from the depths of the Earth, shakes all of Heaven like a leaf in the wind. Neptune stumbles backward and nearly loses his footing. His concern turns to outright fear as he gapes at a humongous, unthinkable giant arm bursting out of Heaven's Soil.

"Gods! Oh, ancestors! What have the bloodskins done?! What horror have they summoned from beyond the realm of death?!"

The monstrous arm, formed purely from demonic energy, slams into Heaven, crushing a hundred angels and demons before they can flee. The impact sends a shockwave throughout the land, causing thousands of spectators to lose their footing. Within seconds, another giant demonic arm bursts out of the ground and slams against the soil. Rocks and dirt spray outward in a circle, raining upon the unsuspecting demons and angels nearby. All semblance of order vanishes as chaos engulfs the battlefield.

Demons run. Angels fly. Titans leap. All three sides flee as quickly as they can from the terrifying monster emerging from the boundary of life and death.

Raphael and Camael stare, transfixed, at the scene unfolding before them.

Forget Neptune... Raphael reflects. *He doesn't matter anymore. Nothing does.*

Michael's eyes lose their luster. The mana emanating from Hercules' soul manipulation vanishes, allowing the Archangel of Courage to see once again. He blinks in surprise at his surroundings.

"Where am I? The last thing I remember..."

"Brother!"

Uzziel jumps out of the ground, startling Michael. In the blink of an eye, he yanks out his sword and sweeps it toward her neck. At the last second, he stops and retracts it, leaving his sister's head on her shoulders. "Gah! Uzziel! Do not leap out at me like that! We're in the middle of a battle, ye damned!"

Suddenly, Michael catches himself. He observes Uzziel more closely as the fog from his head vanishes.

"Thy eyes! No longer do they glow! What of Hercules? Have thou broken free of his control?"

Uzziel flicks her gaze around Michael. Several demon corpses lay in heaps here and there, but the torn-apart body of Lucifer stands out from the crowd. "Yes! But never mind that! We have to get out of here! Look around! Something terrible is about to happen! Can't thou not see it?"

Uzziel gestures behind herself. For the first time, Michael notices a huge plume of bloody miasma arcing off the ground. "What in the Creator's name is that?!"

Whump!

Something insanely huge smashes into the ground behind Michael. He whirls around, senses alert, to look for the unknown attacker. His eyes raise upward as he notices Chantis, a forty-foot-tall Titaness, wearing little more than a braided grass skirt. The ogre-like she-Titan raises her foot as she spots the blood starting to move and congeal into the form of a demon once again.

"Die, Devil! You damned monster! Stop coming back!!"

SPLAT!

Chantis stomps down and crushes Satan's reforming body into a puddle of blood, then raises her foot again as she waits for movement.

The Titaness ignores Michael. He, however, stares at her in disbelief. Having never seen Satan regenerate from death, he can only gaze in confusion at her actions.

"Has everyone gone mad?"

Shaking the disorientation from his head, Michael turns to face his sister, only to spot Belial lying unconscious a few feet away. Severe burns scar her whole body, giving the impression she's fallen in battle.

"Thou hath defeated all of these Demon Emperors while under Hercules' control," Uzziel says. "I know not what actions thou took, but we have a bigger problem on our hands. It seems that in death, one of the Emperors summoned a terrible calamity upon Heaven. We must leave at once!"

Michael follows Uzziel's gaze to the rapidly thickening plume of blood-red mana. Nausea and disgust surges through the Archangel of Courage as he gazes upon it, causing him to take a step back.

"What evil energy! Thou art correct, sister. Let us regroup with the other Archangels. I cannot bring myself to take a single step toward-"

"HAAAAAAAAARRRUUGGHHH!!!"

Michael falls silent as a thunderous scream explodes from the ground, one so loud that his entire body shakes, and his eardrums burst. Agony tears through Michael's mind, causing him to stumble backward, disoriented. The Archangel of Courage seemingly falls into quicksand, moments before Uzziel grabs and pulls him underground, then transports the two of them elsewhere.

Stars dance in Michael's eyes. Uzziel heals and whisks him to a place away from the Archdemon, then jumps out of the ground, not far from Gabriel.

"Brother!" Uzziel yells. She waves her hand to get Gabriel's attention, but the exhausted Archangel of Power takes a second to recognize her presence.

Gabriel stands amidst several low-ranked cherubs and seraphs at the northern end of the battlefield. Having helped his family clear out hundreds of demons, Gabriel's breathing comes in ragged gasps. Zeus stands a short distance away, sweat dripping down his whole body as he gazes upon not only the Archdemon's emerging form, but the newly arisen Titan King, Neptune.

"Uzziel..." Gabriel mutters. He drops to one knee and reaches out a hand to touch his sister's shoulder. "And Michael, too. What fortune that both of thee have survived this horrible war."

"Hercules betrayed us," Uzziel says. She glances at Michael and checks his physical condition, then returns her gaze to Gabriel. "I sealed his powers. If my vines have relayed the correct information to me, then it also seems Raphael has dealt with the Reaper. All of his minions are dead. Our only remaining threat is..."

"That *thing*," Zeus growls. His eyes laser onto a massive arm bursting out of Heaven's Soil in the distance. The three Archangels and their low-ranked brethren stumble slightly as an earthquake shakes Heaven. "Ancestors! What horrors have these damned demons unleashed?!"

Gabriel shakily rises to his feet. His hands tremble as he gazes upon the emerging eldritch horror. "All that matters is killing that creature. If push comes to shove... I'll re-enter my Cosmic Form."

Michael and Uzziel gasp in unison. "What! No!"

"Don't even think of it!" Uzziel says.

"Thy body has reached its limits!" Michael adds. "Forcefully activating thy Cosmic Form now might kill ye!"

"Many have already died, today," Gabriel says, unmoved. "I have no right to live when others have fallen. We must fight with all our hearts to protect Heaven."

"Suicide is not an option," Uzziel says. "I'm overruling it. Besides, Neptune has just ascended to the level of a Titan King! His power exceeds Cronus's! With his strength-"

"Nothing will change," Zeus replies, cutting Uzziel off. "He is a whelp. I know not where he has been for the past three thousand years, but I know that no Titan who has jumped to such an echelon of power will possess the control necessary to unleash their true potential. Uzziel, where is the Titan Queen I summoned? We will need her help in this battle."

Uzziel's expression turns blank. After a moment she gasps. "Ah! That's right! I left her over there!"

The Archangel of Creation gestures toward the east, where the indistinct figure of Ivaldi stands wrapped in suppressive folds of a chrysalis. The green, diamond-like leaves coil around her, pinning her in place so that she cannot move.

Zeus frowns.

"Why did you bind her with your nature magic? No, before that, how did you unleash such fearsome power against the Hydra? You have some explaining to do."

Hardly have the words left Zeus's mouth, before two more Archdemon limbs burst from the ground. The Archdemon howls in rage and begins pulling itself from the depths of Heaven, causing tremendous amounts of magical energy to escape its portal and fire in random directions.

Explosions echo throughout the battlefield. Artillery-like bombardments of crystallized mana rush at the three Archangels and the Titan King, forcing all of them to dive for cover.

BOOM, BOOM!

Craters appear all over the place. Several cherubs, present for the discussion only seconds before, end up vaporized into nothingness by the power of the Archdemon's attacks.

Uzziel lands in a roll and jumps to her feet. "I don't know! The long and short of it; Hercules manipulated me!"

"And I as well," Michael adds. "Zeus, go with my sister and release that Titan Queen! I'll take Gabriel to rejoin Raphael and the others!"

Zeus nods. His questions vanish into the wind, no longer mattering in the face of the evil emerging from Heaven's core. "We'll follow you in a few minutes. Go!"

The three Archangels and Titan King run like the wind, splitting off into pairs. Zeus and Uzziel travel solo, while Gabriel and Michael take their brothers and sister with them.

As Uzziel leaves, her eyes fixate on the Archdemon's rising body. Two massive horns emerge from the ground, along with an eyeless head that bobs and turns in random directions; searching for prey. Every second that passes, the Archdemon's body grows taller and taller.

The blood drains from Uzziel's face. "Oh, Creator... what devilry..."

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A minute later, she and Zeus arrive before Ivaldi. The Titaness stands with her back to the Archdemon; unable to see it. Despite being bound by Yggdrasil's nature energy, Ivaldi remains fully aware of her surroundings. She spots Uzziel and snarls angrily.

"Release me; you damned Archangel whore!"

Uzziel flinches. "I-I'm sorry for trapping thee in such a manner! Hercules controlled my actions! I had no say in what my body did!"

"Like I care! I won't forgive you, Yggdrasil! You slew me in cold blood! I've come to return the favor!!"

Zeus halts. His thoughts of rescuing the Titan woman falter. "Uzziel killed you? When?"

"How should I know?! Millennia turned into eons! I haven't a clue how long it's been since I died. I only know that this... this disgusting Devil laughed maniacally as she watched my body shrivel up and wither into nothing!"

Uzziel shakes her head. "I'm sorry, but thou must be confusing me with someone else. I would never harm a fly. 'Tis not in my nature to bring injury upon others."

"WHAT?! Lies! Filthy, damned, Archangel lies!!"

Ivaldi jerks her body from right to left. Despite only moving a few inches, each movement releases a monstrous amount of energy. The chrysalis shudders and shakes, but doesn't break. It holds firm, keeping her contained.

"Please! I am not thy enemy!" Uzziel says. "I don't even know thy name or face! If we knew each other, 'twas during the Primordial Era. I remember nothing from those days, due to Raphael's mind-wipes."

"Grrrgh!"

Ivaldi continues to struggle, but after a moment, Uzziel's words reach her ears.

"Raphael's... mind-wipes... ah. That's right... I vaguely remember some news regarding..."

A look of surprise crosses Ivaldi's face. She flicks her eyes between Zeus's face and Uzziel's as well.

"The descendant of Hrothgar stands beside the one who slew his ancestor... such a thing should be impossible, according to the Titan code. That must mean the rumors were true..."

Zeus scowls. "What are you babbling about?! Look to the south, great ancestor! A monster of cosmic power is emerging to kill us all! I summoned you back to help us! I gave up my birthright for the sake of my people! Please, forget thy past grievances, and help us-"

"Do not order me around!" Ivaldi roars. "I won't take any lip from some pathetic, half-baked runt of Hrothgar's line! Hmph! You claim there's a mighty foe here; one worthy of my attention? I will never fight it for your sake! I returned only to raise my family's glory! I will kill to increase my standing at the High Table, and I will take my revenge on Yggdrasil! Nothing else matters!"

Suddenly, Heaven shakes once again. A massive blast of hyper-condensed water slams into the emerging Archdemon, causing the creature to become enraged and thrash about. It continues rising from

Heaven's depths, but pauses for a moment to charge up a powerful laser of atomic breath.

One second later, it swivels its head toward Neptune and fires.

KSSEEEWWWW!

The high-pitched squeal of Heaven's Light burning into nothingness mixes with the heat of the sun. The laser fires at Neptune, who manages to leap into the sky at the last second. It narrowly misses, slams into Heaven's soil, and sprays a mountain of rubble into the distance. A gorge as deep as the Grand Canyon appears where Neptune stood only seconds earlier, and all of the rock that was once there flies away into the distance to land at the far reaches of Heaven.

With her back facing the Archdemon, Ivaldi cannot see the several-hundred-foot-tall creature emerging from an unseen abyss. However, the energy emitted by the Archdemon instantly silences her.

Ivaldi's eyes shrink to pinpricks.

"...By the Creator. Was that...?"

Zeus nods hurriedly. "Ancestor! Please! Set aside thy differences with Uzziel! This monster will be the death of all living Titans! We need thy help!"

Ivaldi stands thirty feet taller than Zeus, at seventy feet tall. Nevertheless, compared to the Archdemon, she appears pitifully tiny and impotent.

For the first time since her arrival, Ivaldi senses a threat to her existence.

She nods.

"I... I understand. Release me. Regarding the memory-wipes and other matters, we will speak later, Uzziel. For now... I will fight. Not for others, but for myself. I will redeem myself in the eyes of the High Table."

Uzziel exhales a sigh of relief. She motions with her hands and slowly retracts the chrysalis from around Ivaldi. She winces, expecting the Titan Queen to double-cross her, but Ivaldi makes no aggressive moves.

Instead, Ivaldi whips around to gaze upon the Archdemon's visage.

All the color drains from her face.

"It can't be... is this... Morva? The King of Darkness? I never lived to see him walk the plane of existence, but this creature fits the description..."

A shudder runs down Ivaldi's back. She swallows her saliva and glances at Zeus.

"If only I could bring Odin here. Surely, she would be able to handle such a creature on her own. Compared to the Allmother, I am little more than a gnat. I know not how my strength will fare, but if this beast is Morva's fourth reincarnation, we must stop him at any cost. His power will only continue to grow!"

The mana-like body of the Archdemon solidifies even further. Several tentacles, each one possessing heads of razor-sharp teeth at the ends, snap at nearby cherubs and demons, chewing them up before they

can react and swallowing them whole.

Zeus clenches his fist. "If we fail here, this creature will break free from Heaven and annihilate the mortal realm. Nothing will be able to stop it. We must kill it while we can."

"Aye!" Ivaldi replies. She motions with her hands and summons a divine sword and shield. "No matter the foe, a Titan never backs down! We are dragonslayers; deities birthed to kill! Even if I perish here, I will earn accolades and glory!"

With a knowing glint in her eyes, she smiles at Zeus. "Young one. You have given up your birthright by summoning me. However, against such a foe, it may be earned again. Do not hold back. Fight with such zeal that the Ancestors will sing tales of your bravery. Only then will you have a chance at redeeming your shame and joining me in the Great Hall of Valhalla."

Zeus's expression changes. Like a divine gift imparted from the Creator himself, he gazes at Ivaldi with newfound admiration.

"Of course! What sort of fool would I be to pass up this opportunity! Let's kill this bastard!"

Ivaldi returns her gaze to the Archdemon.

"Hmph. Perhaps Hrothgar's descendants aren't as weak-willed as I first thought."

Part 166: The Archdemon's Rampage

Recommended Listening - Mirror

Michael murdered Lucy. He butchered the woman I love.

Diablo's heart shatters as he recalls the image burned into his memory; that of Lucifer's body lying broken on the ground at Michael's feet - the Archangel smiling at Diablo, taunting him for his weakness.

I couldn't move a muscle. I couldn't save her.

It's not Michael's fault. It's mine. I let him kill her. I stood by while he threw her away like garbage.

I'm worthless. WORTHLESS!!

Diablo's body trembles. Rage engulfs him, and his soul begins to resonate.

*I can't let it end like this. I can't let Michael get away with murder! I hate him! **I HATE HIM!!***

Diablo's soul takes physical shape. It expands in size, dissolving away his skin and bone to make room for a newer, mightier form.

Four new arms materialize on his right and left. Diablo's legs shift and split into hundreds of writhing, barracuda-like tentacles with teeth.

A light appears above Diablo, one leading back to the realm of the living. He raises his eyes to gaze at it.

*I have to go back. I can't die here! **I HAVE TO AVENGE HER!***

Horns grow from Diablo's head. His eyes seal shut, while a psychic impression of the world swirls around him. Like water rushing toward the top of a geyser, Diablo coils all of the strength in his lower body and leaps toward the light.

"MICHAEEEEEL!!"

Long, thin spines grow out of Diablo's back, each one allowing him to sense the area around his body. The moment his head emerges into Heaven's Light, millions of pinpricks of mana appear around him. Diablo's face contorts in rage as he spins his head around, trying to find the bastard who killed his wife.

"WHERE ARE YOU?! DON'T THINK YOU CAN HIDE FROM ME!!"

* * *

Diablo imagines full sentences in his mind, but out loud, the only thing the angels and demons hear are violent, animalistic screams of rage. The Archdemon emerges from the Great Beyond; vengeance etched onto his face. He swivels in search of his prey, but every being in Heaven appears as the same-colored blip of energy, no matter how he tries to discern them.

MICHAEL MUST BE HERE! HE'S BLENDING IN... TRYING TO HIDE AMONGST THE OTHERS! I WON'T LET HIM! I'LL KILL EVERYONE IN MY WAY!! NOBODY WILL STOP ME!

Diablo's four arms crash into Heaven's surface, stabilizing his climb out of the infinite abyss while sending megaquakes in every direction. By the time he's halfway emerged from the soil, he already towers five hundred feet over the battlefield.

"MICHAEEEEEL!! SHOW YOURSELF, YOU MURDERER!!"

Something strikes Diablo's chest. A faint tingle spreads through the affected area, causing a weak sensation of pain to stir in the Archdemon's newly awakened body. He jerks his head toward several glowing souls flying in the air; all of them bunched up together.

"FILTHY ANGELS!! I WON'T LET YOU LIVE!! YOU'LL PAAAAY!!"

Another incomprehensible scream bursts from the Archdemon's mouth, flattening the grass within a mile around him and deafening all unlucky enough not to cover their ears.

A moment later, Diablo inhales. A vortex of air sucks into his mouth and ignites the power of a star in his belly.

Then, he exhales.

A pointed flash of heat fires from the Archdemon's mouth and surges into the flying group of souls. They vaporize instantly, while the beam sails into the south, where it incinerates a mountain, sends it flying into the stratosphere, and eventually destroys a chunk of land the size of a small city.

KILL... KILL! KILL KILL KILL!!! I'LL KILL EVERY LAST ANGEL BASTARD UNTIL THEY BEG FOR MERCY!!"

At this moment, a much brighter soul, one that takes the form of a star compared to the others, steps toward Diablo.

Boom!

A hardened trident of water stabs into the Archdemon's chest, triggering Diablo's rage.

"YOU... YOU DARE STRIKE ME?! PERISH!"

Neptune's complexion turns ashen as the Archdemon sweeps its hand toward him. A thousand bolts of lightning fire from Diablo's fingers, each one ten times more energetic than even Zeus can unleash.

Neptune can't react in time. Trillions of volts of electricity hit him with enough force to send him flying backward. The newly arisen Titan King flies off his feet, spins helplessly, and hurtles over ten miles before crashing into the hill dividing the battlefield from Nirvana.

Thoom!

Every bone in Neptune's body howls and pleads for forgiveness. The Titan gasps as his muscles seize up, and his body temporarily shuts down. None of his limbs listen to his commands. His whole body shivers and convulses.

Diablo's interest in Neptune's existence vanishes just as fast as it arrived. His senses quickly pick out the largest groups of glowing souls scattered amidst the battlefield, and power builds up in his chest.

"KILL THEM ALL! EVERY LAST ONE!!"

A ball of dark energy fires from the Archdemon's forehead. It rushes toward the cluster of ten thousand souls and explodes, scattering their bodies to the four winds and eradicating the lives of all trapped within its area of effect.

* * *

Half a mile away, Raphael and the other Archangels suppress the urge to vomit as they witness thousands of angels and demons perish in the blink of an eye. The unbelievably powerful Archdemon roars again, nearly shattering their eardrums.

"What are we waiting for?!" Camael screams, her voice hoarse. "Let's kill this thing!"

Raphael grits his teeth. Terror seizes his limbs, but he forces himself to move. "Aye!"

Recommended Listening

Chaos erupts on all sides of the Archdemon. After fleeing from the freshly arisen abomination, many demons turn around and raise their fists to the sky.

"Hahaha! Filthy pigeons! Now you're all dead!"

"That big demon's on our side! We can't lose now!"

"Haha! Wait... wha-... what's it doing?"

One group of demons, all bunched together in a clump, attracts the Archdemon's attention. Their eyes widen as Diablo inhales to form a blast of fire energy.

"W-wait, stop! We're on your side! We're on- EEYAAAH!!"

The demons scream as the heat of the sun incinerates them, blasting tons of debris outward to rain upon those fortunate enough to escape the Archdemon's initial salvo.

"Shrakh! He's attackin' everyone! Not just pigeons! That fuckin' bastard!"

"Stabface! My blood-brother, nooo!"

Some demons wail as their closest friends perish to the Archdemon's fierce assault. A moment later, electric energy arcs between Diablo's horns. It combines to form a disruptive EMP blast; then the Archdemon fires it upward.

Kseeeew!

Heaven's Light dims as the mighty blast of electrical energy detonates in midair. Thousands of bolts of lightning fly out in every direction and surge toward the ground, striking angels, demons, monsters, and Titans at random. The weakest beings explode violently into superheated clouds of blood-gas, while the brains of others turn to mush and melt inside their skulls. A horrific stench of death washes across Heaven, gagging the survivors and stifling their will to fight.

"What can we do?" One female cherub wails in terror. "Th-this monster is too powerful! We're all going to die!"

A demon nearby, close enough to stab her in the back, instead fixes his gaze on the mountain of flesh dwarfing the battlefield. "H-how should I know?! Ain't you an angel? Get up there and fight it!"

"I don't want to fight! I want to run away!" The woman howls. She flaps her wings and starts to fly away. Before she makes it a hundred feet, a figure suddenly appears before her.

"Ah! Get out of my- huh? Brother Raphael?"

One of Raphael's illusions materializes before her. Hundreds of others spread across Heaven's battlefield. They speak all at once while using Raphael's power to amplify their voices.

"Brothers! Sisters! Do not give up hope! This hellspawn is only one enemy! We must unite together and kill it as quickly as possible! Fear not, for we have faced entities a thousand times mightier than this one! I will not allow us to lose!"

* * *

Raphael levitates in the air only half a mile from the Archdemon. Despite the confident tone in his illusions' voices, Raphael's heart weighs heavy.

Indeed, this demon cannot compare to the ancient dragons, nor to many of the dark Titan Kings... but where they were one thousand times stronger, the angels were millions of times mightier than we are, today.

We may yet lose everything.

This creature strongly resembles the dark Titan, Morva, but it doesn't possess a trillionth his cunning. At best, it wields a mere facsimile of his former power.

Raphael's thoughts tumble around in his head, giving him a migraine. He turns to Camael and nods.

"Catherine was right to face the Reaper on her own. Use thy divine weapon, Excalibur, now."

Camael meets her brother's gaze. "I cannot come close to unleashing Excalibur's full might. 'Tis an incomplete weapon."

"We haven't many options left," Raphael replies. He presses his lips together. "Gabriel's Cosmic Form might stand a chance against this unholy fiend, but he has already used it. Now, only Michael still possesses a trump card."

"He does?"

"Aye. And if possible, I won't allow him to use it. Go!"

Raphael gestures toward the Archdemon, and Camael nods.

"I'm off! Wish me luck!"

She flaps her wings and rushes toward the ground a short distance from the still-emerging Archdemon. Raphael swallows as he watches her leave.

"Oh, Creator. Have we not suffered enough? Have we not lost enough of our brothers and sisters?!"

* * *

Camael lands feet-first on the torn-up remnants of Heaven's Soil. Immediately, massive waves of demonic energy crash against her and root her to the ground.

The Archangel of Divination raises her eyes toward the Archdemon. Already, he stands seven hundred feet tall.

"I can scarcely breathe! Thou art a dark god, but one born of demonkind! Thou hath one weakness, and 'tis none other than the might of holy energy!!"

Camael unsheathes Excalibur and points its tip toward the Archdemon. Power rushes from the hilt into her arms, then into her heart. The divine mana spins around in her chest for a moment to gather momentum, then surges back into the weapon.

Excalibur radiates dazzling light. The tip of its blade ignites with power.

Camael howls in rage as she puts all of her strength into the attack. A blast of divine energy greater than any seen in eons fires from Excalibur toward the Archdemon's chest.

CRASH!

The divine mana strikes Diablo square in the ribs. It impacts a barrier of hardened mana created from the Archdemon's raw essence and explodes, only to pierce through the Archdemon's chest and soar into the stratosphere an instant later.

"HEEEOOOORRR!!!"

The Archdemon bellows at the top of its lungs. Camael falls backward and crashes into the ground, breaking both of her wings from the power of the Archdemon's voice. She blacks out, only to wake up a moment later with someone standing over her.

"M-Michael?"

Michael and Uzziel join together with Gabriel, Zeus, and Ivaldi to form a shield of flesh around Camael. Uzziel heals her eldest sister and nods.

"Thank the Creator that I saw what happened. We whisked thy body away before the Great Demon could retaliate. A moment later, and thou would have perished!"

Camael gasps. "Ah! Did I kill it? Injure it?"

The Archangel of Divination gazes past Uzziel, to the Archdemon, now a little over a mile away. Having moved their sister to safety, the Archangels take a moment to finish healing Camael before helping her to her feet.

Camael proves little more than a minor nuisance in Diablo's mind. He forgets about her existence almost immediately and returns to annihilating the most densely packed clusters of mana and souls he can find.

Camael scrutinizes the Archdemon for only a moment. Horror spreads across her face as she spots the place where Excalibur's attack hit.

"Scarcely a scratch! That blast of holy energy should... should have..."

Gabriel nods. "Do not blame thyself, Camael. Leave this to Ivaldi."

Camael jumps to her feet and turns to look at the Titan King and Queen towering over her. Ivaldi tilts her head down to examine the tiny Archangel.

"Hmph. The All-Seer. I suppose you've already forgotten the prophecy you bequeathed me when we last spoke."

"My apologies," Camael replies. "I do not remember."

"The past is the past," Ivaldi says. "Come, Zeus. Let us go to Neptune. The more Titans, the better."

Ivaldi and Zeus nod toward each other. Zeus activates his Thunderstep and rushes away at the speed of sound, leaving a sonic boom in his wake. Ivaldi transforms into a beam of light, exceeding his speed by several thousand factors.

Camael turns to Gabriel. "What did Ivaldi mean? Why are the Titans going to battle the Great Demon by themselves?"

Gabriel narrows his eyes as he loses sight of Zeus and Ivaldi. "I do not know. Ivaldi claimed she had a technique that could give them the power to take down the Great Demon. We must trust her... for now."

Nearby, the Archangel of Courage turns to gaze upon the Archdemon. In the back of his mind, a nagging doubt begins to emerge.

When Gabriel and I rescued Camael and spoke to Raphael, his words gave me pause. Why would my brother imply that I had yet to unleash my true potential? Have I a trump card of which I know nothing? Why would Raphael hide it from me, especially now?

Shaking his worries away, Michael nods toward the Archdemon.

"We will stay here and await Raphael's orders."

* * *

Ivaldi and Zeus reach Neptune in the blink of an eye. The freshly minted Titan King sits on his knees, gasping for breath. Sweat drenches his body and forms puddles all over the ground beneath him.

The two newcomers barely reach his knees. However, compared to the pathetic appearance of the 150-foot Titan King before her, Ivaldi cuts a much more confident and menacing presence.

"Stupid brat! How could you fall to such a weak attack?! Disgraceful! You don't deserve such a powerful body!"

She berates Neptune, causing him to flinch and glare at her angrily.

"Do not speak to me in such a manner, *little* one! I am Neptune, son of Poseidon, son of Cronus! Who are you to address me with such disrespect?!"

Neptune shakily rises to his feet. Despite the overwhelming difference in size, Ivaldi continues to laugh at him.

"Hah! The Cronus line is plagued with fools and simpletons! You should know your place, runt! Before you stands none other than Ivaldi, the Queen of Divinity! Hmph! My bloodline once ran so thick that a

thousand Cronus-spawn couldn't lay a hand against me!"

Zeus flicks his eyes between the two bickering Titans. After a moment, he pulls his arms apart, then claps his palms together, creating a thunderous *boom!*

"Stop your squabbling! Ivaldi, we came here for a reason. Don't forget what it was! Neptune, know your place! This woman is none other than one of our legendary ancestors, here to save us from the Great Demon! Make Poseidon proud; show her the appropriate respect!"

Zeus's words calm the tension between both of his fellow Titans. Neptune relaxes his expression and nods apologetically. "Ah, now, I understand. My apologies, Queen of Divinity. I did not realize your position."

"Hmph. This generation is ignorant of a great many things. Never mind all of that! We must gather as many Titans as possible. I have a secret method to defeat the Great Demon! It cannot fail!"

Zeus nods. "You referred to it as the Binding Arts. How does it work?"

"Better to show than to tell," Ivaldi replies. "Both of you, split up. Fetch every Titan you can find. We'll meet up atop that mountain to the west!"

Ivaldi gestured toward the mountain overlooking Heaven's Gate; the place where the demons initially began their attack.

"Very well," Zeus replies. "Neptune. You heard our ancestor. Get a move on! Your voice carries quite far!"

Confusion appears in Neptune's eyes.

The Binding Arts? What sort of incredible technique could it be? Will we tie it down to restrict its movement? Will we restraining it somehow, allowing us to annihilate its helpless form? Against the Great Demon, will such a strategy have any effect?

He keeps his reservations to himself. After a moment, he nods.

"Very well. I'll do as you say, ancestor."

"No more words!"

Ivaldi transforms into a flash of light and zips away. Zeus follows a moment later, each of them traveling to the east and west side of the battlefield.

Neptune takes a step toward the battlefield, still far in the distance, and shudders.

"I... I have to go back there? I have to face that hellspawn once more? Oh, ancestors. What have I signed up for?"

Despite possessing a body rivaling the ancient Titan Kings, Neptune reveals his child-like thoughts for a moment before suppressing them once more.

"My people need me. They need a king! I will make them proud!"

He coils power into his legs and leaps to the north, heading swiftly toward the battlefield.

Ten minutes later, all fifty of the remaining Titans arrive at the top of the mountain overlooking the battlefield. Their movements draw plenty of attention from the demons and angels below, but nobody has time to care. The angels and the demons occasionally backstab one another while evading the Archdemon's attacks, but a few scattered groups begrudgingly set aside their differences and work together to defend themselves.

Ivaldi turns her head from left to right. Disappointment crosses her face as she eyeballs the Titans gathered.

"Zeus. I told you to find as many Titans as possible. This sum will hardly do anything for us."

Zeus lowers his eyes. "My apologies, great ancestor. These are all of our people who remain. If any others exist, I do not know of them."

"What?! Only fifty Titans walk among the mortal realm?! You can't be serious!"

A flicker of movement at Ivaldi's left catches her attention. The Queen of Divinity turns to watch as a Titaness sheds her invisibility and flies toward the group of assembled giants.

"This had better be important!" Chantis growls. "I was suppressing Satan from resurrecting! Now that I've left, he'll surely rebirth!"

Zeus nods. "Our ancestor, Ivaldi, has a task for us. We need every available pair of hands."

Ivaldi ignores Chantis's objections. "Your petty squabbles with the low-ranked demons mean nothing. We must slay the Great Demon here and now. Listen carefully. I possess knowledge of an ancient Titan power, one I've designated the 'Binding Arts.' However, the power of this spell will lose much of its effectiveness with such... inferior Titanspawn."

A look of disdain passes over Ivaldi's face. Internally, she groans. *None of these children stand more than forty feet tall. How can I defeat the Great Demon if the only pawns I can use are hatchlings fresh from their mother's bosoms?*

Ivaldi curls up her lip in disgust, then quickly hides her annoyance.

They will have to do.

"Everyone. Gather around and form a circle. Take the hands of the Titans closest to you. I will stand in the center and invoke the rite of the Binding Arts."

Zeus gestures toward Neptune. "Poseidon's boy is too tall for us to reach. What should we do?"

"Worry not," Ivaldi replies. "For the Binding Arts to work, we need a vessel, a controller, and spirits with enough energy to initiate the transference. Neptune will be the vessel, while I will be the controller."

Zeus nods along, but he creases his brow in worry. "These Binding Arts sound incredibly complex. What are you planning to do?"

"Hmph. Do you want to know? I'll tell you. Long ago, the nine Archangels used their ability to join their souls and bodies together to create freakishly powerful beings known as the Three Divines. The Cherubim, Seraphim, and Ophanim comprised their ranks. Three Archangels, one Divine Being. As you

might notice, I am the Queen of Divinity. I created an ability which copies the Archangel's powers, allowing Titans to fuse their souls and bodies!"

All of the gathered Titans gasp in awe.

"Goodness! Our ancestor is mightier than I thought!"

"Who knew such a technique existed? With her power, we will easily overwhelm the Great Demon!"

Several Titans nod along and chain their hands together, eager to experience their ancestor's ultimate technique. However, Zeus pauses to rub his beard.

"You copied the Archangel's ability? It sounds overwhelmingly powerful, but fusing souls and bodies is..."

He trails off and leaves an implication hanging in the air.

Ivaldi smiles at him, but a trace of malice appears in her gaze. "Do not confuse my Binding Arts with the despicable acts of a soul manipulator. I do not retain the souls used for my own ends, and this technique requires willing participants. Once I finish, we will all disperse safely."

Ivaldi pauses.

"However... there is one flaw."

Zeus raises an eyebrow. "Hm?"

"The Archangels multiplied their power by several factors when transforming into a Divine. Unlike them, my Binding Arts can only unleash a small portion of all our combined might. That is why- ah!!"

Ivaldi spins on her heel. She gasps as a sense of overwhelming danger appears in her mind. Several miles away, the Archdemon spots the clump of juicy-looking Titan souls standing atop the mountain. Diablo inhales for a moment before firing a laser of flame toward his prey.

"Get down!!!" Ivaldi bellows. She jumps forward, motions with her hands, and summons a divine bubble of mana to envelop the Titans present.

One second later, Diablo's concentrated blast of fire impacts the mountain.

THOOOOM!

Ivaldi's shield stretches around all of the Titans. However, due to making it as big as possible, its defensive strength drops sharply. The Titan ancestor screams as the heat of the sun blasts her body, scorches her skin, and flings her into the distance.

Far behind the mountain, high into the sky, and down toward a previously unseen forest, Ivaldi careens helplessly. She plummets fifty miles toward the ground below. The Titaness crashes into Heaven's Soil with an explosive *boom*, tearing up trees, shattering boulders, and ripping a gash through one of Heaven's most beautiful forests.

After several seconds, Ivaldi grinds to a stop. Catastrophic pain wracks her body from head to toe. Third degree burns turn her skin black, while an uncountable number of blisters rapidly form, intensifying her pain further.

The Queen of Divinity gags on her tongue. It takes her brain a moment to reorient itself. She opens her eyes only to see a blood-red world, one tainted by the damage to her brain. Forcing herself to lift her head, Ivaldi shakily glances toward the mountain far in the distance where she stood with the other Titans only a minute before.

Ah... ah... oh, gods... I couldn't react... in time... aaooo...

A tear streams down her cheek as she fights the urge to vomit. With a motion of her hands, she summons healing magic to coat her body. While nowhere as effective as Belial or Uzziel's abilities, Ivaldi manages to bring herself back from the brink of death. She climbs to her feet and staggers forward. Her skin cracks and snaps as she walks. It breaks apart and causes fresh blood to flow, making her wince in pain.

"Damn... too many questions... let my guard down... huwak!"

She coughs black blood for a moment, then activates a spell, transforming herself into a beam of light.

Fwip!

Ivaldi rushes back to the mountain. A second later, she appears at the top and gasps in horror.

A dozen Titans lay dead, their bodies battered and broken. Where before, fifty Titans stood, fewer than forty remain.

Zeus stands over Chantis. The invisibility Titaness whimpers as she clutches a giant tree branch impaled through her chest.

"Daddy... daddy... I don't want to die... I don't..."

Zeus holds the back of her head with his hand. "Stay with me, daughter! Don't give in! I can find Uzziel! She will be able to-"

"That won't be necessary," Ivaldi interrupts. She staggers toward Zeus and brusquely pushes him aside. "I can heal her. Give me a moment."

Zeus ignores her pushiness. He moves to the left and watches as Ivaldi yanks the branch through Chantis's chest, causing a fountain of blood to erupt. Before Chantis can succumb to her wounds, Ivaldi casts healing magic and repairs the damage.

"I cannot replace the lost blood, but I can seal the hole and repair this girl's broken bones. However, my power is limited. I only have so long before I must return to Valhalla. The more mana I use, the sooner I must leave."

Ivaldi flicks her eyes around the devastated mountainside. Other than several dead and injured Titans, superheated rocks slowly cool down, and small fires crackle and burn wherever grass gives them fuel.

"Where is Neptune?"

"Here!"

Neptune's voice comes from the sky. Ivaldi flicks her gaze upward and sighs.

"You turned yourself into water? The Great Demon's attack must have evaporated you."

Several clouds high in the sky dissipate and transform into a river. Neptune falls downward, morphs back into his Titan body, and hits the mountainside feet first, landing with the ease of a practiced skydiver.

"Aye, but don't worry about me. We must hurry and use your Binding Arts, ancestor! If the Great Demon attacks again, I don't want to imagine the tragedy we'll suffer!"

Ivaldi nods. "The others here are too injured. Damn! I should have moved more quickly. Zeus, it will have to be just the three of us. Come, stand between Neptune and I. I will bind us together at once."

Zeus and Neptune nod. The Titan King of Thunder stands before the newly awakened Titan King of the Seas. Both of them face Ivaldi as she aims her finger at the ground.

A beam of light fires from Ivaldi's fingertip. She rapidly draws a magical circle around herself and Zeus, along with a second circle around Neptune.

"O, powers of divinity, those which come from the might of the Creator, give rise to the cosmic forces within us all..."

Ivaldi chants a spell. Several seconds pass as she finishes drawing the magic circle.

"...to the ends of time... and now, I activate the might of the Creator... unify!"

Zeus gasps. A black hole appears before Ivaldi, and his body begins to suck toward it.

Terror engulfs Zeus's mind. "Ah! I cannot resist! What is...?!"

An instant later, his body and soul compresses into a small orb of light. He rushes toward his ancestor and enters her chest, causing the black hole to vanish. She motions toward Neptune, and a similar black hole appears, but this time, in front of his face.

"I acknowledge this one's power! Combine!"

Ivaldi copies Zeus and flies at Neptune's face. He flinches slightly as his ancestor becomes an orb of light, and a strange, alien presence appears in his mind.

Ivaldi's magical circles lose their luster. Within seconds, only Neptune remains standing.

Neptune clenches his fists. "It worked!"

His words echo strangely, the combination of his voice, Zeus's, and Ivaldi's.

"I see. So this is the power of the Binding Arts! With our powers combined, I have three times the strength I did before!"

"No," Neptune says, replying to himself. "My technique is a pale imitation of the Archangels'. At best, we have only doubled your original strength. If the Archangels were to perform their version of the Binding Arts, their strength would increase by twenty times! In any case, we haven't much time. We need to kill the Great Demon before our fusion dissipates."

"Right. Let's go!"

Neptune motions with his hands and transforms his body into a beam of light. He uses Ivaldi's power, along with his own, and flies toward the Archdemon.

"You killed my children!" Neptune roars. "You'll pay with your blood!"

Author's note:

This is the Archdemon!



And here, as well!



Originally based off this image.



Part 167: A Rare Catch

Recommended Listening

Five cherubs flap their wings and soar around the Archdemon in circles. They form a Flying-V shape in the air while slashing, stabbing, and cutting the Archdemon's back. Despite their incredible battle strength, the might of these cherubs pales in comparison to their seemingly unstoppable foe.

Diablo towers nine hundred feet over the battlefield. With his emergence into Heaven slowed by the appearance of millions of annoying pests, the Archdemon has yet to fully emerge into Heaven's Light. Instead, his attention jumps from one cluster of enemies to another, killing and slaughtering without any remorse.

Kirie, the female cherub leading her four brothers and sisters in an assault on the Archdemon, curls her wings together and dives down along the path of his spine. She holds out her magically-enchanted blade and slices a shallow gash down the Archdemon's back, peeling him open from his neck to his waist. The other four cherubs mimic her, creating a five-fingered gash that stretches halfway down the Archdemon's body.

Diablo's thick, oppressive mana causes Kirie's heart to pound like a drum in her chest. Her fingers tremble from how hard it is to maintain her grip on her sword.

"H-hold out a little longer!" Kirie exclaims. "Raphael will arrive soon!"

As Kirie swoops down, she pulls up at the last second and flies away from the Archdemon. Her brothers and sisters follow after her, maintaining their Flying-V formation.

"Damn! We've hardly scratched the fiend!" Flora, one of Kirie's sisters, says. "My right arm is going numb! The Great Demon's mana is too suffocating!"

"Aye," Hophis, one of the male cherubs, adds. "My body is still wracked with exhaustion from fighting the weaker demons. The Great Demon will kill us all if we don't eliminate it quickly! We can't win a war of attrition against these damned bloodskins."

Kirie doesn't reply. Her brother's words strike a nerve, causing her to retreat to her inner thoughts.

Brother Gabriel has already used his Cosmic Form! He can't use it again. If he does, he might die. How can we possibly defeat the Great Demon without him? It's hopeless. Hopeless!

Despair floods into Kirie's heart. She flaps her wings and rises into the sky, then twists around and rushes back toward the Archdemon.

I don't want to die, but neither do I want this horrible entity to kill my family! If only Raphael would give the order to retreat... we could leave Heaven behind and travel the stars to seek out a new home. Why doesn't he give the order? Does he consider our lives less important than Heaven's survival?!

The cherub leader curses Raphael inwardly. She doesn't hate him, but during this moment of crisis, her doubts turn her thoughts rebellious.

"Ah! Gods, what is that?!" Flora exclaims. Kirie jerks her head back to see her sister staring wide-eyed at the blood-red portal beneath Diablo.

Hophis's expression turns ghastly. "Are those the fiend's... legs?!"

Kirie slows to a stop. She flaps her wings to hover in midair, then lowers her eyes to stare at Heaven's Soil, hundreds of feet below.

A writhing mass of appendages becomes visible beneath the Archdemon. Tentacles, each one filled to the brim with razor-sharp teeth, quickly flood out of the portal and press against Heaven's Soil, increasing the Archdemon's speed of ascent. Within seconds, tens of thousands of man-eating barracuda-like heads surge in every direction and snap at the nearest angels, demons, and monsters.

"Oh, Creator!" Kirie exclaims. Her blood turns to ice. "What horrors have arrived this time?!"

"GERROOOOAAHH!!!"

Diablo screams in rage. Despite his head facing to the south, the five cherubs behind him get caught by the oppressive soundwave and fly backward, unable to stop themselves in time.

"Ahhh!"

Kirie cries out in fear and flaps her wings, reorienting herself in midair. Below her, the horrifying winding maws sense her panic and leap from the ground into the sky.

Oh, gods! Kirie exclaims in her mind. A surge of adrenaline surges through her body, causing her to flap her wings three times harder. She jumps into the air, narrowly evading the nearest tentacle's jaws.

Snap!

The fearsome maw chomps at the air, but only nets a few feathers for its efforts. Angered, it sends a signal to three nearby barracuda-jaws. The four mindless maws turn their attention on the fleeing cherubs and join together with one purpose to hunt them down.

"Kirie! Look out!" Flora cries.

Kirie flies toward the sky, but her eyes widen as the tentacles stretch to freakish lengths and pounce toward her from the ground.

"What?! Each one is as long as the Great Demon's main body!"

The elite cherub curls her right wing and twists her body in midair to face the Archdemon. She flaps her wings and rushes toward Diablo at top speed, ignoring G-forces that would cause a fighter jet pilot to pass out. The four jaws pursue her and snap at her from the right and left, as well as below. Each time, she pulls up her feet, twists to the side, or slashes with her sword to cut a path toward them.

At the last second, before she can slam into the Archdemon's main body, she swoops straight downward. The four hungry jaws slap against the Archdemon's body like pancakes against a boulder, only to immediately shrug off the impact and pursue her again.

"I can't escape these horrible monsters!" Kirie yells in panic. "What should I do?!"

A scream of terror catches Kirie's attention. Her eyes snap to Flora right as two of the maws bring their teeth down, chewing the cherub warrior to death. In the blink of an eye, they finish her off and rip her to pieces, killing the once-beautiful angel woman and reducing her to bloody meat-chunks.

"Flora!! Oh, gods, no!!"

Hatred and despair overwhelm Kirie as she dodges two more potentially fatal attacks. Due to the extreme danger and stress, she puts all of her efforts into dodging the Archdemon's tentacles, but her movements begin to slow as her energy levels fall.

"I can't... can't run forever... I'm going to die!"

The cries of Hophis and the other two cherubs as they turn to mincemeat sends Kirie into the final realm of despair.

It's all over... I won't last ten more seconds...

A tear streams down her face as she plunges to Heaven below, where hundreds of tentacles writhe around on the ground, waiting for prey to draw near.

Flora... Hophis... everyone... I've failed all of them.

Suddenly, a burst of energy on the opposite side of the Archdemon causes Heaven to rumble and shake. The Archdemon staggers backward as something with incredible force strikes it in the chest.

The maws pursuing Kirie pause their pursuit and jerk to look at the sky as their master gives them a mental command.

THE ANGELS ARE ATTACKING ME! PROTECT ME! KILL THEM ALL!

Kirie's body trembles as she forces her wings to flap again. She pulls up and soars along the ground to fly away from the Archdemon. As she does, she shoots a look behind herself at Diablo's back.

"What happened? Why did those horrible jaws cease their pursuit?"

Kirie's confusion doesn't give her enough reason to stick around. She continues flying away, beating as hasty a retreat as possible after witnessing the death of all her friends.

Recommended Listening

Ivaldi's light form combines with Zeus's Thunderstep and Neptune's demigod-like body to accelerate to well over ten times the speed of sound. Instantly, Neptune leaps from the mountain where his Titan relatives lay in heaps and arrives at the Archdemon's face with his fist raised.

Whump!

Using the combination of his insane speed and his durable body, Neptune pounds his fist against the Archdemon's head, staggering the giant with the might of his Titan power. Neptune's overwhelming attack catches Diablo by surprise and sends him reeling backward, causing all of his attention to fall upon his ambusher.

"Again!" Neptune yells.

Once again, his body morphs into a flash of light. He zips away before the Archdemon can follow his movements and quickly begins spinning around the Archdemon's body.

A dazzling flash of light captures the attention of the angels and demons surrounding the Archdemon. They watch in bewilderment as the three unified Titans revolve around the Archdemon at insane speeds, transforming themselves into circles of light.

Swish-swish-swish, skreeeee!

As Neptune's speed increases, the circles of light start emitting high-pitched squeals, due to his body agitating the air molecules around the Archdemon.

Neptune's three inner voices speak at once. *Now for the second phase! We will combine the powers of divinity with the might of the ocean and the forces of entropy to create electrified holy water!*

The ever-multiplying circles of light suddenly shoot dozens of lasers of enchanted holy water at the Archdemon.

Ksseew! Ksseeeew!

The lasers appear simultaneously from over fifty different positions. Using his insane speed, Neptune unleashes the full might of three Titan kings against the Archdemon and rips up Diablo's skin and bone with the power of the cosmos.

"SKROOOOAAARR!!"

Diablo howls in rage. To him, the 250-foot-tall pest ripping open his body is like a dog trying to take down a sumo wrestler, but due to Neptune's incredible speed, the Archdemon cannot hit him at all.

Swipe!

Diablo swings one of his hands at the rings of light encircling him, but his palm passes through it harmlessly, causing no injury to the unified Titan kings.

Several seconds pass. Neptune's lasers embed deep into the Archdemon's flesh, exposing Diablo's muscle and bone. No matter how the Archdemon roars or cries out in pain, Neptune doesn't stop his fearsome assault.

"We're doing it!" Neptune roars. "We can kill this bastard!"

The circles of light double in quantity. Fifty tracks of light spread around the Archdemon from his head to his legs. The Archdemon's tentacles snap uselessly at the circles, but the moment they get too close, the Titan King plows through them and pulverizes the hungry maws into flesh-bombs of gore. Masses of fat and skin rain upon the ground, coating Heaven with the Archdemon's essence.

A surge of energy appears inside the Archdemon's body. Diablo claps all four of his palms together and activates the power of chaos within himself. His blood-red mana turns black as the night, causing Heaven's Light to shudder and dim.

Neptune continues circling the Archdemon. He fires his holy energy at the dark god without stopping, but a flash of worry passes over his face.

"How can the Great Demon cause Heaven's Light to lose its luster? Such a feat should be impossible."

Neptune's mind, now a combination of three Titans with varying levels of knowledge and intelligence, ponders the implications of this new development. His attention wavers for a split-second, and at that moment, Diablo unleashes the full power of Chaos!

The gravity around the Archdemon multiplies by a factor of one hundred! Neptune's body increases from a hundred tons to over ten thousand. The spiraling form of the Titan King comes to an instant halt as his body tumbles from the sky and careens toward the gaping maws of Diablo's tentacles.

"Aaaaugh!!"

Unable to stop his momentum, the Titan King plunges helplessly toward the ground below. Fifty tentacles rush up at him, intent on tearing him apart, all of them unaffected by Diablo's gravity.

Two seconds before Neptune lands in the Archdemon's maws and perishes, a portal appears beneath him! Neptune falls inside the gateway and reappears a mile away. He flies outward only a hundred feet above the ground and crashes into Heaven's Soil, narrowly missing a group of angels and demons all lined up to watch his battle.

"Guh!"

Neptune coughs out blood. He presses his palms against the ground and rises to his feet, but the sudden deceleration caused by the Archdemon's chaos magic leaves dozens of lingering aches and pains.

Neptune stands up straight and turns to look at the Archdemon, causing his pupils to dilate in shock. Thousands of cuts and burns mark every inch of Diablo's body. The Archdemon screams in rage as he senses the pain flowing across his monstrous form.

"Neptune!"

A tiny voice yells from somewhere near the Titan King's ear. He turns his head slightly to look at Raphael. The old man appears as little more than a speck of dust compared to the walking mountain before him.

"Thou were lucky I saved thee! Thou art no match for the Great Demon alone. I will assist thee in thy next assault."

"How?"

"I will cast illusions of thy body to trick the Great Demon."

Neptune nods. "Very well. Support me from the rear!"

Once again, Neptune transforms into a flash of light. He leaps into the sky at blinding speeds and arrives above the Archdemon. After hovering for a moment, Neptune's hands become a blur as he utters a thousand magical incantations all at once.

Raphael activates his illusion magic. Ten copies of Neptune materialize around the Archdemon and begin firing blasts of holy light at him. However, to Raphael's surprise, the Archdemon ignores them and tilts its head upward.

"Damn," Raphael mutters. "By chance, the Great Demon must have figured out which was the real one."

However, after a moment, a realization strikes Raphael.

"No... the Great Demon does not possess eyes. It must be sensing its surroundings in some other way. It might not even see my illusions in the first place. Gods! Neptune is in danger!"

Neptune finishes his incantation. A ball of holy light materializes in his palm and hardens into an orb of crystallized light. He stares at it for a split-second and frowns.

"If this doesn't work..."

With a shake of his head, the Titan King ignores his misgivings. He releases the orb and allows it to fall straight down toward the Archdemon below.

The moment the orb comes within half a mile of the Archdemon's body, Diablo's gravity field yanks it down, increasing its mass by over a hundred times. The orb's speed surges and instantly reaches terminal velocity.

The Archdemon doesn't have time to react. Neptune's enchanted ball of light smashes into the thousand-foot-tall demon's face with the force of a meteor. With its speed and weight enhanced by Diablo's gravity magic, it pounds his skull with ungodly strength and yanks the Archdemon backward.

"GROOOOARGH?!"

Diablo howls in confusion as the thousand-ton ball of light detonates. A light ten times brighter than the sun erupts from within Neptune's orb, causing millions of rays of cosmic energy to rip through the Archdemon's head and body.

Neptune stares intently at the bright light, unaffected by its appearance. The other angels and demons, however, jerk their heads away and cover their faces.

SHOOOOM!

The condensed orb of holy energy releases a thunderous explosion that blows away all the smoke and fire across the battlefield. All of the oxygen for miles around vanishes, sucking the air from everyone's lungs.

The Archdemon's body tears into pieces, and many of its tentacles turn to ash under the power of Ivaldi's divine magic. Half of Diablo's head explodes, causing him to lose his focus and tumble backward. The Archdemon crashes onto its back and flattens tens of thousands of demons, monsters, and angels.

Seconds later, Heaven falls silent.

The Archdemon lays on its back, unmoving, with gaping wounds lining every inch of its skin.

Neptune clenches his fists at his sides. "We... we did it! WE DID IT!"

He gazes upon the Archdemon intently, but after fifteen seconds, the godlike entity doesn't move.

However, despite Neptune's elation, his expression turns ugly. Ivaldi's consciousness takes the helm. "Damn. Even after unleashing my Sanctifying Sphere, that demonic fiend still possesses a star's worth of

vitality! It's not dead yet!"

Hardly have the words left Neptune's mouth before the Archdemon suddenly spasms. It thrashes around on its back for a moment, before using its remaining tentacles to pull itself upward.

"GRRRAAAAOOOO!!"

With half its head missing and an uncountable number of burns and pockmarks lining its skin, the Archdemon appears ten times more horrifying than before. It jumps up, and immediately, Heaven's Light dims noticeably. The abnormally bright light permeating all of Heaven dials down several levels, while Diablo's body rapidly begins to regenerate and repair its wounds.

Panic appears in Neptune's eyes. "What?! How can this be?! The fiend is bringing itself back from the brink of death! I can't allow that to happen!"

Operating on instinct, Neptune leaps into the sky and appears over the Archdemon's head once again.

"Get back on the ground; you damned monster!"

Neptune aims his palm at Diablo. His fingers turn yellow and flash with the power of divinity.

"Palm of the Creator!"

A spiritual projection of Neptune's hand shoots from his palm. It increases in size by a factor of thirty and slams into the Archdemon. Diablo once again falls backward as the mana-projection presses against his body and shoves him into the dirt.

"Stay down! STAY DOWN!!" Neptune roars. He continues to aim his right hand at the Archdemon to hold it in place, and with his left hand, he concentrates on the millions of gallons of water spiraling within his spiritual center.

A moment later, Neptune unleashes the compressed power of the ocean. Ivaldi's holy magic mixes with it, creating a holy-water cannon. The blast of aqua magic surges at the Archdemon's head.

At the last second, the Archdemon jerks to the right! Neptune's holy water misses its target, plows into the dirt, and instantly bores a hole one hundred feet deep.

"I missed?! Imposs- ah!"

To Neptune's surprise, the power of Ivaldi's divine hand suddenly weakens. He continues aiming his palm at the Archdemon to pin it against Heaven's Soil, but to his shock, the brightness of the Creator's Palm loses its brilliance. Half of its luster disappears, turning it into a rapidly fading husk of its former self.

Neptune's eyes shrink to pinpricks. "By the gods! No wonder we haven't killed it yet! The Archdemon is... it's absorbing my divine energy to strengthen itself!!"

Terror flows through Neptune's veins. The Archdemon sucks away the last vestiges of the Creator's Palm, boosting its power to a new realm. Its head finishes regenerating, and all of the wounds inflicted upon it thus far fade away, leaving the Archdemon as healthy as when it first appeared.

"GRRRROOOOOAAAR!!"

The Archdemon leaps atop its tentacles, all of which have revived. Before Neptune can comprehend the situation, Diablo focuses strength into his lower body and jumps into the sky!

"Oh, shit! SHIT!"

Neptune yells in fright as the terrifying monster pounces at him like a jaguar leaping for the neck of an impala. The instant before the Archdemon can seize him, Neptune transforms into a beam of light and zips away, causing the Archdemon to grab nothing but air.

The enormous monster falls from the sky, causing millions of voices to cry out in terror. Diablo crashes into Heaven's Soil, sending shockwaves in every direction. He crushes thousands of demons and angels into pulp, and for the lucky groups that survive, his tentacles lash out to feast upon them.

"Ahhh!" One male cherub howls. He brandishes his sword and tries to chop the three tentacles rushing him, but he fails. His body becomes little more than shredded beef in the Archdemon's maws.

Three fire-type Demon Lords do their best to fend off a dozen tentacles, but their flames barely tickle the ferocious Flesh Eaters. The three demons dissolve into chewed-up mush in their mouths.

* * *

All the while, Raphael gazes upon the unstoppable power of the Archdemon. He levitates, unmoving, a few miles away from the battlefield.

Oh, Creator... how can we win? If I hadn't seen it myself, I would never have believed such a fiend could exist in the mortal realm.

"Brother Raphael!" A female voice calls out. Raphael turns to his right and spots Uzziel flying toward him. "I need thy help!"

"My help? To what end? I'm trying to discern the Great Demon's weakness!"

Uzziel glances over her shoulder at the Archdemon. Her gaze darkens as she shoots a scowl at it. "I cannot allow chaos to reign supreme on the battlefield. Help me, Raphael. I will heal everyone on both sides. If we unite our strength, we can defeat the Great Demon. He is everyone's enemy!"

Raphael balks. "Impossible! The demons have slaughtered too many of our people! We cannot join forces with our mortal enemies."

"We must," Uzziel replies. She returns to gazing at Raphael, and her expression turns solemn. "Do not allow hatred to blind thee. The demons might be our enemies, but today, we face an existential threat. Help me, Raphael. The demons are on the verge of fleeing. If they leave Heaven, we will not be able to defeat the Great Demon. Our brothers and sisters will all perish!"

Heaven's Light dims again. Raphael flinches as the Archdemon fires another concentrated flame-blast at Neptune in the skies above. Neptune dodges it and counters with divine energy, but it does little to slow the Archdemon down.

"Damn..." Raphael growls. "I can't... I can't bow my head to these scheming little..."

Uzziel ignores the Archdemon behind her and maintains eye contact with her brother. Her eyes harden as the two of them exchange their opinions wordlessly.

"I won't allow us to die. Help me, Raphael. I need thy power to unite everyone."

Raphael pales. He nods along to Uzziel's words, but his approval appears half-hearted, given the circumstances.

"Very well. Tell me thy plan."

Kirie lands amidst the battlefield somewhere two miles behind the Archdemon. Diablo's colossal body engulfs the horizon, sending a chill down Kirie's back as she imagines the horrifying death she barely escaped. The redheaded cherub pauses for a moment to sweep her gaze around, where she spots a dozen demons fighting with five seraphs.

The seraph warriors unleash fire and lightning upon their foes. Their teamwork goes beyond the ordinary, allowing them to cover each other's backs. A low-level healer does his best to maintain the vitality and energy of his comrades, but it's clear by the look on his face that he's just as worn out as his comrades.

Kirie takes only a moment to catch her breath. After flying through Diablo's tentacles and barely escaping death, her wings ache in a way she's never experienced before.

Fighting for my life is awful! Kirie thinks. It's much more brutal than any of Michael's training exercises. I can barely use my wings! I'll have to ground myself for the moment and help out where I can.

The curly-haired cherub shoots a look behind herself, where she witnesses Neptune transform into rings of light to encircle the Archdemon.

The Titans are way too powerful! It's no wonder Raphael always told us not to agitate them. If we survive this battle, I'll make sure to keep my distance.

Kirie draws her sword and charges toward the nearby demons and seraphs. Once she arrives within a few dozen feet, a pair of demons jump out in front of her and lick their lips. "Ohoho! A little chicken, all by her lonesome! Don't even think about helping your friends, stupid girl! We're gonna chop you into bits, first!"

The demon on the right, a Scyther, lowers into an attacking stance with both blade-arms at his side. The other demon, a Brute, flexes his huge muscles and grins at her. Both of them are only Demon Grunts, but to the exhausted Kirie, they're incredibly threatening.

Kirie scowls. "Damn. Just when I thought I'd escaped the jaws of death..."

The Scyther demon jumps at her. He swings his razor-sharp sword-arms at her, and she deflects his bones with her sword and shield.

Clang!

Kirie spins to her right and knocks the Scyther's arms to the dirt. With a quick hop, she flaps her wings and jump-kicks the little bastard right in the face, sending him tumbling backward.

An instant before Kirie's feet touch the ground, the Brute demon bullrushes her. He uses his shoulder as a battering ram and plows into her to knock her off-balance.

"Ah!"

Kirie yelps in surprise as she hits the dirt. Her fatigued wings grind along the soil and break a few of their bones, sending waves of pain coursing through her spine. Before she can worry about her injuries, Kirie's eyes widen as the Brute lifts his fist to punch her face.

Kirie quickly raises her shield to block him.

Thunk! Crack.

The Brute savagely pounds Kirie's shield without holding back. His punch pushes through her defenses and breaks her left arm, causing her to scream. "Ahhh!"

"Hahaha! Stupid pigeon!" The Brute laughs. "Now you're-"

Hardly has the Brute began to gloat before Kirie drops her sword and aims her palm at his face.

Shik!

A dagger made of holy energy fires from her palm and impales the big demon's head. He jumps backward reflexively, only to perish a moment later.

"Nnnn!"

Kirie pushes herself to her feet. The moment the Brute hits the dirt, the Scyther jumps at her, giving her only a second to retaliate.

Kirie quickly draws a circle in the air and aims it at the Scyther.

Thoom!

A concussive blast of holy energy fires from the circle and thumps the little bastard right in his gut. Kirie knocks the wind out of the Scyther in one move, then follows up with a pair of holy daggers.

Shik, shik!

One dagger impales the Scyther's heart, while the other stabs him in the eye. He falls backward, dead.

Kirie gasps for breath. She grits her teeth as the pain from her broken wings and left arm cause no end to her misery.

Aaaoo... I can't fight much longer. I barely have any spiritual energy left. Even if I win another fight or two, I'll perish once my mana depletes...

Kirie turns to look at the five seraph warriors. To her horror, all of them lay at the feet of their demon opponents, dead and broken. Blood gushes from fresh cuts, while the healer's head sits spread out across several feet of the battlefield.

The remaining demons turn to face Kirie. The blood of their victims coats their faces and bodies, making them appear even more fierce than before.

"Look! Another pigeon bitch! Let's gut her!"

"She done killed Flim and Glomp all by 'erself! That stinkin' no-good cunt!"

Kirie turns deathly pale. The demons stomp toward her, while all she can manage is to turn around and limp away. Within seconds, the five demons catch up to her.

"Ey! Where d'ya think you're runnin' off? You ain't goin' nowhere, ya filthy flyin' cow!"

One of the demons reaches out to grab her. However, at the moment, a tremendous outburst of holy magic explodes next to the Archdemon's face, startling everyone present. All of the demons jerk their eyes up right as a light as bright as the sun ignites atop the Archdemon's head.

"Ahhhh!!"

"My eyes! My fuckin' eyes!"

Kirie presses her right arm against her eyes and stumbles to the left. She continues to limp away, even though she knows the blindness will only momentarily stun her pursuers.

Someone save me! Please!!

Kirie begs for a hero to come in her moment of desperation.

The Archdemon falls backward. His body smashes into Heaven's Soil a mile away, sending a blast of rocks and dirt surging toward Kirie and the demons.

One of the demons cracks open his eyes and screams as he spots a humongous boulder tumbling across Heaven toward him and his friends.

"LOOK-!!"

He barely gets one word off before the boulder smashes into the group of demons and pulverizes them into a mass of blood and bone. Kirie continues running, unaware of their gruesome ends.

Then, a few seconds later, two boulders collide with each other and explode in a hail of shrapnel. Kirie's body goes numb as a storm of rock-bullets batters her arms, strikes her head, and sends her flying to the left. She hits the ground, *hard*.

* * *

Kirie opens her eyes.

Every single inch of her body aches. Spots dance in her vision. She chokes on her saliva and shakily uses her right arm to pull herself to a sitting position.

The distant sounds of battle echo in Kirie's ears. Deliriously, she raises her head to stare at the Archdemon as it fights... something.

What happened? Am I alive...? Dead?

Kirie examines her broken body with a semi-detached expression, almost as if it belonged to someone else.

My left arm's useless. Can't move my wings at all. Legs are all cut up... barely any armor left. I'm losing a lot of blood. If I don't find a healer soon...

Regret washes over the cherub woman. Her life flashes before her eyes. All those days she complained about this banal thing or that unimportant matter...

Life was too good for me. That's why I'll soon die. The Creator has gazed upon me and found me wanting. Envy and greed are all I've ever known. Raphael spoiled our people. He gave us an easy life, and now we're paying for our lack of vigilance.

Kirie shakes her head.

If I had a second chance... I wonder what I might do differently...

Kirie raises her eyes to look at the Archdemon.

However, a bolt of horror shoots through her body.

"Eeyyaah!!"

Kirie shoves herself backward with her feet as she suddenly notices a Demon Lord standing before her!

Oh, Creator! I didn't pay attention! One of the bloodskins has come to kill me!!

Kirie instinctively reaches for her sword, only to find its sheath empty. She panics and tries to fire a holy dagger at the demon, but screws up her incantation and causes it to backfire in her face.

Fwish!

An explosion of mana detonates at her fingertips. She burns her hand and wails in pain, then falls on her back.

All the while, the Demon Lord stares at her without reacting.

"Sheesh. She's in worse condition than we thought."

"What a cutie. We oughta take some pity on her, don't'cha think? Ain't never seen a redhead before."

"Gross! There you go thinking with our Little Demon again. Leave me out of your fantasies!"

The Demon Lord talks to himself, acting as though there are two beings inside his mind.

Kirie stares at him, wide-eyed.

Oh, no! A crazy aberrant demon! I'm dead! I can't fight back at all!

The Demon Lord takes a step toward her, and Kirie instinctively summons a holy dagger in her grasp. She clutches it tightly and points it at him.

"S-stay away! Stay back!! I'll fight to my last breath!"

"Whoa whoa, calm down, little lady," he says. "We've killed plenty of pigeons today. We're downright sick of it. Let's not be strangers now. My name's Davook. What's yours?"

A look of confusion passes over Kirie's face.

The Demon hasn't yet attacked me. He has the upper hand. What horrible cruelty is he planning to unleash?

Kirie's voice shakes slightly. "I-I don't have anything to say to the likes of you!"

"Huh? Geez. She's a dense one..."

"Oh, come on. Look at her face. She must be scared stiff! She's vulnerable, helpless, and now some big scary Demon pops up. Whaddya expect her to say?"

Davook converses with himself again, ignoring Kirie entirely.

Then, he points his finger at her.

"Let's put down the weapon, sweetie. We don't want you to hurt yourself."

Suddenly, a tendril of shadow shoots out from under Davook's foot. It pounces at Kirie's arm, coils around it, and wrenches it to her right. Davook binds her arm to the ground, pinning her in place.

"Augh!" Kirie cries. Pain shoots from her arm as she tries to fight Davook's shadow, but she can't muster any strength to resist.

Davook flicks his eyes up and down her body, from head to toe. "What a catch. I thought this day couldn't get any better, but I was wrong! Alright, how about this? If you ain't gonna tell us your name, then we'll call you... Red! Yeah, how do you like that? Red's such a cute name!"

Davook's second personality immediately counters his own words. "I'd prefer Bloodhair. It's appropriate. The pigeons call us Bloodskins, so why not call a pigeon Bloodhair?"

"No way! A cute name for a cute girl."

"She ain't cute; you're just nasty."

Kirie curls herself into a ball. She shivers as Davook continues to talk about her as if she isn't there. "M-my name is Kirie! Not Red... not Bloodhair! Don't call me w-whatever you want... filthy demon..."

Davook whistles. "Hey! A name! She has one after all! Boy, we have to respect that fighting spirit. You haven't got any mana left, yet you're still acting like a big bad angel warrior. Hahaha! I love it when girls fight back."

A nasty look appears in Davook's eyes.

"Yeah... that's right. It ain't no fun if a girl's meek and submissive..."

Davook's formerly lighthearted attitude disappears. All of Kirie's courage vanishes as her eyes meet those of the horrible monster planning to enslave her.

"Please... please kill me..."

Her pitiful begging only makes Davook grin like a madman.

"Nah. I don't waste perfectly serviceable goods. I've got a better idea. How about you come along with me, and the two of us treat each other *real* nice?"

Davook reaches toward Kirie. Shadows fire from his hand and wrap around her face, cutting off her oxygen.

Kirie gasps and tries to use her broken left arm to paw at her face, but her strength isn't enough to resist.

Eventually, her consciousness fades. She slumps backward and falls comatose, leaving Davook to rub his hands together with glee.

"Oooh! Oh, boy, oh, boy. These new shadow powers are awesome! We can do whatever we want, and nobody can stop us!"

Davook's grin vanishes. "Don't lump me in with the likes of you. I don't know what you're planning, and I don't *want* to know. When will *I* get what *I* want, for once?"

"Pft. You're way too dull. What do you even want?"

"...I'd like to play some Sticks and Bones."

"BORING! Getting chicks is way better than playing stupid games with other demons. Now shut your face and help me pick her up."

Davook uses his shadows to levitate Kirie into his grasp. He wraps one arm around her and grunts as the unconscious cherub hangs limply over his shoulder.

"Damn. This girl's heavier than I expected. Or maybe we're just weak?"

With a shrug, Davook melts into his shadow and takes his prisoner along for the ride. The two of them disappear into the distance as he heads for Heaven's Gate.

"Hoo-hoo! What a great day! What a great day, indeed!"

Part 168: The Creator's Rain

At every corner of the battlefield, demons and angels jump back and forth between fighting each other and focusing their efforts on the Archdemon. Diablo's godlike presence never leaves the back of their minds. The moment any group of angels or demons notices the Archdemon turn its head toward them, they swiftly disband and spread out to flee for their lives.

Biting wounds cover the bodies of the majority of warriors, both demonic and angelic. With each side only having one high-level healer and a few scattered low-level ones as well, the wounds most angels and demons suffer eventually turn fatal. Occasionally, after winning a round of combat, a demon or an angel will stumble and fall, taking their last pained breath as their soul fades away.

During the heat of battle, far above the Archdemon and the heads of the battlefield's combatants, a mass of clouds forms from nothing. Heaven's Light shines as brightly as ever, but the unmistakable grey color in the atmosphere causes many warriors to raise their eyes skyward.

Could this new development be another of the Archdemon's attacks?

Might everyone perish under some despicable angel or demon plot?

Panic and anger appear on the faces of both sides. They howl in rage as their suspicions reach a boiling point.

However, to everyone's surprise, drops of water start slowly trickling down from above. In a realm where the water cycle has never occurred due to the lack of sunlight, Heaven experiences its first rainy day since its creation.

The angels stare in disbelief as the downfall intensifies. "How can this be? Have the demons defiled our home?"

The demons, likewise, hold out their palms and allow the rainwater to wet their hands. "Somethin' about this water feels... *funny*..."

Within seconds, an angel yelps in surprise. "What?! By the Creator! My wounds! They're..."

Fifty feet away, his demon opponent takes a step backward in surprise. "Holy shit! This water is *healing* me? How's that even possible?"

The slow and steady rainfall eventually transforms into a torrential downpour. Angels and demons all across Heaven rise to their feet as their fatigue vanishes. Their bodies regenerate, causing those who were on the brink of death only moments earlier to smile like children.

One angel cries out in joy. "It is a sign! A blessing from the Creator! Heaven itself has given us a second chance to slaughter the bloodskins!"

A demon retorts. "Bullshit! The Great Demon did this to heal *us*! It'll be your turn to die next, ugly!"

Within seconds, the raucous celebration vanishes, replaced instead with hatred and enmity. Demons and angels alike raise their weapons, preparing to tear each other apart.

High above the battlefield, two figures flap their wings and gaze upon the few million remaining combatants. Uzziel and Raphael, the Archangels of Creation and Wisdom, shake their heads and sigh.

"'Tis impossible, my little sister," Raphael mutters. "The hatred between our people runs deep. Thy performance will not sway their hearts."

Uzziel ignores Raphael's words of disapproval. She continues to hold her arms skyward, where her powers of nature twist the clouds around to summon Enchanted Rain.

"It will, Raphael. Come, it is time for thou to do thy part. I need thy power to speak to all the warriors on both sides. Help me!"

Raphael closes his eyes.

"Haah... I have nearly spent all of my mana, sister. If I assist thee, the possibility is high that I will... I will..."

"Thou shalt not perish," Uzziel says. She continues to gaze at the clouds, but her eyes harden. "I will gift thee my mana if necessary."

"But, to maintain such a powerful spell-"

"Worry not about my mana," Uzziel says, cutting him off. A strange look enters her eyes. "For some reason, my mana is at a peak I've never before experienced in my life."

Her words send a jolt of shock through the old man's heart.

Without saying anything, Raphael gazes at his sister's figure for a moment with deep suspicion.

By the Creator! I suspected earlier that I might have sensed Yggdrasil's power, but that part of my memory was so faint... could it be? Has Uzziel regained her memories?!

Almost immediately, he discards the notion.

Nay. 'Tis unlikely. If she had, then t'would not be Enchanted Rain falling from the skies, but Cursed Rain to rot away all it touches.

Raphael stifles a shudder. He swallows hard and forces himself to smile at Uzziel. "Ah, yes. Very well, then. Give me a moment, and I will project thy image to all presently standing in Heaven."

The old man doesn't hesitate. Raphael's fingers weave together to form a complex spell, the same one he used earlier to try and distract the Archdemon. This time, he focuses its energy on Uzziel to project her body all across Heaven's battlefield.

During the minute it takes for Raphael to complete his spell, several demons and angels resume their bloody fighting. To their surprise, even when fatal blows meet their marks, the loser will often survive at the brink of death, only to regenerate back to their full health.

Several angels curl their hands into fists. "Damn! We won't be able to kill the bloodskins at this rate! They're healing too quickly!"

The demons stomp their feet and gnash their teeth. "Filthy chickens! If it weren't for this damned rain, we'd have made mincemeat of them by now!"

The Archdemon unleashes another blast of fire. He incinerates a thousand clumped-together demons and angels, killing them before Uzziel's rain can regenerate their bodies. However, his gaping maws prove the most horrifying. They zip around in every direction, chewing up angels and demons who can't dodge in time. Thanks to Uzziel's Enchanted Rain, their prey continue to regenerate even as the barracuda-teeth chew them up, over and over.

"LET ME DIE!! AAAHH!!!"

One demon wails pitifully as his body heals inside a Flesh Eater's mouth. It responds by chewing him up again, to which he revives once more.

"How horrifying!" One Demon Lord yells. He jumps over to the Flesh Eater and swings his hand down to chop at its soft, fatty neck. After severing the maw from its tentacle, he rescues his comrade and helps him escape.

Orcs and Hellhounds mobilize together to dash around and chop at any tentacles that get too close. Some of them end up inside the Archdemon's Flesh Eaters, but their fellow monsters eventually cut them loose.

As the battle continues to intensify, hundreds of flashes of light appear a few hundred feet above the ground. The sudden firework display catches everyone's attention, putting both the demons and the angels on-guard.

"Brothers, sisters, and my children, too! Please, listen to my words!"

Uzziel's body appears in a thousand places, projecting her image to all those present. She clutches her chest with one hand and sweeps the other in a wide arc to capture their attention.

"Do not fight amongst one another! The Great Demon is a threat unlike any we've ever faced. He will kill both angels and demons alike if we do not stop him!"

When the cherubs and seraphs spot their beloved sister's apparition, many angels whoop and cheer. "Hah! Of course t'was our sister's power, which saved us! How could the accursed bloodskins activate such a vast battlefield healing technique? The might of the Archangels reigns supreme!"

The demons offer a different perspective. "Bahaha! Does that stupid bitch really think we'll cooperate with her? If she's going to heal us, then we'll just use this chance to take our revenge!"

Uzziel's next words quickly change the minds of both sides.

"This battle is pointless. The angels are my family, but the demons are my children. I do not wish to see anyone else perish today! Set aside thy differences! The Great Demon will kill us all if we don't work together! Already, it has slain half a million warriors on both sides. We have to work together to defeat it, or it will kill us all and set its sights on Earth!"

As Uzziel speaks, Heaven's Light shudders, temporarily dimming under the might of the Archdemon's power.

"The Great Demon will not stop here! Even if all of us should flee, Heaven will not be able to contain its power. It will destroy Heaven and seek us out, one by one. It is the enemy of creation, an arbiter of

death!"

The Archdemon swivels its head toward a group of angels and demons. With their gazes fixed on Uzziel's projection, they don't recognize the metaphorical scythes held to their necks. A moment later, the Archdemon waves its hand, and a thousand beams of lightning fire from its fingertips to tear through the warriors before they can react.

"Geeeyaagh-!!"

Their final screams send horror washing through the nearby survivors. At once, Uzziel's words awaken them from their anger.

"Shrakh! That chicken lady is right! The Great Demon's gonna kill us all!"

"What should we do? We can't trust the pigeons!"

"I-I don't know! Don't look at me!"

Panic appears in the eyes of many demons. The freshly charred bodies of their former comrades quickly gets their mental juices flowing.

Uzziel continues to speak. "To my brothers and sisters, take flight, now. Join me in the skies. Leave the demons alone. We will not fight them anymore. To the demons, my wayward children, I promise you this; we will not harm you. We must set aside our differences and work together. Only then can we save ourselves from extinction!"

A moment later, Uzziel waves her hand, causing a chilling wind to rush toward the Archdemon from the north. The power of winter materializes against Diablo's back, sending ice creeping across his body.

"Come! We must bet everything on this final battle! The angels will attack from the skies, while the demons will attack from the ground! Hold nothing back! We must banish this monster to the Nether from whence it came!"

Uzziel's anger-filled tone rouses the rage of all the demons and angels. They raise their weapons to the sky and howl like wolves.

"Wooo! Hell yeah! Let's kill this spawn of a broodmother!"

"We fight for our sister! We fight for the Archangels!"

Without saying another word, the angels and demons separate from each other. The angels flap their wings to soar above the battlefield, while the demons and monsters rally together, surrounding the Archdemon from every direction.

Within minutes, a cloud of bodies appears in the sky, while a sea of flesh engulfs Diablo's tentacle-legs. The angels form a sphere around Diablo's upper body, while the demons make themselves into sandbags to contain his movements.

Uzziel's illusions disappear. Once Raphael removes his power, the old man shudders violently and loses his ability to fly. He starts to plunge toward Heaven's Soil, but Camael flies over and grabs him within seconds.

"Brother! Art thou alright?"

Raphael's fingers barely manage to hold onto his staff. His skin turns grey, and his muscles shrivel up noticeably.

"I... I... can't... can't move... barely any strength..."

Uzziel turns to look at her brother, and the color drains from her face. "Oh, gods! He's almost out of mana! Here, let me give Raphael some of my nature energy!"

The Archangel of Creation lowers her arms and stops casting her Enchanted Rain. She moves toward her brother to transfer her power to him, but Raphael's eyes widen with fear.

"No! No... H-Heavens, no... nature energy is... is not... something anyone but thou can... can control..."

Camael frowns. She eyes her brother's pallid appearance for a moment, as if realizing something for the first time. "I see. If Uzziel cannot assist thee, then I can. One moment, brother."

Using her left arm to support Raphael and her right arm to reach for her sheathed blade, Camael takes hold of Excalibur's handle and winces as a massive deluge of energy floods inside her body.

"Hnnnnghhhh...!!!"

The Archangel of Divination winces as her aura brightens to an insane level, transforming her into a ten thousand watt lightbulb levitating above the battlefield. A moment later, she releases Excalibur and quickly presses her hand against Raphael's chest. The divine energy inside herself drops by half and transfers into Raphael, increasing his mana to its former levels and instantly rejuvenating his failing body.

Raphael gasps. "Gah! What? How in the Creator's name..."

He pulls away from Camael and stares at her in awe.

"Where did'st thou obtain so much energy, sister?"

Camael sighs. "My new weapon, Excalibur. 'Tis incomplete, but its power dwarfs all the others I've made during my life. Perhaps not those I made during the Primordial Era, but I possess no knowledge of them. Nay, this blade has a special ability which allows it to condense holy energy within itself, folding it over and over an infinite number of times."

Raphael nods along to her words, and a trace of a smile appears on his face. "By the Creator! Such a divine weapon... we could use it to revitalize our brothers and sisters! With our energy dwindling over time, thy blade would allow us to refill our mana and survive indefinitely, without the need for-"

Camael shakes her head and interrupts Raphael. "Nay. T'will not work. The sword's mana might seem nigh-infinite, but not even I know the place from where it draws its power. Further, the mana is not pure enough for our needs. Our Archangel bodies possess the means to adapt it, but for the lower angels, they would perish if they were to try."

Raphael's joy subsides.

"Ah. I... I understand. Very well, then. At the least, I thank thee for saving me, sister."

"I will never let thy life fade," Camael replies. She smiles at Raphael, but her expression carries a hint of foreboding. "Thou art my most precious brother. Our people will not survive without thy hand guiding them."

Raphael meets Camael's gaze. He cocks his head slightly, and a questioning look appears in his eyes.

"Camael...?"

The moment Raphael speaks, Camael quickly turns her head away to look at the Archdemon. She scowls and clenches her fists. "Don't think so hard about everything, Raphael. We must fight now."

Raphael's expression turns hollow. He nods along, and an inkling of realization toward Camael's arrangements appears in the back of his mind.

"I see. So it was like that. Hm."

The Archangel of Wisdom nods along to his inner thoughts, then pushes them aside and sets his gaze on the Archdemon.

"Where is Michael? We will need him for this final phase."

Satan staggers away from the enormous Archdemon. His thoughts bounce around aimlessly as he tries to put two and two together.

"So, the angels and demons are... are workin' together? To fight that big fuckin' monster thing?"

Hades grunts. *So it would seem. The Enchanted Rain assisted our regeneration, but if the Titan woman hadn't stopped stomping us into paste, I'm afraid we would have lost a countless number of other souls.*

"That's all in the past now," Satan mutters. "Where's Deebs? Lucy? ...Shit! Where's Belial? Where's my girl?!"

Satan stumbles past a row of fire-type demon grunts. All of them conjure balls of flame in their palms and sling them toward the Archdemon. The fireballs explode like firecrackers against the monster's flesh, causing little to no damage, but the demon grunts don't back down.

"Keep lobbing!"

Satan rubs his face as he runs past row after row of demons and monsters, all of them flinging fire and fury at the Archdemon.

"I don't get it. What changed while we were out? Why are my people working with the angels? Ain't that big demon on our side? Do you think maybe Hercules has something to do with this?"

Perhaps. Let's stop and ask someone.

Satan nods. He grabs the nearest demon grunt, a Brute-type with giant muscles. "Hey, you! It's me, Satan. What's going on, here?"

The Brute jerks back in surprise. "Huh? You're alive? We thought the Great Demon offed ya!"

"No, stupid, I'm immortal. I always come back from death. Sheesh. Anyway, what the hell is this 'Great Demon,' and why are we fighting it?"

"Satan... have you been living under a rock for the past hour?! This big bastard's killed... like... a whole bunch of us! He ain't on our side!"

"He's not?"

"Nah, boss! He, she, or whatever the hell it is... it kills chickens and demons all the same!"

Satan's confusion vanishes. He turns around to gape at the Archdemon right as it conjures another ball of electrical energy between its horns. A second later, the Brute behind him screams in terror.

"INCOMING! Burrowers, get us underground!!"

Satan whirls around to stare in disbelief as waves of burrower demons slap their palms against Heaven's soul and instantly yank their comrades under Heaven's Soil. A second later, the Archdemon fires his electrified ball into the sky, where it detonates and sends thousands of lightning bolts in every direction. Tens of thousands of angels perish instantly, unable to avoid its area-of-effect.

Satan nearly chokes on his tongue. "Gah! Spawn of a broodmother! What in mama's green Earth was THAT?!"

The Great Demon's strength surpasses that of many ancient enemies I helped defeat, Hades replies, his voice icy. I've fought legendary Titan Kings whose battle might would come second to this monstrosity. If it keeps up-

Hades pauses.

A moment passes where Heaven's Light dims as the Archdemon unleashes a stream of fire upon the ground, blasting several hundred demons to smithereens.

By the Creator... no wonder this monster is so powerful.

"Huh? You know somethin'?"

Perhaps. For the moment, tis' only a conjecture, but I believe... it might be drawing power from Heaven itself.

Satan turns to run from the Archdemon. He sweeps his eyes around to scan for Belial and the others, but also keeps his attention on Hades. "Don't hold back on me now, buddy. What's the down-low? I'll take any hints I can get."

As I said, I can only hazard a guess, but if my intuition is correct, Raphael might be thinking the same thing.

Satan... Heaven is an artificial dimension. Raphael created it as a haven for our people, a place where we could live outside the mortal realm, safe from Titans, who might come and attack us. Back when the Primordial Wars concluded, when we stood at the precipice of Raphael's mind-wipes, my brother decided we needed a fail-safe in case the Titans broke their end of the treaty. He used a tremendous amount of mana from all the angels to create Heaven, where we have resided ever since.

"Alright, makes sense," Satan grunts. "What else?"

The Great Demon's attacks appear erratically powerful. Such a being's mana cannot come from nowhere. He must be drawing his might from something or somewhere, and I believe the Great Demon's power comes from Heaven's Core.

"What, you mean something buried deep below us?"

Nay. What I refer to is none other than the all-encompassing glow which surrounds us; Heaven's Light. Heaven draws upon life energy from the mortal realm to sustain itself, but the energy it requires has to stay at a certain level. Too much, and Heaven will explode, killing everyone inside and causing massive damage to Earth. Too little, and it will implode; ejecting us back to Earth, while Heaven itself will disappear forever.

Satan pauses to gaze at the charred remains of several demons. Their corpses lay with twisted expressions of terror and fear etched into their faces. After Satan double-checks to make sure none of them are his fellow Emperors, he continues running toward the outskirts of the battlefield.

"So what's gonna happen? Will we explode or implode?"

Neither, if we're lucky. I suspect the reason everyone has joined forces is for the sole purpose of defeating the Great Demon. If we succeed, we'll save Heaven and ourselves. If we fail, everyone will die. For the sake of self-preservation, we only have one choice.

"Can't we just escape and leave the Great Demon here? It can't fit through Heaven's Gate."

We don't know if it has the power to teleport or open gates. If it does, it will follow us. More importantly, if Heaven implodes... the Great Demon will be free to roam the Earth. It will turn our planet barren and wipe out all life.

Satan grinds his teeth together.

"Damn! Fucking hell! I came here to kill the Archangels, but now you're telling me I have to work with 'em? What a bunch of skarn-droppings!"

Thou knoweth me well, Satan. Raphael is not my ally. I would love to plunge the knife in his back. However, for the sake of our survival, we must look at the big picture.

Satan nods. "Fine, fine, but after we finish off the Great Demon, our next target's the old man!"

Agreed.

* * *

Satan calls out at the top of his lungs. "Oy! Diablo! Lucy! Belial! Where are you guys? Hello?!"

They might be dead.

"No way! Don't even bullshit me like that. Where are their bodies? They're alive."

When we woke up, the surrounding area had been pulverized by the Great Demon. Perhaps... perhaps they were...

"Crushed? Nope! I don't buy it. Not for one- WHAT THE...!"

Satan suddenly leaps backward in surprise as a horrifying Flesh Eater charges him from above. The gigantic head filled with razor-sharp teeth lunges toward the scent of powerful magic like a moth attracted to a flame. Satan's quick thinking causes the gigantic maw to crash into the dirt where he stood only a moment before. The Flesh Eater immediately pulls itself up with its tentacle and hisses at him.

"What the fuck is THAT?!"

One of the Great Demon's... legs? I think it's hungry.

"No, shit!"

The gaping maw lunges at Satan once more, but this time the Devil unleashes a blast of air at it, which deflects the tentacle to the left. It smashes into the dirt and immediately rises to charge again.

The Devil snarls. "You creepy tooth-face! Get away from me!"

Satan burns ten souls to summon a massive fireball in his palm. The Flesh Eater rushes him like a wolf pouncing on a corpse, but Satan hurls his fireball straight into the monster's mouth and detonates it.

Choom- splat!

The Flesh Eater explodes into a thousand pieces, spraying blood and gore in every direction while leaving only one writhing tentacle connected to Diablo's distant body. Flesh remains spray all over Satan's naked figure, causing him to shudder.

"Eugh, nasty! I'm gonna need one hell of a bath when we finish."

Assuming we manage to make it out of here alive.

"Yeah, thanks for the positivity. Jackass."

While Satan grumbles at Hades, his eyes flick over to the tentacle, which continues to hover in midair. After a few seconds, his expression turns to disbelief.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa... is... is it...?"

The bloody stump where the maw once stood begins to shift and writhe. Within seconds, a small bulb appears on the tentacle's end. It expands to the size of a grapefruit, making Satan's eyes nearly bulge out of his sockets.

"It's growing back!"

Indeed. We should leave.

"Yeah! No, kidding!"

Satan ignites flames from his feet and pounces into the sky. He leaves the Flesh Eater behind and starts flying to the north to search for his friends.

Over there, Hades says, a note of urgency in his voice. Down and to the right.

Satan lowers his eyes to the battlefield below him and spots Bael amidst a crowd of demons and orcs, all of whom stand in a circle and fight off the attacks of more than fifty Flesh Eaters.

"Good eyes! Let's help him out!"

Satan burns several souls to increase his power to fly around the hungry maws. He concentrates the shape of his fireballs into a sword and slashes through the thin tentacles supporting their heads.

Within a minute, Satan cleaves over thirty of the bulbous jaw-worms from their supporting tentacles, causing them to crash into the dirt and writhe around helplessly.

Bael swings a newly acquired flail around. The multi-ton wrecking ball smashes through a dozen Flesh Eater heads and crushes them into pulp. Once Bael clears out the immediate area, he waves at Satan.

"Oy! Big boss, it's you!"

"Yeah, it's me," Satan answers.

"Boy, am I glad to see you here!"

Bael grins like an idiot. A single Flesh Eater lunges at him from behind, but Bael instantly whips around and smashes it with his fist. His ridiculous strength nets him a home run as he sends it flying into the distance.

"Oooh! Score! Yo, Satan, get down here! I need you, man! We've got some Demon Emperors who're hurt real bad."

Satan pauses. He glances behind Bael, where Lucifer and Belial lay on their backs. Belial draws the shallowest of breaths, while her physical condition appears far more gruesome than Lucifer's. Third and fourth-degree burns cover her whole body, each one caused by Michael's holy aura. Lucifer, meanwhile, lays unmoving like a corpse. Her right arm and leg end in stumps, but neither bleed profusely, having apparently been healed at some point.

"Belial! Lucy! Spawn of a broodmother!"

Satan disengages his flame-jets and falls to the soil below. He hits the ground and lands in a crouch, then runs over to Bael with several Flesh Eaters in hot pursuit.

"Cover me!"

"On it!"

Bael swings his spiked flail like a baseball bat, and Satan ducks it, allowing the weapon to plow through the hungry jaw-worms behind him. A few seconds later, Satan runs past Bael and his orc companions to kneel beside Belial and Lucifer.

"Healing water, healing water... gimme a sec, baby girl..."

Satan splashes water on Belial. Her body spasms in pain as the healing energy hisses and burns her blood vessels and nerves. Belial gasps for breath, gnashes her teeth, and arches her back involuntarily. "Ahhhn!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Satan yells, trying to calm her down. "I ain't that good at healing magic! Baby, are you okay? What happened? Did Michael hurt you?"

Belial doesn't respond. Her figure goes limp. Several seconds pass before she manages to crack open her eyes. Her vision spins erratically, causing her to whimper pitifully.

"Guh... S-Satan? Diablo... he..."

Belial coughs weakly, and traces of blood leak from her mouth.

"Diablo... Lucy... dead? I saw... saw them die... saw you die, too... am I dead?"

"No, no, you're alive," Satan says. He splashes more water on Belial to continue healing her, but it doesn't do much to the extensive burns covering her skin. He quickly moves on to Lucifer, but her body doesn't react at all to his healing touch.

"I don't know about Lucy and Deebs, though," Satan mutters. "Lucy ain't moving. Shit. She might be dead."

Belial forces her eyes open. She follows Satan's gaze and turns her head to look at Lucifer. "No... not dead. That's right... I... I preserved her life... with... my last breath. Thought I would die. Michael went berserk. Cough..."

Belial's eyelids flutter for a moment, but she summons adrenaline from a previously untapped well, raises her hand, and releases healing magic over herself. Despite her extensive injuries, Belial's inner mana reserves don't lack for storage. Her energy dips slightly, and within seconds, the horrific burns covering her entire body melt away, revealing her shiny red skin.

A minute passes. Bael and the orcs maintain their defensive encirclement of the three Emperors, while Belial pulls herself to a sitting position and examines Lucifer.

"I stabilized Lucifer's wounds before I passed out," Belial says, her body fully healed. "If it weren't for that, she would have died of blood loss. I slowed her heartbeat to almost nothing and put her in suspended animation, but now that I've recovered, I can bring her back."

Satan nods along to Belial's words. "You're a great gal, Belial. I don't know if I'd have helped someone else in such a dire situation. But... you should watch out. That selflessness is gonna get you killed one of these days."

Belial focuses her gaze on Lucifer's comatose form and sighs. "So be it. Better to die after living a life of goodness, than to live forever with a guilty conscience."

Inside Satan's mind, Hades smiles. *Ah, what pure thoughts thy mate possesses.*

Satan rolls his eyes. "Oh, shut up."

"Pardon?" Belial replies, turning a curious gaze toward her mate.

"Sorry. Not you. Sammy-boy."

"Oh."

Belial returns her attention to Lucifer. After a few moments, she intones several healing spells at once and focuses them on Lucifer's heart and severed limbs.

"Satan. Do you know what happened to Diablo? Have you seen him?"

Satan shakes his head. "Not a clue. I only revived a few minutes ago. The Great Demon has been ravaging Heaven. However... as I recall..."

Satan's mind flashes back to an hour in the past, just before Chantis began repeatedly stomping him into puddles of blood.

"...Michael beheaded Deebs. That's the last thing I remember."

Belial nods. "I saw a little more than you. After Michael severed Diablo's head, I remember hearing a strange voice whispering Lucifer's name. I thought it might have been a hallucination, but now I know better. Diablo is the Great Demon."

Belial's words contain no emotion. She does not utter them as if they were a profound truth, but instead, a simple observation.

However, they rock Satan's heart to the core.

"Deebs is the Great Demon?! No way! How is that possible? I always knew he was pretty strong, but this is a whole new level of insanity!"

Belial shrugs. "Lucifer healed his fatal wounds from our original attack on Heaven by using Agares' transformation powers. She then went on to use those powers on several other demons afterward. Diablo, Bael, myself, and even herself... each time, Agares' transformation abilities had a different effect."

Belial's fingers deftly press against the injured parts of Lucifer's body. Healing energy flows into the Emperor of Providence, regenerating her limbs and restarting her heartbeat.

Satan falls silent. He watches with vacant, unseeing eyes, as Belial brings Lucifer back to life. His mind wanders, causing him to think of the possibilities Diablo's transformation might bring.

If Deebs was capable of such a powerful transformation, then that means we could have easily overpowered the angels anytime in the past. However, based on his current actions, I have to assume the dude's gone totally nuts! If Belial is right, then it means he can't control when or how he transforms, nor his actions. He might be powerful, but he's a threat to his friends and his foes as well.

"Kuhk!"

Lucifer gasps for breath. She bolts upright and clutches her heart.

"MICHAEL!!"

"Calm down, you're safe," Belial says, as she grabs the Emperor of Providence by her shoulders. "I healed you. You're fine."

Belial's words cause Lucifer to pause and examine her surroundings. The Third Emperor quickly swivels all three of her eyes in a 180-degree radius, allowing her to take in the situation around them.

"What the Devil is that... that huge monster over there?!"

"Diablo, I think."

"Diablo?! Impossible! How could he have- augh! What are those horrible giant mouths?!"

Lucifer's gaze falls upon the fifty chomping Flesh Eaters being fought off by Bael and the orc protectors. Every time one of them ends up smashed into a pulp, their heads fall off their tentacles, and new ones grow back, causing an infinite amount of annoyance.

"Fuckin' die already!" Bael bellows. He jumps at the nearest Flesh Eater right as it opens its mouth and lands inside its gaping maw, only for it to bite down and try to chew him up.

Two seconds later, the Flesh Eater pauses its chewing and freezes in midair. Its mouth curls into an expression of disgust, and it spits Bael out to land on Heaven's Soil.

Bael jumps to his feet. "Oh, what's the matter?! I don't taste good enough for you?! Huh? HUH?! C'mere, you ugly barf-face!"

He leaps at the Flesh Eater that just spit him out, grabs it by the back of its 'neck,' and strangles the tentacle with all his strength. Bael crushes and mashes it into pulp, causing the maw to fall off and slap against the ground.

"Screw you, you stupid toothy-head thing! I'll show you who's boss!"

Lucifer and the other two Emperors watch with dumbfounded expressions as Bael starts yanking on the tentacle and pulling it toward himself to spool it around his arm. After a few seconds of pulling, he yanks with all his strength and tears the tentacle off Diablo's main body, causing the Archdemon to roar in pain and swivel its head toward the one who maimed it.

Lucifer's third eye jumps upward toward the angered Archdemon standing only a couple of miles away. "Belial, you said that thing was Diablo, didn't you? Why is it looking at us with such hatred? It's... it's about to attack!!!"

Diablo boils heat inside his body. He targets Bael, the one being who has managed to cause the Archdemon permanent injury, and unleashes a blast of laser-like fire at the Duke of Pain.

Bael freezes in place as the heat of the sun fires at him.

"Aw, fuck."

Satan slaps the ground. He uses his power of earth manipulation to suck the other Emperors and their orc guardians underground, but Bael isn't close enough for Satan to bring him along.

BOOM!

Ten thousand degrees of concentrated heat slams into Bael, incinerating the world around him. Bael's body disappears from the vision of anyone hapless enough to stare at the Archdemon's blinding attack. However, after a few seconds, Diablo's mana dips, and he ceases his assault on the tiny little Demon Duke.

Smoke rises from where Bael once stood. After half a minute, Bael stumbles out of the smoke and waves his hands.

"Shit! Shit! Owie, ow! That hurt like hell! Hey! What's the big idea?! Ain't we on the same side! You're pissing me off, buster!"

The Archdemon's mindless rampage ceases for a moment. Diablo's consciousness, trapped within a sea of rage, pauses to evaluate the single remaining speck of light where he aimed his last attack.

SOMEONE SURVIVED? IT MUST BE MICHAEL; THE BASTARD WHO KILLED LUCY!! I FINALLY FOUND HIM!

Diablo's thoughts cause him to become even more enraged. He turns his entire body to the east, where Bael stands all alone amidst a field of molten rock. Bael ignores the lava melting against his toes.

"Hey, you! Yeah, you! You big, ugly, no-good, worthless piece of shit! You ain't that tough! I ain't scared of you, not one bit! Is that the best you've got?!"

The Archdemon screams at Bael.

"SCRREEEEEEAAAAH!!!"

Bael howls right back.

"BLEEEEAUGH! Yeah, do you hear that? That's what you sound like! A big, dumb friggin' idiot!"

As Bael goads the Archdemon, he hasn't the faintest clue that none of his words reach Diablo's ears at all. Instead, Diablo's mana-attuned senses gaze upon Bael's juicy glowing form with glee as the Archdemon imagines how much anger he'll get to let out upon 'Michael,' the one who killed his wife.

Diablo accumulates the energy needed for three attacks at once. The superheated flames from his belly, the electrical bomb from between his horns, and the power of gravitation all aim toward Bael, who remains blissfully unaware of his impending doom.

* * *

Satan and the others emerge from underground. They gaze upon Bael's suicidal idiocy with looks of disbelief.

"Oy! What's Bael thinking?" Satan yells. "He's gonna get himself killed!"

Lucifer flicks her gaze from the godlike Archdemon to the comparatively insignificant Bael. "I wouldn't count on it. Bael took that attack like a champ."

"If there's anything left of him, I can heal him afterward," Belial adds. "Come on. We can't leave him to fight the Great Demon alone."

"We can't fight Diablo in the first place!" Lucifer hisses. She turns her sharp gaze on Belial and glares daggers at her. "Are you stupid?! He's our greatest weapon! With Diablo's power at our disposal, nothing will stop us!"

Satan and Belial both scowl at her. They take a minute to explain the situation to Lucifer, and soon, her eyes shine with understanding.

"I see. So Diablo is our enemy, then?"

"Something like that," Belial replies. "We need to defeat him. If we don't, we might all perish. Even Satan has a limit to how many times he can rebirth himself."

"Oh? Does he, now?"

Lucifer shoots a suspicious glance at Satan. The Devil rolls his eyes at her. "Belial, you need to learn to keep your trap shut..."

Suddenly, one of the orcs cries out. "The Great Demon! He's gonna-!!!"

Diablo unleashes all three of his prepared attacks. A blast of fire, a surge of lightning, and a ball of concentrated gravity all rush toward Bael with killing intent.

Bael presses his feet against the ground. "Oh, man. I hope I don't regret this..."

Satan and the others dive underground yet again. Heaven shakes and rumbles from the unrelenting power of the Archdemon's assault.

* * *

Five miles away, at the Archdemon's south side, Raphael and the other Archangels all levitate in a circle around Michael.

Michael wipes a river of sweat from his forehead.

"I feel it, Raphael. It's..."

"It's ready!" Raphael says. "Go, brother! Show us thy courage! Thou art our last hope!"

Michael nods. His body glows with radiant light.

"I will not allow my brothers and sisters to perish today. Raphael, this gift thou hath given me, I won't forget it!"

Michael flaps his wings and rushes toward the Archdemon. As he does, his mana bursts out of his body like a waterfall erupting from a mountain. Spiritual energy condenses and hardens around himself. It transforms into a cocoon and envelops him in ancient magic from the Primordial Era, the might of which only a few people on the battlefield have ever witnessed.

Neptune hovers high above the Archdemon. Ivaldi gazes out from his eyes, and anger boils in her heart.

"Hmph. Michael: The one who slew Jörmungandr. Catherine might possess the dragon's fire, and Gabriel her mana, but Michael controls her *body*. How desperate must Raphael be to allow his tainted brother to unleash a power he cannot control?"

Neptune shakes his head. The other two Titan Kings frown at Ivaldi's words, while quietly wondering to themselves what events transpired in the past to cause her such anger.

But, without accessing her memories, they will never know.

Only Raphael and Ivaldi understand the secrets contained in Michael's ultimate magic.

* * *

The Archangel of Courage leaves behind his cocoon. His mana deforms, wraps around him, and rapidly expands into a five-hundred-foot-tall body of magical energy.

"Jörmungandr, lend me thy strength! Together, we will annihilate the Great Demon and save my people!"

Part 169: Heaven's Destruction

Recommended Listening

Bael howls at the top of his lungs.

"FUUUUUUUUCK!!"

Three combined magical attacks, each with the power of hundreds of tons of TNT, smash into Bael simultaneously. His vision turns white as the air around him ignites with the heat of the sun, tearing the breath from his chest.

Kathoom!

Diablo's rage-imbued spells pulverize Bael backward, batter him over a thousand feet underground, and bury him under the weight of hundreds of tons of molten, electrified rock. Smoke fills the area, coating an enormous portion of the battlefield in toxic fumes. Many demons, a sizable distance away, are forced backward by the unbreathable gasses.

The Archdemon howls with glee, pleased that its assault on 'Michael' worked so well. Diablo leans forward to peer through the gas erupting from the area, but a flash of light in the skies near its chest causes Diablo to jerk his head to the south.

Michael transforms into Jörmungandr. This unexpected development startles the demons at Diablo's feet, as well as all of the lower-level angels. The Archdemon himself sees only a brilliantly shining soul hovering in the sky, and not Michael's dragon-form, but nevertheless, alarm bells ring out in Diablo's mind.

AH! A POWERFUL SOUL! IT MUST BE MICHA AAAEL!!

Diablo immediately forgets about the other 'Michael' he just defeated. The Archdemon lunges toward the brilliantly shining light in his vision, only for an invisible force to hold him back. Michael's dragon body, now 500-foot-tall, shrouds him in dense mana, protecting him like a mother's womb. The Archangel moves his arms and legs to manipulate Jörmungandr's limbs, and likewise for his wings.

Diablo tries to grab at the shining soul with all four of his arms, but Jörmungandr slaps aside Diablo's limbs, leaps into the sky, and uses its smaller form to slip through the Archdemon's grasp. Diablo closes his arms on empty air and scowls angrily as the shining soul leaps over his head.

MICHA AAAEL! YOU'LL PAY FOR WHAT YOU DIIIIID!!

Neptune transforms into light. He circles behind the Archdemon and begins smashing into him over and over. The 250-foot-tall Titan King and 500-foot-tall False Dragon join forces against their 1000-foot-tall enemy to execute a series of combination strikes. Every time Neptune crashes against the Archdemon's spine, he zips away and slingshots back. His body becomes a battering ram of light as he hurls himself into his monstrous opponent over and over.

Meanwhile, Michael flaps his wings and dives toward the Archdemon from above. He swings his talons down and tears several gashes across the Archdemon's chest, spraying rivers of blood all over the southern end of the battlefield. The demons and monsters at Diablo's feet raise their arms to shield themselves as the thick, viscous liquid pours on them from above.

It doesn't take long for Diablo's wounds to heal, but Michael doesn't relent. He continues to swipe and bite at the Archdemon. He tears chunks of flesh and bone from his opponent's body and flings them backward, where they impact Heaven's Soil with enough force to summon minor earthquakes. Many times, the mountainous hunks of the Archdemon's body will impact the land and crush any demons and monsters unlucky enough to be in their way.

Enraged, Diablo fights back with his full fury. He blasts Michael with his atomic breath, but Jörmungandr's dragon body shrugs off the sun-like heat effortlessly. Not only does the Archdemon's flame cause no damage, it even heals the dragon a little, boosting Michael's strength.

With his front and back under constant assault, the Archdemon staggers back and forth, unable to take on both threats simultaneously. The demons at his feet continue slinging missiles of varying elements at him, while the angels in the skies pelt him with shots of holy energy.

Raphael watches the battle with bated breath.

One Great Demon versus millions of demons and angels means we have a chance! But... why does a feeling of dread still coat my bones? Why does the monster continue to gain strength over time?

Every time Michael swings Jörmungandr's talons, he gouges out tonnes of the Archdemon's flesh and muscle. However, those wounds heal far too quickly for the Archangel of Courage to keep up.

Minutes pass. The combined forces of the demons and angels sweat bullets as they realize their attacks aren't dealing enough damage.

At the eastern side of the battlefield, Bael bursts out of the ground with a look of rage etched into his face! The Duke of Pain peels several chunks of cooling, hardened magma off his skin. Despite the Archdemon's incredible combination attack, Bael appears completely uninjured. While Camael's hammer may have nearly broken his arm earlier in the day, Diablo's demonic attacks didn't daunt Bael at all.

"Screw you, you big, fat cunt!" Bael barks. "Were you tryin'a tickle me ta' death?! Next time, put on your big boy pants 'fore you come ta' tussle!"

The Archdemon ignores Bael. Faced with two incredible opponents raking his front and smashing his spine, Diablo hasn't a moment to spare for the tiny little Duke several miles away... not that he can hear Bael's words in the first place.

"Bael!" Satan yells. The Devil flies over to Bael, while Lucifer, Belial, and a horde of orcs quickly follow after him on the ground. "Are you okay?! I thought you might survive but... I mean... you ain't injured at all! What the hell have you been eating to get so strong?"

Bael scowls at Satan. "Water. Meat. What's it to ya?"

Satan sighs. "Never mind. Since you're alive, I hope you're ready to help us out. The angels are playing us for fools. While our guys get crushed and eaten by Diablo's tentacle-heads, the angels are keeping to the skies and using us as bait. We're taking heavy losses."

Bael blinks. "We are?"

"Yeah. Look!"

Satan gestures to the south, where legions of demons, orcs, and goblins all lay dead in heaps and mounds. The Archdemon fires a blast of fire at Michael's dragon body, but Michael deflects it with his shoulder toward the ground, where it incinerates ten thousand demons before they can dodge.

"Spawn of a- those sneaky chickens!" Bael snarls. "I shoulda known they'd pull something!"

Belial clasps her hands together. "Satan, aren't you misunderstanding? Michael isn't targeting the demons intentionally. He's fighting Diablo with all his strength! Deflecting Diablo's fire-blast onto the demons was an accident!"

Satan snorts. "Pft. Bullshit. C'mon, baby, were you born yesterday? Use your head. The angels want to defeat Deeks, sure, but it'd be pretty *convenient* if they could take us out at the same time, wouldn't it?"

Lucifer narrows her third eye to scout the skies. As she does, she spots Raphael hanging in the rear of the angelic contingent, where the defense is the highest.

"Hmph. As much as it pains me to say this: Satan is correct. The Archangels are hanging back where their safety is guaranteed. Look at how little effort the cherubs put into their attacks! They're barely even using any energy. It's all a show. A front! They plan to whittle us down through underhanded means... the damned dirty..."

"GEEYYYYOOOARGH!!"

Diablo roars once again and flattens the nearby land. His soundwave shatters the brains of thousands of demons and monsters at his feet, while only a few hundred angels on the frontlines perish. With a sweep of his hand, Diablo fires off thousands of bolts of lightning to tear apart all in his path. Unsurprisingly, the angels all fly in different directions to evade Diablo's attack, while the demons take the brunt of it.

Belial's expression pales. "Oh, devils... how could I not see the angel's evil ploy? Were Uzziel's words merely one of Raphael's weapons, meant to make us lower our guard?"

"Nah," Satan grunts. "I guarantee her intentions were pure. Raphael's using her to advance his schemes. He's one disgusting little worm..."

"So, what do we do?" Bael asks. "I'm not the idea guy. You *know* I'm not the idea guy."

Satan smirks. "Exactly what we intended to do. From the very beginning, I said this would be a suicide mission. Our plan hasn't changed; only how we'll have to go about it."

Lucifer narrows her eyes. "Don't be cryptic, Satan. Explain."

Satan's smirk deepens. He gestures toward the orcs behind Lucifer. "It's simple. We let the angels win so that they'll lose."

Bael scratches his ass. "I... I don't get it."

"You'll see, soon. I've got everything all figured out."

Recommended Listening

Diablo's anger rises further and further. Spasms of pain wrack his body every time the dragon and Titan batter him from the front and back, but it always fades into the back of his mind, pressed there by his overwhelming, unstoppable rage.

I HATE YOU, MICHAEL! HATE YOUUUU!! YOU KILLED MY GIRL! I'LL KILL EVERYONE YOU KNOW AND LOVE! I'LL GRIND YOU INTO PULP!!

Despite Diablo's inner thoughts, his mind gains the slightest hint of sanity. For a brief moment, a realization occurs to him.

I... I CAN'T WIN LIKE THIS! THERE ARE TOO MANY ANGELS!! I HAVE TO... HAVE TO... BECOME EVEN STRONGER...

Slowly, an idea creeps into the Archdemon's mind. He concentrates on his stomach and begins inhaling air like before, but this time, he doesn't boil his rage to ignite a fire-laser. Instead, he sucks in mana from the air itself.

POWER. POWER! POWERRRR!! I NEED MORE POWERRR!!

* * *

Raphael clenches his fists. Hints of excitement appear in his eyes as Michael and Neptune step up their attacks. Whenever Michael deflects one of the Archdemon's fire-blasts onto the demons below, Raphael shakes his fist. *Yes! Yes!!*

The old man's thoughts rampage uncontrollably. *Victory is within our grasp! The Great Demon isn't invincible. Its attacks are slowing down over time. If Michael can maintain Jörmungandr's body for a while longer, we will overwhelm this enemy and stomp the demons into meat paste! Today's battle results will change from mutual destruction into our victory!*

Raphael's excitement builds silently inside himself, where nobody can see, but Uzziel notices a spark of light in her brother's eyes. "Raphael! Is something the matter? Art thou worried about something?"

Raphael pales. He quickly turns to look at his little sister and shakes his head. "No, no, it's just... the Great Demon's attacks seem to have lost their steam, haven't they? This bodes well for us!"

Uzziel nibbles on her lip. "Mmm. I suppose so..."

Raphael's eyes flick back to the Archdemon. He gazes upon the 1000-foot monstrosity and frowns. "Hm? What's this? Why has it stopped attacking?"

Diablo curls his arms around his chest protectively, allowing Michael to use the Archdemon's passiveness to launch into a flurry of claw and teeth attacks. He rips and tears Diablo from his head to his belly, spraying rivers and seas of blood and gore in a large radius around the battlefield. The sudden

deluge of plasma drowns a few hundred demons alive, while the rest sink their toes into the soil to hold on for dear life.

Michael narrows his eyes. He gazes at the Archdemon from the safety of Jörmungandr's scaled body and frowns.

I sense power building within the Great Demon's chest. Could it be planning to unleash some new, hellish magic?

* * *

Neptune assaults the Archdemon from behind. He fires a concentrated blast of electrified holy water at the base of the Archdemon's neck and drills deep into Diablo's muscle, but it heals within seconds.

"Again!"

Neptune summons mana into his feet and launches at Diablo. The moment he strikes the Archdemon's body, a shudder goes through the unified Titan's soul, causing his attack to lose more than half of its striking power.

"Augh! What happened?!"

"Our unity is weakening!"

"How? Why?"

"The Binding Arts are supposed to be temporary. We can't maintain it for long, or our souls and bodies will permanently merge. However, the resulting chimera will be far weaker than we are now. We absolutely cannot allow that to happen!"

Neptune flies away from the Archdemon and explains the situation to himself. After all, since Ivaldi is the only one among the three Titan Kings with knowledge of how the Binding Arts work, only she can elaborate on its intricacies.

As Ivaldi opens Neptune's mouth to explain further, a massive earthquake rumbles through Heaven. Heaven's Light dims significantly, turning from the blinding brightness of a summer day to a color much closer to the waning of dusk. Visibility drops to a percent of what it was only a moment before, causing Neptune's blood to turn to ice in his veins.

"By the ancestors! What... what has the fiend done now?!"

The Archdemon leans forward. Diablo continues to press his arms against his chest and inhale deeply, sucking vast amounts of mana into his body.

Ivaldi gazes around Heaven. Heaven's Light dims even further, making the pitch black of night descend in its place.

Fireballs and blasts of holy light illuminate the battlefield in colorful flashes of white and yellow. The demons and angels intensify their assault as the encroaching darkness causes an unspoken fear to materialize in their hearts.

The towering visage of the Archdemon appears ten times more threatening in the gloom. Electricity crackles on Diablo's fingertips, while deep inside his chest, his heart glows with a furious red light.

Lub-lub. Lub-lub. Lub-lub.

The Archdemon's beating heart barely makes any noise, but as the darkness intensifies, Diablo's heartrate increases.

Lub-lub-lub-lub-lub...

Raphael swivels his head in every direction. All of his confidence vanishes.

"Uzziel! UZZIEL! This is bad! This is worse than I ever could have imagined!!"

"Brother? What's wrong? What has happened to Heaven's Light?"

The Archangels and low-ranked angels all glow faintly in the sky. Their bodies emit trace amounts of holy light, giving them the appearance of fireflies hovering above the Archdemon.

Uzziel turns to look at her brother, and his expression fills her with unspeakable horror.

"Raphael? Raphael?! Why has Heaven gone dark? Tell me, please!"

The Archangel of Wisdom whips his head to the left to look at the Archdemon, then back to Uzziel.

"I should have known! Damn! The Great Demon might take a small amount of damage from holy magic, but it also increases its power! It's not only wasting our stamina; it's sucking Heaven dry! If the Great Demon continues, Heaven will implode! We'll return to Earth and have to fight it there, where we won't be able to contain it! The end-times are upon us!"

Wisps of fire trails from the Archdemon's mouth. He swings his arms in every direction, sending brilliant flashes of lightning to cut through his angel and demon opponents. Within seconds, tens of thousands of troops on the ground and in the skies end up fried to ash, unable to retaliate. Only a couple of million angels hover in the skies, while barely a million demons and monsters surround the Archdemon on the ground below.

Uzziel stares at her brother with wide eyes. "Can we stop the Great Demon before we're too late? Can we save Heaven?!"

Raphael clasps his hands together. "Possibly! But the only method I can think of- ah! Neptune! Watch-"

The old man barely gets a word out before something truly horrifying happens. Neptune rushes the Archdemon once again, but despite his incredible speed, accelerated by both Ivaldi and Zeus, the Archdemon catches him off-guard. Right before Neptune's enchanted fist makes contact with Diablo's skin, the Titan King's heartbeat freezes.

The Archdemon's senses zero in on the incoming threat.

Diablo turns his head slightly. He spots the diminutive Titan King, only a quarter of the Archdemon's size, rushing in for another round of attacks.

Diablo's thought patterns shift. Instead of mere rage controlling him, a dark, sinister thought occurs to him.

Why kill everyone all at once when I can make them suffer?

The moment Diablo has this realization, the Archdemon swivels his waist to face the Titan King. His movements become a blur, greatly outclassing the formerly untouchable Titan King.

Ivaldi's soul trembles.

Im...possible...

Diablo reaches out with his hand. The 250-foot-tall Titan seems to freeze in the air. Neptune's speed slows to a crawl in the eyes of the Archdemon.

You... want... to hurt... me? Hah... hah hah.... I won't allow it.

Snatch!

Diablo's hand grabs the Titan King before he can react. In the eyes of those watching the battle, all they see is a blur of movement, a flash of light, and Neptune's body landing in Diablo's grasp.

When did the Great Demon turn around?

How did it seize the invincible Titan King out of the air?

Neptune howls in pain. "Aaaaargh!!"

Diablo's giant hand squeezes around his Titan prey's waist, pinning Neptune's arms to his side. His already formidable strength rises ten realms higher, allowing him to subdue Neptune without batting an eye.

"Hah... hah... hah... I... smart... now... see... through... your... fear..."

For the first time since the battle started, the Archdemon doesn't scream, bellow, or howl in rage. Instead, he speaks, haltingly, sending waves of terror through the minds of his enemies.

Neptune raises his head. Sweat drenches his skin as he gazes at the eyeless head of the monstrous giant dominating Heaven.

"You... you can talk?!"

Ivaldi takes control of Neptune's body. Her eyes flash with realization, and she uses the slightest movement of her fingers to transform into a ray of light.

Before she can jump away from the Archdemon, demonic mana floods through Diablo's arm to wrap around his captured Titan enemy. The blood-red energy rips apart the Titan King's magic and reverts Neptune to his physical body.

"No! It can't be!!"

Ivaldi howls in rage as she realizes what's happened.

Magic Neutralization! The Great Demon is too powerful! It's going to kill us! It-

Before any escape plans can materialize in Ivaldi's mind, Diablo raises his arm to lift Neptune high above his head.

"Hah... hah... no more running... for you..."

Neptune screams. "No! No! Someone help us! HELP!!"

Michael stares, wide-eyed with disbelief, as the Archdemon swings his arm down toward the ground. At the last second, he releases the Titan King, throwing Neptune into Heaven's Soil with a thunderous crash. The two-hundred-ton Titan King hits the ground so hard that an earthquake instantly ravages Heaven, destroying angelic cities tens of miles away. Neptune's bones shatter from the impact, causing all of his limbs to turn into jello. He bounces off the ground and flies into the sky, unable to stop his momentum.

The Archdemon watches without speaking as one of its two most annoying enemies plummets from the sky and crashes into the soil a second time.

THUNK!

Neptune tumbles and rolls a few times before coming to a stop.

He doesn't get back up.

"Hah hah hah... tiny angels... weak pests... you will all suffer."

The Archdemon turns around. His eyeless head swivels to face Michael, making the Archangel of Courage take a step back as powerful demonic energy sweeps across the battlefield.

"Michael. I see you. You hurt me. You... will... die."

Recommended Listening

Diablo lunges toward Michael. His blinding speed proves impossible for the Archangel to dodge, and Michael takes the full force of the Archdemon's fists straight to his face.

Over and over, the Archdemon pummels Michael mercilessly. The fearsome dragon and its heavily armored body fail to hold up against the savagery of the Archdemon. Michael tries to deflect any attacks he can, but even with his Omni-Perception, the dragon's body isn't nearly fast enough to keep up with his eyes.

Crack-crack-snap!

The Archdemon blasts Jörmungandr with lightning and rains down a hail of punches as well. His Flesh Eaters coil around the dragon's legs and wings, preventing Michael from escaping, while also pulling the dragon in closer.

"MICHAEL! YOU ARE WEAK! TOO WEEEEEEAK!!"

One of the Archdemon's punches hits the dragon's head so hard that its force reaches Michael in the center of the dragon's chest.

"Aaugh!"

Michael's soul trembles from the punch. Despite his soul's hardened properties giving it a million times the strength of any mortal, Michael still receives incredible backlash from the Archdemon's attacks.

I'm losing! Damn! I can't let a bloodskin treat me with such disregard!!

Michael's rage flares up. He snaps his head forward, and Jörmungandr echoes his movements. Mana materializes in his body, travels to the dragon's mouth, and fires outward with a blast of holy energy.

"HARUUUGH!"

Jörmungandr unleashes an attack upon the Archdemon that could wipe out a whole city under different circumstances. The wave of power smashes into Diablo's chest and sprays outward in every direction. Thousands of demons perish as the slightest trickle of Michael's mana tickles them. Their souls evaporate, and their bodies fall to the ground, lifeless and empty.

The Archdemon loosens its grip for the briefest of moments. Diablo grunts as the energy simultaneously boils his demon blood while also strengthening his power.

"Foolish angel... your power... only makes... me... STRONGER!!"

The darkness pervading Heaven causes everyone to gasp as a violent blast of flames fires from Diablo's mouth and hits Jörmungandr's head like a freight train. Before, the dragon would have shrugged off any flame-based attack, but after suffering a beatdown under Diablo's power, the dragon can only recoil as scorch marks cover its head. Superheated flames ricochet off the dragon and impact thousands of angels, frying them alive before they can react.

Michael sags in Diablo's grip. The Archangel of Courage pants for breath. With his stamina drained, his control over the dragon's body begins to slip.

I won't last much longer... this damned demon is... is... too tenacious...

* * *

Not far away, Raphael and the other Archangels look to one another for ideas.

"I have my sword!" Camael says. She unsheathes Excalibur and holds it up to prove her point. "If I unleash Excalibur's full power-"

"No! No, don't even think of it!" Raphael hisses. "The Great Demon absorbs holy energy to empower himself! If thou were to gift him the full might of Excalibur, the universe in its entirety might fall into darkness!"

Uzziel shoots a glance behind the Archdemon. "I can heal Neptune! With his help-"

"That won't be enough, either," Raphael growls. "No... our only option left is... to retreat..."

Camael and Uzziel raise their eyebrows in surprise.

"Retreat?" Camael asks. "That would ensure our temporary survival, but if we don't stop this fiend here..."

Raphael balls his hands into fists. "I have only one other option, and that is to summon the Cherubiim!"

Camael blinks. "What? The Cherubiim? But... thou hath always said..."

"Aye. If Gabriel, Michael, and I combine our powers, we might be able to crush the Great Demon. However, t'would require sharing our memories amongst one another. Unless I have no choice, I mustn't let knowledge of the Primordial Era slip. That was our agreement, all those eons ago!"

Raphael shoots a look at Michael. His expression pales as he witnesses the light fading from Michael's body.

"Gods! I have to do something! I can't just stand by and let-"

"Brother."

Gabriel interrupts Raphael. He places a hand on the old man's shoulder and smiles.

"We must be ready to sacrifice our lives for the greater good. Do not fret. I will re-enter my Cosmic Form."

Raphael freezes in place. He opens his mouth to speak, but it takes a few moments for words to come out.

"Th-thou shalt... no... no! Gabriel! Do not speak in haste! If thou dost activate thy Cosmic Inflation a second time, thy body-"

"Shall surely perish."

Gabriel finishes Raphael's sentence without hesitation. His smile fades, and he shakes his head.

"I have made my decision. If I must fall here, today, then so be it. However, we have a trump card that may assist me."

Gabriel gestures to Excalibur in Camael's grasp.

"This weapon can provide me with the energy I need to activate my power a second time, forcefully. We have no other options."

Hesitation appears in Raphael's eyes.

The old man trembles inwardly. He tries to come up with an excuse, a rationalization, anything to stop his brother's actions.

However, Gabriel's words linger in the air just long enough for the Archangel of Power to assume Raphael has no retort. Without another word, he turns to his sister.

"Camael. If thou would'st be so kind."

He holds out his palm and waits for Camael's response. His elder sister lowers her eyes to stare at the divine blade in her hand.

Never before did I expect a weapon of this power would feel so... heavy.

Camael swallows her doubts. She takes Gabriel's palm with her hand and activates her weapon's magic. Seconds later, a flood of holy energy passes from the sword through her into her brother.

Unlike Raphael's pained expression, Gabriel doesn't even flinch. However, his pupils shrink slightly as blinding pain surges within his body. He closes his eyes to concentrate, and after a few seconds, manages

to stabilize his inner mana flow.

"I thank thee, Camael. Now, I will take my leave."

Raphael's retorts hang unspoken in the air, while Camael only offers a farewell with her eyes. Both of them gaze upon their brother with a mixture of awe and reverence.

Gabriel flaps his wings and flies away. As he leaves his family behind, he motions with his hands to summon forth his cosmic might.

The Creator bestowed my people with the right, the honor, and the responsibility of conceiving the universe.

Holy energy bubbles through Gabriel's skin, muscle, and bone, causing his body to expand.

Our mission was to populate the universe with kind, loving creatures. We were meant to bear the load of the low-born so that they might someday rise to the same heights as us.

Gabriel's feet pound onto Heaven's Soil right as his expansion reaches its exponential growth rate.

But, sometimes, a father raises a son who grows into a monster. What then?

Gabriel's body increases from twelve feet to twenty, then to thirty.

The answer is simple. A man must correct his mistakes. He must restore order, even if it costs him his life. He must teach that unfilial son a lesson, and use his corpse as a tool to educate others.

Fifty feet. A hundred.

Sometimes... to kill a monster... one must become a monster!

Gabriel's overwhelming mana pours from his body like a hurricane. He smashes through the hundred-foot barrier and doubles in size, reaching a height he's never before achieved. Two hundred feet. Five hundred!

The Archdemon's gaze falls upon a brightening soul; one whose energy agitation reaches a height rivalling his own.

What?! Not Michael... someone else!

Gabriel raises his eyes toward the rapidly approaching head of the Archdemon.

Seven hundred feet. Nine hundred!

Gabriel rears his fist back.

If I must die today, then so be it!

One thousand feet!

"But if I die, then thou shalt come with me!!"

Recommended Listening

One thousand feet of Archangel Flesh towers into the sky, matching that of his Archdemon opponent. Gabriel tackles the Archdemon before Diablo can untangle his tentacles from Michael's legs and wings.

Gabriel rears his head back, then swings it forward.

CRACK!!

He headbutts the Archdemon, sending a shockwave throughout the battlefield. Boulders explode, trees rip from the soil, and the endless craters spread across Heaven's Soil flatten like the surface of a lake.

Gabriel's mountain-flattening attack sends the Archdemon reeling backward. Before Diablo can react, Gabriel summons his divine greatsword, a weapon forged from holy energy, and lunges at Diablo.

"Demonic hellspawn! Return to the darkness!"

Gabriel impales Diablo through his chest. He skewers the Archdemon and pushes him backward with all his strength. Diablo's tentacles stab into the ground and bite down to hold on, but their efforts mean nothing compared to the Archangel of Power's might.

Diablo struggles to hold off his Archangel opponent, but Diablo's tentacles rip in half, one by one, as they snap after failing to withstand Gabriel's power.

The Archdemon tries to summon a blast of fire, but the sword pierced through his chest prevents him. Enraged, Diablo summons lightning into his palms and slaps them against Gabriel's sides.

KZZZAT!

Millions of volts of electricity surge through Gabriel's armor. Gabriel's pained expression lights up in the darkness under the brightness of Diablo's thunder, causing the nearby angels and demons to wince in sympathy.

"ARCHANGEL SCUM! PERISH!!"

Diablo claps his hands together. Suddenly, the gravity around his body multiplies by ten times. Gabriel staggers as his body loses its lightness and inflates from one thousand to over ten thousand tons.

"Grrrrgh!"

Gabriel grits his teeth, but his grip on his greatsword falters as he struggles to stand up.

Diablo rears his fist back.

THOOMPH!

He punches Gabriel in the face and sends the giant tumbling backward. Gabriel crashes into Heaven's Soil and gasps for breath. His impact creates a crater, spraying hundreds of tons of rock and dirt outward to coat the battlefield.

* * *

Meanwhile, back at the Archangels, Raphael's expression turns grim.

"Uzziel. Can thou sense something amiss with Heaven?"

Uzziel nods. She scrunches up her forehead and frowns as she peers into the darkness as the giants trading blows. "Heaven's Soil is turning gray..."

"Aye. I did not realize what would happen until now. When Gabriel activated his Cosmic Form, where did he pull the energy from to break through three realms of power? Not from within himself, but... but

from Heaven."

Camael grabs her brother's arm. "What?! Will Heaven disappear?"

"Aye. We haven't much time. When it implodes, it will fall apart and dissolve into nothingness. We will travel through the folds of space and arrive back on Earth. My second greatest fear has come to pass."

Uzziel and Camael don't ask what fear takes his number one spot since the answer is obvious: the extinction of angelkind.

"Can we save Heaven?" Uzziel asks. "Can I do anything to help?"

Raphael smiles, but his expression is one of a man who has gazed upon horrors he can never forget.

"When I created Heaven, twas none other than thee who assisted me, Uzziel. The two of us may yet be able to save our home."

Uzziel and Camael wait, but the old man doesn't elaborate.

"Yes? What must we do?" Uzziel finally asks, breaking through his contemplation.

Raphael sighs. "Saving Heaven is no trivial matter. It will require a vast amount of mana. With our reserves already lower than ever and five million of our brothers and sisters dead, I must consider whether saving it is our best course of action. To preserve the two million angels who remain and seek out a new home, or to save our home we spent so much effort creating for the sake of the future... what path should I take?"

Raphael muses to himself distantly, as if Gabriel's battle no longer holds any significance. The Archangel of Power and the Archdemon trade blows, each one jarring the senses of those witnessing their battle.

Eventually, the Archangel of Wisdom nods. "Aye. At the least, we must restore Heaven to trap the Great Demon here. Uzziel. I will rely upon thee, as thy powers of Nature are most suited for this task."

Raphael launches into an explanation about the powers of nature and how he originally stabilized and created Heaven inside a pocket of space. Forged inside Earth's gravity field, Heaven was created to be a separate realm of existence to separate the Titans and angels from one another.

"I will do my best," Uzziel replies, as Raphael finishes his explanation. "But... drawing nature energy from Earth... that will cause much harm to the planet."

"Aye," Raphael nods. "The last time thou did'st such a thing, a mass extinction wiped out millions of lives across Earth. This time, I know not what will happen."

"But... if I do it, will I be able to save Heaven?"

Raphael sighs.

"At this point, all we can do is hope for the Creator's blessing. Go. Do not delay!"

Raphael motions with his hands and activates a portal to Earth, revealing a beautiful plain filled with flowers and animals. Uzziel follows up by summoning the power of nature. She reaches through Raphael's portal and begins pulling the essence of life from Earth's soil.

Seconds later, the grass shrivels up. Rocks crack and crumble, and the sky on Earth darkens.

However, all around Uzziel, Heaven's Light brightens slightly. As the seconds pass, Heaven's Soil regains some of its vitality, while the all-encompassing light brightens further and further.

Raphael fixes his eyes on Uzziel. "Yes. Yes, little sister! Thy magic is working!"

Uzziel's body trembles as her nature energy drops precipitously. However, after focusing her mind, she drains some of Earth's energy for herself. Outside, cold winds begin to blow, and an icy chill spreads across the portal's vision.

"Retract thy arms!" Raphael yells. "I'll find another place rich with life!"

Raphael opens another portal, and this time, a beautiful forest appears. Uzziel quickly continues draining nature energy from Earth to revive Heaven, causing the trees to crackle and snap. Some of them fall to ash, revealing the startled animals and bugs within. The various forest creatures flee for their lives, uncertain as to what disaster is befalling their home.

"I'm sorry..." Uzziel mutters. "The Saharan jungle teems with life, but I must drain it for the sake of my people! Earth will heal its wounds, but Heaven will not... not without my power!"

Minutes pass. Gabriel howls in pain as the Archdemon frees himself from the greatsword and unleashes a torrent of fire upon his Archangel opponent. However, Gabriel's mana barrier shields and protects him from the worst of Diablo's attack.

"D-done!" Uzziel yells. Outside the portal, all that remains of the Saharan Jungle is a sandy desert, one filled with confused critters and animals, all of which haven't a clue what happened to their home.

Raphael frowns. "Those creatures will perish without the jungle, and their bodies flow with life energy. Spare them a slow, tortured death, little sister. Kill them to revitalize Heaven."

Uzziel balks. "No! Not a chance! I won't kill unless I must! Raphael, why must thou test me?!"

Raphael glances at Camael, then back at Uzziel. He smiles. "A-aye, t'was just a test, nothing more. Thou hath done it! With Heaven's Core restored, this dimension will not collapse under the Great Demon's-"

"GOOOOAAAHHH!!!"

Diablo bellows in rage. He uses his tentacles to move far faster than Gabriel, circles around his Archangel opponent, and swings his fist at Gabriel's back.

THWICK!!

Diablo's fist rams through Gabriel's back and bursts out of his chest. He smashes through the Archangel of Power's barrier, causing Gabriel's body to spasm violently.

Camael, Raphael, and Uzziel all scream in terror. "Brother!! NOOOOO!"

Michael gathers strength in Jörmungandr's legs. He leaps at the Archdemon's exposed back and swings his claws toward the monster's head.

"BASTAAAARD!"

* * *

Diablo turns his head slightly to the side. He watches as the dragon leaps at him.

Then, he smiles.

FWUMP!

Diablo swings his fist backward and smashes the side of Jörmungandr's face. The dragon wrenches to the side, spins through the air uncontrollably, and crashes against the mountain atop Heaven's Gate.

Thoom!

Michael hits the mountain, bounces off, and lands on the plains nearby. His dragon body shudders for a moment, then goes still.

The Archdemon's joyful grin reveals the excitement boiling within him.

Heh heh heh... with only two moves, I've won this war.

He yanks his hand back from Gabriel's chest and gives the Archangel of Power a slight push. Gabriel's strength fades, and he falls to his knees. A moment later, he falls forward and flops against Heaven's soil, sending a mountain of debris in every direction.

The Archdemon slowly, deliberately, turns to face the south. He raises his bloodied hand and points at the cluster of angels flying high in the sky.

"Now... the slaughter... begins..."

Part 170: Return of the Balrog

The Archangels of Power and Courage lay motionless on Heaven's Soil. Michael's mana-infused dragon body dissipates into particles of light, while Gabriel rapidly shrinks from 1000 feet tall back to his original size.

"Quickly!" Raphael yells at Uzziel. "Pull our brothers back before the Great Demon finishes them off!"

Uzziel's nods her head, but the blood-drained expression on her face reveals her panic. "O-okay!"

Uzziel flies to the ground to save her brothers, but Raphael hasn't a moment to spend worrying about her efforts. Instead, his attention falls upon Camael as she flaps her wings and charges at the Archdemon.

"BASTAAAARD!!"

The Archangel of Divination loses all her ability to reason. Having witnessed millions of siblings perish during this war, all of her sanity crumbles away when she sees both of her Archangel brothers nearly lose their lives.

"Camael! No! Stop!" Raphael yells. He tries to chase after her, but Excalibur's power increases Camael's speed by several factors. She travels two miles in the blink of an eye and smashes into the dirt before the Archdemon.

"Fight someone thy own size! EXCALIBUUUR!!"

Diablo's head jerks downward as he detects an immense buildup of holy energy. He sends a legion of Flesh Eaters toward the rapidly brightening speck of light below him, but before they can get close, each of his maws crashes against a barrier of mana surrounding Camael.

Magical power condenses inside Excalibur. It passes through the hilt and swirls into Camael's body like a typhoon at sea. Camael cries out wordlessly as she uses every part of her soul to stabilize and magnify Excalibur's energy.

"Stand right there, ye damned bastard! Don't even THINK of dodging this!!"

Camael concentrates and focuses her mind. More energy spins inside her body than she has possessed in possibly her entire life, even during the Primordial Era. All around her, Heaven's Soil soaks up the excess energy emitted by Excalibur to sprout grass and plants at her feet. Heaven's Light intensifies as Heaven's Core greedily gulps every drop of spiritual energy Camael can't contain within her soul.

Raphael comes to a screeching halt as astoundingly bright light bursts from Camael's skin, pierces her armor, and transforms her into a miniature sun. "Gah! Sister... no! Stop! If thou unleasheth the full might of that blade....!!"

Camael doesn't hear him. Her hair shifts from white to gold, while her muscles double in size. She places all of her attention on the mountain of flesh towering over her, then lifts Excalibur with both hands to point its tip at the Archdemon's chest.

"HAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!"

Diablo's rage-filled body trembles. A new emotion passes through his mind, one he hasn't experienced since his rebirth.

Fear.

The Archdemon retreats a single step, but that's all the distance it gets before Camael unleashes Excalibur's full power.

BOOOOM!

Camael fires a blast of holy energy from Excalibur with a circumference twenty-times wider than her entire body. The explosion of mana flattens the plain around her and sends several-hundred-mile-an-hour gusts of wind sweeping throughout Heaven. Demons and angels instantly lose their footing and go flying in every direction, unable to save themselves.

In less than a second, Excalibur's hyper-blast pounds into Diablo's midsection like magma bursting through the Earth's crust. Diablo's chest and spine explode outward, spraying countless tons of flesh, bone, and muscle all across Heaven. Camael's attack pierces the Archdemon's body like a javelin hurled into wet sand, causing catastrophic damage across his colossal figure.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!!"

Camael continues shrieking, as Excalibur's energy reaches its peak potential.

Suddenly, the blade's power flickers.

A moment later, Excalibur explodes.

The divine blade, Camael's mightiest weapon, shatters into countless shards. The blowback from releasing all of its energy destroys the unfinished blade and rips Camael's arms off her body. The Archangel of Divination goes flying backward, smashes into the dirt, and skips across Heaven like a rock across a pond.

Seconds later, Camael grinds to a stop. She flops lifelessly to the ground and falls comatose, unable to move.

Meanwhile, with Excalibur's power suddenly inert, the Archdemon staggers forward and flops to the ground. Diablo lands with his arms outstretched to rest upon his palms, but his body trembles due to the giant gaping hole in his chest.

"Huhk... hurk..."

All of the nearby angels and demons gaze at the Archdemon with trepidation and dismay.

"Shrakh! That angel lady blew a fuggin' hole in the big guy's chest!"

"Is the Great Demon going to die? I never imagined our sister could unleash such a fearsome power!"

"As expected, our forces don't lose out to those of the bloodskins..."

Both sides quietly gaze upon the Archdemon's failing body, but within seconds, their dismay turns to fright.

"It's... it's getting back up! The Great Demon still lives!"

"How could it heal from such a wound?! It must be on its final legs!"

"Look out! Those jowls are about to attack!"

The angels spread out and dive down to the right and left as Diablo's Flesh Eaters pounce upon their ranks. Each time an angel or a demon perishes to the horrible, teeth-filled maws, Diablo regains a little vitality.

After a few minutes, the Archdemon lifts himself to a standing position. The hole in his chest visibly shrinks to a quarter of its size, causing panic to appear among the ranks of both sides.

Raphael flies to Camael's motionless form, and Uzziel follows him. "Heal Camael at once!"

Uzziel summons nature energy to envelop Camael. Her sister's armless figure sits amidst an expanding pool of blood, giving her the appearance of a dead woman. Luckily, Uzziel manages to bring Camael back from the brink of death and regenerate her arms.

"Ngh," Uzziel grunts. "At least Camael's arms weren't poisoned like Michael's. I can still regrow them."

"Yes, yes, good," Raphael mutters. He turns his head around to look at the Archdemon, and a sense of despair enters his mind. "We've used nearly all of our trump cards. Must... must I unite with Michael and Gabriel? Will the Cherubiim be any use against such an unstoppable force?"

Uzziel waves her hands to summon healing energy into Camael's chest. "We must retreat, brother. We can take to the stars. At the least, we can preserve those who remain. We can always make another Heaven elsewhere."

Raphael grinds his teeth together. "No, we *cannot*. The mana needed to create a second Heaven would be far more than what we can produce today. Curses... if I had known the demons were capable of such power, I would have sealed Heaven's Gate and prevented them from ever entering!"

"Tis too late to second-guess ourselves," Uzziel mutters. "Now, we can only try to save as many of our people as possible."

Raphael continues to gaze at the Archdemon, but after a moment, his eyes change their focus to a speck on the Archdemon's body.

"Gods! What is that... that demon thinking?!"

"Hm? What demon?" Uzziel asks. She finishes regenerating her sister's arms, then turns to follow Raphael's gaze.

"There! On the Great Demon's body! There's another demon climbing it!"

Uzziel narrows her eyes.

"What fool would court death in such a manner? Has he not seen the devastation the Great Demon can unleash? Forget him! We must tell our brothers to retreat at once."

Uzziel moves to grab Raphael's arm, but the old man doesn't budge. Instead, he squints even harder to try and make out the demon's figure.

"I recognize him! He's... he's...!"

* * *

A few miles away...

"Just gonna ignore me, huh? Dickhead! I thought we were friends!"

Bael reaches up and stabs one of his fingers into the next layer of the Archdemon's skin. With Diablo distracted by the hole in his chest, he hasn't any interest in the tiny gnat clinging to his lower body.

"Yo, ugly! I'm talkin' to you!"

Bael continues yelling at Diablo, but the Archdemon pays him no mind. Frustrated, Bael stabs his hands into Diablo's torso and climbs up, one handhold at a time. Every so often, he coils strength into his arms and yanks himself upward, leaping thirty feet skyward in a single bound. Then, he thrusts his arm out to create another handhold.

"You smell like shit, Deebs! Anyone ever tell you that?! After I beat some sense into ya, I'm gonna throw you in a lake and scrub your asshole real good!"

Bael pauses for a moment.

"Okay, maybe I won't, cuz' that's kinda gross! Hey! Are you even listening to me?!"

The Archdemon aims his hand at the ground. A moment later, he exhales a blast of concentrated electrical energy and instantly kills two thousand demons. Their corpses explode, sending fountains of blood in every direction.

Bael jerks his eyes to the ground. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Stop it! Stop killing my friends! That ain't cool, bub!"

Bael increases his climbing speed. Despite the extra ton of weight wrapped around his body in the form of his new flail, Mjölnir, Bael traverses the Archdemon's body without slowing down in the slightest.

Diablo finishes healing his chest. With all signs of Camael's attack gone, the Archdemon's presence once again dominates the battlefield. All around him, demons and angels flee, unable to hold out hope any longer.

Raphael summons a portal to the outside realm, allowing his brothers and sisters to slowly pass through. Meanwhile, the demons head for Heaven's Gate. With only a few hundred thousand demons left, compared to nearly two million angels, the demon's numbers appear insignificant in comparison. Still, Diablo aims his hand at them and blasts them with lightning over and over.

Crack! Crack!

Every time Diablo unleashes his power, thousands of demons perish before they can react. The angels continue streaming out of Heaven, but a few of them pause to gape at the Archdemon's relentless onslaught.

"Look! The damned fiend slaughters his people even more mercilessly than he does ours!"

"What sort of callous, black heart does the Great Demon possess?!"

""Tis none of our concern! Leave the Bloodskins to their devices. We must leave while we still can!"

After a few minutes, only a thousand angels manage to flee Heaven, along with a couple thousand demons and monsters.

However, the Archdemon's next attack shatters the morale of the demons. He fires a bolt of super-powered lightning at the demons, but instead, it strikes Heaven's Gate. The resulting explosion annihilates their only path of escape and crumbles the mountain, causing a landslide to plummet downward and bury thirty thousand demons and monsters alive.

Raphael continues motioning his brothers and sisters out through his portal. His expression darkens as he watches the demons scatter in panic and flee in every possible direction. With no way of fleeing Heaven, many of them burrow underground in the hopes of saving themselves, but the Archdemon continues systematically blasting them to smithereens one after the other.

"Uzziel, take the other Archangels and leave. Once the Great Demon finishes slaughtering his kin, he'll come after us. We don't have any methods left to fight back."

"Not even one?"

"Nay. None that I would consider worth the cost."

Raphael shakes his head. The aching in his heart fades away, replaced instead with a cold rationality entirely removed from emotion.

"We have no counter to this fiend. Perhaps, after fleeing for a thousand lightyears, we may find some remote rock suitable for our people. Perhaps... perhaps..."

Raphael trails off. He continues waving angels through his portal, but his thoughts drift away to ancient memories, places long since forgotten.

* * *

Bael launches himself up Diablo's chest. It doesn't take him much time before he arrives atop the Archdemon's shoulder, only fifty feet away from Diablo's gigantic head.

"Hey! Stupid! Stop killing my friends! I ain't warning you again!"

Diablo pays no attention to the single soul on his shoulder. It doesn't shine brightly enough to attract his interest, especially compared to all the juicy, clumped-together lights running away on the ground.

He inhales for a moment, then unleashes a terrific blast of laser-fire. Instead of aiming at one particular spot, Diablo sweeps his head from side to side to carve out a swath of death and destruction.

Bael gapes at the bloodshed on display.

"Oh, *now* you've done it, punk. Now you've fuckin' done it. You've pissed me off!"

Bael unwraps Mjölnir's chains from around his body. He spins the flail around over his head, causing it to pick up speed and transform into a blinding blur.

"If you ain't gonna listen, then I'm gonna hafta knock some sense into ya! Ha!"

Bael releases the flail, sending it flying at Diablo's head.

Diablo senses the faintest whiff of danger coming toward him, but he doesn't react in time.

Thunk!

Despite only weighing one ton and paling in comparison to the monstrous giant, Mjölnir smashes against Diablo's face with astounding force. The Archdemon yelps in surprise and staggers to the right as pain erupts through his left cheek. Immediately, he swivels his head to face the tiny gnat perched on his shoulder.

"Yeah! That got your attention! Maybe next time, you oughta perk up them ears and-"

Whap.

Bael's body disappears as Diablo's hand reaches up and crushes him with the barest amount of effort. The Archdemon slaps the tiny soul on his shoulder and flicks Bael away like a bug.

The Duke of Pain falls from the sky and careens toward the ground below.

"You spawn of a-!"

CRASH!

Bael hits the dirt with the power of a cannonball plowing through a dinghy. His body and Mjölnir combined weigh nearly two tons, and together they create a crater bigger than a five-story building.

"Ugh..."

Bael grunts. His body creaks like the doors on an old house, but otherwise, he feels no pain.

"Fuckin'... that little bitch... did Deebs hit me? *Me?* Okay, now I'm pissed. *Real* pissed."

Bael grinds his teeth. Rage boils in his mind, causing him to stare at the figure towering over him with bloodshot eyes.

"I'm... gonna... SMASH YA!"

Recommended Listening

Diablo flicks the gnat off his shoulder. It falls to the ground, and he immediately forgets its existence.

First, I KILL the angels on the ground, then I DESTROY the ones in the sky! Filthy bastards... they took her from me! THEY KILLED LUCYYYY!!"

Diablo swings his four arms out and shreds thirty thousand demons with chained lightning bolts.

KILL! KILL! KILL!

Diablo gazes upon the fleeing souls with a mixture of hunger and hatred. However, after a moment, his mind jolts back to that one soul he casually discarded a minute ago.

It leaps from the ground and rushes toward his head at speeds exceeding imagination.

Hm?

The instant the soul strikes Diablo's head, a wave of pain surges throughout his entire body. The Archdemon staggers backward several steps, only to gasp as he eyes the tiny, insignificant soul suspiciously.

What angel dares attack me?!

CRACK!

It leaps at his head again and smashes into his chin with the power of a meteor. Diablo lurches violently as his brain turns to mush for a moment.

STRONG! DANGEROUS!! This angel is my enemy! MICHAEEEEEL!!

Diablo swings his hand at the tiny speck of light, but the instant he makes contact, the unknown soul strikes his hand so hard that its bones break, making his arm drop to his side uselessly.

* * *

Bael, now in his Balrog form, howls in rage.

"YOU KILL FRIENDS! ME KILL YOU! STUPID DUMB-HEAD!!"

He swings his flail overhead, and this time, enhanced by his incredible Balrog strength, it pounds against Diablo's head like a cruise missile, causing immense damage and shattering his jaw-bones.

"SKREEEE!"

Diablo howls in pain. His mouth hangs open uselessly, preventing him from using his fire-blasts. He tries to swipe at the Balrog, but each time, Bael deflects Diablo's hands with Mjölnir and breaks one of the Archdemon's arms.

Crack! CRACK!

Bael pummels the Archdemon relentlessly. Diablo staggers again and again. His arms hang at his side, while his mind trembles from the shock of the Balrog's attacks.

ONE LITTLE ANGEL CANNOT KILL ME!! WORTHLESS FUCKER! I'LL KILL YOU INSTEAD!!

Bael swings Mjölnir at Diablo once again, but this time, Diablo activates his powerful gravity field.

Instantly, Mjölnir's weight increases by 100 times. Instead of launching at Diablo's head, it falters mid-flight and plops to his shoulder, then rolls off and drags Bael along with it.

"AH! SHIT! SHIIIT!"

Bael howls in surprise as the immense gravity catches him off-guard and causes him to lose his footing. He falls off Diablo's body and plummets to Heaven's Soil below, where he strikes the ground with the force of a tactical nuke.

FWOOOOM!

Rocks and soil explode outward in every direction. Countless Flesh Eaters at Diablo's base end up pummeled into mulch from the incredible impact of the Balrog's body, but they grow back within moments, leaving no lasting damage for the Archdemon.

Damned angel! That's what you get for messing with me!

Diablo waits for a minute, allowing his body to regenerate back to pristine condition. Meanwhile, Bael's Balrog form wears off, having been defeated in one move by the Archdemon's power.

As Bael reverts to his base form, Satan jumps out of the dirt beside him.

"Good try, bub. Nice effort. I'll take it from here."

Bael groans. "Ugh... I couldn't do anything, after all..."

"Nah. You did plenty."

Satan lifts his head to gaze upon the Archdemon. Diablo resumes his annihilation of demonic life, but now, he occasionally targets the angels flying in the sky as well.

"I've only had one plan, all this time, Bael. The whole point of attacking Heaven... and now, I'm gonna do it."

Bael blinks. "Wha...? You can't be serious! Deebs is too strong!"

"Sure, he's strong, but he ain't invincible. Nobody is."

Satan winks at the Duke of Pain. "'Cept you, but that's different."

Bael pulls himself to his feet. He glances around the crater and scowls at the devastation. "How're you gonna win, boss?"

"It's better you don't know."

Satan motions with his hands, causing a portal to appear.

"This will take you back to Earth. Go. Belial and the others have already left."

Bael's eyes widen. "What?! You want me to run away? Nuh-uh! I ain't lettin' you take all the glory! I can still fight!"

Satan shakes his head. "Sorry, Bael. Deebs isn't an enemy you can beat, not right now. Maybe if you were an Emperor, things would be different. It takes an Emperor to defeat an Emperor, and that's just how things are."

"What about the other demons?"

Bael gestures to the west, where the Archdemon lights them up with a blast of hellfire.

"This was always a suicide mission."

Bael opens his mouth to protest, but suddenly, an invisible hand reaches out and grabs him. Before the Duke of Pain can retort, Satan hurls him through the portal, where he lands unceremoniously on his ass and skids to a stop.

"Hey! What the hell?! Satan! You worthless-!"

Satan closes the portal, leaving Bael to curse uselessly at the empty air.

The Devil raises his eyes skyward.

"Tch. By now, Raphael must have allowed ten thousand of his people to escape. If I'm gonna do this, I'll have to move quickly."

Nearly two million angels hover in the skies above. The Archdemon only attacks them occasionally, but much of his effort goes into extinguishing demon and monster lives at his feet.

Satan ignites fire from his feet and jumps into the sky.

"Hades. Have you allocated the souls?"

Aye, comes the response inside Satan's mind.

"How many?"

Nearly three million. A lot of demons died, today.

"We'll survive. We have broodmothers, while the angels don't. They can't reproduce."

Mmm. Still, what about the demons in Heaven? If thou didn't allow the Warpers to use their magic...

"I don't have time for that. Every angel that escapes is one more pain in our asses. Alright, talk-time's up."

Satan flies in front of the Archdemon. He stares at the colossal giant with a mixture of pity and disdain.

"Last check. You aren't wasting any Titan souls, are you? I don't have many in there."

No. I am not. I've saved roughly ten thousand souls for later. All of them should provide thee with plenty of utility.

"Great. Burn the rest. Let's do this."

A moment passes. Hades speaks once again, but this time, he lowers his voice.

Satan... this is going to hurt more than anything thou hath ever experienced before.

"I'm used to pain."

Not like this.

Hades sighs. He casts one regretful gaze toward the hundreds of thousands of clumped-up angels waiting their turn to pass through Raphael's lone portal, then sets his mind to the task at hand.

I am starting now.

The moment the words leave Hades' mouth, he reaches deep into Satan's mind. There, nearly two million demon, angel, and Titan souls rest in captivity, unable to escape.

Burn.

The former Archangel of Change begins extinguishing souls one by one, then in clumps and groups and batches and droves and hordes as well.

One soul, a hundred, a thousand...

Within seconds, the mana in Satan's body builds up to a level never before seen in all his life. The Devil's eyes bulge, his teeth clench, and he curls up into the fetal position, barely managing to hold himself aloft.

Like a waterfall crashing upon a beetle, Satan's entire body begins to tremble and shake under the incredible, immense power bursting from within himself.

"Ahhh! AHHHHHH!!!"

He screams in pain, his voice rising to a volume that nearly everyone in Heaven can hear.

A few miles away, Raphael continues to usher angels through his portal. However, the moment he hears Satan's unceasing screams, he lifts his eyes to gaze in astonishment at the Devil's rapidly expanding presence.

"WHAT?! O, Creator, what is happening? Satan's mana is intensifying! It's expanding! If it continues unfolding, his entire body will explode!"

Several nearby angels hear Raphael's words. They turn around to gape at Satan's power, and a horrifying sense of dread fills their minds.

"Ah! If the Devil explodes, what ungodly destruction will that much mana unleash?"

"He's getting stronger every second! Look at the Devil's power! How can a mere bloodskin possess such limitless potential?!"

Their eyes widen, and their hearts turn to ice. All of the cherubs and seraphs panic and rush toward Raphael's portal. Raphael winces as the strain of so many bodies passing through rapidly drains his mana.

"Ah... my mind is starting to ache... what immense pressure! Satan's mana is driving me to the brink of sanity! His energy is... it's exceeding the Great Demon's! He can't possibly continue any further!"

A minute passes. Satan's godlike mana doubles in power, causing the brains and hearts of all the beings in Heaven to tremble. The Archdemon attacks Satan, but his fire-blasts and punches reflect off an immensely powerful energy barrier protecting the Devil.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Satan's screaming never stops. In Diablo's eyes, the Devil's mana shines like the midday sun, while everyone else appears only like fireflies or pinpricks of light.

I CAN'T HURT HIM?! THIS ANGEL IS STRONGER THAN ME!

The blood drains from Raphael's skin. A realization strikes him as he watches the Devil's power increase.

"Oh my god... Satan... he's planning to detonate his body! The blast will surely kill the Great Demon, but Heaven... it will... everyone here will perish!"

To the surprise of all the cherubs and seraphs trying to escape, their elder brother suddenly pushes his way past everyone and dives through his portal.

"Only seconds remain! I have to save whomever I can!"

Raphael claps his hands together. His portal, the only lifeline allowing his angel brothers and sisters to escape Heaven, seals shut.

The last face Raphael sees is one of his beautiful sisters. She screams and begs him to let her through, but he closes the gate, sealing her within Heaven.

Uzziel and fifteen thousand other angels all stand nearby. When they see the panicked looks on the faces of those who have recently fled Heaven, along with the sealing of Raphael's portal, all of the other survivors stare at Raphael in disbelief.

"Brother! What's wrong?! Why have thou closed the portal? Our brothers and sisters are still in Heaven!"

Camael, now healed, flaps her wings and jumps to Raphael's side. Immediately, upon seeing the look on her brother's face, her expression turns as black as night.

"Raphael. Why have thou sealed our brothers in Heaven? The Archdemon will kill them."

Raphael shakes his head.

"No... no... the Devil... he's... he's going to..."

RUMBLE...

A massive tremor strikes the entirety of Earth. Every one of the continents shudders as, in a dimension adjacent to the planet, an explosion of previously-unseen scope detonates inside Heaven's pocket dimension.

Raphael and his remaining family members, all bunched up in the plains outside of Mount Sinai, jerk their heads upward. In the sky, several spatial distortions appear, causing the clouds to rush away at blinding speeds. Rips in the fabric of reality tear across the horizon, while beams of blood-red light cascade down to fall upon the Earth. Everything the demonic miasma touches turns to ash, while the rest remains in its former pristine condition.

Uzziel gasps. "By the Creator! What's happening?!"

Half a minute later, the interspatial tears seal up and vanish. All that remains are the ashen remnants of plants, trees, and animals caught by the demonic power.

Raphael slumps to his knees. Tears boil in his eyes as waves of guilt and rage overwhelm him.

"Dead... dead... they're all dead..."

Satan's body regenerates. After detonating himself in a brilliant explosion, his mind wavers for several seconds. He stands up in a blood-red crater, his senses reeling from the stench of copper and plasma.

"Guhk... where... where am I? What happened?"

Several seconds pass before Hades answers him.

Congratulations. The deed is done.

His monotone voice sends shivers down Satan's spine. The Devil pulls himself to his feet, but bolts of electrical pain shoot through his arms and legs. Lingering after-effects from his violent explosion cause his body to moan and groan while begging for forgiveness.

"Fuck... everything hurts... my whole body burns like a bitch..."

Hades says nothing. Instead, his soul emits a sensation of lingering anguish. When Satan peers inside his mind, all he sees is Hades' apparition sitting down, staring at nothing.

"Hades? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

The former Archangel shakes his head.

Satan. Look around. Thou haven't a clue what thy actions... what they've...

Hades trails off. Frowning, Satan ignites flames from his feet and jumps into the sky.

Immediately, the stench of blood assaults his senses — once he obtains an aerial viewpoint, his confusion increases.

"Where the hell am I?"

Heaven, Hades replies.

Satan sweeps his eyes to the north, east, south, and west. No matter where he looks, the only thing he sees is blood-red land. Heaven's Light, once a mixture of white and gold, now tints the world crimson, giving the entirety of Heaven a horrifying, eerie atmosphere.

Instead of trees and grass, an endless wasteland stretches out as far as Satan can see. A tremendous crater, nearly five miles in circumference, engulfs the area where Satan woke up. Beyond that, the cataclysmic damage Heaven suffered renders the rest of it inhospitable to life.

Streams and rivers of blood coat the soil. Much of it boils slightly, revealing the presence of intense heat beneath Heaven's surface, but as the minutes pass, the temperature dies down somewhat, causing Satan to breathe a little easier.

"I see. So... I did this."

Satan speaks to himself, more than anyone else, but Hades still responds.

Aye. They're all dead, now. All of my former brothers and sisters. All of the demons. Anyone unlucky enough to end up trapped in thy suicidal blast... they've left the realm of the living.

Satan nods. "All according to plan."

Mmm. Was this the right way to win the war, though? Without hesitation, thou didn't sacrifice thy fellow demons. My former brothers and family... I cannot help but wonder if... if we've made the right choice.

Satan coughs. The stench of blood strains his breathing.

"Kuh. It's too late for regrets. Raphael didn't leave me another option."

Satan flies across Heaven. He eyeballs the ground and keeps an eye out for survivors.

"How much power did I release? I can't find a trace of life, not even a plant, anywhere."

'Twas immeasurable, Hades murmurs. *Not even the great Morva, a mighty Titan from the Primordial Era, could have caused such devastation. Not with a single attack. Such is the might of a fully realized soul manipulator.*

"I hope I never have to do it again. The pain made me wish I was dead."

* * *

Soon, Satan's eyes fall upon an enormous chunk of flesh, one the size of a two-story building. It rests in a crater, while bloody smoke boils from its charred skin toward the skies above.

"Spawn of a- is that a piece of the Great Demon? I thought I killed it!"

Hades nods. *Aye, 'tis dead. Not a drop of life-force remains. This bloody husk appears to be a remnant of its skull.*

Satan flies to the ground and lands a few feet away from the lump of blackened flesh and bone. The stench of death makes him recoil, but after forcing down his disgust, he takes a step forward.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Hm? Found something?

"I think I have."

Satan jumps atop the mass of flesh and cranes his neck to look at a giant gash across the top. There, inside the remnant of the Archdemon's brain, a 6-foot-tall figure lies drenched in blood and guts.

"Deebs! He's alive!"

Satan reaches inside the Archdemon's skull, grabs hold of his friend, and pulls him out. With a look of pure joy, he grins from ear to ear at Diablo's unconscious figure.

"I dunno how he survived, but that makes today our lucky day."

Satan shoots another glance around Heaven, then motions with his hand and activates the power of a warper within himself. He summons a portal back to Earth, but before he can step through, a male voice cries out from the skies.

"Satan! Bastard! Don't even think of leaving here alive!"

Raphael, Uzziel, Camael, and a hundred cherub warriors soar high above Satan. They drop to the ground and splash their legs into the bloody swamp.

Raphael's expression oozes with rage. He stabs a finger toward the Devil, perched atop the Archdemon's skull, and growls deep in his throat. "Foul demon! Thy attack slew millions of my brothers and sisters! Not only that, but the audacity required to slay thy own people as well boggles my mind! Thou art a source of evil worse than any I've ever seen! We won't allow thee to leave alive!"

Satan stares, unblinking, at the Archangel of Wisdom. His smile fades away, replaced with an expression of doubt.

"You think I wanted to kill millions of angels and demons? My intention was to kill the Great Demon. Had I waited any longer, he'd have killed everyone anyway."

Several veins bulge along Raphael's head. "Lying snake! My people were on their way out of Heaven! Were it not for thy cowardly attack; they might have survived!"

Satan narrows his eyes. "The Great Demon destroyed Heaven's Gate. *My* people were going to die while yours would have escaped safely. I didn't see you offer to help them."

"I can only open one portal at a time!" Raphael bellows. "Blackheart! Don't even think of slandering me! 'Tis none other than thy suicidal attack that killed three million angels and demons! Thou art a stain upon the mortal realm!"

Camael walks over and places her hand on Raphael's shoulder. After taking a moment to calm Raphael down, she gestures toward Diablo, still held in Satan's grasp.

"That fellow there. He's the one who transformed into the Great Demon. Give him to us. He must pay for his deeds with blood."

Satan narrows his eyes. He glares at Camael with a look of fire and fury.

"Hm? Are you stupid, grandma?"

"Excuse me?"

"You saw me unleash enough power to kill the Great Demon. If you want to continue pissing me off, maybe I'll do it again."

Camael falters. "...No. D-do not jest, Devil."

"I ain't in the mood to joke around," Satan mutters. "You wanna know the truth? I'll tell you. I planned for this. My goal, from the beginning, was to take your kind down a few pegs. I succeeded. I won the war."

Satan smirks.

"What can you do? Your best fighters are down for the count. You're exhausted. You're running on fumes. Me? I just blew up all of Heaven and killed the Great Demon without batting an eye, and I've got tons more kick left in my step. Face it, grandma, grandpa, your time's up."

Satan turns around to face his portal. His smirk widens.

"The Age of the Angels is over. The Era of the Demons is here. Maybe next time you guys see me, I'll finish you off. That depends on my mood."

Raphael stares at Satan's back. Every second, a new understanding of Satan's planning enters his mind.

"Blackheart. All of this death and destruction... and thou expect me to let thee walk away? Not a chance."

Raphael's eyes flash with anger.

"I shan't let thee take another step. Today is the day thou die, damned soul-manipulator."

Raphael's wings twitch. He coils strength into his legs and prepares to jump at the Devil, but before he can make his move, Satan whirls to face him.

"I don't think so, pops. I already beat you once. Your little illusion tricks won't work on me. Why don't you just thank me for sparing your life, eh?"

Raphael pauses. "My... illusion tricks?"

Several seconds pass. Satan says nothing, but instead continues to grin like a maniac. As he does, Raphael's frown deepens.

That's right... I awoke to find myself resting only a short distance from the Devil while he battled the Reaper. But... how did I end up on the ground? AH! Don't tell me... I lost?! The Devil defeated me in a clash of souls?!

Satan nods. "That's right. I see the gears turning, old man. Seems you've pieced it all together. I beat you. I left you to rot, and yet you still haven't thanked me for sparing your life. Oh, well. It seems good manners are out of style these days."

Satan rolls his eyes. He turns back to his portal and takes a step toward it.

"How many angels are left, I wonder? How will your kind hold out, while we demons replenish our numbers? Better start planning for the future. The clock's ticking. The hunt is on."

Satan steps inside his portal. It seals shut behind him, sending an ominous silence through the air.

Raphael stares, unmoving, at the spot where Satan stood only a moment before.

Camael echoes him. Her eyes turn misty as a flood of emotions surges through her mind.

"Satan played us for fools," Camael mutters. "All along, we assumed the Devil was after the Archangel's heads... but he wasn't. He only wished to reduce angelkind's numbers. In a war of attrition, he always held the advantage."

Raphael nods.

"We've lost the war. There's... there's no hope left."

Uzziel stands behind her elder brother and sister. A complicated series of emotions pass over her face — guilt, denial, self-loathing.

I created the demons. It's because of me that... that all my brothers and sisters died. It's my fault. If only I hadn't been so damned foolish...

The stench of blood hangs in the air, warning the gathered angels of their inevitable future.

Whether one year or one thousand, eventually... they will fall to the might of demonkind.

* * *

Elsewhere, on Earth, a single human male sits atop a rock several miles from Mount Sinai. His hawk-like eyes scrutinize the rippling tears in space as they fade away, and a mixture of emotions washes over his face.

"Master Hercules. With you gone, what must I do? Was any of this within your expectations?"

His eyes lower to a field of angels. Nearly ten thousand of them mill about in the grass. Some sit, some stand, while others pace back and forth while they wait for their brother to return with news of Heaven's fate.

"With the angels all but extinct, my people will have to fend for themselves. How will we survive when a single demon outmatches a hundred of our finest warriors?"

The human lowers his eyes. He gazes at a nearby flower, as if waiting for it to give him a reply.

"Is that why, in your final moments, you gave me the rest of your power? Did you choose me as their leader?"

The human climbs off the rock. He stretches for a moment and pops his back.

"I am but one man. To defeat the demons, I will need an army."

He raises his eyes to the perfectly blue sky above. Already, all traces of the deadly demonic energy from Heaven have dissipated, leaving Earth in its former pristine state.

"So be it. I will raise an army the likes of which the universe has never seen. I will stay true to my heart, and I will take my revenge."

"I will kill them all. Every. Last. Demon."

Part 171: The Neverending Cycle

In the realm of the Ancient Titans, at the High Court of the Allmother, several hundred former Titan Kings and Queens sit at a table laden with a magnificent spread of scrumptious food. Every form of culinary delight lines their dishes, ranging from seafood to beef to vegetarian delights as well.

And, at the end of the several-thousand-foot-long table, a single Titan Queen, only fifty-feet-tall, stands atop it while hanging her head in shame. Her fellow Titans tower over her like mountains above boulders. Their expressions range from pity and empathy to scorn and disgust.

Queen Odin, the Allmother, mightiest of her people, sits at the head of the table. She takes a sip of wine, sloshes it around in her cup for a moment, then places it on the table. After crossing her arms, she sighs.

"Ivaldi, the so-called Queen of Divinity. We gave you a most fortuitous chance to elevate yourself two hundred positions. You were to take Hrothgar's seat at the High Table, a spot he has shown no interest in, nor has he so much as sat in for a dozen generations. Now, please, my beloved god-daughter, tell me why you have claimed no victories in your return to the mortal realm. Explain to your fellow clansmen why you have disgraced our names."

Murmurs spread around the table. Several Titans whisper to one another about the battles they saw.

"Perhaps Ivaldi was too weak to handle that terrible fiend from the Primordial Era."

"Bah. She is, of course, the lowest-seated among us. Had we known such a mighty beast was to appear, we might have jumped at the chance to fight it."

"I'd have given up a few positions to fight such a blood-stirring battle. Alas! The Queen of Divinity was no match for such a terrifying monster."

Having witnessed Ivaldi's exploits for themselves, many of the Titans present brag amongst themselves about how easily they would have felled the Great Demon. However, none of them step up to defend her.

Ivaldi hangs her head in shame. "I failed, Allmother. I attempted to slay the Hydra, but the Plaguebringer, the Archangel of Creation, Uzziel, defeated it first. When I directed my vengeance toward her, she crushed me. I should like to point out that one of Hrothgar's descendants, a young Titan named Hercules, was manipulating Uzziel behind the scenes. I know not how he overpowered her soul, given her status as an Archangel, but he succeeded."

The murmuring around the table falls silent for a moment.

Several Titans shoot looks of disdain at one another.

"Hrothgar's line now includes a soul manipulator?"

"Hmph. I'd sooner die of embarrassment than suffer such an indignity from my progeny. Who knew his kin would fall so far as to walk Morva's decrepit path?"

Odin raises her hand. "Quiet. Ivaldi, I understand your inability to defeat the Great Demon, since its might exceeded most of the Titans seated at this table. However, my issue lies with your embarrassing loss to the Plaguebringer. As everyone here knows, my firstborn fell to the Earthmother's violent fury. I could understand a close loss, but from what I understand, her magical power has fallen from its once-lofty heights, and yet you barely put up a fight. Have you no shame?"

Ivaldi clenches her fists. The once-imposing aura of the Divine Queen loses its luster under Odin's wrathful gaze. "I make no excuses for my failure. I, too, assumed Uzziel would be as weak as her brethren, but I did not realize she was capable of pulling mana from the essence of nature. It seems that Hercules was somehow able to tap into her primordial powers to defeat me. My lack of vigilance caused my defeat."

Odin furrows her brow. "Hm. Indeed. More importantly, I noticed that you used your Binding Arts to merge with two of Hrothgar's Descendants. Why have I heard nothing of this technique from you in the past? Such a deadly kill move might have aided us greatly during the Third War."

Ivaldi straightens her stance. She shifts her arms behind her back and clasps her hands together. "Ah, regarding my Binding Arts, I only created them out of boredom after I arrived in Valhalla. I used my knowledge of the Cherubim, Seraphim, and Ophanim to create a technique that merges multiple Titans into one entity. Sadly, its efficiency and power level is far lower than what the Archangels can unleash. I consider my performance unworthy."

"Nonsense," Odin mutters. She waves her hand flippantly, dismissing Ivaldi's concerns. "Even with its limited power, it could have provided us with a much-needed boost in fighting capability during the ancient wars. You may have utterly failed in defeating three legendary opponents, but I must admire your inventiveness in the ways of combat. You did not waver and unleashed every tool in your arsenal without holding back. From where I stand, your foolishness and naivete come second to your ingenuity and creativity."

The Ancestor's Hall falls silent as several Titans stare at Odin with looks of incredulity.

The Allmother is actually praising Ivaldi after her shameful performance? Never in a million years did I expect such a bizarre twist of fate to occur before my eyes!

Gods! How could Odin gaze upon Ivaldi with anything but scorn? Having that diminutive daughter in my presence sickens me. The Allmother's compassion seems to have grown over the last few eons.

Odin pushes around a piece of chicken on her plate. An absent-minded look appears in her eyes as she stares at the table for a moment.

"How strange, though, that the Archangels and the remaining descendants of Hrothgar's line all chose to seal away their memories. Why did I hear nothing of this revelation?"

A Titan King sitting beside Odin at her right, clears his throat.

"Ahm, ah, Allmother, it's like this, you see..."

He presses his fingers to his temple and sends a telepathic message to her.

Several seconds pass. Odin says nothing as she receives her advisor's message. Eventually, she nods.

"Ah, thank you, Hyperion. I see. So we've known for a long time, but it slipped my mind. The state of the outside universe has remained outside my interest for a very, very long time. I suppose my only concern would be whether we will need to worry about these 'demons' finding a way to attack Valhalla or not. Have they any means of entering our realm?"

Ivaldi bows her head. "With all due respect, Allmother, I possess limited knowledge of the demons. While the Great Demon was a terrifying deity, it seemed he was an aberrant among his people. The others were like gnats compared to his godlike existence. I would not worry about them."

"We've underestimated these children of the Plaguebringer once already. I won't have another incident unfold a second time. Hyperion, how goes Helios's experiments? Has he uncovered a method for reviving our bodies? Has he found even a hint?"

Hyperion shakes his head. "Nothing so far, my queen."

"Ah, how unfortunate. Returning to the mortal realm may prove impossible."

With a shrug of her shoulders, Odin waves her hand at Ivaldi. "For your performance in the mortal realm, I will promote you fifty positions. That is all."

Ivaldi stiffens. She stares at the Allmother with a mixture of surprise and reverence. "Fifty positions?! Queen Odin, I am unworthy! I failed in my quest! I was unable to defeat even a single enemy during my return to the mortal realm! Your generosity might be boundless, but I-"

"Quiet."

Odin's expression darkens.

"Know your place. I do not hand out rewards flippantly. Have you forgotten? Hrothgar's descendant sent us a request. His appeal was 'to save the Titans from the demonic calamity.' Killing the Hydra was only a secondary objective. You created a portal out of Heaven and saved many Titans from the Devil's final cowardly act of self-destruction. Additionally, you unleashed a new power, one which might prove useful to our people if we ever return to the mortal realm. For your achievements, I am awarding you a small promotion among this table's ranks."

Odin continues. "Beyond that, you gave Zeus a chance to redeem his cowardice by teaming up to battle the Great Demon. He did not flinch from his duty, and thus, you have partially redeemed his weakness. It remains his responsibility to carry on into the future if he wishes to reobtain a spot at the High Table. With any luck, he might take your former seat at the *end* of the table."

Odin chuckles.

"Hah. Oh, what great entertainment we've enjoyed over the last twenty-four hours. I look forward to witnessing the antics these demons unleash upon the mortal realm, as well as how Hrothgar's descendants will deal with them. Hyperion, how many Titans remain alive after the war against the Great Demon?"

Hyperion strokes his long, luscious black hair. "I believe the exact number was forty-two, my queen."

"Hmph. If the living Titans can bring themselves back from extinction, I will laud them."

After a moment, Odin leans back in her chair and gestures to Ivaldi. "Go on, then. Take your seat. My judgment is over."

Ivaldi smiles. She kowtows to the Allmother and nods profusely. "Yes, Queen Odin. Your graciousness knows no limits. I will consider myself in your debt until the day I... die? Well, I suppose a second death might be possible... haha..."

Odin rolls her eyes. "That would defeat the point of Valhalla, little one."

Satan, Belial, Lucifer, and Bael all trudge through a dense forest several miles from Mount Sinai. Their feet snap twigs as they walk, and their eyes gaze upon the desiccated remains of a once-beautiful jungle that previously hid their movements from their angelic oppressors.

"Something ain't right," Satan says. His eyes flick from left to right as he and the other demons slowly make their way through the forest.

"Mmm," Lucifer mutters. "My third eye is picking up strange mana fluctuations in the air. They appear... foreign."

Behind the three Emperors and Bael, fifty thousand demons stomp along, ignorant of the danger ahead. Orcs and goblins intermingle with various demon grunts, lords, and even a baron or two.

Meanwhile, at Lucifer's side, a single Hellhound matches its pace to hers. Diablo's comatose body rests atop the fifty-eyed beast's back. He sways from side to side as the monster takes slow, plodding steps.

Bael smirks. "Whaddyas scared of, eh? I'm here. I'll knock out anyone in our way."

Satan nods. "I'm sure you will. However-"

"Satan! Satan!"

A voice up ahead startles the demons, causing them to slow to a halt. Satan frowns as a Lord stumbles toward him.

"Orias? What's wrong?"

The haggard-looking Lord of the Moon falls forward and lands in Satan's outstretched arms. His body, still weakened from expending so much power against the Valkyries earlier in the day, trembles and shudders as he struggles to hold himself up.

"Oh, devils! It's terrible! Terrible! The broodmothers! They're dead! Some horrible monster is ripping them apart! I barely escaped with my life!"

Immediately, Satan's cautious attitude turns to alarm. "What?! Someone's killing the Broodmothers?! What sick spawn of a- Belial! Bael! Lucy! Come with me! We've gotta stop them!"

The other two Emperors and Bael nod along with Satan's words. "Right!"

They skip the formalities. Satan gestures to the demons behind him. "Come on! We can't let a few angel infiltrators take out the Broodmothers! They're our key to winning this war, dammit!"

Orias opens his mouth to say something, but the words don't come out in time. Before he manages to say, "The intruder isn't an angel! It's-" he's too late. Satan and the others rush past him, their battle instincts kindled and roaring to go.

"W-wait, stop..." Orias coughs. "The monster is too dangerous... it kills without mercy..."

Orias staggers after the others, but his speed is nowhere near capable enough to keep up with them. He slumps to the ground in defeat and sighs as the horde of demons, orcs, and goblins head toward their base, ready to kill whoever is threatening their survival.

"I hope Satan can defeat that damned fiend..."

Recommended Listening

Satan and Belial split apart from Bael and Lucifer. They group into two teams and summon half of their warriors to check on the various hatcheries and spawning rooms.

What they find is a stomach-churning disaster.

"Oh, no!" Belial gasps.

She splits off from Satan and heads over to an alcove where the body of a formerly-plump Broodmother lays lifelessly on the dirt. A giant hole in her chest reveals she perished in a single blow, unable to defend herself.

"Who did this?! Who killed Haley?!"

Tears well up in Belial's eyes. As a former succubus, the Broodmother before her was once one of her beloved sisters... until Lucifer turned her into a demon-whelping invalid incapable of defending herself.

Satan scowls as his gaze falls upon one corpse after another. Dozens of broodmothers, as well as their unborn hellspawn, lay in puddles of blood and gore. The expressions of many reveal their terror, sending chills down Satan's spine.

"I never imagined Raphael would be so devious! When I get my hands on the worthless little cherub who did this..."

"EEYAAH!"

A Broodmother cries out in pain from an adjacent room. Satan and Belial's hearts leap into their throats. In the blink of an eye, both of them dash over to a burrowed-out hallway, run down a corridor, and arrive at a horrifying scene of death and destruction.

Dozens of demons lay dead around another of the Broodmother's rooms. This time, the fresh corpses send up a pungent stench in the air, causing Satan's brows to tighten.

"What the hell?! Someone killed these guys just now! It didn't take us five seconds to get here! Where'd the killer go?!"

His gaze falls upon a Broodmother at the edge of the room. A gaping hole in her chest oozes blood. With her giant rump stuck in the wall to birth children, she cannot free herself to move around or beg for

help.

Belial dashes over to her and summons healing magic. "Lophi! Stay with me! You're not dead yet!"

After a few seconds, the hole in Lophi's chest heals. She raises her head and stares at Belial with a look of terror.

"A-awful! Scary! Big monster! Killed Mari! Killed Fee!"

Satan walks over to Belial's side and touches Lophi's chin. "Who did this? Who's killing the Broodmothers? Did you see them?"

The demoness shudders as memories appear in her mind. "The eyes! The horrible, glowing eyes! I couldn't run! I couldn't escape! Help me get out! I don't wanna die!!"

She breaks down into uncontrollable sobbing. Belial tries to comfort her, but after a few moments, she turns to glare icy daggers at Satan.

"Glowing eyes. *Hercules*. He must be the one attacking us. That's how our Grunts and Lords are dying, even in these cramped-"

"Guwahk!!"

Several squishy sounds like balloons bursting with blood pop outside the room, startling both Emperors. A quick clattering of fists and bone echoes in the hallways, but before Satan and Belial can take two steps toward the doorway, the noises cease.

Both of the Emperors arrive at the scene to find fifty dead demons and orcs lying in heaps and piles. With their necks snapped and their heads crushed, their appearances send rage washing through both Emperor's hearts.

"Hercules!!" Satan bellows. "You damned coward! Show yourself! Where are you?!"

Satan's angry cry echoes down the hallway ahead, but after several seconds, he only receives silence as a reply.

Belial presses against Satan's side. Her eyes flick from left to right as she scans the nearby area for threats. "I don't like this. We need to rescue as many Broodmothers as we can and leave."

"How?" Satan asks. "They're too big to move."

"I... I don't know..." Belial whispers. She steps away from Satan and presses her back to the wall. "All I know is- shit!"

Before Satan can react, Belial leaps toward him and transforms her fists into bone-hammers.

CRACK!

A deafening explosion rings out as her fists collide with someone else's. A previously unseen assassin tries to take out Satan in one blow, but Belial foils him, making him leap backward and land in a crouch.

Satan and Belial quickly turn to face their mysterious enemy. A moment later, the Devil hesitates as confusion appears in his gaze.

"What the fuck? That ain't Hercules. That's a human, right? He looks different from the others I've seen, though."

A dark-skinned, muscular man, crouches in a defensive stance ten feet away. His glowing eyes fixate on Satan and Belial as he waits for an opportunity to strike. His eyes glow far brighter than the torches on the wall.

"Demon Emperors. We finally meet."

Satan purses his lips. "Did Hercules send you?"

"Hercules died," The man replies. His lips curl into a faint smile. "I serve a new master now. We all do."

Footsteps.

Satan turns around to gaze into the shadows behind himself. Five pairs of glowing eyes stand apart from each other as five humans become faintly visible.

"We serve the Illuminator, the one who will deliver us from darkness," The first human says. "Before, we were helpless, but now, we have the power to fight back."

Satan smirks. "Hah. And here I was, gettin' all *fidgety*. A buncha possessed humans ain't no match for me. Better leave now, punks, before you get *burned*."

Belial clenches her jaw. "S-Satan... just now, when my fist collided with his... his strength was far beyond the ordinary. Don't look down on them. There's... there's something about these people that unnerves me..."

Satan's smugness dissipates. He eyes his girl for a moment as several thoughts enter his mind.

Belial might be the strongest demon I know. If she thinks these punks are tough guys, then I'd better not take 'em lightly.

The Devil straightens his posture. He presses his palms together and licks his lips.

"You think you can come into *my* home and kill *my* girls? You're in for a wake-up call, chums."

The first human's grin expands across his whole face. "We know how strong you are, Satan. We've prepared many counters for you. The Illuminator knows all your weaknesses."

Swish!

Five demi-humans leap at Satan and Belial from the back, while the other one charges them from the front.

Both Emperors put their backs together. Belial transforms her arms into blade-tendrils and lunges toward her enemies at twice the speed of sound.

Cling-cling-clang!

Her razor-sharp bones slash at the demi-humans with the rage of a hurricane and the power of a tornado. To her astonishment, the humans manage to keep up with her speed and power. They use their bare hands to swat and bat aside her blades, while also delivering brutal punches to her face and chest.

Thunk-thunk!

Several fists collide with Belial's chiseled abs, only to bounce off an invisible barrier created by Satan's Vectors. The Demi-humans immediately leap backward to get out of Belial's attack range, while their leader attacks Satan from the front.

Whiff! Whiff!

He slashes at Satan with his fingers, but Satan counters with his Vectors and his Octopus Form as well. Ten invisible and visible limbs work together in tandem to fend off the single opponent while a few others hang back to assist Belial. However, to Satan's alarm, his speed pales in comparison to the empowered demi-human.

"Shit!"

Time after time, Satan attacks, only for his opponent to bat aside, dodge, or counter his blows with ones of equal or greater power.

The man snorts. "What's the matter, Satan? Can't keep up?"

Hades speaks from within Satan's mind. *Gods. I can't believe it! Satan, each of these humans has nearly the same strength and speed as Hercules! I don't know how that's possible!*

Sweat pours off Satan's brow. While he tries to fend off his attacker, the other five demi-humans swarm Belial and resume their barrage of attacks.

"No kidding! This fucker's a lot smaller, too, so he's a lot nimbler! How're you doing back there, Belial?!"

"Terribly!" Belial howls. "There's too many! I can't fight them all off!"

"That's right; you can't," The human's leader says, a cold glint in his eye. "Once we crush your body for the first time, we'll keep mashing you to paste until you run out of souls. As for your woman, we'll spare her a slow, torturous death. We're not animals... not like *you*."

The leader of the demi-humans leaps at a nearby wall, plants his feet against it, and pounces straight at Satan's stomach. The Devil hardens his Vectors and holds them up to protect himself, but a split-second before the human's fist connects, his body disappears and reappears inches from Satan's face.

Shit-!

Crunch!

The leader of the demi-humans punches Satan so hard that the Devil flies to the right and crashes into the hardened dirt wall. Dozens of his bones crack and snap like dried-out wood, while portions of his brain explode through his various orifices.

"Kuhuk!"

Satan loses his stamina. A moment later, the human follows up with a devastating punch aimed at the back of his head.

Splurt!

Satan's brains explode in every direction. The human kills him without hesitation, crushing the Devil before he can react.

"Satan!!"

Belial shrieks in horror as she catches a glimpse of her beloved perishing to the human leader's attack.

Immediately, the demi-humans put all their attention on her.

The leader barks a command. "We have sixty seconds before the Devil revives. Finish her off, now."

Belial's heart turns to ice. All five of the enemies she was already fighting intensify their attacks, while their far-more-capable leader joins in as well. With six people assaulting her from every direction, not even her incredible strength and speed allow her to avoid injury.

Thump!

Every time Belial dodges two attacks, a third slips past and impacts her gut or chest. Several of her ribs crack, her stomach ruptures, and her heart rumbles. Belial's eyes dart from left to right.

I have to hold out until Satan revives!

The leader calls out as he attacks her from behind. "Only fifty-five more seconds!"

Chills spread through Belial's veins. *Only five seconds have passed?! It feels like an eternity! I can't keep this pace up!*

With so many enemies attacking her, she eventually slips up.

FWAP!

The leader lands a decisive punch. He smashes Belial across the back of her head and sends her flying forward. She plows into one of the other demi-humans, causing both of them to tumble and sprawl down the corridor. By the time they both land in a heap, Belial's vision begins to waver.

"Unn... nnn..."

She tries to jump to her feet, but her arms fail her. Instead, she slumps forward and lands atop the human she hit.

After blinking for a moment, she stares into the man's eyes. His gaze meets hers, and his look of hatred startles her.

"Filthy demon whore! Get off me!"

The man starts to push her off, but Belial's trembling face causes him to freeze in his tracks.

"P-please... don't... don't do this..."

She coughs out a few weak words, begging him to take pity on her.

To Belial's surprise, the human hesitates. As he gazes into her eyes, his pupils start to dilate.

"I... I didn't mean to..."

He stops just short of throwing the disgusting demoness off him, and instead, strange feelings emerge in his chest.

Now that I look into this woman's eyes, I notice how... how beautiful she is. Why was I attacking her? What's wrong with me? How could I bring harm upon such a fair, innocent girl?

Unwittingly, Belial releases her succubus hormones. The man's inner desires rapidly overpower his senses.

Everything happens too quickly for the demi-human's leader to put two and two together. "Hey! Forhan! Get up, already. You're not even hurt!"

His annoyance turns to anger as his subordinate pauses for a few seconds to stare at the helpless demoness lying atop him.

"Forhan! Are you listening to me?"

The demi-human's leader trudges over with his other four lackeys. He reaches down to grab Belial by the back of his head, but at that moment, Forhan leaps into action. He wraps his arms around Belial and rolls with her to the side, narrowly evading his leader's grasp. After landing atop Belial, he jumps to his feet and stands over her protectively, facing down his commander and companions.

"Stay away! She's mine! MINE! You can't have her!"

The commander blinks. "What's wrong with you? She's a bloodskin!"

"She's beautiful! She's the love of my life! I won't let you HURT HER!"

Forhan charges his former companions. All reason leaves his mind as the horrifying thought of them hurting the woman he 'loves' takes over his thoughts. He leaps at the nearest warrior and swings his fist.

Fwump!

Forhan's fist crashes against the other man's head, catching him by surprise. He gets battered backward and stumbles to the ground, unable to comprehend the actions of his comrade.

The leader puts two and two together. "Worthless little-! The she-devil must have bewitched Forhan! Take him out!"

A furious fight begins as the lone warrior battles his comrades. However, with his skills sorely lacking compared to his leader, as well as facing a numerical disadvantage, Forhan perishes seconds later when his leader shoves a fist through his chest and tears out his spine.

"Gah! Damned traitor! Forhan was too weak-willed! Don't fall for the bloodskin's tricks! Kill her before Satan revives!"

Belial smiles. After her unexpected savior gave her a few seconds, she used the time to heal herself. She leaps to her feet and transforms her arms into blades.

I didn't realize I could make men do anything I wanted! I always assumed they just thought I was sexy. Maybe my succubus powers are useful after all!

She aims her gaze at another of the human warriors. Before he can react, her entrancing stare meets his glowing eyes, causing him to shudder.

"Nnngh!"

The man staggers backward, unable to resist the sultry gaze of the demon woman before him. He, too, leaps at his comrades and attacks them before they can react.

"Dammit! You, too, Lonquo?!"

The leader of the demi-humans starts to fight off the second traitor in his ranks, but the moment he takes his eyes off Belial, she strikes.

THUNK!

Belial charges him and delivers a gut-busting kick straight to his spine. The leader of the demi-humans goes flying forward. He skids across the ground and strikes the far wall at the end of the corridor with a tremendous *crash*, sending shudders through the underground passages. With his spine crushed, he flops to the ground, unable to move.

"Darrol! Leader!"

The others cry out in surprise, but with their leader gone and one of their colleagues turned to Belial's side, their formation falls to pieces. Belial chops their arms off, gashes out their legs, and leaves them rolling on the floor to cry out in pain.

Once she finishes, Belial turns to her newly acquired ally. The man grins at her like a dog and mentally wags his tail. "Mistress! I fight for you! I die for you!"

Belial glances at the demi-humans before her, all of them hanging onto their lives by a thread. "Mmm. Yes, you do."

Seconds later, Satan revives. He jumps to his feet and jerks his head from left to right. "Belial?! Where are you?! Are you-... uhm... alright...?"

The Devil trails off when he spots the battered bodies of the demi-humans before her, as well as their leader at the end of the hallway.

"Wha... what happened? What'd I miss?"

Belial fans out her fingernails and bats her eyes innocently. "Oh, nothing much. I shook my honkers a couple times, and these boys tore themselves apart in a lust-filled rage. Sometimes I can't help myself."

Satan stares at her, dumbfounded. "You're kidding."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Satan turns to the defeated men at Belial's feet. He takes a step toward them. "Well, guess I'll just put the bastards out of their misery."

"What?! No!" Belial cries, as she jumps in front of them. "Satan! You can't just kill everyone you hate!"

"Why not? It's worked pretty well for me so far."

"Y-yeah, but it's wrong! It's bad! We've already beaten them, why not show them a little compassion and let them go? Let's prove we're the good guys!"

Satan frowns. "I'm not a good guy, sweetie. If you wanna be all cute and caring, do it on your own time. Or have you forgotten? These dickbags killed a bunch of your friends! They murdered and butchered our broodmothers without showing any sympathy! They deserve what I'm gonna give 'em."

Satan pushes past Belial and turns his attention on the demi-human still standing, the one Belial bewitched.

"Who's this guy? Why's he staring at me like an idiot? Don't tell me... he's braindead?"

"No. I entranced him. He works for me, now."

Satan's jaw drops. "You can DO that?!"

"Apparently."

"Dang, toots. You scare me sometimes."

Satan's light-hearted words merely conceal the anger in his heart. He turns away from Belial's thrall to face the broken bodies at his feet.

"I can't leave these guys alive, Belial. Look away for a moment. I don't want you to see this."

Belial scowls. "Don't give me that! I've seen plenty of death, Satan. I know what it looks like. I just don't *like* it. If we let these humans live, maybe-"

"Maybe they'll heal up, come back, and kill more demons," Satan says, interrupting her. "Or do you think they're the types to forgive and forget? I don't think so. Maybe you can beat 'em with one hand behind your back, but the rest of the demons can't. That leader guy got the jump on me pretty good. I doubt anyone else would have stood a chance against these monsters."

"Heh heh..."

One of the humans chokes out a laugh. His glowing eyes tilt toward Belial, and a smirk appears on his face.

"Keh... the Devil's right... we don't... we don't want your pity... finish us off, already. If you don't, we'll come again. You'll never know... never know the meaning of safety, so long as we live. The Illuminator never forgives, and he never forgets. He'll hunt you like the dogs you are. He'll-"

Before the human can continue, fury erupts in Satan's eyes.

SPLAT!

One of Satan's Vectors pounces at the demi-human and crushes his head mid-sentence. His brains coat the ground, while bits of his skull and grey matter spray all over the place.

Belial freezes in place. She stares, wide-eyed, at Satan.

"No... no... no..."

Satan quickly wipes his face. He doesn't look at Belial, but instead, the headless corpse at his feet. "You heard the man. It has to be this way."

Belial lowers her trembling fists. A moment later, Satan crushes the heads of every other human nearby. He only pauses momentarily before killing Belial's thrall. She stares ahead numbly and watches her husband without saying anything.

"Damn," Satan mutters. "I thought they'd have special souls. Their power ain't their own."

Satan heads over to their commander, Darrol, lying against the wall at the end of the corridor. The paralyzed human gurgles blood as he spots the Devil walking toward him, but unable to fight back, he can only watch as his death approaches.

"You came here to kill," Satan says. "So I'm here to pay you back. I don't even know why you punks hate us so much. I didn't do anything to you."

Darrol coughs.

"Kuh... shit-fucking demon bastard... you don't know why we hate you? You don't know... what your little monsters do to our people?! Gurgh... curses... after all the children you're killed... all the women your kind have defiled... we won't rest... we won't let you- uhk?!"

The man's glowing eyes suddenly intensify in luminosity. A look of shock passes over his face.

"Ah! Ahaha! Ahahaha! Kahaha! Stupid Devil bastard! Hahaha! It's over for you, now! Haaahaha! He's coming! You're already dead, and you don't even know it! Bahahaha!!"

The human's expression turns maniacal. He laughs like a crazy person, each breath forcing up mouthfuls of blood. He ignores the pain as his frantic breathing causes him to choke violently.

"Kahk! Kah... kahaha! Tremble and weep, accursed bloodskin! Jephthah is coming! He's coming for you! AHAHAHA!!"

As the man laughs, Satan's hands begin to tremble. Something about the human's absolute confidence in his master, coupled with his overwhelming display of power earlier, causes many unspoken worries to appear in Satan's heart.

"Shut up!" Satan bellows. He swings his fist down and crushes Darrol's head, ending the man's life mid-laugh. For half a second afterward, Darrol's maniacal laughter echoes throughout the hallways, sending shivers down Satan's spine.

"C'mon, baby. We need to leave," Satan mutters. He turns around to look at Belial, only to notice a look of dazed disinterest on her face. Belial stares ahead at the wall, a blank mask covering her face. Her arms sag at her sides, and a sensation of defeat swallows her whole.

"Baby? What's wrong? Come on; this ain't the time for moping around!"

Satan walks over and grabs her hand, but Belial doesn't react.

"...All everyone does is fight and kill," Belial mumbles. "When does it end? When does it ever end?"

Satan groans. "I don't know, but not today, it doesn't! Didn't you hear that guy just now? His boss is coming over! Let's hurry up and get out of here while we still can."

Belial lowers her eyes to the five headless corpses at her feet. "Why couldn't you leave them alive? They weren't going anywhere. They weren't about to hurt anyone."

"Maybe not now, but they would have in the future," Satan says.

The Devil pauses for a moment. He caresses Belial's hand, then starts pulling her along to follow him. "I get it, honey. I do. You think there's a better way we can do things, right? If everyone just set aside their

differences, we'd all get along. I like the idea, but it'll never happen. As long as this chump or that punk has beef, they'll always be trying to set themselves up for a better position in life. The angels have their selfish desires, and so do the demons. Get it?"

Satan doesn't wait for Belial's reply. He drags her down the hallway toward the room from earlier and continues talking. "The world has limited resources. We demons need souls to power up and protect ourselves from the angels. The angels want to kill us because we've killed 'em first. Of course, we killed 'em because they enslaved us and treated us like dirt. At this point, it don't even matter who started what, 'cause we ain't never gonna fix the cycle. These humans are just the latest enemies we've made. They'll get sucked into the void, and we'll have to fight 'em off, too."

Finally, Belial speaks. "I see. So, do you think we can break the cycle?"

Her monotone voice makes Satan pause for a moment before replying. "Yeah, maybe. I don't see it working right now, though. Hell, I don't see it happening for a long time. Maybe in the future, we can patch things up."

Belial nods. She stares at the back of Satan's head as the two of them round the corner and enter the Broodmother's room. "The future... okay. Alright. Maybe in the future we can fix things."

Satan bobs his head. "Yeah. Who knows? Anything's possible... alright! Hey, Lophi! We're back. Come on, girl. I can't fit that big, birthing ass of yours out the door, but I can make a portal for ya."

Lophi raises her eyes to look at Satan and Belial. "You can save me?! Please hurry! I don't wanna stay here anymore! I'll die! I'll die!!"

Satan swaggers over and places his hand on the broodmother's shoulder. His eyes scan her body to look for injuries, but Belial's healing magic left no traces behind. Then, he flicks his gaze to the ant-queen-like posterior sticking out from behind her, with its faintly pulsing life energy revealing the demon imps contained within.

"Oy, moving that big arse is gonna be a bitch. Welp, here goes nothing."

Satan motions with his hands and summons a portal half a foot in front of Lophi. When the warp-gate opens, all the demons see on the other side is a dark, rocky cave — the lack of light inside echoes the atmosphere within the demon catacombs.

Lophi shivers. Her eagerness to leave deflates, replaced instead with tension and worry.

"W-where does this portal go? It looks scary..."

"It's a backup cave," Satan mutters. "I found it a few years ago — no big deal. I'm just gonna put you there for a bit, then come and get you to move you somewhere better. It's totally safe. Nobody else knows about it."

"Is... is that so..."

Lophi swallows her fear. After a little bit of encouraging, she leans on Belial and Satan to shakily waddle forward an inch at a time and slide through the portal. Belial uses her strength and bendiness to lift and push Lophi's rump from the rear, while Satan uses his Vectors.

A minute later, they finish shoving the broodmother through Satan's portal, wave goodbye, and close it off.

Satan wipes his forehead. "One down, a bunch more to go."

"Assuming any others are still alive," Belial replies, her voice frosty.

The two Emperors step out of the room. They leave behind the corpses of the demons, monsters, and demi-humans, and head deeper into the catacombs.

However, they don't travel far before Satan screeches to a halt and stares forward into the darkness.

With all the torches extinguished, the pitch-black hallways might prove impossible for humans to see through, but Satan's demonic vision gives him an acute sense of night-vision surpassing that of any hominid.

Satan frowns. A hundred feet ahead, a single figure limps toward them. His broken, battered body, barely clinging to the edge of life and death, causes Satan's hair to stand on the back of his neck.

"Who's that?" Belial asks.

"It's Bael..." Satan murmurs. "B-Bael! Dude! Are you okay?!"

Satan and Belial quickly close the distance between themselves and their friend. When they arrive, they try to meet Bael's eyes, but the Duke of Pain merely continues limping forward. His eyes stare blankly at the ground.

"Bael! Hey! What's wrong? What happened?"

Satan sweeps his gaze across Bael's body. The Duke's right arm hangs limp at his side, with several of its joints bent in the opposite direction they should be facing. Bruises and lacerations cover his chest and face. His right eye swells to the point he can't see out of it, while his puffy lips tell the tale of a savage beatdown unlike any other.

"H-he beat me..." Bael murmurs. "Gotta... gotta run... gotta get away..."

Bael pushes past Satan and Belial. He barely acknowledges their existence, let alone speaks to them in any meaningful way.

Satan gazes at Bael's back as the big guy hobbles further up the hallway.

"Someone... beat Bael? How? Nobody's ever managed such a thing..."

Belial swallows her saliva. A sensation like sand creeps into her throat.

"Let's get out of here, Satan."

The two lovers meet each other's gazes. Both of them share a moment of faint panic.

Satan nods. "Right. Yeah. Let's help Bael get to the surface. We can't stick around anymore."

Both Emperors nod. They glance down the hallway, into the pitch-black maw of the cavernous depths. For a moment, both of them imagine seeing a pair of glowing eyes, but they quickly shake off those terrifying thoughts and trail after Bael to guide him to Earth's surface.

In the darkness, a single human watches them leave.

Jepthath, the Shepherd, stares with rage-filled eyes at the demons he hates the most.

"Run away, bloodskin leaders. Your deaths will come last."

Jepthath's expression turns frosty. "You've yet to learn the true meaning of fear."

Part 172: End of Chapter Two - Abandoned

How long has it been since I experienced life outside of Solomon's Visions?

A day? A year? A thousand years?

I've spent so much time living with the demons and angels that I've nearly forgotten what it's like to be myself, Jason Hiro.

Solomon's visions fade away, returning me to a familiar bonfire. Once again, the Archangels of Power and Wisdom sit across from me on logs. Gabriel on the left, and Raphael straight ahead.

Gabriel presses his palms together, rests his elbows on his knees, and hunches forward. He touches the tip of his middle fingers to his chin and stares into the bonfire contemplatively.

Raphael, on the other hand, has the presence of someone who's lost everything. With his sagging skin and darkened eyes, the old man appears as little more than a husk of his former self, the person I first met at the start of Solomon's visions.

Solomon sits beside me on the ground with his legs crossed. He sips tea from a dainty little cup and stares silently at Raphael.

"Hello, Jason. It seems you've returned."

I nod. "You were controlling the visions, so that shouldn't be a surprise."

"Mmm."

Solomon doesn't look me in the eye. Instead, he continues to gaze at Raphael, while the Archangel of Wisdom stares emptily into the fire.

"Hmph..." Raphael grunts. "To think that Jephthah had possessed Hercules' power for so long... I never knew."

"There were a great many things you didn't comprehend during your lifetime," Solomon says. His words, while biting, do not come off excessively harsh. Instead, his tone is that of a father gently reprimanding his child for making several minor mistakes. "Camael's visions, the turbulent emotions swirling inside the first demons, the existence of Leviathan... your lack of foresight caused much heartache, old friend."

"Do not refer to me as a friend," Raphael growls. "What am I to do now? The Wordsmith knows everything. I harbored our secret without leaking it for ten eternities, yet casually, thou blabbed it in a single afternoon. If it weren't for thee..."

I raise an eyebrow. "Which secret are you talking about, Raphael? Was it the one where you created the demons? Or maybe the fact the dragons weren't as evil as you claimed? Of course, it's probably the one where you were a soul manipulator all this time, along with all of your fellow Archangels as well! Your hypocrisy knows no limits."

Raphael's expression sinks deeper into the depths of despair. He avoids my gaze and instead tries to suppress a look of shame. "What wouldn't thou have done in my position, young one? 'Tis a simple matter to gaze upon the past and find solutions to problems via hindsight. 'Tis an entirely different issue when living during said time. Camael could see into the future, but even she did not have all of the answers."

Raphael raises his eyes to stare at Solomon. "Again, I ask, why didn't thou choose to show the Wordsmith our deepest secrets? What point is there in learning the Archangels were once soul manipulators?"

"The mistakes of others are a great teaching aid if one has an open mind," Solomon replies. "Further, knowing the extent of your mistakes will assist him in avoiding them during the future. Walking a path of lies will only cause embarrassing, deadly missteps in his quest to eradicate demonkind. If others don't believe his words, then-"

"Hold on," I say, interrupting Solomon. "Where do you get the idea that I'm going to eradicate demonkind? I never agreed to that."

Solomon pauses for a moment. He turns to look at me with a grave expression. "Every Hero must wipe out the demonic threat. That is our duty; our purpose."

"Who decided that? Not me."

"Jepthath was the first Hero," Solomon murmurs. "He was the first human to gain the gift of speech. He put our species on a path to greatness. Were it not for him, we would have perished to the demons shortly after the War in Heaven."

I cross my arms. "Yeah? So what? Just because he saved our species doesn't mean he was right about everything. George Washington was a great man, too, but he owned slaves. Nobody is perfect. I am my own person, so I don't need to follow the ideals of a man who died well over 100,000 years ago, especially when the state of humankind was very different then compared to now. Not unless you have a more persuasive argument."

After a breath's time, I raise an eyebrow. "Besides. What was the point of showing me thousands of years of demon and angel history, if not to give me a more balanced perspective? Didn't you want me to feel more empathetic towards the demons? Isn't that why you humanized Satan and revealed his struggle against the angels?"

Solomon's face turns several shades paler. He glances at Raphael, then back at me. "Erm, ah, not quite... I intended to show you the danger the demons pose. After witnessing the might of the Archdemon, how could you not see what a threat they are?"

"I get that they're a threat, Solomon. What I don't understand is why you would show me Raphael's failures and the demon's struggles, if not for the sake of equalizing my perspective. What were you thinking?"

Solomon swallows his saliva. "I... I thought... if I showed you how powerful Raphael and the Archangels were, and the control he wielded, you would understand what a meteoric rise the demons sustained. Even with the help of the dragon, their powers exploded into the stratosphere."

This time, it's Raphael who frowns. "Solomon! Neither this lad nor I was born yesterday! How could such a bald-faced lie sway anyone here? Admit it. Thou beareth a grudge against the angels. Revealing our secrets was thy method for rubbing salt in my wounds!"

Solomon winces. He turns to glare at Raphael. "Fine. I may have had a slightly self-serving motivation. You deserved to die, Raphael, along with all of the other angels. Your people were vile, disgusting monsters; worse than the demons on many fronts! Are you happy now? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

The Knowledge-Seeker shakes his fist at Raphael. "If you hadn't created the godforsaken demons and treated them like manure, the universe might have ended up a far safer place! Instead, you kicked them around and beat them like dogs, only to become shocked when they rebelled, just like the dragons and Titans! You never learn! You always repeat the same mistakes!"

Raphael leans back in surprise as Solomon berates him. Even I can't help but be awed by Solomon's anger. His words sound impersonal, spoken as if they are a grudge on behalf of the entire human species. However, his emotions are far more biting, coming from a place of personal pain.

The Archangel of Wisdom's expression darkens. "The demons slew thy wife and family. Dost thou blameth me for their deaths?"

Instantly, rage boils in Solomon's eyes. He jumps to his feet and stabs a finger through the air to point at Raphael. "That's right! I do! If the demons didn't exist, Naamah might still be alive today! I nearly had it, Raphael! I had almost concocted the elixir of immortality! It took me ages, decades of intense research, and I nearly held the flask in my grasp! But because of your failures, your lack of foresight, your lack of intelligence, she perished!! What have you to say in your defense?!"

Not in all the years I've known him have I ever seen Solomon like this. I once asked him about his family, but the look on his face told me everything I needed to know.

He lost someone important to him — Someone who mattered more than life itself.

If anyone but Solomon were to claim they had concocted an Elixir of Immortality, I'd laugh in their faces. Who is Solomon, but the Knowledge-Seeker? His crown contains information about tens of thousands of fantastical machines, devices, and futuristic weapons unlike any I've ever seen.

But why didn't he finish it?

Simple. After his wife's death, what purpose would living forever mean to him? Why would he want to exist in perpetuity without her?

Solomon bites his lip. "What can you say in your defense, Raphael? Nothing. After all, you tricked me! You tricked me!! I gave up on the elixir, thinking that I could once again see Naamah in the afterlife. Instead, I ended up trapped in this godforsaken crown! I couldn't even walk the physical world to enjoy the company of my children and grandchildren! I lost everything, and it was all because of YOU!"

Solomon's extended finger trembles. Tears boil in his eyes, and he finally turns around, unable to look at Raphael.

The Archangel of Wisdom stares stoically at the Knowledge-Seeker. His expression contains a wide variety of mixed emotions and feelings. He opens his mouth to say something, only to close it a moment later.

What can he say? What can he do to alleviate Solomon's anguish?

* * *

To my surprise, Gabriel is the next to speak. The Archangel of Power sighs as he lowers his palms from his chin. "Haah... how unfortunate that Solomon was not born in the era after Michael's sacrifice. If only we hadn't needed thousands of years to complete the Lazarus Tower, we might have saved Naamah's life."

My ears perk up. "Hm? The Lazarus Tower? What's that?"

Solomon wipes his eyes. He paces away from me and stares off into the forest. "Another of Raphael's failed experiments."

"Nay," Raphael murmurs. "'Twas no failure. It had the potential to tip the scales in our favor. Alas, for it eventually led to the demon's greatest increase in power. My greed was always at the heart of our downfall. Thou art correct, Solomon. I am a poor leader and a failure of an Archangel."

Solomon turns around again. This time, his eyes appear red and swollen. Having cried only a few tears, I'm almost surprised at the look of agony etched into his gaze.

"Spare me your self-pity. Give me answers. What in the Creator's name possessed you to repeat the same mistakes over and over? Why create demons, only to treat them in the same way as the dragons and Titans?! How could you not have seen the disaster which would occur?"

"I am not omniscient," Raphael replies. "In the beginning, I knew that my people required a vast amount of spiritual energy to sustain their lives. The best option in my hands was to use Uzziel to create much weaker, but far more plentiful, lower life-forms. They would regenerate small amounts of mana over time and then give it to us. Everything had a far more positive appearance in my eyes following the memory-wipes. However, I did not foresee how my people would treat the demons, and thus, I did not comprehend the anger the demons would feel."

Raphael continues. "I treated the demons neutrally. To me, they were little more than a source of mana for my people. I did not molest them, kick them, or treat them like dirt. However, my brothers and sisters did. I had no way of stopping millions of abusive cases every day and thus overlooked them. I had too much on my mind to worry about what I believed were abuses of insignificant life-forms. After all, compared to the power of the dragons and Titans, the demons never seemed like they would become a threat."

"But they did," I counter. "You underestimated the demons, and you paid the price. What was eating up so much of your time that you couldn't tell your people to treat the demons decently? It seems like you mostly had things made in Heaven. Plenty of food, lots of sunlight..."

Raphael clears his throat. "Rehabilitation, Jason. Rehabilitation is what sucked away my time. I could not change Michael's personality while also placing my focus on Uzziel. Splitting my attention between

both of them would have halved my efforts. Instead, I focused on Uzziel exclusively to prevent her from reverting to her... former ways."

The Archangel's expression turns stormy. "I wish I could have brought such a sense of peace to Michael, as well."

The old man's words light a fire in my imagination. I take a moment to reflect on how Michael's personality pre-wipe and post-wipe were virtually identical, while Uzziel's flipped to the opposite extreme. How much time and effort did Raphael spend turning her from a hardened killer into a soft butterfly?

What if he had done the same for the other angels? *Could* he have managed such a feat?

Solomon punches his palm. "You were the leader of angelkind! No matter what excuses you give me, I won't forgive you. I've suffered for millennia inside this crown. Unable to kill myself, I finally emerged at the end of the Energy Wars to move as many artifacts into the Labyrinth as possible. Do you know the joy I felt when I felt my soul begin to fade? Had I known that exiting my prison would have brought about my end, I would have done so thousands of years earlier!"

Solomon continues. "But, in the end, my so-called death was merely a mirage. I awoke to find myself still trapped in this crown! Not only that, but the demons had gone on to thrive and spread across much of the galaxy! My second most hated enemies, the ones who slew my wives and children... they roam freely while I live in confinement! The very Devils themselves who wantonly slaughtered my family continue to walk the physical plane, and there is little I can do about it."

Solomon turns to look at me, and a sinking realization sets in my gut.

"I cannot exact my revenge," Solomon says, "but you can! Not only can you kill the demons, but you can set me free! I will continue to give you my knowledge, Jason. All you must do is use your Wordsmithing against our shared enemies. Then, once you finish, you can free me from my eternal torment. Kill me and allow my soul to enter the Great Beyond. That is all I want. That is my only desire."

The Knowledge-Seeker falls silent. His intent gaze meets mine, causing a wellspring of emotions to bubble up inside me.

I understand, now. Why has Solomon always been willing to help me? Was it because he was a kind, benevolent man? Was it because of some duty to humanity or a sense of righteousness? Perhaps it was a paternal instinct that guided him to teach a young Hero and show him the ropes?

No.

Solomon is using me.

Sure, his methods don't harm me directly or indirectly. However, what difference does it make?

Solomon's goal is genocide.

Solomon wants me to kill off the entirety of demonkind.

Every last one of them.

But... has he ever asked me what I wanted? Does he even know?

Of course he has, and he does.

Solomon has read my thoughts and lived in my head for years. I have demon friends now. Not many, but a few. One of those friends is Belial, who is an even greater friend to Phoebe than she is to me. I know from what she's told me that she has strong romantic feelings for Phoebe.

What does Solomon want?

He wants Belial dead.

How could I kill her? She is a kind and caring person. Her physical power is nothing compared to her magical healing ability. She is a soft-hearted demoness who wishes to see an end to war and suffering.

I agree with her beliefs. After watching the demons struggle against their angelic oppressors, I, too, understand their origins.

Of course, I am not naive.

Most demons are horrible monsters. They rape and kill humans wantonly, and their cruelty to their kind can occasionally exceed the evil they unleash upon mine.

In that sense, I empathize with Solomon. I don't want demons to kill the people I love. I also don't want to kill demons if it isn't strictly necessary.

Diplomacy. Peace talks. Treaties.

Humans fought and killed each other for thousands and thousands of years. When the world came under the threat of nuclear conflict, eventually, our self-preservation set in. We came up with a system of nuclear deterrence to put an end to the possibility of atomic warfare.

The demons are many things, but they are not brainless. When faced with the choice between extinction and survival, even they should choose the path that will cost them the fewest lives.

But... no!

No!

I won't use that path. Violence begets violence!

As a Wordsmith, perhaps I could create a machine of unimaginable power, something that would threaten the Labyrinth in its entirety. This weapon could possess the military might to destroy planets.

But even if the demons backed down, wouldn't they continue to gaze upon humanity with hate-filled eyes?

Of course!

What use is there in sustaining such a tenuous peace? Why would I want trillions of potential enemies to lie in wait and plot my demise, as well as the rest of humanity?

The answer is, I wouldn't.

Solomon wants to use me. I sympathize with him, but I need not obey.

* * *

Even as the thoughts pass through my mind, Solomon's smile slips away.

"Jason. Don't be unreasonable. Think through my words carefully. Search for the wellspring of wisdom within yourself. The demons slaughtered and captured humanity. I know you want to believe that peace with them is possible, but think about what will happen if you ever tried to use human means of enforcing peace. Do you think you can reason with the demons?"

"I do, and I have," I reply. "I've already convinced a few to join my cause. Guns and swords can only force the flesh to obey, but words can move the heart."

"Yes, you're right," Solomon says, "but you're ignoring the issue of time. How many demons can you convert to your side in a day? One? Ten? A hundred? Do you think that a simple loudspeaker announcement will stir the sympathy in their chests? The demons are beasts, Jason! Animals!"

Solomon's eyes once again ignite with fiery rage.

"They kill for sport! They treat human slaves like garbage! Even if you somehow convinced one hundred percent of all demons to join your side, eventually, their cruel, baser instincts would take over. The demons live for blood and glory. They baked those desires into their genes!"

"I know," I say, keeping my voice neutral. "Demons kill, murder, and ravage humans indiscriminately. However... Paimon set aside his evil ways after I showed him a better path. What use is there in being a Hero if not for me to summon the power of righteousness? Perhaps my thinking seems naive, but I do not believe demons and humans are all that different. You once told me demons influenced the Mayans, and thus, they grew to love the taste of flesh and blood. Perhaps that was the case! Even so, that only shows how much in common we share and how much we can influence one another!"

"Nonsense!" Solomon barks. "Have you learned nothing from my visions?! The demons will stop at nothing to secure a victory! Satan sacrificed hundreds of thousands of demons in a last-ditch effort to defeat the Archdemon and wipe out angelkind! Why can't you see the light, Jason?!"

"I **can** see the light!!"

I leap to my feet and stand my ground against Solomon's fury. With only half a foot separating us, I shout in his face. "You are the blind one! Your family's deaths have clouded your judgment for so long that the only path you'll consider is the path of blood! But what if there's another way, Solomon?! If I try to kill the demons and succeed, I will lose a chance at making them my allies! But if I try to befriend them and seek common ground, I will always have the choice of seeking violence! Once someone dies, there's no going back! Once I decide to start killing, I'll be no better than them! I'll be just as bad as the demons are now!"

"That's the point!" Solomon howls. "The demons have murdered and slaughtered and gutted humans for so long that their only way to move forward is to seek out our destruction! How can you worry about turning into an irredeemable bloodthirsty monster when your enemies have already beaten you to the goal?!"

My teeth grind together. "Because I know myself, Solomon! I know who I am! If I, personally, choose to start killing, I don't see how I'll ever stop!"

Solomon and I stand mere inches from each other. If we weren't in his fake dream realm, I might be able to smell his breath.

His gaze softens ever so slightly.

"What are you implying, Jason?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm *saying* that if I choose to start killing, my logical nature will take over. I believe in the slippery slope. Why should I discriminate between right and wrong? If I'm going to kill all demons, then I'll have to do it equally. And what about humans with a demonic nature? Why not kill them too? Why not kill human murderers and cannibals? What about people who intend to harm others, but don't follow through? What about people who make threats? Where does the killing end, Solomon?"

I hold up my palm.

"This discussion is over. I'm not going to commit genocide, not unless I have no choice. It's not in my nature, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did. Further, I'm not even sure I *can* kill them all. Maybe my Wordsmithing is powerful enough, or perhaps I'll end up dead at some point, and the rest of humanity will be rightly fucked!"

Solomon hesitates.

His eyes shift slightly. He turns to look at Raphael, but the old man says nothing. Instead, the Archangel of Wisdom gazes into the fire and sucks on his pipe, exhaling smoke through his nose without commenting on our dispute.

Solomon turns to me.

"After all the history I've shown you, and after everything we've been through, you choose to reject me?"

"Yes. I will. Not because I hate you, but because I cannot bring myself to commit an act of evil that I know in my heart is wrong."

Solomon frowns.

"Tch. I was wrong about you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"You're not the Hero I thought you were," Solomon continues. "You're weak. All you want is to skip around, pick daisies, and pretend everyone can simply get along. Well, I have news for you, Jason. They can't. The demons are incompatible with humans. They're uncivilized monsters who seek out death and destruction. If we don't kill them, they'll kill us first."

"Yeah?" I counter. "And who are you, but a man who wishes to trade an eye for an eye? If you want to meet the demons on their terms, then that makes you no better than them."

Solomon raises his hand to his chin. He strokes his white beard for a moment and sighs.

"At least I am a realist. You are still a child — a naive young boy whose mind is clouded with fantasies and delusions of grandeur. I'll tell you this; Jason. Someday, the demons will take someone, or something,

from you. When they do... you will understand. You will comprehend my words."

Solomon's expression darkens.

"But, sadly, it will be too late. You will have lost that which you cared about most. You will be the same as me."

I nod.

"Maybe that will happen, and maybe it won't. I never said I wouldn't fight to protect those I love. I simply won't seek out death and destruction for the sake of old grievances."

"*Legitimate* 'old grievances,'" Solomon murmurs. "In the end, you are too young to understand your folly."

"And you are too old a dog to learn a new trick," I remark.

The air between us frosts over. Solomon takes a step back, while I echo his movements.

Both of us stare at one another for several long, agonizing seconds.

This is it. After everything Solomon has shown me, I cannot agree with him and walk the path of violence.

I am a Wordsmith. I will step forth into a future that I can be proud of, or I will die trying.

Solomon waves his hand. "I'm sorry, Raphael, but it seems our discussion is over. Even if I hate you, I must admit it was good to see you again. At least *you* were willing to do anything to save the lives of the angels."

I scowl at Solomon. "Now you're praising him? After first insulting Raphael and saying he was a fool who repeated the mistakes of the past? You're a real piece of work, Solomon. You and Raphael are birds of the same feather. I'll change the future, whether you like it or not."

Solomon smiles. "Aye. You may do as you please. However, we must go our separate ways, Jason Hiro. I wish you the best, but when you fail, don't come crawling back to me for help."

"Don't underestimate me, Solomon. I'll succeed where others have failed."

"You will try."

Solomon waves his hand. A thick veil of darkness falls from the sky and sweeps over the campfire. I glance around at the Archangels as they begin to fade away. Raphael doesn't meet my gaze, but Gabriel waves politely.

"Farewell, Jason."

"Farewell, Gabriel."

I wave back at him a moment before he disappears. Solomon dissolves into nothingness, leaving me to fall through an empty void.

* * *

A minute passes. Two minutes. Five.

I raise an eyebrow as my eternal falling begins to drag.

"Hello? Solomon?"

...No response.

Several minutes pass again. My concern increases as I continue to lay trapped inside a void of blackness.

"Awaken! Wakey! Open! Appear!"

I yell into the void, but nothing happens. My Wordsmithing doesn't work in my dreams.

Right as my concern reaches its apex, the blackness dissolves away, and my eyes bolt open.

I'm awake!

I jerk up in surprise and nearly bang my head on a metal toolbox. It takes me a second to regain my bearings. I sit up and sigh as the familiar surroundings of my spaceship, Esther, surround me.

Everything is exactly as I remember it.

Daisy lies motionless on the bed beside me. Her chest rises and falls as she naps peacefully, dreaming of horses and unicorns and whatever other cute things little kids like to imagine in their dreams.

But, unlike her, my thoughts tumble and twist uncontrollably. Memories from thousands of years of demon and angel warfare appear in my mind unbidden.

Solomon showed me the Ancient Era not to educate me, but to influence my actions. He intended to shift my values toward killing demons. However, my mental fortitude was stronger than he expected, and thus, he failed.

I feel bad for Solomon. He's lived far longer than other humans, and his longevity has only extended his mental agony. What could be worse than living a tortured existence for 100,000 years, suffering under the weight of everything I've lost, while also remembering the faces of people long-dead?

Nothing.

"Solomon," I murmur, keeping my voice low so that I don't wake up Daisy, "let's talk for a minute. I know we have our differences, but they shouldn't mean we can't be friends anymore. We're on the same side; the same team. We're both humans fighting for humanity's sake. Don't you agree?"

...Silence.

Solomon doesn't reply. His astral figure doesn't appear beside me, nor is there the faintest whisper to reveal his presence.

I frown. "Come on, man. Don't give me the silent treatment. You're better than that."

Absentmindedly, I fiddle with the three Archangel rings while I wait for Solomon's response.

Still, he says nothing.

"Hello? Are you still alive in there?"

I reach up to tap my finger on the crown, hoping it will jar him awake.

However, a moment later, my blood turns to ice.

There's nothing on my head.

Solomon's Crown is gone.

Part 173: Hope's Crowning Achievement

Raindrops lightly sprinkle against the top of a Victorian-style mansion — their pitter-pattering echoes through the tin roof, into the attic, and throughout the interior. The darkness of night imposes on the manor, daring its residents to step outside, where countless wild animals lurk in the distance, waiting for their prey to exit.

However, thanks to the state-of-the-art automated defenses mounted atop the building and around its walls at regular intervals, the hungry beasts of Maiura keep their distance, unwilling to risk their lives for the tasty morsels contained within.

Inside the spacious dwelling, two residents press their nude bodies together. They snore soundly, having long since fallen into a deep sleep after a raucous night of passionate lovemaking.

Hope, the owner of the villa, lays on his back. His nostrils flare open and shut, but it is not he who snores audibly. Instead, it is the beautiful, dark-haired woman lying atop his right flank — her face presses against the gap between his shoulder and neck. Every ten seconds, she inhales audibly, snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

Hope doesn't hear a thing. Thanks to several years of living together, he has long since grown used to her night-time noises. Instead, his eyes dance about under his eyelids, jumping to and fro as he dreams of this and that.

"Grrn..."

Hope grunts softly. His brows tighten into a knot. Suddenly, his eyes bolt open.

The Wordsmith doesn't move a muscle. Instead, he stares into the pitch-black darkness of his bedroom, forcing his eyes to adjust.

A drop of sweat slides down Hope's forehead.

What... what the hell was that?

Hope says nothing. He listens to the woman snoring beside him for several seconds, but the unease in his heart doesn't dissipate.

Someone was watching me, just now. I felt their gaze.

In the back of Hope's mind, a mechanical voice whirs to life.

SLEEP MODE DISENGAGED. WARNING! PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR'S MENTAL STATE COMPROMISED. SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY PRESENT.

Hope frowns. *Centurion, run a sweep of the premises. Is there anyone nearby?*

Two seconds pass before Centurion replies.

NEGATIVE. NO INTRUDERS DETECTED ON THE MANOR'S GROUNDS.

Hope's frown deepens. "**Detect**," he whispers.

The Wordsmith's senses expand like a bubble, allowing him to investigate the manor's premises without lifting a finger. Within seconds, his mind's eye travels above the mansion and flicks in every direction to look for intruders. The bloodthirsty beasts of Maiura lurk outside his estate's walls, but he ignores their heat signatures to search for different prey.

There isn't anybody here but Amelia and I. Impossible. I know somebody was watching me. Who was it?!

Hope's spirit returns to his body. The darkness of night swallows him once again, and he shivers slightly.

HEARTBEAT IRREGULAR. STABILIZING NEUROLOGICAL PATHWAYS NOW.

Centurion's nanites react to Hope's agitated mental state. Within seconds, the dopamine in his brain drops by seventy percent, restraining his physical reaction to a fraction of its original intensity.

Hope stares at the ceiling silently. His nanite-enhanced eyes pierce the darkness as easily as if he were standing in daylight, yet his sense of unease doesn't disappear.

Centurion, turn on the lights and set them to 10%.

COMMAND ACCEPTED.

Hope's worries finally disappear as a soft, yellow glow pushes the darkness away. He sighs as the faint light from the overhead bulbs reveals no enemies lurking at the corners of the room.

"Damn..." Hope mutters. "I'm getting too jumpy, these days."

His words barely squeak through his lips. However, the slight glow in the room causes the woman sleeping on his right arm to stir.

"Nnn... hmm?"

The black-haired beauty grunts for a moment before raising her head to blink her bleary eyes.

"Uhn... Jason? What's going on...?"

Hope sighs. "Sorry, Amelia. I didn't mean to wake you."

"No, no... it's fine."

Amelia's hair spills over her eyes, forcing her to lift her hand to brush it aside.

"What's wrong?" Amelia asks. "You don't usually wake up in the middle of the night."

Hope smiles as he meets his lover's gaze. "Oh, it's nothing. I just had this weird feeling someone was watching me. Someone other than you, I mean."

"Oh? A creeper in the dark? I'm scared. Hold me tighter."

Amelia echoes Hope's smile. She pulls herself toward his face, and their lips meet. Both of them fall silent as they embrace each other for a moment or two.

Eventually, Amelia pulls away and licks her lips. "Mmm. That's a nice way to wake up. You should come home more often."

Hope's smile falters. "Ah. Yeah, I should. It's just... Neil always has me going on missions, and then there's all the political stuff I have to deal with..."

Amelia lays down again and rests one arm across Hope's bare chest. She snuggles a little closer and shivers as the cold of the night presses upon them. "I get lonely without you here. I don't have anyone to talk to, and I'm always bored."

Hope winces. "I'm sorry. That isn't fair to you."

"Well, you're the leader of humanity. I'll deal with it."

Hope's smile vanishes, and a frown takes its place. He uses his free arm to lift Amelia's chin so they can look into each other's eyes. "Don't say stuff like that. I don't want you to be lonely, sweetheart. As soon as the situation changes, I'll... I'll take you out there and introduce you to everyone. You won't have to stay in hiding anymore."

Amelia's fiery red irises meet Hope's opposing blue. The two lovers stare at each other for a moment before she pulls away and averts her gaze.

"You always say that. It's been years, Jason. You don't have to lie to me."

"What? I'm not lying. Amelia! Come on..."

Hope tries to reassure the woman in his arms, but she ignores his words.

"I'm a monster. Humanity will never accept me. Not after... not after what I did."

"That wasn't you," Hope says, his voice tinged with anger. "That was Blaarjiim. He isn't around anymore. He can't influence your mind."

Amelia immediately retorts. "Yeah, well, I miss him. He was my good friend."

Hope thinks of a counter, then immediately rejects it. Instead, the Wordsmith falls silent for a few moments.

"Well. Good friend or not, he's gone, now. Not even I can bring him back."

Amelia replies, her voice barely a whisper.

"You resurrected me."

"That was different. You're human. Blaarjiim was a weird... *orb thing*."

Hope and Amelia fall silent once again. However, after a few moments, Amelia pulls away and sits up in bed.

The distance between the two lovers only increases by a couple of feet, but to Hope, it becomes an immense gulf.

"I know you didn't like Blaarjiim," Amelia says, "but when I lost my best friend of ten thousand years, only Blaarjiim was there for me. His ways were wicked, but still, he helped heal the wound on my heart."

With the weight of Amelia lifted off his arm, Hope takes a moment to flex and squeeze, eventually returning sensation to his nerves. "I'm not disparaging your relationship with Blaarjiim. All I'm saying is

that he took you to a dark place, mentally. You can't blame yourself for what you did, all while ignoring his influence."

Amelia nods. "I know."

She sits in silence for a minute, staring ahead into the barely-illuminated darkness. Hope reaches his hand out and strokes her back.

"Hey..." Hope begins. "I, uh, I was thinking of making this vacation a two-weeker. If you want, we could go somewhere, just the two of us. Maybe a trip to the mountains? A visit to the lake?"

Amelia turns her head to look at Hope from the corner of her eye. "Really? I thought you were busy. I can't keep you away from work."

Hope waves away Amelia's concerns. "Nah, nah. It's fine. You mean the world to me. I can't just leave my girl here all by herself. Hell, I was even thinking we could... could..."

Hope tries to finish his sentence, but a lump forms in his throat, preventing the words from getting out.

"W-we could... well, just the two of us... and maybe Neil... we could find a way to, uh..."

Amelia raises an eyebrow. "Uh-huh? We could... what?"

Sweat drips down Hope's face. As he stares at the woman he loves, a strange mixture of emotions enters his mind.

Guilt. Fear. Disgust.

He lowers his eyes and instead opts to stare at his stomach.

"Haah... nevermind. I'm getting ahead of myself, like usual."

Amelia rolls her eyes. "*O-kay*. There you go with that weird, moepy attitude, again."

Hope doesn't retort. Instead, his thoughts become a jumbled mess.

I can't ask her to marry me. Why would I ever think of such a thing? I'm not like Jason. He's a good cop, while I'm the bad cop. I've done too many terrible things to deserve the gift of marriage.

Amelia searches Hope's face for answers, but he doesn't meet her gaze. The two lovers fall into a strange, uncomfortable silence for a few moments, before she eventually shrugs and climbs off the bed.

"Well, since we're awake, I might as well make breakfast. Want some bacon and eggs?"

Hope smiles. "I can Wordsmith some food. Come on; it's cold. Just get back in bed."

"Homemade food tastes better," Amelia replies. She pulls on a pair of sweatpants and a sweater. "How about *you* come out here and help me make a few omelets?"

Hope's smile fades. "Yeah, alright. That sounds like fun. At least you have your sense of taste back. That's another plus, right?"

Amelia rests her hands on her hips. She smacks her lips, and a sardonic expression covers her face. "Oh, I don't know. Human flesh ain't all *that* bad. You should try it sometime."

"Eugh. Forget I said anything."

Hope swings his legs out of bed. As he stands, he speaks to the air.

"Clothes."

Fwoop!

Instantly, a matching tracksuit filled with warm fibers and cushy padding materializes over his body to protect him from the cold.

"Hmm. I could warm it up in here," Hope remarks. "Then we can walk around naked."

"I don't want to splash bacon grease on my bare skin," Amelia says with a playful smile. "Though, the nudity *does* sound tantalizing."

"You're a dirty girl."

Hope walks around the side of the bed. As he nears Amelia, he reaches out and wraps his arms around her.

Both of them settle into a moment of silence as they hug each other, each one thinking of how much they love the other.

Soon, Hope thinks to himself. Soon, I'll have to pop the question. I can't keep going on like we are now. Amelia... she deserves better from me.

As Hope's thoughts spin in his head, a strange sensation swallows his mind.

The hairs stand up on his neck.

Suddenly...

Foomp!

A sound like air rushing into a vacuum echoes throughout the room. Hope's eyes laser toward the bed.

"What the-?!"

His pupils shrink as he stares in disbelief at an object falling out of midair.

Plop.

Amelia turns her head to follow Hope's gaze. Her jaw drops as she, too, spots the plain golden circlet lying on the bed.

"What? Is that... Solomon's Crown?!"

Hope's face turns white as a bedsheet. He quickly pulls Amelia behind himself and stares at the divine artifact with a mixture of terror and dread.

Solomon's Crown lies motionless on the comforter. It produces no magical energy, yet all Hope can do is stare, transfixed, at the object Jason has never let out of his sight once in the last several years.

Jason knows, Hope thinks to himself. His heart races as several realizations come rushing to him all at once. He knows about Amelia. He knows everything! This must be a sign! He's taunting me — telling me that he'll expose everything! What do I do?! Solomon is watching me, right now, scanning my every

move! How can I get out of this? I can't just erase Jason's memories! I'd have to keep doing it over and over again! Oh god, what can I possibly-

"Jason?" Amelia says, startling Hope. She steps out from behind Hope and stares at him with a quizzical expression. "What's the matter? Aren't you happy? You lost the Crown during the battle against the Archdemon, and now, here it is! Aren't you going to put it on?"

Hope's heartbeat intensifies.

Amelia doesn't know about Solomon. She only knows what I told her. I can't let her know about Jason, or my real identity. Damn! The fucking bastard has me against the ropes. How much does Jason know?!

Hundreds of conflicting thoughts collide with one another in Hope's mind, but he quickly forces a nod and a smile.

"Y-yeah. You're right. It's just... this feels a little convenient. I, uh... it could be a demon trap!"

Amelia's confusion disappears. After a moment, her eyes brighten. "Ohh, so that's why you look so shocked. True, it might be a trap. Still, you can use your Wordsmithing, right? Check the Crown for anomalies."

Hope nods quickly; perhaps a little *too* quickly. He stumbles toward the bed and reaches out to touch the Crown. Already, he can practically hear Solomon's cackling laughter in his ears.

We've got you right where we want you, Hope. Stupid little clone. You brought back the dead! You brought back the Black Queen! Don't think we'll let you off easy!

His hands tremble as he finally touches the plain, unadorned golden circlet.

"I-inspect."

More for Amelia's sake than his own, Hope performs a perfunctory analysis of the Crown's magical energy. It comes back negative, as expected.

"...No traps here," Hope whispers. He forces a smile, but Amelia merely cocks her eyebrows.

"Well? Is it the real deal, or what?"

Hope swallows. A deep sense of shame overcomes him as he lifts the artifact to the top of his head.

"...Only one way to find out."

Two seconds later, the world slows to a halt. Amelia freezes in place, her eyebrow permanently raised in a quizzical expression.

Agonizing pain engulfs Hope's mind as the power of Solomon's Crown floods his neuroreceptors with information. However, unlike the last time Hope wore the Crown, when he was still Jason, the agony wears off almost instantly. Centurion mobilizes the nanites inside the Wordsmith's body to suppress Solomon's Magical energy, and within moments, Hope manages to open his eyes again.

Standing before him is the faint apparition of a familiar figure; one Hope has spoken to and met on only a few occasions, when Jason Wordsmithed his spiritual body into existence.

Solomon.

The ancient king stands before Hope with both of his hands clasped behind his back. He smiles, but the expression gives Hope a distinct sense of unease.

"Hello, Hope. It's been a while."

"Solomon."

Hope growls out the ancient king's name. He flicks his eyes to Amelia, only to frown as he spots her immobilized form standing in the same position as before he wore the Crown.

"Don't worry about your... *friend*," Solomon says, placing extra emphasis on the last word. "I've temporarily suspended your perception of time. We're currently using the full power of my Crown's mind-space. I'd like to speak to you about several important matters, so I won't allow any interruptions."

Hope flicks his gaze away from Amelia. "What the hell do you want, Solomon? What does Jason want? Are you here to punish me? To threaten me?!"

His tone turns menacing, but Solomon ignores it. The ancient king frowns as a look of concern passes over his face.

"Ah, no. You misunderstand the reason I've come. Since I now have access to all of your memories, I'm quite aware of everything you've been doing, of late. I'm not here about any of that, though I do find the details of your exploits over the past few years to be quite fascinating."

Hope narrows his eyes. "I... I don't follow. What are you saying?"

"Mmm... how to put this? Let's just say that Jason and I... have... parted ways."

"You two stopped working together?"

"Yes."

Solomon purses his lips. A strange look of annoyance mixes with agitation.

"I've spent six years bonding with Jason. We've grown quite close, and at one point, I thought I knew his personality like the back of my hand. After all, being able to comb through his memories let me see his public and private life in exquisite detail. Unfortunately, it ended up that, in the end, he and I weren't a good match for each other."

Hope knots his eyebrows together in frustration. He sits on the bed quietly, flashes a look at Amelia's immobilized form, then returns his gaze to Solomon. "So... you've come to me? Why?"

Solomon smiles. "That's right. I came because while you might resemble Jason, the evidence I've gathered observing you over the past several years made me realize you are a far better Hero than him. I love your ambition, your drive, and, most importantly... your goals."

Hope nods. "Okay. Spit it out. What do you want, then? If you're done with Jason, and if you're considering working for me--"

"*With* you," Solomon says, a slight hint of annoyance in his voice. "I am nobody's slave. My Crown is my home, and I won't allow someone to use it for the wrong purpose."

Hope nods, but his concern deepens. "Right. If you intend to work *with* me, then what can I offer you that Jason can't?"

Solomon doesn't answer. Instead, he turns his gaze to Amelia and strides over to her side. After a moment of scrutinizing her face, he touches her chin. His aetherial hand passes through, but the gesture has a symbolic feeling to it. "You've been busy over the last few years, haven't you?"

Slowly, Hope pulls away from the bed and rises to his feet. "Don't touch her."

"I wasn't alive when Jason met Amelia," Solomon says, ignoring the anger in Hope's voice. "But I know he possessed strong feelings for her. It seems you inherited those emotions. I must say, I'm impressed. If I had the power to bring back the dead, my life might have taken a very different turn."

"I told you to stay away," Hope says, repeating his previous words. "If you think of hurting Amelia... I won't forgive you. I'll melt your Crown to slag."

Solomon turns around and smiles at Hope with a hint of condescension. "Oh, please. Don't threaten me with a good time. I might just take you up on that offer."

Before Hope can reply, Solomon waves his hand flippantly and brushes aside the Wordsmith's concerns. "I don't care about what you've done, here. You can have your woman and your fun all you like. I'm a little disappointed in the *means* you used to bring her back, but ah, well, if you can't have Phoebe..."

Solomon shrugs.

"...Well, better to bring back your first love, right? Of course, you *do* still have some feelings for Jason's wife, don't you? How did you reconcile those with your love for Amelia?"

Hope scowls. "Goddamn it, Solomon! What the fuck do you want?! Stop pissing me off!"

"Alright, alright," Solomon says, raising both palms. "I think I've touched a nerve. No need to unleash the beast against me. How about I speak more plainly? Would you prefer that?"

Hope snorts hot air. "Yes. I would."

"Good, good! How should I say this? I love your... ethical greyness. Unlike Jason, you don't have that silly moral code guiding you. You do what you think is right, even if you know people won't look kindly upon you in the end. Is that a fair description of your character?"

The Wordsmith bristles. "Maybe a little. What I love about you is your inability to string two sentences together without sounding like an asshole."

"Hah! It's a talent!" Solomon laughs. "Well, my boy, you and I are birds of a feather. Jason tries to appease the demons while rebuilding humanity, but you've been getting down and dirty in the trenches. Look at all the *blood* on your hands. Going by your memories, it seems you've killed... ten thousand demons? I'm rounding down, of course."

"Of course," Hope echoes. "Demons are our enemies. Jason can spew whatever crap he wants about making peace with them, but I've seen what they can do. They're animals. Monsters. They rape, kill, pillage, and plunder without mercy. We're nothing but soul Slurpees to them. I won't make peace with monsters who eat human flesh for fun."

Solomon's smile fades. In its place, a dark haze appears. "Hmph. Well said. If only Jason had a hundredth of your insight, we might have started crushing the demons nonstop. I've seen the power Wordsmithing can unleash. He's too afraid to use it."

"That's right!" Hope yells, a sudden flash of anger erupting in his eyes. "He's a limp-wristed little wuss! He has everything handed to him on a silver platter! He doesn't know a goddamn thing about what it means to lose someone!"

Solomon nods. His expression turns melancholic as he evaluates Hope. "You feel hatred toward Jason. Why don't you just kill him? Using your Wordsmithing, you could easily take over his position as the leader of humanity."

Immediately, Hope shakes his head. "No. Don't even say shit like that. I kill demons and monsters, not humans. There's only one person who kills humans, and that's Jason. I'm better than him."

Solomon frowns. "Hm? Since when did Jason ever kill a human?"

"You don't know?" Hope asks, a smirk materializing on his face. "Thousands die every day as a result of his inaction. Amelia perished because he couldn't take the proper steps to save her. Unlike him, I do whatever it takes to rescue my fellow men, women, and children from the demons. If someone dies on my watch, it's because I failed to move quickly, not because I didn't try in the first place."

Solomon returns his gaze to Amelia. "Mmm. You and Jason were one and the same until the moment he created you. Don't you share some culpability regarding this woman's death?"

"That's the thing!" Hope says, raising his voice again. "I might share Jason's memories up to the moment of my creation, but I'm not him! He's not me! If you had put both of us on that doomed planet, I would have saved Amelia! Jason would have let her die, just like he did the first time."

Solomon presses Hope for an answer. "How would you save her if even he couldn't?"

"There were many possibilities," Hope says. "However, the best thing he could have done would be to destroy Blaarjiim's orb. Without Blaarjiim corrupting her, Amelia wouldn't have become a world devourer."

Solomon falls silent for a moment.

"You don't know that."

"I do!" Hope says, gesturing to Amelia. "The proof is right before you."

Solomon snorts. "Amelia died. This woman is not the same person. She's a copy. A facsimile. She possesses none of Amelia's powers. You can't use her as a baseline example."

"I can, and I will," Hope says, his voice defiant. "What do you know, anyway? You might be the Knowledge-Seeker, but you don't know everything about the universe. My grasp on Wordsmithing greatly surpasses yours."

"I've looked into all your memories," Solomon counters. "I know plenty more than you'd like. That's not the point. I know about the Great Beyond. Souls can't simply come back once they've passed through it."

"Of course not," Hope replies. "But I'm a Wordsmith. I'm not some simple demon Emperor."

Solomon rolls his eyes. "Delude yourself, and delude everyone else, but don't think you can fool me. As a clone of Jason, you believe yourself to be your own person, separate from him. How can you not see the similarities between your situation and cloning Amelia after she died?"

"It's not the same!" Hope snarls. "I brought her back! I didn't copy her!"

Once again, Solomon falls silent.

This time, when he replies, he keeps his voice low.

"No. You didn't. Jason cloned himself, but that was only possible because of my Crown. You never possessed it. You couldn't replicate his feat. You had to use an alternate method."

Hope's eye twitches. "Yeah? So what? I did what I thought was right. Don't judge me."

"I'm not, and I won't," Solomon says. He finally steps away from Amelia and walks over to Hope. "As I said, I don't care about any of that. All I want is for you to fulfill my request. If you can do that, I'll grant you all of my power."

Solomon rests his hand on Hope's shoulder, surprising the Wordsmith when he feels the weight of the ancient king's hand.

"Okay. What is your request?"

Solomon closes his eyes.

"Promise me that you will fight with all your might to exterminate the demons. After that, I want you to destroy my Crown and send my soul to the Great Beyond."

Unlike before, Solomon doesn't quip, nor lace his words with snarky undertones. Instead, his expression becomes stern as he looks Hope in the eye.

"I'm tired of living for all eternity, trapped within this Crown. I want to die, but I can't end my life without seeing the ones who killed my family pay for their crimes. Only you can satisfy my revenge."

Solomon's chin quivers. He forces himself to swallow his emotions, but Hope doesn't miss the moment of weakness.

Hope nods. "I see. If that's what you want, I don't see why we can't work together. I'm no friend of demonkind. I hate them all."

"As do I," Solomon murmurs. "Jason and Phoebe play house with that succubus, Belial, all while ignoring her position as the Second Emperor of demonkind. That alone should tell you how compromised Jason has become."

"Oh yes, I know," Hope says. "Neil and I both hate her. There's no way we can trust a damned shapeshifting demon. She could be anyone, anywhere, corrupting our troops without us knowing."

"Exactly," Solomon says. A smile crosses his face. "Especially when you know what I do about her past. About what she *did* for her husband."

"Satan?"

"That very same Devil," Solomon nods.

The ancient king pulls away from Hope. He takes a few steps back and leans against the wall nonchalantly.

"I took some time to show Jason the ancient history of demons and angels. Sadly, he took away the wrong lesson from my visions, which is why I had to depart. However, I don't think you'll make the same *mistake*. After all, you're better than Jason. Aren't you?"

Hope nods. "Damn right, I am."

"Good. I'd like to take you on a little trip 100,000 years into the past. After that, I have a few friends you need to meet. I was going to introduce Jason to them, but I think you'll like them more."

"Who are they?"

"You'll see."

Solomon raises his hands and weaves a series of intricate magic symbols.

"This won't take long."

Hope sighs. "It had better not. I was looking forward to two weeks off with Amelia."

Solomon spreads his arms and grins. "You won't regret this. We're going to have a fabulous relationship, Hope. You kill demons, and I help you kill them faster. It's a win-win."

The world begins to shift around Hope. Within seconds, he finds himself in the body of an angel woman, during the Ancient Era.

"Don't act like I enjoy genocide. I only kill out of necessity. If there was a better way, I would do it."

Solomon's body fades away, leaving Hope to experience a vision of the past.

"Whatever helps you sleep better, my boy."

AUTHOR NOTE!

Welcome to chapter 3 of Cryopod Refresh! From this point on, the story is going to intensify dramatically! Since you have now completed the Ancient Era, I highly recommend checking out my blog post regarding the entirety of Chapter 2. I had a bunch of stuff I wanted to address, and this 8,000-word post was the best way for me to do it.

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/klok-blogs-era-28683765>

Thanks for reading!

Part 174: Superhuman

"Daisy. Come on; it's time to wake up."

I poke my daughter's cheek several times, but it takes a full minute for her to yawn and open her eyes.

"Nnn! Where are we, daddy?"

Daisy sits up in bed and stretches. When she finally meets my gaze, I can't help but notice a strange look in her eyes.

"We're aboard our spaceship: Esther. Are you okay? You look sick."

I press my hand against her forehead, but her temperature seems fine. My daughter wraps her arms around her legs and curls into a ball.

"...I had a bad dream."

"A bad dream? Aww, sweetie. I'm sorry about that. Wanna talk about it?"

Daisy nods slowly. Her eyes travel to the window, where the world of Tarus II gradually comes into view as our spaceship descends to the surface.

"I don't know. There were these people in... in white clothes... and they had big bird-wings... and they were fighting a bunch of people who looked like Aunt Sammy..."

Daisy concentrates harder to remember her dream.

"And... and there were big booms! Lots of booms! And a big scary monster, he was like *this* big! He was shooting laser beams out of his mouth, and he kept screaming and yelling... he scared me the most."

Daisy stretches out her arms to demonstrate the size of the 'monster' in her dream, but immediately, I know what monster she means.

What the hell did Solomon do? Why did he show my daughter images of the Ancient Era? Christ! My daughter's only six, and that asshole went and transmitted scenes of death and despair into her brain. Hell, now I have to ask how he did it since, as far as I know, he can't telepathically link to someone not wearing his Crown.

More importantly, how in the hell did he leave? Did he jump off my head and roll away?

A sudden thought occurs to me.

Solomon may have taken over my mind and used my Wordsmithing.

He's never done it before, but as the knowledge seeker with a crown of infinite wisdom, perhaps such a feat isn't all *that* farfetched.

And, if so, I have to wonder where he went.

"Locate."

Daisy watches as I wordsmith to try and find Solomon's Crown, but my search comes back negative. I can't use 'Locate' on dead people or inanimate objects, and Solomon's Crown counts for at least one of

those things. I'm shit out of luck.

"Daddy...?"

"Sorry, sweetie," I say, turning my attention back to Daisy. "I'm sorry you had a nightmare. Why don't we get some ice cream once we land? Mommy can read you a story later."

Daisy lowers her eyes. "It didn't feel like a dream..."

"Sometimes dreams can feel more tangible than real life," I say, as I pat my daughter's back. "Come on. Why don't you help daddy fly the spaceship?"

"Okay..."

Daisy slides off the bed and follows me to the cockpit, but her movements seem duller and less energetic than usual. A sense of gloom follows her everywhere she walks, which only further angers me at Solomon's jackassery.

He showed me the Ancient Era! I didn't ask for it. Then he went and showed Daisy too?! Fucking asshole! God, I can't believe I trusted him. I yearn for the time when the Crown was just a tool I used to increase my cognitive power, back before Solomon woke up. The more I think about him, the angrier I become.

Daisy and I plop down in the pilot and co-pilot seats. I try to make conversation, but she merely pokes at the buttons, barely listening to my words. As the ship descends, she sighs and leans back in the chair to stare up at the clouds in the sky.

"Daddy... who were the people with the wings?"

I frown. "Angels, sweetie. Those were angels."

"Does aunt Sammy hurt angels?"

"Of course not."

Daisy crosses her arms. The ship shudders to a stop atop a landing platform on a building's roof across from our house. Even with the sight of 'home' before her, Daisy's expression barely changes. She remains distant and unfocused, as if contemplating more than her childish mind can handle.

"Where are the angels? Are they gone?"

"Yeah. Gone for good."

"That's not dope at all."

Daisy climbs out of the chair and exits the cockpit, leaving me to scratch my head.

Dope? Jeez. I need to stop running my mouth in front of her. She's picking up my worst habits.

I follow my daughter to the exit door. Soon, it opens up and lowers a platform to the rooftop below, allowing us to exit the ship.

A group of men and women arrive on the roof, nod at me, and head over to start cleaning and inspecting my ship. I could do it myself, but I figure it can't hurt to have someone else give Esther a once-

over. Among the group are a pair of goblins, both of whom are the top experts in mechanical engineering on Tarus II.

Daisy and I head to the rooftop elevator. I could teleport us to the ground floor, but Phoebe always worries and frets about me popping Daisy into a wall or a pillar, so I'd prefer not to take any chances.

Once inside, I rub Daisy's head playfully. "Hey, how about we go over and say 'hi' to your friends from school? Like that one Felaris kid... uh... what was his name again..."

"Likil," Daisy mumbles. "His name is Likil..."

"Right, yeah! You like hanging out with Likil, right? Maybe he and his sister will be home. You guys can, I dunno, chase a ball of yarn or something."

Daisy shakes her head. "I don't wanna."

"Oh. Alright."

My daughter's somber mood is way beyond my capability to handle. No matter what I try, I can't get through to her. I've never been good with kids, which is why I often rely on Phoebe for this stuff. But when I think about it, it makes no sense for Phoebe to be any better with kids than me. She spent 100,000 years living under the control of Bahamut, so I can't see how she cultivated any parental instincts.

Maybe I'm worse on average with kids than other guys. That might be it. I didn't have a mother or a father growing up, so I never learned any parenting techniques. Phoebe at least lived in a dual-parent family, even if she barely remembers them.

Damn. Come to think of it; I ought to use my Wordsmithing to refresh Phoebe's memories sometime. I bet she'd be thrilled to have images of her parents and friends fresh in her mind!

...Or not. They're long dead. Maybe bringing them back would only make the pain of their loss fresh and raw in her mind.

Solomon once told me that my power has no limit to its applications. He swore I could repair the universe with it and mend the old rifts and rivalries. That might be true, but when it comes to the small day-to-day aspects of my life, I can't help but feel as though wordsmithing creates more problems than it solves.

Perhaps if I was more willing to ignore personal ethics, I could fix my problems, but I don't like that idea at all. Erasing memories, changing people's opinions, and rewriting reality to make it suit my fancy isn't something I ever want to do.

* * *

The elevator arrives at the bottom. By the time we reach the lobby of the Tarus II command center, where I perform most of my day to day duties, there are already several people waiting for us.

"Jason, we need you to authorize and notarize these forms."

"Commander, it would be great if you could head over to the western outskirts in the next few days and speak with the Dilithium miner strike. We're not able to build up our reserves without them."

"Sir! Your wife called and wanted to know what time you would be home for dinner!"

I reach down and take Daisy's hand while smiling and nodding politely at each of the people pestering me.

"Yeah, uh-huh. I'll be right there, Janis. I'm heading home right now. Mark! Good to see you. Yeah, I'll just- okay. Sure, I'll get right on that."

Sweat builds up on my forehead as the various demi-humans and monsters bombard me with requests and questions. I fend them off as best as I can, but without Solomon's Crown, my attention span feels like it's a tenth of its usual self. Damn! I didn't realize my concentration levels would drop so rapidly without him around.

I push through and eventually leave the crowd of people behind. Daisy bobbles along beside me and pulls her hand away.

"Sorry, sweetie. People never stop pestering daddy."

"Mhm."

Daisy barely says anything and instead opts to grunt in response.

Once we step through the front doors and spot our gigantic multi-story palace across the street, Daisy's eyes brighten.

"Mommy! I see mommy!"

I raise an eyebrow as my gaze sweeps toward the entrance. I don't see Phoebe at all.

A moment later, the door opens, causing my confusion to double as both Phoebe and Samantha stride out of our house. Phoebe chats amiably with the Second Emperor, then spots us and waves. How did Daisy see them before me?

Phoebe waves at us. "Hey, Sammy! You were right. They're back!"

Samantha smirks. "Mhm. I told you I saw Esther."

Daisy immediately pulls away from me and dashes across the street. "Mommy! We're back!"

HONK! HONK!

My heart stops.

In the blink of an eye, I jerk my head to the left. A bus barrels down the street toward Daisy and slams on its brakes. The kobold driver inside spots my daughter and gasps as he realizes he can't stop in time.

"Daisy!" I yell, pinned on the spot. Before I can make a move, a blur of movement rushes toward my little girl. Phoebe jumps in front of the bus and spreads her body out as wide as possible.

CRASH!!

Metal and glass explode like a bomb. The bus comes to an instant stop as it strikes the mass of flesh and bone protecting my daughter. Phoebe stands, rooted on the spot, as the bus crumples around her.

A moment later, time resumes.

I dash over and gasp at the blood covering Phoebe's body. She pulls away from the front of the bus and winces, only to fall on her ass.

"Mommy? Mommy!" Daisy cries. "Are you okay?"

Phoebe grits her teeth. Despite a fifteen-ton vehicle crashing against her, her injuries are mostly superficial. "Ahhn... fuck, shit..."

"Heal," I say, aiming my Wordsmithing at her. A few seconds later, the bloodied scratches covering Phoebe's body vanish, returning her to her peak physical form.

"Devils! Phoebe, are you alright?" Samantha asks. The succubus appears on Phoebe's right, opposite me. She quickly scrutinizes Phoebe's body, then breathes a sigh of relief. "I should have paid more attention! Why did you jump out like that? Next time, throw me in the path! You could have died!"

Phoebe turns and hugs Daisy. "No, I'm fine. Jason Wordsmithed my body to become much stronger and more durable. I didn't have time to think, and just did what I had to."

"We're lucky you were paying attention," I say, with a deep sigh. "My daughter and my wife's lives just flashed before my eyes. Goddamn, what a day."

Behind me, the bus door opens. A bloodied kobold stumbles out of it and falls to the ground. "M-Mish Hiro! Me shorry! I didn't mean tuh hit yuh!!"

All the passengers on the bus stumble to the front to see whatever the bus struck. A few of them suffered minor scrapes and bruises, but for the most part, nobody appears critically injured.

"Oy! That Miss Hiro!" A goblin gasps. "She okay? She hurt?! Stupid Glim-Glim nearly killed her!"

"Shrakh," the Kobold's mate cries. "We no want lose Miss Hiro! Me heart shatter in pieces!"

Phoebe rises to her feet and embraces Daisy. "I'm fine, everyone — no need to worry. Daisy, are you okay? Are you hurt, anywhere?"

Tears well up in Daisy's eyes. "I'm sorry, mommy! I didn't mean to run out like that! Uwaaah! It's all my fault mommy got hurt..."

My heart continues to pound at a thousand beats per minute, but with the shock wearing off, my adrenaline eventually drops to a more sustainable level.

Belial leans down to pat Daisy's head, while I turn my attention to the injured people on the bus. **"Heal. Heal. Heal."**

One by one, I regenerate each human and non-human to pristine physical condition. However, a problem occurs when I try to fix the bus.

"Repair."

...Nothing happens.

While Belial and Phoebe comfort Daisy and try to calm her down, my eyes laser in on the damaged bus and my inability to fix it.

Why can't I do something that would have been the simplest thing in the world yesterday?

Because I no longer have the Crown.

Solomon's Crown accomplished many tasks for me. Not only did it accelerate my thoughts and reflexes, but it also gave me a vast library of knowledge regarding devices and concepts from the past and future. I could craft any device by constructing it in my mind and speaking a word out loud.

But now... without the Crown... my Wordsmithing loses more than half of its power.

Losing the Crown isn't a tenth as important to me as protecting Daisy or Phoebe, but if I don't have it, I lose a lot of my power to shield humanity from the horrors lurking within the Labyrinth.

One reason the demons haven't attacked yet is that I haven't given them an opening. We surely have a few spies living on Tarus II, but it's unlikely they've infiltrated our mightiest defenses. I've spent the last five years turning this planet into an impregnable fortress, but I never feel that I've added enough weapons to protect the people I love.

That's the thing about me. I don't want to kill if I don't have to... but if someone attacks my home, I won't hesitate to fight back. At least, I pray I won't. If I'm lucky, I'll never have to make that choice.

Phoebe wraps her arms around Daisy and rises to a standing position. She cradles our daughter in her arms and smiles at me. "I'm glad you're back, Jason. Sorry for all the, um, distractions."

"You got hit by a truck," I say while trying to act nonchalant. "If anyone needs to apologize, it's me. I should have paid more attention while walking with Daisy."

Samantha crosses her arms. "I'm a Demon Emperor. If my brain hadn't been running on molasses, I'd have beaten Phoebe to the bus by a mile!"

The bus driver wrings his hands together. "Plenty of blame to go around, all of it mine! Sho shorry, sho shorry! I never meant to hit Mish Hiro! Eternally shorry! Life debt! Life debt!!"

The kobold flings himself to the ground and prostrates before Phoebe, begging her for forgiveness. Several of the bus's riders nod along and cross their arms angrily at him.

"Stupid Glim-Glim! He shouldn't drive anymore! We can't trust someone like him!"

I walk over to defuse the situation. "Now, now. Don't blame the poor guy. My daughter ran out into the road. It was her fault, not Glim-Glim's. Nobody could have reacted in time. Hell, Glim-Glim hit those brakes instantly. If he'd had a little more stopping room, he would have saved the day. I think he's an excellent bus driver! As for Phoebe, I healed her with my Wordsmithing. She isn't injured, not even a little bit."

Phoebe glances in my direction. "Jason is right. I'm fine, everyone. Don't worry! It was just a little scare, in the end."

The ten bus passengers grumble among themselves for a moment before nodding and accepting our words. "Hmph, yeah, alright, then. As long as you okay, Miss Hiro! We leave Glim-Glim alone!"

The assortment of monsters and humans turn to get back on the bus, only to pause and examine the front.

"Err, this thing still work? It look real beat-up."

I shake my head. "Sorry, guys. That bus is ruined. You'll have to have Ogie take a look at it."

Phoebe and Samantha walk over to my right. My wife continues to hold Daisy, who chokes back several sobs, but quickly regains her senses. "Jason? Can't you repair Glim-Glim's bus?"

I shake my head. "Not right now. We can talk about it once we're inside."

Phoebe raises her eyes to the top of my head. For the first time, she notices my missing Crown. "Oh. I see."

Samantha echoes her. "Did something happen?"

"We'll talk about it inside," I repeat. With a heavy heart, I wave goodbye to Glim-Glim, who shoots me a satisfied smile. I saved his reputation, and probably his butt, from a smackdown.

Without another word, my wife and I, along with Samantha and Daisy, all head toward our house.

We arrive in Daisy's room. Samantha takes Daisy from Phoebe and heads off to the corner to console her. Within a minute, she has Daisy giggling thanks to her infamous 'transformation game,' where she turns into a variety of cute and fluffy creatures, most of which I've never seen.

I take a few minutes to explain the situation to Phoebe, who merely nods along and grunts.

"Mm. Mm, yeah. Wow. *Solomon* did that? That seems a little out of character, don't you think?"

I shake my head. "Maybe not. He's one of the smartest beings in existence. He might have been manipulating me ever since his first appearance."

"Or... maybe something changed," Phoebe says slowly. "What happened on your trip to Tarus III?"

"Solomon showed me images of the ancient past. Specifically, the era when the angels and demons fought. I think he wanted me to, err... kill all the demons. Including Samantha."

Phoebe narrows her eyes. "Are you certain that was his intent?"

"I'm ninety percent sure."

"Wow. You think you know a guy..."

Phoebe trails off and gazes over at Samantha. Samantha turns herself into a five-foot-tall bunny rabbit, causing Daisy to squeal with glee.

"There's more," I add. "I think, somehow, Solomon transmitted all the images of the Ancient Era to Daisy. She was way too distant on the way back. Only now, with Samantha distracting her, is Daisy acting like her usual self. Fuck. I can't believe Solomon's nerve! I never thought he'd show my little girl such horrible, horrible images."

"How bad were they?" Phoebe asks. "You're not looking so good yourself."

I start to reply, only to pause for a moment.

Samantha isn't ten feet away. She might be playing with Daisy, but I don't want her to know what I've seen. It's not that I don't trust her, though I don't. Rather, it's that I don't know if I can, or should. Her

demon name is Belial, and she was once Satan's spouse. Phoebe and I have known this since shortly after meeting her... but things are different now, for me at least.

I saw what Belial did. She transformed and took out Uriel, allowing the Archangel of Protection to end up devoured by demons. She didn't kill Uriel herself, but her actions directly resulted in the Archangel's death.

She's a shapeshifter. An infiltrator. How can I believe anything she says? She might be telling the truth about hating the violence of demonkind, but actions speak louder than words. She beat the shit out of Beelzebub, twice, and she unleashed plenty of violence during the War in Heaven.

I don't know what to say or think about her. For now, it's best I keep my mouth shut.

"Pretty bad," I reply, answering Phoebe's question. "Lots of gore. I mostly got a general sense of the emotions running wild during those ancient times, as well as a bunch of disjointed images of gory, over-the-top battles. I don't remember much specifically."

I don't want to lie to Phoebe about what I saw, but with Samantha mere feet away, I can't take any chances.

Phoebe nods. "Well, Daisy's our little girl, and we want her to have a wonderful life. However, she will have to learn about the violence enveloping us eventually. Maybe Solomon intended to show her the dangers lurking in the Labyrinth."

"Solomon never liked Daisy," I reply. "He always thought she was a nuisance. Maybe he wanted to scare her. Like the *bastard* he is."

"You don't know that..." Phoebe mutters. "Maybe Solomon is testing you. Maybe he's-"

"He's not," I say, cutting her off. "He left me after I rejected his revenge fantasy. I don't want to hear another word spoken in his defense. Right now, I have more pressing matters to worry about."

Phoebe sighs. Her eyes tell me she has more questions, but still, she acquiesces to my request. "Fine. What's the matter, now?"

"I tried to repair that bus outside, but failed. Without the Crown, I can't envision complex objects. I don't know what I'm going to do. Tarus II needs me. If any spies find out I've lost the Crown, the demons might attack."

Phoebe frowns. "They haven't made any moves for the last five years. Do you think it's because they're afraid of you?"

"Maybe, maybe not. All I know is that the demons haven't rested on their laurels. They won't sit idly while their food supply dries up."

"So what can we do? Go to war?"

I pause for a moment to think.

Solomon would love nothing more than for humanity to battle the demons. He believes that with his mind and the power of Wordsmithing, we could annihilate the demons with ease.

Maybe he's right.

I used my power against Satan and killed him several times. Even so, the battle exhausted me to my limits. Other than him, I've never killed anyone, demon or otherwise.

I don't want to fight. If I have to, I will... but given a choice; it would be my last option.

Therefore, initiating a war proactively to get the first strike would be my least favorite option.

So what if I go the opposite direction?

What if I place an offer of peace on the table? What if I go to the demons to negotiate directly?

A proactive declaration of peaceful intent!

The demons aren't 'good guys,' but they aren't evil, either. They have the same self-preservation instincts as humans. If I demonstrate the might of my people, perhaps they will realize a protracted war will do nothing more than cause immense losses on their side and ours.

Besides, demons and monsters don't even NEED humans! Why do they want our souls? For the sake of evolution! They're immortal with or without us, so peace wouldn't hurt them, beyond losing their ability to grow.

Maybe there's another option available for that one goal, then. Maybe they can evolve without human souls!

Solomon desires war, but I want the opposite. I will find a solution, no matter what it takes.

"No," I say, returning my attention to Phoebe. "I won't do something so rash and stupid as starting a war. I have no guarantee humanity will survive it, let alone win. And what about the demi-humans and monsters living among us, along with the minority of disaffected demons and imps? They'll end up as collateral damage, to say nothing of the conflict in their hearts about fighting their former brothers and sisters. No, I won't hurt our citizens like that."

I take a look out the window, at the bright, sunny world of Tarus II.

"I'm going to negotiate with Ose. She's the new leader of demonkind. Maybe I can reason with her. Maybe I can appeal to her emotions, or find some way to strike a balance between humanity and demonkind. I won't know until I try."

Phoebe frowns. "Ose. I've heard her name before. I think Sammy mentioned her once."

"Yeah? Maybe Samantha knows her. After all, she's the Second Emperor."

Daisy giggles loudly, catching my attention. I blink twice to spot Samantha, still in her giant, rabbit body, staring at me as she plays with my daughter.

The Second Emperor of demonkind gazes at me with her adorable bunny face and slowly shakes her head.

Don't do it, her movements say. You're making a big mistake.

When I look into her eyes, my blood pressure rises.

Belial knows something. I never bothered to ask her about Ose, but maybe that was a mistake.

It's time for answers.

Part 175: The Quest for Peace

"Ose?" Samantha asks, frowning. "Why do you want to learn about her?"

"She's the current leader of demonkind," I reply. "I need to know more about her before I make a decision."

Samantha sits on Daisy's bed, one covered with a bright pink comforter littered with pictures of dogs, cats, and other cute animals. Behind her, Daisy sits quietly and reads a book, wholly absorbed in its contents.

The succubus rests her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand. She stares at me for a moment before replying. "A decision about what?"

"I'm debating going to Ose and striking a deal with her. I want to cease all hostility between humans and demons. I don't know anything about her, but maybe if we sit down and talk, she'll be more receptive to changes than Diablo."

While I lightly lean back against the wall and cross my arms, Phoebe stands next to me and loops her arm through mine. She rests her head against my shoulder and nods. "Peace between demons and humans is for the best, Sam. If we're lucky, Jason might be able to find a way to work something out with Ose."

Samantha sighs. "Haah... I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but whatever plan is rolling around in your head, forget it. It's doomed to fail."

The succubus flops backward and places both hands behind her head. Her tail flicks around lazily while her legs hang off the bed. "If anything, Diablo was your best bet. He was a reasonable guy, unlike Ose. She's nothing but a cold-hearted monster, devoid of all emotion."

I frown. "Tell me more."

"Ose is ancient, compared to most demons," Belial replies. "She isn't as old as me, but she lived during the Energy Wars. She is unique among my people, in that she is exceptionally talented with technology."

I nod slowly. "Right... what about it?"

"Demons suffer from technophobia," Phoebe says, replying before Samantha can say anything. "None of them have the slightest clue how human gizmos and gadgets work. Show them the simplest device, and they'll get a migraine from confusion."

Samantha blinks. "Mhm. I don't even understand most of the things you've made for this city, Jason, and I lived among humans more than most other demons. That's why Ose is special."

The Second Emperor of Demonkind continues to stare fixedly at the ceiling. "Ever since the humans tortured her brother to death, Ose has been obsessed with learning all she can about your weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The reason humans ended up trapped for 100,000 years was due to her familiarity with all

manner of human quirks. She studied psychology at numerous human universities and used that information to devise systems that would keep humans in check physically and mentally."

Belial shakes her head. "Don't even bother trying to convince Ose to sign a peace treaty. You haven't a prayer of success. Her hatred of humans permeates her very being, from her head to her toes. If you appear before her, she might attack you on the spot for daring to speak. She cuts out the tongues of human slaves if they whisper even a single word of complaint."

Phoebe's expression turns grim. My wife shivers at Belial's words. "So sinister. If Ose is leading demonkind, then why haven't they attacked us for the last six years? It doesn't sound like she would be content to let us grow and flourish."

"No. She wouldn't."

Belial shakes her head.

"When Uriel appeared, she unleashed all of her power and crippled the might of demonkind. She killed several Barons and caused us severe losses. Bael, Mephisto, and Ose might be powerful, but they wouldn't dare charge in and attack humanity recklessly, especially with Jason here. Heroes are threats no demon would dare to provoke, especially after fighting an Archangel and Demon Duke fusion."

I narrow my eyes. "It's been six years since Uriel's appearance. Hasn't demonkind recovered from their losses?"

"I don't know," Belial says, shrugging. She rolls onto her side and props her head up with her palm. "But if I had to make a guess... I would assume Ose is preparing a massive offensive. You've not only liberated countless human colonies from the demons but also cut off my people's supply of souls. If things continue progressing, Ose will lose influence among the demon council. She's probably preparing for an invasion as we speak."

"An invasion?!" Phoebe gasps. "Why didn't you say anything? If Ose is going to attack us, we can't sit around and wait for our deaths!"

Belial raises an eyebrow. "Until today, I thought you guys knew. Isn't that why Jason has been building up humanity? To defend against the demons?"

My face flushes red. "Err, not exactly. I built many automated defenses to protect Tarus II, but I never knew anything about Ose's personality and disposition as a leader. My only goal was to defend the planet in case of unforeseen events. If the entirety of Hell comes pounding on our doors, I don't know how long we'll last..."

Phoebe pulls away from me. "We should be fine. I mean, those weapons you built atop Mount Gurren should obliterate any attacking army with ease, right?"

Despite her confident tone, Phoebe's phrasing betrays her doubt. She meets my gaze with a hint of worry, making me nod along with her words.

"Yeah. We *should* be fine. Nevertheless, it can't hurt to prepare a little more."

I turn my gaze to Belial. "You say Ose can't be reasoned with, but do you know that for sure? I have to try diplomacy before initiating a war. I can't just take your word on her stubbornness."

Belial wraps a few strands of hair around her finger. "Feel free to try, but don't say I didn't warn you. Ose is vicious. Now that she has the power of an Emperor, you ought to tread very lightly around her. Besides! Ose lives in Hell Harbor. How are you going to request an audience with her when an anti-Teleportation Matrice protects the whole planet?"

Phoebe smirks. "Oh, come on, Sam. This is Jason we're talking about. He's a Wordsmith. He doesn't need to *request an audience*, like some beggar kneeling before a king. He can simply... pop in and say hello!"

My heart jolts. "What?! That's just asking for an ass-kicking! Do you want ten thousand demons to jump me all at the same time?"

Belial rolls her eyes. "I'm sure you'll be fine, what with your 'invincible armor' and 'nano-books.'"

"Come on, ladies, let's not screw around with my life," I say, shooting a suspicious glance at both girls. "I'm far from invincible, and I'd like to make it to age thirty."

Phoebe wanders away from me and plops down beside Daisy. She glances at our daughter's book for a few moments, but Daisy doesn't acknowledge her mother's presence at all.

"I don't know what you should do," Phoebe says to me, "but I doubt Sammy is understating the impossibilities. Ose doesn't seem like a reasonable person. If you pay her a visit, you might set her off."

"If I *don't*, she's likely to launch an invasion anyway," I retort. "I have Wordsmithing. Maybe I can influence her thoughts somehow. You know... make her sign a peace treaty."

Belial's expression darkens. She sits up and looks at me with a solemn gesture. "Don't even think about it. Ose's mental resilience is incredible. Hope tried to influence the mind of a Demon Lord a few years ago. I had to clean up the bodies that barbarous rat left in his wake when he finally roused himself from his stupor. If you try to alter Ose's thoughts, you might get a few minutes of subservience out of her before she regains her consciousness and tears you to pieces."

"I only need a few minutes," I reply. "If I can get Ose to sign a Soul Contract, she won't be able to launch an invasion. It'll be impossible for her to go against the terms of the treaty."

Belial blinks in surprise. "A... a Soul Contract? But... how do you know about those? Only-"

"Satan used them," I say, finishing her sentence for her. "Yeah. Solomon showed me a bunch of demon and angel history. I know about Satan's powers."

Belial bites her lip. She lowers her eyes and leans forward to stare at the floor contemplatively for a moment.

"I don't know... I never liked Satan's power. It was too manipulative for my tastes. You shouldn't dabble with matters involving souls if you can avoid it."

"What choice do I have? If Ose won't accept a treaty willingly, then that means war is inevitable! I'd rather manipulate one demoness than have millions and billions of lives perish because I couldn't bend

my morals even a smidge."

"I'm not worried about your morality," Belial says, a warning tone in her voice. "Soul manipulation is dangerous. It consumed Satan and countless others. It's an easy path to power and obtaining what you want, but in the end, it always comes back to bite you."

"So I've heard."

I nod along to Belial's words. Having had a former Hero and three Archangels speak of the dangers of Soul Manipulation, hearing a Demon Emperor speak similar words certainly unnerves me. After all, it seems that no matter who brings up Soul Manipulation, they always have nothing but bad things to say about it.

Interrupting my thoughts, Daisy looks up from her book.

"I don't want to die."

"Huh?"

I glance at Daisy and stare, slack-jawed.

"No, no, sweetheart! You're not going to die. Don't even think like that. Daddy is more than capable of stopping the big, bad demons."

Samantha jerks her head up. "Hey! We're not all bad, you know."

I shrug. "An exception doesn't prove the rule."

Her annoyance dissipates. "Mmm. True."

* * *

The three of us talk for a while, but no matter how we debate, we don't come to a definite conclusion.

"Alright," I say, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "I won't use a Soul Contract. I've never done one before, anyway. I might screw it up. I'll just... try and convince Ose to look at things from a different point of view."

"After everything I've said, you still intend to have a friendly chat with that white-haired witch?" Belial asks, awe in her voice. "Jason! She'll rip you to pieces! I'm not kidding; Ose is vicious, even moreso than all the other demons I know! At the least, if you're going to visit her, you ought to take some backup. If you go in there alone and she somehow takes control of a Wordsmith..."

Belial shudders.

"...I don't want to imagine the results. Ose would kill to have power like yours at her disposal."

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can say anything, Daisy suddenly raises her arm and points at the door.

"Daddy. Someone's coming."

Frowning, I turn to look at the doorway. Seconds later, a pair of stomping feet come running down the hallway outside, the footsteps barely audible even when I turn my full attention away from the other three in the room.

Bang bang bang!

Someone pounds on the door, startling Phoebe. She turns to look at the door, wide-eyed. "Wow, Daisy. You have good hearing."

Daisy nods. "Mhm."

I shrug. "Kids, am I right?"

A man outside our room yells loudly. "Sir! Commander Hiro, sir! Are you in there? It's an emergency!"

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "That voice... Henry? I thought he was stationed in the Core?"

I nod. "Let me see what he wants."

A moment later, I walk toward the door and grab hold of the handle. Upon opening it, I spot a 24-year-old guy, almost the same age as me. His buzzed black hair and military uniform might normally give him an imposing look, but at this moment, he's so busy gasping for breath that he looks like he's about to pass out.

"What's wrong, Henry?" I ask, quickly examining him. Immediately, I spot several specks of blood dotting his uniform. They appear not to belong to him, but someone else.

Henry swallows a breath and quickly spits out words rapid-fire. "There's a Behemoth-class native fauna rampaging near the outskirts of the city! I've got two platoons fighting to contain it, with three more on the way, but the goddamn thing is too powerful! It killed three troopers with a swing of its tail; not even the T-REX's saved them!"

Immediately, my gaze hardens. "What species is it? What size? Have you activated the defensive battlements? What about the advanced troopers? Has Neil offered battle strategies yet?"

My barrage of questions doesn't phase Henry. He quickly nods and follows up with a series of answers. After a moment, Belial jumps up from behind me and runs to my side, her eyes the size of dinner plates. "What?! You've got to be kidding me! It can't be a Hydra!"

Henry grits his teeth. "Kar confirmed it. He's witnessed one in the flesh a few thousand years ago. We're lucky that it hasn't fully matured! It's only fifty feet tall!"

"Only fifty-?!" Belial growls. "Spawn of a broodmother! Jason, we can't dawdle here! I've fought Hydras three times, and each instance was worse than the last! If the troopers start cutting off its heads...!"

Henry's expression darkens. "You're too late. Before Kar arrived on the scene, a few Thundercats severed two of its heads. Now it has four! We quickly learned not to do that anymore, but with four heads..."

My heart pounds like a drum. "Say no more. Phoebe, Samantha, stay here with Daisy. I'll go out there and help put the beast down."

"The hell you will!" Samantha yells. "I've by far the most experienced on this whole planet when it comes to fighting Hydras. I'm coming with you."

"Don't even think of leaving me behind," Phoebe replies. "I'm not letting you two have all the fun."

Belial glances at Phoebe for a half-second before nodding. "Grab your rifle. I'll take care of the melee combat. You need to stay in the back."

Phoebe chews her lip. "Alright. Daisy, sweetheart, you stay here. Mommy and daddy need to fight the big bad monster. Okay?"

Immediately, Daisy starts to pout. "I wanna go, too! I wanna see the Hydrant!"

"Daisy Brianne Hiro!"

Phoebe's words instantly carry a sense of power my Wordsmithing could never hope to achieve. The blood drains from Daisy's face as Phoebe shoots a death-glare at her.

"Uh... um... never mind! I'll read my book."

Daisy quickly ducks her face down, and her cheeks turn red-hot as she tries to avoid Phoebe's gaze. My wife only maintains her death-glare for a moment longer before leaning over to kiss Daisy's head.

"Mwah! You stay here and wait for us to return. Do you hear me, young lady?"

"Y-yes... mommy..."

Satisfied, Phoebe turns to nod at me.

"Let's go."

Part 176: Hail Hydra

It barely takes the four of us fifteen minutes to jump in Phoebe's monster truck, leave our house, and race out of the city. By the time we reach the ridge and start to drive down the ramp toward the forest road leading to the warp-gate, all of us can already see an intense battle happening several miles away.

Phoebe tightens her grip on the steering wheel. "By the Creator! Henry, you only told us about the Hydra! Didn't you think it was worth mentioning the dozen angry wyverns it brought along?!"

The four-headed Hydra howls angrily and tears apart several heavily armored tanks with its teeth and claws. Compared to the behemoth's gigantic body, the soldiers at its feet appear as little more than specks of dust.

In the skies, twelve wyverns fly overhead, each one twice the size of a school bus with a forty-foot wingspan. Some of them breathe fire on the soldiers at their feet, while others spit lightning and ice instead.

Belial, seated behind me in the passenger seat, grabs my shoulder and leans forward to peer over the windshield. "Elemental wyverns, at that! What the hell is going on, Henry? Did you disturb a spirit monster nest or something?!"

Henry immediately shakes his head. "Don't ask me! I had nothing to do with this! When I left, only the Hydra was attacking us! It came out of nowhere!"

Phoebe presses down on the accelerator, bringing our speed to over a hundred miles an hour. The perfectly straight road I carved through the forest six years ago stretches on ahead of us, while the distance to the Hydra shrinks rapidly every second.

Belial scowls at Henry. "Hydras aren't like other monsters. They're Lucifer's artificial creations. Considering I helped kill all three that have appeared, there shouldn't be any others still alive, let alone a random backwater planet like Tarus II! Not to mention elemental wyverns. Each one possesses nearly two percent the power of an ancient dragon. Do you mean to tell me-"

"Shit!" Phoebe howls in fright as a gigantic pothole suddenly appears in the road ahead. With her attention focused on the Hydra, she doesn't see it until the last second.

My eyes widen. Our truck flies over the edge and smashes into the bottom of a ten-foot-deep crater. At the last second, sensing the surge of adrenaline in our hearts, the T-REX's on all of our chests activate simultaneously.

CRASH!!

My vision turns spotty as the world comes to a screeching halt. Moments later, Centurion's robotic voice faintly appears in my ear.

"...ORGANS: MINOR. DAMAGE TO BONE STRUCTURE: INSIGNIFICANT. DAMAGE TO BRAIN TISSUE: ELEVATED. PILOT ZERO-ZERO-THREE'S OVERALL CONDITION:

STABLE."

The disorientingly loud AI voice gives me a headache. I blink and rub my eyes, then turn to look at the driver seat. Phoebe leans limply against the steering wheel, but as my gaze falls on her, she pulls backward. "Aaaoo... shit, shit... broke my wrist..."

"Is everyone okay?" Belial asks. I turn around to see Henry also in his faceless armored suit, and Belial, still wearing only a few strips of cloth to cover her lady bits. Unlike us weak and feeble humans, her demonic body, strengthened by her rank of Emperor, gives her unparalleled defense.

"I'll be perfect in a sec," I reply. "**Heal. Heal. Heal. Heal.**"

A few drops of mana leave my body and travel to everyone in the truck. Belial probably doesn't need my help, given her titanium defenses and nigh-omnipotent healing powers, but it can't hurt to be polite.

All of us shake off the daze enveloping our minds. I kick the side-door away and hop outside, while the others mirror my actions.

"We're only a mile from the Hydra," Phoebe says, as she shoots a glance at the crumpled front end of the truck. A look of dismay passes over her face, but she quickly recovers. "Let's run the rest of the way!"

With a nod, all four of us agree to her decision. We break into a dead sprint and unleash the full power of the T-REX suits.

The Transforming Replicant Exosuit is an invention made possible thanks to Phoebe and Hans Wagner's collaboration. Capable of granting its user unparalleled defense, the suit also gives them superhuman speed and agility. Since it can adapt to its owner's physiological strengths, it's become even stronger after I enhanced Phoebe's strength and durability. The only one of us who doesn't wear one is Belial, since she lacks even the most basic comprehension of any technology. Henry lags slightly behind Belial, Phoebe, and I, but it doesn't take long before all four of us close the distance to the Hydra.

Our feet smash against the ground and surge with strength. Without a vehicle, our sustained top speed reaches sixty miles an hour, while in the heat of combat, the suits allow any human to unleash even faster bursts of acceleration.

We reach the battlefield within two minutes. Immediately, the sight churns my stomach.

Dozens and dozens of bodies lay motionless in the area around the rampaging Hydra. Several armored Clinicians try to mend the wounds of downed soldiers, but I can tell at a glance those warriors will never again walk among the living. One of the combat medics senses incoming danger and instinctively leaps straight up, clearing thirty feet in the blink of an eye. A split second later, the Hydra's tail lashes across the area he was standing in and rips apart the corpse he was trying to heal, as well as two other combat medics who didn't dodge in time. The bodies of the clinicians and their deceased comrade explode; unable to withstand the Hydra's might.

Phoebe screeches to a halt a quarter-mile away from the rampaging monster, taps a button on her T-REX's wrist modulator, and summons a weapon out of her nano-storage assembler. Several kilowatts of electricity arc together before her, and three seconds later, a massive energy rifle springs into existence, becoming a weapon nearly as long as she is tall.

Belial and I don't spare a glance toward Phoebe. Before we can travel a hundred yards closer to the Hydra, Phoebe begins firing high-powered plasma shots at the Hydra's carapace.

Ksss-thoom! Ksss-thoom!

Each shot takes a split-second to build up energy before firing, resulting in energy blasts that travel five times the speed of sound. All Belial and I can see are brief flashes of light as the plasmoid bullets strike the Hydra and send it reeling.

"Skreee!"

The Hydra howls in pain. Two of its heads whip to the right to glare at my wife furiously.

Belial's face turns pallid. "Don't let the beast focus on Phoebe! We have to protect her!"

I turn around to shout an order at Henry, only to see him break off from the succubus and I. The young man leaves us and returns to the formation of other T-REX users to rejoin his companions.

Tch. I guess Belial and I will have to protect Phoebe by ourselves.

I plant my feet down and screech to a halt. "Grab the Hydra's attention!" I yell. "I'll take the middle position!"

"On it!"

Belial motions with her hands. Without pausing to concentrate her mana, her body rapidly shifts its form to one I saw in Solomon's visions. Her bright red skin darkens and turns into an ashen-grey color. Her hands morph into powerful claws. Leathery wings sprout from her back, while her features turn noticeably more monstrous.

She leaps into the sky and rushes at the nearest Hydra head.

CRACK!

Belial smashes her fist into the Hydra's kisser. The momentum and strength of her attack turns the monster's head into meat paste and sends it rocketing backward. It plows into another head, causing the second to sustain severe injuries.

I aim my mind at the first broken head. Before the Hydra can regenerate, I speak a word of power. **"Seal!"**

My words carry authority on par with that of the Creator. Poisonous black fog engulfs the Hydra's destroyed head to suppress its regenerative ability. Instead of growing a second head, the monster's pulverized skull rapidly decomposes and withers away.

I aim my mind at the second head. **"Sea-!"**

Before I can speak, two of the Elemental Wyverns screech angrily. I jump backward out of instinct as a massive ball of lightning crashes into the spot where I was standing only a moment earlier, followed by a hail of icy daggers.

"Gaugh!"

Despite avoiding the brunt of the lightning attack, several bolts of electricity arc toward my nanite-covered body. Clumps of nanites explode into melted metal, scattered by the electrical power of the wyvern overhead. With small patches of my skin exposed, a sense of danger quickly appears in the back of my mind.

This battle will be far more treacherous than I first expected!

I flick my eyes toward the sky, where both wyverns are preparing to launch another assault.

"PULL!"

A surge of power emanates from my body. As if an invisible hand had wrapped itself around them, both wyverns shriek in surprise and tumble from the sky. They hit the ground at terminal velocity, sending dirt and debris scattering in every direction. To my astonishment, both wyverns immediately leap onto their hind legs and screech at me, uninjured by the fall.

The bastards are resilient!

The ice-type Wyvern starts to lunge toward me, but a familiar sound resonates in the air.

Ksss-thoom!

A bolt of plasma smashes into the monster's head, sending it careening to the side. I quickly glance at Phoebe and give her a thumbs-up, but she ignores me and instead levels her rifle at the other wyvern.

Ksss-thoom!

The twenty-foot-tall ice-wyvern screeches in pain as the superheated bolt of plasma explodes against its skull, sending it tumbling as well. Despite the might of Phoebe's plasma rifle, it causes little damage to either monster. Both wyverns shake their heads in indignation and charge toward Phoebe. They duck and weave as they dart across the ground, allowing them to dodge two more of Phoebe's shots as they advance upon her.

"Phoebe!" I yell, aiming my mind at her. "Watch out! **Teleport!**"

Foop!

Phoebe vanishes a split-second before the wyverns can unleash a barrage of ice and lightning upon her. Their attacks strike the empty air, exploding against the ground harmlessly.

Foop!

Phoebe reappears three hundred feet away. With a tap of her fingers, her rifle rapidly alters its shape to transform into a massive two-handed broadsword. She stomps her foot on the ground and leaps at the lightning-type wyvern. Before it can dodge, her suit's inertia boosters activate, accelerating her speed by a factor of ten.

Half a second later, Phoebe reappears next to the ice-wyvern and swings her sword down. It slices through the wyvern's neck with ease, severing the monster's head from its body. She easily takes out one of the eleven threats on the battlefield without batting an eye.

"Skree?!"

The lightning wyvern howls at Phoebe. It jumps backward, flaps its wings, and takes to the sky to avoid her.

"You're not going anywhere!" I yell. **"Break! Break!"**

The sounds of two bones violently snapping, followed by a heart-wrenching howl of pain, resound throughout the battlefield. The wyvern's wing-bones snap in half, causing it to plummet toward my wife below.

Phoebe gathers strength in her legs and leaps straight upward. She turns her body and sword into a living spear and impales the monster before it can hit the ground. A moment later, the wyvern falls silent as a razor-sharp nanite blade stabs its skull and ends its life.

Phoebe falls and lands on her feet, while the wyvern crashes to the ground behind her.

"What are you staring at?" Phoebe asks. "Help Sam!"

I nod, then turn around and speak to the sky. **"Predict!"**

My perception of time accelerates by a factor of one hundred. For a few seconds, the entire world grinds to a halt, while a series of lines and patterns appear among the battlefield's combatants.

Squadron B is about to suffer a major blow when the third Hydra head exhales corrosive fumes on them. Their nanite suits will only dissipate 95% of the damage, but the rest of the fumes will penetrate their defenses and kill them! Following that, those four wyverns to the south will unleash a fireball encirclement, pinning Squadron H in place, which will allow those two electric-type wyverns to wipe out their nanites. Shortly afterward...

A massive flow of information surges into my brain. My eyes flick from right to left as I rapidly classify each enemy and ally movement into different threat levels, allowing me to determine which groups are in the highest likelihood of taking heavy casualties.

A moment later, time resumes.

"Seal! Shield! Block! Teleport! Pull! Wall! Disorient! Shatter!"

A flurry of words escapes my lips, each one targeted at specific enemies and allies. Walls of stone spring up behind one platoon of soldiers, saving them from a fiery encirclement, while I also pull down the lightning-type wyverns from the sky, stagger the Hydra with a mental blast, and teleport a small squadron of soldiers out of the way of the falling monsters.

Ten seconds later, the monsters break apart and gaze around in bewilderment as all of their attacks scatter to the four fucking winds. The lightning-type wyverns howl in terror as a group of soldiers leaps into action to stab and shoot them from every angle. With them gone, the threat of destabilized nanites vanishes from the battlefield, allowing me to breathe a slight sigh of relief.

"Jason! To the north!" Phoebe yells from behind me. A moment later, the sound of her rifle firing to my right makes me turn and look in that direction.

"What the fuck?" I ask, to nobody in particular.

Hundreds of orcs charge out of a burning thicket. Lit aflame by the flame wyverns, the patch of dense woodland connects to seemingly nothing, yet the monsters storm out of it as if stepping through an unseen portal.

I set my astonishment aside and narrow my gaze. "**Examine.**"

Detailed information about each orc pops into my head.

Name: Grimplum. Rank: Orc Jerma. IQ: 75. Status: Berserked, frenzied, insane.

Name: Gorn. Rank: Orc Jerma. IQ: 50. Status: Lobotomized, berserked.

Name: Kiki. Rank: Orc Hudin. IQ: 89. Status: Berserked, mindless.

Waves of information flood into my mind, making me frown. The one thing all of the orcs share is their berserked state. What could cause so many orcs to appear on Tarus II, a planet where only a few have ever lived? More importantly, what could cause them to lose their minds and rush into a battlefield without regard for their lives?

Suddenly, from the south, a surge of movement catches my attention. A massive horde of monsters climbs up the edge of a canyon and rushes toward the troops at the warp-gate, creating a deadly encirclement when combined with the orc's charge.

"My god!" Phoebe yells. "Jason, those are Obsidian Goblins!"

"Obsidian Goblins?!"

My mind blanks out for a moment. It only takes me a moment to recall a lesson Phoebe once read to me about Obsidian Goblins when we first met, back when I was paralyzed in bed.

Obsidian Goblins are an extremely rare subspecies of the traditional Goblin family tree. Fewer than one in one thousand goblins will evolve to become an Obsidian Goblin, but when they do, they gain near-total immunity to flames and heat-based attacks, in addition to astounding defenses! Coupled with their small bodies and swift speed, they're capable of charging through a hail of projectiles without taking any damage. If faced with several obsidian goblins clumped together, one must keep their distance and pummel them with piercing weaponry; especially armor-piercing projectiles and the like.

"Enraged orcs and Obsidian Goblins, along with a fucking Hydra and Elemental Wyverns?! When did so many different monsters decide to work together? Why are they attacking us?!"

Phoebe shakes her head. "I don't know. All I do know is that normal weapons will be useless against those goblins. Cover me! I'll enter melee range!"

Phoebe charges to the south and taps a button on her sword. It rapidly reconfigures itself from a razor-sharp blade into a massive Warhammer, one capable of smashing diamonds into dust with a single blow.

"Shit!" I curse, unable to contain my anger. "What a bad day! What a bad fuckin' day!"

I aim my mind at my body and inhale.

It's time to put all of my lessons with Solomon to good use. I can't allow my emotions to get the best of me.

"Wings!"

Angelic wings explode from my back, each of them colored an ashen grey. My T-REX armor splits apart, allowing my rapidly forming appendages to sprout into their full glory before sealing up behind them. I pounce into the air to soar hundreds of feet over the battlefield. Thanks to half a year of practice, with Solomon's help, I've become extremely adept at manipulating my wings to achieve maximum speed and agility.

With a bird's eye view, I use Centurion's sensors to highlight and identify various targets. **"Seal. Seal. Suppress. Shove! Heal. Heal. Collapse!"**

One by one, I take out various threats, doing my best not to kill anyone, but merely batter them unconscious or knock them out. Clouds of sleeping gas erupt here and there as I attempt to take out one group of enemies or another, but every so often, I miss one, allowing them to penetrate my barriers to land a lucky hit on a soldier here and there.

Belial, still flying around and fighting the Hydra, dodges one of its attacks, barrel-rolls in midair, and flies over to fight beside Phoebe.

"I'm here to help!" Belial yells, as she stomps her feet into the ground beside Phoebe. The succubus claps her hands together, and with her tremendous strength, sends a shockwave outward, flinging a hundred Obsidian Goblins flying backward.

"Thanks!" Phoebe says, sparing as few words as possible. She swings her hammer down and pounds a goblin's head, shatters its obsidian skin, and flattens it against the ground. A moment later, she swings her hammer again, this time battering its back and breaking half the bones in its body. The monster goes limp and perishes, its soul vanishing from this world.

Belial's expression turns grim. "Brutal!"

"Anyone who kills my friends and family will pay with their blood," Phoebe says, ignoring Belial's concern for the dead goblin. "I respect your reverence for life, but I have my own way of doing things!"

Phoebe darts away from Belial and swings her hammer in a wide arc. She smashes one Goblin to bits and sends him hurtling into the body of one of his comrades. The second-hand impact of goblin-on-goblin ends up shattering both of their heavily armored carapaces while also rupturing multiple internal organs and fracturing their skulls. Both monsters slump lifelessly to the ground and perish under Phoebe's assault.

Belial's eyes widen as Phoebe continues her onslaughts. "Devils! Phoebe shouldn't be half as strong as me, yet when she wields that hammer..."

The succubus shakes the thoughts out of her head and joins Phoebe in battle. While merely trying to incapacitate our enemies, like me, Belial winces every time Phoebe instead opts to kill them, sending their bodies tumbling across the plains to land as lifeless, broken husks. Belial pounds the monsters with her fists, but holds back slightly during every attack, ensuring they'll just barely survive.

One after the other, both ladies tear ass through over three hundred Obsidian Goblins. Eventually, the remaining goblins turn tail and flee, having witnessed the frightening power of Tarus II's Dynamic Duo.

Phoebe slows to a stop and watches the Goblins retreat. A moment later, she spins on her heel and dashes toward the orcs, who I've managed to keep away from the main troops with my Wordsmithing.

"Wait!" Belial yells, panic in her eyes. "Go easy on them! Those orcs aren't in their right minds!"

Belial chases after Phoebe, but Phoebe merely shoots a gaze at the several dozen dead bodies of the soldiers who perished to the Hydra's maws.

"Neither am I!"

Smash!

Phoebe doesn't even use her hammer. She charges into the incoming orc army and uses her shoulder as a battering ram. Like an unstoppable bowling ball crashing through 7-foot-tall pins, Phoebe's diminutive figure sends orcs flying left and right as she knocks them out of her way and breaks their bones with impunity.

Suddenly, my eyes flick to the Hydra. The Behemoth-class monster notices Phoebe's dominating presence and lunges two of its heads toward her. Before I can speak a word, Belial leaps between Phoebe and the Hydra to clap her hands.

CRACK!!

A thunderous shockwave fires from Belial's palms, sending her flying backward to hit the ground while also knocking the Hydra for a loop. Both of the Hydra's heads swing around like an inverted rope and smash against the monster's back, momentarily stunning it.

"Skree?"

Having only one head intact, the Hydra evaluates its other three mangled and broken limbs with a sinister gaze.

Phoebe continues tearing through the orc horde, while Belial smirks at the Hydra.

"Skree, *indeed*."

The few remaining wyverns fly higher into the sky, unable to figure out how they can take out the humans. The orcs howl angrily, only to end up as pulverized mush when Phoebe stampedes over top of them, while the Goblins flee into the distance.

With all four monster groups in total disarray, a smile flashes over my face.

Victory is in our grasp!

However, the unthinkable happens.

The Hydra's remaining head lunges toward the necks of its other disfigured heads. It rips the necks off and shrills in rage, as six new heads grow from the stumps of the former ones.

My eyes widen.

The Hydra tore off the flesh I sealed, allowing it to regenerate its heads again! That no-good cheating bastard!

"SKREEEE!"

A deafening howl bursts from all seven of the Hydra's mouths. It lunges across the ground and attacks in seven different directions, targeting Phoebe, Belial, and numerous injured soldiers as well.

"Shit! **Teleport!**"

I aim my mind at the Hydra and speak a word of power. An instant later, the Hydra vanishes and reappears several football fields away, directly beneath me, its heads diving into the dirt and striking thin air.

"Guhurk!"

Burning pain blooms in my chest. Unexpected feedback courses through my body from teleporting such a colossal monster without thought to my energy reserves. All of my mana vanishes, causing my skin to turn ashen.

My wings lose their strength. The ground rushes at me. As I fall, the last thing I see is a Hydra's head lunging toward my plummeting form.

Part 177: Deadly Hydration

Several minutes earlier.

Jason, Phoebe, and Belial shoot a look of surprise at Henry as the young man breaks away from them and rushes over to reinforce his fellow soldiers. However, he pays the three of them no mind and quickly crosses the battlefield to arrive at his comrade's sides.

Dozens of bodies lay lifelessly strewn about here and there. A one-armed woman slashes with her sword at one of the Hydra's legs, ignoring the pain from her severed limb. Blood flows freely from its stump, but her nanite-armor doesn't manage to seal off the injury like it usually would. Due to the immense damage her suit has taken, the soldier can only spend her last moments trying to wound the Behemoth-class monster.

Henry grinds his teeth as he evaluates the woman's condition. *Kyra is too injured for me to save. Compared to the soldiers in the Core, the Tarus reserve personnel are pathetic! They're barely putting up a fight against these monsters!*

The young soldier runs past the injured woman and flicks his gaze toward a group of men and women using teamwork to fend off the assault of the wyverns above. The lightning-type wyverns rain electricity upon them, destabilizing their nanite suits, while the fire-type wyverns unleash infernal blasts, cooking them alive.

As Henry clears the gap between himself and the others, he calls out a single word. "Boost!"

The group of soldiers turn their heads in his direction. Upon seeing a painted yellow line across the incoming soldier's chest, their hearts leap for joy.

Ah! That man is a member of the Core personnel! He's a lieutenant!

We're saved!

Henry jumps toward them and stretches out his leg. As if on cue, the group of low-ranked soldiers clump together and extend their palms outward to catch his foot. Then, they hurl him straight upward, aiming for the wyverns above. Henry coils his leg to combine his strength with theirs. The moment his fellow soldiers throw him skyward, he unleashes the power in his body to triple their kinetic force, giving himself a massive burst of speed.

Halfway into his jump, Henry taps a button on his T-REX and summons a nano-bladed sword, one with an edge sharp enough to lop down a tree in a single swing. He curls it below his waist, and at the last second, swings it upward.

Swish!

An unlucky fire-type wyvern takes its last breath as Henry decapitates it with a single swing. Unlike the awkward motions of the soldiers below him, those too weak to enter the Core's fighting forces, his

experience and battle prowess reaches several tiers beyond them. With a single move, he wipes out one of the fearsome enemies terrorizing Tarus II's reserve forces as if it were a flying ant.

Henry's eyes flash as he throws his nanite-sword. It shoots from his hand like a bullet and rushes straight at an ice-type wyvern. The wyrm screeches in pain and plummets to the ground below, where it perishes on impact. The sword continues into the distance, disappearing into the mountains, never to be seen again.

Lieutenant Henry finally loses his momentum and descends toward the planet's surface. With a quick flick of his legs, he deftly spins around in midair and lands on the ground feet-first, allowing his T-REX to absorb the brunt of the impact.

Damn, Henry thinks. I only managed to kill two wyverns. Compared to Commander Hope's battle prowess, I am sorely lacking. Even without tapping into his Wordsmithing, he could wipe me out with his physical strength alone. I'll have to train harder if I hope to win Miss Oshina's favor!

For a brief moment, an image of a beautiful, white-haired woman appears in Henry's mind.

Miss Oshina is the only person I will ever love! I'll do anything for her, including eradicating these so-called 'heroes.' Even if it costs me my life, I won't allow these damned demon-worshippers to take over humanity.

Henry tilts his head slightly. Even in the heat of battle, his sharpened instincts afford him a moment to shoot a hate-filled glance at Jason, the leader of Tarus II.

For Commander Neil to have been taken in by the honey-filled words of Hope, that shows how dangerous these demon-loving bastards are. Where else could their powers come from, if not some unholy pact with our enemies? Only a fool would believe they possess some 'divine' power. Humans must rely on our strength, and nothing else. Once I expose Jason and Hope's deceitful plots, Neil will have no choice but to recognize me as his inheritor. With that, I'll finally be able to win Miss Oshina's heart!

The young Lieutenant swallows his seething rage and immediately returns his attention to the monsters around him.

A lightning-type wyvern fires a thunder-orb at the group of soldiers who helped Henry only a moment before. Without any hesitation, Henry leaps toward a boulder, wraps his arms around it, and uses the T-REX's power to rip the rock from the ground. With a weight of nearly two tons, the stone would crush any human under ordinary circumstances, but Henry hoists it onto his shoulders as though it were an infant.

"Huff!"

Henry hurls the boulder over the other soldier's heads. An instant before the orb of lightning strikes them, Henry's makeshift shield crosses its path.

Thoom!

The rock shatters into a thousand pieces after absorbing the brunt of the wyvern's attack. However, thanks to Henry's swift movements, he manages to save the lives of the other soldiers by dissipating the

wyvern's electric energy before it can reach their nanites.

"Lieutenant! Thank you!"

One of the soldiers offers a quick word of thanks before turning his attention to the sky. The wyvern above starts to unleash another attack, only for it to squawk in surprise.

"Skraw?!"

Jason's Wordsmithing strikes it and the other remaining lightning-type wyverns with a mental attack. Disoriented, the three of them plummet from the skies and strike the earth with a thunderous crash.

Henry smiles. *Jason and Hope might be traitors to humanity, but they still have to put on airs to protect their righteous image. It's like Miss Oshina said: they can't afford to have others second-guess them, now. It's all part of their ploy to reduce our wariness!*

Shaking his head, Henry leaps at the stunned wyverns and rears back for a punch. *No matter what, the other humans are innocent! They can't help being deceived by these ungodly hellspawn! I'll protect everyone and prove I'm the true hero!*

Unleashing all of his pent-up rage, Henry swings his fist forward and batters one of the wyverns right in the head. The monster doesn't have time to react as its skull bursts like a balloon.

At the same time, the remaining soldiers work together to impale and dice apart the two remaining wyverns, leaving three corpses behind to clean up later.

"Pass me your blade!" Henry yells, aiming his attention at the nearest soldier. Without hesitation, the woman turns around and flings her weapon toward him. Henry snatches it from the air and nods.

"Lieutenant!" The woman says, offering him a quick nod. "We're here to help!"

"Let's take down the Hydra!" Henry says, sweeping his gaze to ten nearby soldiers. Follow my commands, and this brute won't last long!"

The woman pauses for a moment. "But sir! Whenever we cut off a head, it grows two more! How can we defeat something which has no weaknesses?"

Henry snorts. "Everything has a weakness, soldier! Aim for the body. Leave the heads to the damned- I mean, leave them to Commander Hiro! We have to slow the monster down so Jason can kill it."

"I... I see! We'll do whatever you say, sir!"

The woman and her comrades nod in unison. They begin executing battle strategies according to Henry's commands.

Minutes pass.

Henry works in tandem with the other soldiers to cut the Hydra's belly and legs. While doing so, he shoots glances at Jason and Phoebe from time to time, but his gaze lingers the longest on Belial.

Belial pounds one of the Hydra's heads backward with tremendous force, shattering its jaw. Henry's complexion pales when he sees this.

Tch. As expected of the Second Emperor. The infiltrator possesses fearsome strength! Ten of our mightiest warriors wouldn't stand a chance, not even if they ambushed her in the dead of night. It's no wonder Miss Oshina ordered me to keep an eye on her.

His eyes flick toward Phoebe.

Before the devil-worshipper and the Second Emperor beguiled her; Miss Berthold was a wonderful woman capable of rallying an army to her side. But now, I can't look at her with anything but disgust. She's fallen for the lies spoken by the so-called Hero, believing demons and humans can actually work together. Gah! How sickening. Just the thought of her betrayal nauseates me. Phoebe's day of reckoning will soon arrive, and when it does...

Henry clenches his fist and smashes it against one of the Hydra's legs. Even with his enhanced strength and the power of the T-REX, he barely manages to dent the monster's carapace.

Phoebe won't have anywhere to escape!

Suddenly, with his fist still pressed against the Hydra's leg, a falling sensation engulfs Henry's mind. The young lieutenant gasps as an invisible field of energy swallows him.

Foop!

He, along with the Hydra and a few other soldiers, disappear from the foot of the Warpgate Pavilion and reappear several football fields away. Yanked over by some unknown force, Henry raises his head to the skies in confusion.

There, he witnesses an unbelievable sight.

Jason, the Hero of humanity; the devil-worshipper with ill-gotten powers from the underworld, loses control of his body and plummets limply toward the Hydra's open maw.

The behemoth eagerly opens its mouth as it senses the aura of the one who has spent the last fifteen minutes oppressing it and its comrades.

Across the battlefield, where the Hydra stood only a moment earlier, Phoebe's eyes widen in horror as her husband plunges into the monster's shark-like mouth.

"JASOOON!! NOOOO!"

She barely manages to take a single step before Jason lands inside the creature's gullet.

Gulp.

The Hydra swallows Jason whole and shrieks in delight. "Skreeeee!!"

The taste of the Hero permeates its body. Jason's rich heroic energy immediately absorbs into the Hydra, enriching its vitality.

Belial whips her head around and stares in horror as she realizes what's happened.

"Oh, devils!"

The Hydra's seven heads raise to the sky. It howls like a wolf as mana erupts from every pore of its body.

Phoebe dashes toward the Hydra. Tears bubble in her eyes as she tries not to imagine the awful pain Jason must be suffering as the Hydra digests him.

"Jason... Jason... don't be dead... please, don't be dead!"

As Phoebe runs, Belial suddenly appears at her side. The Second Emperor matches her speed to Phoebe's.

"Phoebe! Slow down! Listen to me! You can't fight the Hydra; you're no match for it, now!"

"Don't try to stop me!" Phoebe screams. Her voice cracks as raw emotions tug at her heart. "That bastard is eating my husband! It's swallowing Jason as we speak!!"

Belial's expression turns grim. "The Hydra isn't like other monsters! It seeks out prey with high levels of mana and absorbs their energy to fuel itself. With Jason's mana purity, he should be able to survive for several minutes. We have to come up with a plan! If you rush in there, the Hydra will kill you!"

"Better me than Jason!" Phoebe yells. "He's the Hero! I have to save him! I can't let him die!"

Both women race across the battlefield, clearing the distance within seconds. They grind to a halt a hundred meters from the Hydra and gaze up at the monster as its ocean-blue skin slowly shifts into a whiter shade reminiscent of the clouds. Jason's pure heroic energy floods through its body, tripling its offensive and defensive capabilities. The monster balloons in size, from fifty-feet in height to over a hundred and fifty!

The Hydra's size increase startles Phoebe, causing her to retreat a few steps. Where before, it was a mere Behemoth-class existence, now it approaches the pinnacle of a Titan-class monster. Radiant energy ripples from the Hydra's body, penetrating Phoebe's T-REX armor to leave her in a cold sweat.

"W-we have to save Jason! Why are we standing around, doing nothing?!"

Belial's gaze hardens. "The last time I fought a Hydra, it was two-thirds the size of this one. I had the help of Diablo, Mephisto, and Bael, yet killing the bastard took us seven hours. With my capabilities alone, the best I can do is knock it around. By now, its intelligence has surely reached that of a human's!"

Phoebe blinks. She stares at the howling Hydra in disbelief. "We... we need Hope's help! If he comes here, we'll be able to stop the Hydra and save Jason!"

After hearing Phoebe's idea, Belial's expression loosens up, and a spark appears in her eyes. "That's right! Phoebe, you go and tell the others to radio Hope! By now, the Core personnel should have been alerted. I'll try to hold the Hydra off! If we can hold out until Hope arrives, we might be able to save-"

Before Belial can finish her sentence, the Hydra exits its trance and lasers onto the insects at its feet. It charges forward at a terrifying speed and snaps several of its heads at the women, intending to kill them in one blow.

"Shit!"

Phoebe shoves Belial away and leaps to the side, narrowly avoiding a gruesome death. The Hydra's heads smash against the planet's soil, causing it to eat huge mouthfuls of dirt.

Indignant, the Hydra screeches at the insects who narrowly avoided their doom. "Skreee!!"

"Over here, you big, ugly turtle!" Belial yells. Her words pierce the air and catch the Hydra's attention. With its newly enhanced intelligence, the beast comprehends her meaning and tilts its head toward her.

"Skree? *Skree*."

The monster's formerly shrill shrieking dies down, and a more menacing tone enters its voice. The Hydra's pitch-black reptilian eyes fall on Belial, and all seven of its heads swivel to face her.

A few scattered thoughts pass through the Hydra's mind as it evaluates the tiny little demon who insulted it.

I smell demonic mana. This one is a threat. If I consume it, I will become stronger.

A ferocious light appears in the Hydra's eyes. All seven of its heads pivot toward Belial to focus on her exclusively, and a moment later, it lunges toward her with five times the intensity it did before.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Each head sweeps toward her with the killing intent of a viper nest. Belial charges toward the Hydra and stretches her fists out to knock aside and pummel any of the heads that get too close. Over and over, she smashes and punches the Hydra with all of her strength, but unlike before, the Hydra takes little damage from her attacks. Instead, agony sprouts in her arms, almost as if she were a child punching brick walls repeatedly.

"Augh! Shit! I knew the Hydra would become stronger, but this is ridiculous! Hold on, Jason!"

While Belial battles the Hydra, Phoebe retreats as quickly as she can and races back to the Warpgate Pavilion. She doesn't even glance at the fallen soldiers this time, nor the corpses of the wyverns. Instead, she pushes her speed to the limits and charges into the portal.

Whump!

Phoebe collides with a tall, green monster and ends up tripping against him. Both of them tumble down the warpgate's stairs and hit the ground with a thunderous *boom*, rattling the teeth of the nearby troopers.

"White-hair?" The monster asks.

Phoebe raises her head to see the familiar face of Kar, the reptilian Sphinx, as he stares at her, dumbfounded. "W-whaddya doing in here? We were about to come to you!"

Phoebe blinks. She jumps off Kar and glances around. Two hundred heavily armed soldiers, each with one or more yellow stripes across their chests, look at her in surprise.

Unlike the reserve troops on Tarus II, the mere presence of these well-trained soldiers sends shivers down the backs of their enemies. Having fought in the Labyrinth under Hope and Neil for the last six years, each one's accumulated battle experience makes them a ferocious enemy to demonkind.

"It's terrible!" Phoebe says, hastily explaining the situation. "There's a Hydra on Tarus II! It swallowed Jason and increased its power explosively! We need help! Where's Hope? He has to come here right this instant!"

Kar nods. "Hurgh. We know. I had to take a few minutes to gather the troops, but don't worry! I already sent Rabbit an SOS. He'll get the signal soon."

Phoebe's agitation doesn't vanish. Instead, she starts to shake and tremble. "You did? Where is he? Why isn't he here yet? Jason is going to die!"

Kar nods at the troopers, and all of them quickly charge over to the portal and pass through, leaving Kar behind with Phoebe. "Don't worry! We don't have a portal pointed toward Maiura, so it'll take us a few minutes to connect. Once we call, Rabbit will teleport here!"

Phoebe nods frantically, then turns around and heads back to the portal, dragging Kar along behind her. "Come on! We have to activate Tarus's orbital defenses! If Hope doesn't show, it will be our only method for dealing with the Hydra! Samantha can't... she can't handle it on her own!"

Kar stumbles after Phoebe and hurriedly activates his T-REX. The slender, muscular body of the Sphinx abruptly disappears as nanites surge from his chest and swallow him whole. A moment later, he replies. "I'll help her out, don't you worry!"

Both of them disappear into the portal. The moment they pass through, Phoebe pauses. She stares into the distance and sees something that makes her heart stop.

"H-huh? What... what happened?"

Kar pauses beside her. He stares uncomprehendingly at the massive lake of blood and gore coating the battlefield half a mile away.

A horrible stench wafts across the region, capable of sickening anyone unequipped with a T-REX. The odor of iron and copper fills the air as the sea of plasma slowly spreads out and seeps into the ground.

Phoebe stares at the spot where the Hydra stood only a minute earlier. Now, nothing remains.

"The Hydra... is dead?"

Suddenly, Kar raises his finger to point at the sky. "Look! Isn't that Jason, up there?"

A smile crosses Phoebe's face. Tears flow freely as she gazes upon the majestic sight of her husband levitating in the sky. His body exudes the warm aura of a hero.

"Oh, Creator... he didn't die. My husband is still alive. Thank you... thank you!"

Jason hovers in the sky for several seconds. Below him, standing amidst the lake of blood, Belial stares, uncomprehendingly.

"How did he do it? Jason shouldn't have had a drop of mana left. Isn't that why he fainted? Then... how did he...?"

As Belial stares in disbelief at the man levitating above her, the hairs on the back of her neck slowly prick up, one by one. Jason doesn't fly down to greet her. Instead, the Hero of humanity slowly, deliberately, aims one finger at the succubus below him.

Fwip.

A dot of energy fires from his fingertip. Barely making the faintest of sounds, the seemingly harmless marble rushes toward Belial faster than she can react.

Fwoomp.

A near-silent explosion of energy detonates inches from Belial's face. Holy Energy irradiates the spot where she stands, resulting in a blast radius of over a hundred meters. Belial doesn't get a chance to scream as her vision turns bright white.

Phoebe and Kar stare with horror-filled eyes as the leader of humanity launches a lethal attack at the Second Emperor of demonkind.

Phoebe's vision wavers as she tries to comprehend her husband's actions.

"J-Jason... why... what...?"

Kar says nothing. However, a wave of killing intent emits from his eyes.

That person ain't Turtle.

He's a demon.

Part 178: Helpless Belial

Recommended Listening

Every inch of Belial's body begs for mercy. The moment Jason's holy energy bomb detonates, her consciousness falls to pieces. She crashes into the ground as the divine power of the angels hits her where she's weakest.

The world falls silent.

Belial lays motionless in the dirt, her head reeling from the unexpected assault. She stares into the sky as several seconds later, her vision slowly returns, little more than a spotty haze. The Second Emperor of Demonkind coughs weakly, while the one who assaulted her folds his hands behind his back.

"Juh... Jason...? He... attacked... me?"

Belial wheezes. The Hero's holy energy ravages her internal organs, causing immense pain. Even so, she merely grits her teeth and scowls at the winged-human levitating above her. With her incredible strength as a Demon Emperor, even angelic mana doesn't instantly kill her, despite how it would a subordinate of inferior rank.

Belial twitches her finger and raises a shaking arm to touch her chest. Intending to heal herself, she nearly succeeds before a flicker of movement to her left catches her off-guard.

CRACK!!

A fist bigger than a truck, formed from the wind itself, tears across the ground and uppercuts Belial into the sky. Her body spins and careens as she flies toward the Wordsmith levitating above her.

Suddenly, another fist appears! It strikes Belial from above and sends her tumbling to the planet's surface below. The succubus coughs blood as she falls.

Whump!

Belial hits the dirt with enough speed to crush an ordinary human into a puddle of gore. Despite her incredibly resilient demon body, several of her bones fracture and break, causing her immense pain.

"Ah... augh..."

Belial lays on her back and whimpers pitifully. Her chest rises and falls in short, stuttery motions. Her mind spins like a bowling ball, unable to make out her surroundings. No matter how she tries, the succubus can't calm the terror running through her veins. Her blood turns to ice as another fist hits her and sends her flying to the side.

Meanwhile, a short distance away, Henry and his four fellow soldiers stare at the unexpected sight in total disbelief. The young Lieutenant presses one of his hands against the side of his helmet, even as he tries to make sense of why Jason is attacking Belial with such vicious, bloodthirsty intentions.

"Jason is going to kill Samantha!" One of the nearby soldiers yells. "We have to stop him! That succubus is important to us! She healed one of my friends from a fatal wound. We can't let the

Commander tear her to pieces!"

"You saw what he did to the Hydra," A female soldier says. "Commander Jason blew the beast up from the inside-out. It was as if he detonated a bomb in the center of a lake of blood. How in the hell are we supposed to fight against that?"

Henry grits his teeth. "We don't, and we can't. Stand down. If the Commander is attacking the succubus, then we let him. He must have a good reason! Besides, everyone knows she's the Second Emperor. I'm sure he has a good reason!"

"But... Jason clearly isn't acting like himself! I've never seen him do something like this before! Not ever!"

"Then maybe that's proof he found out something horrifying!" Henry bellows. He jerks his head toward the female soldier and scowls at her. Due to the opaque nature of his helmet, she can't see his expression, but his tense body movements betray the anger boiling in his heart. "Commander Neil has always said we were wrong to accept a goddamned Emperor of Demonkind into our ranks! How do you know Jason hasn't learned something important during his fight against the Hydra? Maybe that bitch summoned it here! Did you ever think about that?!"

The female soldier takes a step back. Her confidence wavers under Henry's onslaught. "N-no, I... I..."

"Then keep your mouth shut, soldier! That's an order! We'll retreat and leave the Commander to his business!"

As Henry yells, a deep voice booms from the direction of the portal. "Hey! Turtle! What in the name of tarnation are you doing! Stop, dammit! STOP!!"

A massive soldier, four feet taller than those around him, stomps across the battlefield at nearly a hundred miles an hour. His feet crash against the ground with deep thunderous *booms*, leaving two-inch depressions in his wake. With huge, sweeping strides, he barrels toward Jason and Belial to try and save the succubus, paying no heed to his safety.

A short distance behind him, a slender soldier with a plasma rifle matches his speed, following him as he crosses the battlefield. "Jason! Stop it! Stop hurting Sammy!"

Kar and Phoebe dash across the torn-up field. As humanity's fourth and fifth strongest warriors, only they dare to stand up to the rampaging Wordsmith and save their friend. Nevertheless, no matter how loudly they yell, Jason merely folds his hands behind his back and stares at the succubus beneath him while battering her limp body wherever he pleases. Jason's windborn fists pummel Belial ferociously, turning her unmoving figure into a ragdoll.

Kar leaps forward and intercepts Belial as Jason sends her spinning across the torn-up plains. The reptilian Sphinx catches her broken body in his arms and envelops her in a protective embrace. Immediately, Jason's assault comes to a stop.

"What's wrong with you?!" Phoebe shrieks. Her gaze falls upon Belial, and a shudder goes down her spine. "Stop attacking Sam! Stop it, right this instant!"

Jason doesn't respond. He slowly flaps his wings and continues to fly in the sky. A moment later, the sound of rushing air envelops Kar.

Foop!

Kar vanishes, causing Belial's body to flop to the ground.

The Sphinx reappears at the warp-gate, a look of confusion on his face. He jerks his head around to gaze at his new location in bewilderment. "Huh? I was over there, and now I'm here... teleportation?"

The moment Kar vanishes, another fist materializes beside Belial and smashes her with all its strength, sending her careening across the ground. In the blink of an eye, a giant boulder appears in Belial's path, causing her to crash into it and come to a shuddering stop. The succubus offers no resistance, her comatose form unable to retaliate against Jason's brutal attacks.

This time, Phoebe dives forward. With tears in her eyes, she leaps atop the Second Emperor and shields her with her body. "Jason! Stop!!"

Foop!

Phoebe vanishes.

She teleports to Kar's side, traveling several football fields in the blink of an eye.

Enraged, Phoebe realizes what has happened far quicker than Kar. "Aaaargh! Kar, I don't know what's wrong with Jason's head, but Samantha won't last much longer! We have to stop him!"

Without replying, Kar jumps forward and dives into the ground. He activates his earth manipulation magic and begins swimming at twice his running speed. Phoebe dashes forward, using her enhanced agility to try and match his pace, but Kar easily outdoes her. Within seconds, right after Jason resumes attacking the helpless demoness beneath him, the soil suddenly opens up, and Belial falls into a depression. Kar engulfs her in dirt and yanks her deep into the depths of the planet.

Then, the Sphinx bursts out of the ground and pounces into the sky. With Jason hovering a hundred feet over the battlefield, Kar clears the gap in a single second. Fifty pounds of rock and dirt coil around the Sphinx's fist as he rears back to punch the Wordsmith in the chest.

Foop!

Jason vanishes, causing the Croco-Sphinx to hit nothing but air. Kar falls from the sky and lands on his feet, hitting the dirt with a deep *whump!*

"What? Where'd Turtle go?!"

Kar turns around, only to see Jason hovering a few feet above the dirt. The Wordsmith tilts his head downward, and a second later...

Foop!

Belial materializes aboveground, still unconscious. With her arms twisted and legs mangled, her appearance is like that of a broken corpse. Kar spares her the briefest of glances, but he can't tell if she's alive anymore.

"Turtle... looks like I'll hafta knock some sense into ya..."

The crocodile narrows his eyes menacingly. Killing intent spirals in his body, causing him to grit his teeth in rage.

Crack! Pop!

Kar's bones rapidly shift and reorient themselves. He leans forward and lands on his hands as his body morphs from an upright humanoid form into a four-legged animal body. His T-REX shifts along with his motions, having long since adapted to his unique physiology.

Seconds later, Jason slugs Belial again, flinging her into the sky. At that moment, massive eagle wings sprout from Kar's back. Now in his ultimate Sphinx form, Kar roars like a tiger and charges at Jason.

"Time for a nap, little turtle!!"

His claws lash out at Jason, but right before they hit...

Foop!

Jason teleports away, causing Kar to miss. The instant Jason reappears, Kar's heightened senses hone in on the Wordsmith. Kar leaps into the sky to chase after him.

Unlike before, thanks to his newly-acquired wings, Kar manages to chase after Jason as the Wordsmith repeatedly teleports to random locations. Kar focuses his senses and quickly notices something astonishing.

When Turtle teleports, there's a faint trail of mana that appears for a split-second! If I focus harder, I can predict his movements!

Despite the rage boiling in Kar's chest, he doesn't allow his emotions to get the best of himself. Instead, he places all of his attention on catching Jason so he can beat some sense into him.

Even if Big Boobs survives, she'll end up crippled and traumatized! Turtle has never been this violent, so what changed? Bah! I need to knock him out so I can get some answers!

Kar twists and somersaults in midair, then lunges toward Jason again. All the while, as Kar engages in combat with the Wordsmith, Phoebe slows to a stop below both of them.

Jason's wife stares at her husband with agitated eyes. Her entire body shivers and trembles as she imagines how badly she wants to wring his neck.

You prick! I was worried about you, but you turned out just fine and even killed the Hydra! Now, what the hell are you doing? How am I supposed to save Sammy?!

"Centurion, I need to speak to Jason! Open up an emergency communication line with him!"

"PILOT ZERO-ZERO-TWO, I CANNOT EXECUTE YOUR ORDER. PILOT ZERO-ZERO-THREE HAS DISABLED HIS COMMUNICATOR. I AM UNABLE TO ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION WITH HIS EXOSUIT."

Phoebe's expression turns ashen. "I made these stupid suits! Don't I have higher administrative rights than Jason?"

"NEGATIVE. PILOT ZERO-ZERO-THREE POSSESSES THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF COMMAND IN THE EXOSUIT INTERFACE. WITHOUT HIS PERMISSION, OR PERMISSION FROM PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR, I AM UNABLE TO ESTABLISH A COMMUNICATION LINK."

"Only Hope can deactivate the communications block?"

"AFFIRMATIVE."

"Fuck!"

Phoebe balls her hands into fists and punches her hips.

"I have to save Sam! I have to! But how can I beat Jason if he can simply teleport away?"

As Phoebe's thoughts race, Belial suddenly falls from the sky, having been battered by Jason yet again.

Boom!

The succubus crashes into the ground a short distance away from Phoebe, startling her.

"Sammy? Sam?!"

Phoebe jumps in fright and rushes over to Belial's side. Her face turns green as she gazes upon the horrible wounds inflicted upon the succubus.

"Oh, god, oh, god..."

The Wordsmith's wife trembles as she nudges Belial's swollen arm. Countless bruises and swollen patches of skin turn the succubus from a glowing shade of red to a miserable mess of black and blue.

Phoebe glances upward, where Kar continues flying after Jason. This time, Jason takes his attention off Belial to focus on dodging the Sphinx's attacks.

No matter how fast Kar jumps, spins, or flies, Jason always teleports away at the last second, causing the Sphinx to slash at the empty air. Over and over, Kar pursues the Wordsmith, only for his attacks to end up causing no damage.

"Dammit! Stand still!" Kar bellows. "I've gotta teach you a lesson!"

Phoebe narrows her eyes.

Jason hasn't retaliated against Kar once. So far, the only person he's attacked was Sam. But why? What reason could he have for attacking our friend? She's healed him on several occasions! They shouldn't have any enmity, yet ever since his encounter with the Hydra...

Gears whirr and click into place in Phoebe's head. Puzzle pieces click together, but several irregularities still don't fit together, leaving her perplexed and stifled.

Could my husband be under someone's mind control? That might be it! Otherwise, why would he ever attack Samantha?

Like a bolt of lightning, that realization causes the hair on the back of Phoebe's neck to stand on end.

Years ago, Jason told me that an attack on his mind caused Solomon's awakening. Solomon first appeared to help Jason from succumbing to someone else's control, but now that Solomon's protection has disappeared, Jason is vulnerable again!

The last puzzle piece clicks in place.

It's Ose! Ose took over Jason's mind, somehow. That has to be it! She nearly succeeded once, and if she has learned that Jason lacks Solomon's protection, she'd leap into action without hesitation!

Countless conversations whirl in Phoebe's mind as she remembers all the days she's spent talking to Belial, especially when Jason wasn't present.

Belial and Ose have a massive grudge between the two of them. From what I've gathered, Belial and Ose hate each other like nobody's business. If so, then it would explain why Jason has only aimed for Belial all this time!

While Phoebe ruminates, Kar and Jason continue to cross blows. Over and over, Kar lunges at Jason, his speed increasing all the time.

I see it! I see it! Kar's inner voice howls. There's a line of mana showing where Turtle is about to teleport! If I can get ahead of him...

Unbeknownst to the Sphinx, as he battles the Wordsmith, his body begins to adapt to the frantic pace of battle. Having only fought small-fry demons over the last several years, the maturing crocodile hasn't gone all-out in a battle since his ascension to Sphinx.

But now, with his battle against the Wordsmith, and his eager desire to inflict a killing blow, his body begins to morph and adapt, increasing his speed to levels beyond where he started minutes earlier.

As the Sphinx chases the Wordsmith, Phoebe watches them from below. A creeping dread appears in her mind, as her initial theory begins to waver.

Ose might be controlling Jason. However, if that's the case, why is he only interested in killing Samantha? Why not Kar, or me? Would Ose only harbor a grudge toward Sam, but not the rest of us? No... that doesn't make any sense.

CRACK!

Kar swipes his claw out and finally manages to tag Jason's arm, causing the Wordsmith to transform into a spinning top right after he teleports. Jason gyrates uncontrollably in the sky and loses his ability to fly. A moment later, he plummets to the earth below and hits the dirt with a tremendous bang!

"Hahahaha! I knew it! You're slowing down, Turtle!" Kar laughs, oblivious to his improving speed. "Now that I've tired you out, it's time to put you to bed!"

Kar flaps his wings. He rushes toward the Wordsmith below and raises a meaty paw. He aims for the back of Jason's head, but, at the last second, a fist formed from condensed holy energy materializes between Jason and the Sphinx. Kar doesn't even get a second to react before it smashes his exosuit's chest.

THOOMPH!

The wordsmithed fist hits Kar like a freight train, sending him flying backward. The Sphinx smashes into Tarus's plains, bounces off the ground two times, and skids to a stop.

"Ow... owie... ooh..."

With a single sneak attack, Jason knocks the Croco-Sphinx out. Immediately, he levitates into the air and aims his gaze at Phoebe and Belial.

"No!" Phoebe exclaims. She jumps in front of Belial to shield the succubus with her body, despite knowing the action is futile.

Instead of teleporting the succubus into his grasp, Jason freezes. A split second later, his body vanishes.

Foop!

Immediately after, another figure appears, only inches from where he hovered before.

Hope.

The second Wordsmith, leader of humanity's military, swings his fist at the empty air and frowns.

"He disappeared?"

PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR! PILOT ZERO-ZERO-THREE TELEPORTED AWAY THE MOMENT YOU ARRIVED. I HYPOTHEZIZE THAT HE ANTICIPATED YOUR ARRIVAL.

"Right..."

Hope sweeps his gaze around the battlefield, only to see Jason levitating several hundred feet behind him. The armored Wordsmith says nothing as he stares down his unarmored clone.

"Long time, no see," Hope mutters. "Got nothing to say for yourself?"

Jason doesn't respond.

However, below both combatants, Phoebe raises her voice. "Hope! There's something wrong with Jason! He attacked Samantha! I suspect someone might have mind-controlled him!"

Hope flicks his gaze down to the two women below him. He raises an eyebrow at the sight of the badly-injured succubus cradled in Phoebe's arms.

Jason attacked Belial? That makes no sense. I might do something like that, but there's no way Jason would.

Hope evaluates Jason carefully as he considers his options.

Meanwhile, below, Phoebe stares at Hope in disbelief.

Hope is levitating, just like Jason, but he isn't using wings! Jason told me that trying to fly without wings was extremely difficult. Does that mean Hope's flying abilities are superior to Jason's?

And look at how scruffy Hope's become! I haven't seen him in months. He looks the same as Jason but also more... threatening.

Phoebe scrutinizes Hope's appearance, shocked at the three-day-old facial hair he hasn't taken care of. However, the one thing she doesn't see is Solomon's Crown, now invisible thanks to Hope's Wordsmithing.

Hope narrows his mind. *Solomon. What's wrong with Jason? Why is he attacking Belial and the others?*

Solomon shrugs. *Does the reason matter? If he kills the Second Emperor, you won't have to worry about a shape-shifting infiltrator in your midst.*

Right. I'm not saying I oppose the idea, but... this isn't like Jason at all. I don't like this one bit. It smells like some fuckery's going on.

Hope's expression turns grim.

If anyone is going to kill the Demon Emperor lurking in our midst; it'll be me. I can't let Jason take my glory.

Solomon nods. *Very well. If that's how you feel, I'll let you in on a secret.*

A secret?

Yes. Indeed, Jason isn't in his right mind. When I transferred my crown to you, I left behind a portion of my soul in his mind in case of emergencies. Since the Hydra nearly killed him, it must have taken over.

Hope's eyes widen.

You did WHAT?! Solomon! What the fuck is wrong with you?

It's a protective measure. Only you and I know about this. If you let Jason rampage a little while longer, my soul can kill the succubus. You won't have to lift a finger. Once she dies, you can return Jason to normal and blame Ose. Nobody will know the difference, and you'll eliminate a threat from our ranks.

Solomon pauses.

What do you think of my plan? Brilliant, isn't it? You'll delegitimize Jason as the first commander, kill the succubus, and have a shot at taking over. Don't you find the idea enticing?

Hope stares at Jason, and Jason stares back. Neither Wordsmith makes a move. From the ground below, Phoebe can only wonder what thoughts are going through their heads.

Why isn't Jason attacking Belial anymore? Why doesn't Hope make a move?

Solomon smiles. *My soul recognizes you. He's waiting to see what we'll do. Given the situation, if I were in Jason's body, I would be seeking to cause as much harm to the demons as possible while pushing the blame on Ose. If you want, I can have him give up, while you can act as if you subdued him with your Wordsmithing.*

An ominous glint appears in Hope's eyes.

No. I have a better idea. Can you communicate with your other soul?

I can.

Hope smirks. *Good. A wise man once said, 'never let a tragedy go to waste.' Tell your other half to attack me, and don't hold back.*

Solomon frowns. *I beg your pardon? What would that accomplish?*

Hope ignores the question.

Do it.

Solomon sighs. *Haah. Very well. Don't come crying to me when Jason thrashes you.*

I'd like to see him try.

* * *

Phoebe watches unblinkingly as both Wordsmiths stare each other down. Her husband gazes at Hope from within his metallic armor, while the unarmored Hope simply smirks at him.

What's happening? Phoebe asks herself. *Why haven't they moved a muscle? Is Hope going to stop Jason? I need to say something! If Hope doesn't heal Belial, she'll die!*

Phoebe opens her mouth to speak. "Hope-"

Before she can get her words out, Jason vanishes!

An instant later, Jason reappears before Hope with his fist raised and punches the other Wordsmith with all his strength!

CRACK!

A sonic boom explodes from the impact point, sending Hope flying backward. He crashes into the ground, only to perfectly backflip and stick the landing.

"You're not Jason!" Hope bellows. "Get out of his head!"

Phoebe's heart skips a beat. *I knew it! Oh god, if Jason's attacking Hope, that must mean... Ose took over his mind! I have to get Samantha out of here! If both Wordsmiths fight, anything could happen!*

Phoebe wraps both arms underneath Belial's body, then dashes toward the portal.

Please don't notice me! Please don't notice me!

She shoots a glance backward just in time to see Hope leap into the sky. He and Jason erupt in an explosive battle of kicks and punches, along with all manner of bizarre magical attacks!

Thank you, Hope! Phoebe says, internally. *You have to stop Jason and get that demon out of his head! Protect Belial! We're counting on you!*

As the Wordsmiths engage in battle, Hope shoots the briefest of glances toward Phoebe's retreating form. His face cracks open in a satisfied grin.

Good. Now I can go all-out.

Part 179: Wordsmith VS Wordsmith

By the time Phoebe makes it to the warp-gate encampment, the battle between Hope and Jason has already reached a deafening peak. She turns around to stare in wide-eyed shock as her husband and his clone exchange vicious, violent blows with one another.

Boom! Crack!

Jason and Hope flit toward each other like enraged dragons. With nearly a mile separating Phoebe from the Wordsmiths, she can't make out any of their words, but the planet-shaking power of their attacks makes her tremble in fear.

"I've never seen Jason unleash this much raw power! He should have burnt himself out when he teleported the Hydra. Where is he pulling all of that mana from?"

* * *

Hope bellows a word as he dodges another flight-enhanced punch. "**Fall!**"

Jason loses his ability to fly, but before he can fall more than twenty feet, he stabilizes himself and leaps toward Hope again.

"Haha! I'm having fun!" Hope laughs. "Solomon, this is great! You should take over Jason's body more often! I never have anyone strong to spar with."

Solomon shakes his head. "My soul can only control him while he's unconscious. Once he wakes up, my duplicate will fall asleep to recover its strength. My original intent was for my soul to provide him some protection against mind-control, but I may have had other thoughts in mind, as well."

Jason summons a sword made of holy energy. Just before he slashes Hope in half, Hope bellows, "**Dissipate!**"

The sword bursts into particles of light, causing Jason's slash to miss Hope by only half a second.

"I never thought Jason could be so ferocious!" Hope says. "Your fighting prowess with his body is nothing to sneeze at."

Solomon remains silent for a moment as the two Wordsmiths trade ten more attacks. Hope smashes his fist against Jason's nanite armor, causing humanity's leader to tumble toward the planet below. With a violent *crash*, he hits the dirt and sends hydra blood spraying in every direction.

"My control of Jason's body is quite good. However... don't underestimate him. Jason is always holding himself back out of fear of hurting others. If he were to go all-out, I don't know how long you'd last."

Hope smirks. "Come on, do you think I'm an idiot? I'm way stronger than my original body. I've killed far more demons than he could imagine. There's a league of difference between us."

"Indeed," Solomon mutters. "However, my other half isn't using his full ability to fight you. He's holding back so he won't strike any lethal blows. In a true life-or-death battle, things might not work out

as smoothly as you'd expect."

Hope rolls his eyes. "**Teleport.**"

Hope aims his palm at Jason as his original body appears a few feet away.

"Incinerate!"

A blast of fire, heated to nearly five thousand degrees, hits Jason like an erupting volcano. The sheer might of the inferno batters the other Wordsmith backward, sending Jason tumbling to the ground below. Before he strikes the planet's surface, Jason suddenly vanishes and reappears, his suit undamaged, and no sign of exertion in his movements.

Hope frowns. "Why isn't Jason's energy running out? Based on what I've gathered, he should have exhausted his mana when he fought the Hydra. How is he still fighting, despite that?"

Solomon chuckles. "Young grasshopper, you have much to learn. I've spent six years training Jason. I helped him reach new heights in his Wordsmithing, and thus, he acquired several backups. While you may have honed your fighting skills against the demons, you would be a fool to think Jason has sat on his laurels this whole time. He is more than a match for you."

With a slight tinge of condescension, Solomon leans forward and sneers. "Haven't you noticed, Hope? I haven't had Jason attack you with a tenth of his strength. He holds back on every attack because you couldn't handle his full power."

"Bullshit," Hope interjects. He scowls at the old man's image in his mind. "You're lying."

"I'm not. Keep your guard up. I'll intensify your 'training,' now."

Suddenly, Jason vanishes. Hope's eyes flick to the side as he senses a trail of mana rushing toward his back.

"Bastard!"

Jason reappears behind Hope with his palm aimed at the other Wordsmith's spine.

BOOM!

A sonic boom detonates behind Hope before he can react. The deafening roar jars Hope's senses and flings him forward, sending him into an uncontrolled free-fall as he tries to reorient his senses.

Foop!

Jason reappears in front of Hope a split-second before his clone hits the ground. Ten bolts of lightning fire from his palm and strike the other Wordsmith's body.

Crack, crack, crack!

Agonizing bursts of electricity flood through Hope's nervous system, causing his muscles to seize up. His momentum reverses under Jason's relentless assault, sending him flying in the opposite direction yet again. This time, Jason doesn't move as his clone plows into the field of bloody dirt headfirst.

"Guhuk!"

Hope crashes onto his back and coughs violently. The stench of Hydra blood assaults his senses, while an awful burning sensation scorches his skin. For several seconds, the nanites in Hope's body tremble and shiver as Centurion tries desperately to reboot his systems.

"H-**Heal!**"

Hope coughs out a word, and finally, the electrical currents in his body die down. He pants weakly and stares at his original body in horror.

"God... damn... how?! How could Jason fire so many lightning bolts? He shouldn't have the energy reserves to pull off a stunt like that!"

Solomon closes his eyes. He crosses his eyes and levitates in the air like an enlightened sage. "Ah, yes. That might seem to be the case, to the untrained eye. Of course, if Jason's body can only hold a certain amount of energy before he reaches his cap, who is to say he can't store some of it later for external use?"

Hope lays on his back and stares at the sky for a moment in disbelief.

"Store some of it later... fuck! FUCK! Why didn't I think of that? It's brilliant!"

Solomon blushes. "Oh, come now. It was nothing much. Just something I thought up on a whim. No big deal at all."

"What other insights did you impart upon my original body? Don't hold out on me now."

Solomon waves his hand flippantly. "Keep fighting, and you'll soon find out! There's no need to trouble me over such trifles!"

Hope jumps to his feet. "**Inspect!**"

His vision shifts slightly as his eyes fall upon Jason's nanite-protected body. Several detailed readouts appear, each one resembling a HUD from a video game. One of them catches Hope's eye.

"According to the energy sensor, there are eighty-seven marble-sized orbs contained within Jason's body. Each one harnesses an immense amount of spiritual energy. Don't tell me... Jason stores his energy inside them to use in an emergency?"

"That's right," Solomon says. "As you are now, even if I wasn't controlling Jason during this battle, you still wouldn't stand a chance."

"Yeah?" Hope asks, as a hint of suspicion appears in his eyes. "Then why did Jason faint when he fought the Hydra?"

Solomon sighs. "He's rusty."

"Rusty?"

"Yes. Jason hardly ever fights anyone but Phoebe, and he always holds back so he won't hurt her. During a life and death battle against the Hydra, he used too much mana and ran all of his energy dry at once. After he fainted, I took over."

Solomon continues. "Had he still possessed even one percent of his mana after teleporting the Hydra, he could have activated a Mana Bead and restored his energy instantly. Since he didn't, my soul sliver

rescued him."

Hope strokes his stubble for a moment, then nods. "I see. You've given me a lot to think about. I always assumed Jason's skills were beneath me when it came to combat prowess, but I was wrong. I'll have to work harder to surpass him."

"Good. Humility is an essential trait any leader should possess," Solomon remarks. "Barring warlords."

"Mmm."

Hope eyeballs Jason for several seconds.

"I'm nearly out of mana. If I continue fighting, I might die. I've always killed my demon adversaries in the most efficient way possible, so I never considered the possibility of engaging in a sustained battle. Go ahead and call the fight here, Solomon. Let Jason wake up."

Solomon hesitates. "Are you certain? Once Jason wakes up, he won't know of the events following his blackout. This is an invaluable opportunity for you to hone your skills."

"I've made up my mind," Hope growls. "Don't test me. Wake Jason up."

Hope's hardened gaze falls upon the heroic specter residing in his body. With a sigh, Solomon tosses his hands in the air. "Haah. Very well. If that is what you want, I will follow your orders. You're in charge, here."

Solomon motions with his hands toward the armored Wordsmith, but Hope's eyes narrow into slits.

Am I in charge? I wonder about that.

A moment later, Jason's body wobbles slightly. He stumbles forward and falls to the ground, splashing in the lake of Hydra blood with a sickening *splort!*

Hope takes a deep breath, then exhales a wave of turbid air. Moments later, his eyes soften, and a look of worry stretches across his face.

"Jason? Jason? Are you alright?"

Hope quickly runs over to his original body and flips him onto his back.

"Talk to me! Come on, man! You can't die here!"

After a few seconds, Jason's helmet eventually dissipates, revealing the Wordsmith's pale, exhausted face.

"Where... am I? Hope? What happened?"

When my eyes open, many questions appear in my mind. My clone rests his arm under my neck to help prop me up. A look of relief passes over his face as he stares at me.

"You're alive. Thank god! I thought you were a goner for a while."

"A goner? Where's the Hydra?"

I pull myself to my feet and frown as I evaluate my mana level. Currently, it appears to be nearly half-full. I remember fainting due to mana exhaustion... and then I fell down... the last thing I saw was the Hydra's mouth as it rushed toward me.

Holy shit! Did that bastard eat me? How am I still alive? I can't remember anything!

Hope smiles and raises his head to the sky. "Oh, Jason. If only you knew. I don't know the exact circumstances but... it seems you fainted, and shortly afterward, a demon took over your body!"

"What?!" I yell, shock jolting through my mind. "A demon? Who? When? How?!"

Hope sighs. "I think Ose was the culprit. She activated your Wordsmithing powers and tried to assassinate Belial. I came just in the nick of time and managed to save her, but then you started attacking me. Look over there! Phoebe and the others witnessed the whole thing."

My clone gestures into the distance, and I follow his gaze to the Core warpgate.

"If we fought, then what happened to Ose? Why isn't she controlling me anymore?"

Hope's expression turns complicated. "I used my Wordsmithing to banish her from your mind. Things looked pretty dicey for a while, but you're lucky I showed up. If I hadn't, she might have killed Belial, and who knows how many others? Maybe even Phoebe..."

As Hope speaks, it dawns on me just how close humanity came to having their so-called protector wipe them out. A shudder goes down my back.

"Wait, you said I nearly killed Belial. Is she okay? Where is she now?"

Hope purses his lips. An odd look appears in his eyes as he glances at the warpgate. "Over there. Phoebe rescued her during our battle. I didn't have time to heal her since you were attacking me with all your might. With any luck, she might still be alive..."

A surge of adrenaline courses through my body. I leap to my feet and aim my mind at the warpgate.

"Teleport!"

Foop.

I instantly travel to Phoebe's side, startling her in the process. My wife jerks backward and stares at me with a mixture of trepidation and fear. "J-Jason...?"

"It's me!" I say, quickly calming her down. My eyes fall on Belial's broken body, making my stomach coil into a knot.

Belial's usually ravishing figure appears mutilated and deformed. Her arms and legs lay broken in dozens of places, causing them to hang off her torso like melted butter. Hundreds of bruises and gashes cover her body. Blood seeps out from innumerable cuts, only slightly stifled thanks to the medical nanobots of our Combat Medic division.

Without wasting any time, I aim my mind at Belial. **"HEAL!"**

A flash of light strikes the succubus. It transforms into a shroud of magical energy and wraps around her like a mother's embrace. Within seconds, the devastating damage to Belial's body begins to heal. Her

broken bones snap back into place, her blood levels stabilize, and the thousands of bruises and cuts fade away, once again giving her skin a beautiful red shine.

However, after the healing aura finishes, Belial doesn't awaken. Phoebe and I wait for a few moments, but nothing happens. Belial continues to lay silently in Phoebe's arms.

"**Status,**" I say, speaking to the void. A wall of information appears in my mind's eye, allowing me to assess Belial's health with the accuracy of a doctor from fifty million years in the future.

"What's wrong with Sam?" Phoebe asks anxiously. "Is she alive?!"

"Yeah. However... it seems that when Ose took over my mind and attacked Samantha... I... I traumatized her brain. Normally, I'd be able to repair the damage, but without Solomon's Crown..."

I trail off, making Phoebe's eyes darken.

Both of us stare at our comatose friend. My thoughts turn inward, while waves of guilt strike me, one after the other.

This is all my fault. I let Ose get in my head. I should have known this would happen! She seized control of my mind in the past, but I only managed to save myself thanks to Solomon's Crown! Without him around, I'm a sitting duck. I'm a liability!

What will happen if another demon takes control of my mind? What about Hope? We're the equivalent of nukes, but without the safety nets those weapons once possessed. Our brains are open books!

Phoebe strokes Belial's face. "Come on, Sammy... wake up... wake up..."

A rushing of air behind me signals Hope's arrival.

Foop.

My clone stands beside me and evaluates Belial's condition for a moment.

"You healed Belial?"

"Yeah."

"Then why hasn't she woken up?"

I sigh. "Well, I can't heal her brain damage. Haven't you noticed? I'm not wearing Solomon's Crown."

Hope glances at the top of my head. "Oh, right. I haven't seen you in so long that I forgot. What does that have to do with anything? Is your Wordsmithing too weak to manage such a simple task?"

"The human brain is the most complex organ in the body. I always needed Solomon's Crown to heal brain damage. Hell, not even Belial can manage such a feat. Shouldn't you know this?"

Hope frowns. "I don't spend a lot of time healing others."

Hardly have the words left Hope's mouth before Phoebe shoots him a vicious scowl. "No, kidding! You and Jason always leave the hospital work to Sam! She's not the only capable healer here, you know! Now that's she's down for the count, are you going to continue shirking your duties?"

Hope's expression remains impassive. "Perhaps. I'm a busy man."

Phoebe rolls her eyes. "You're full of shit, that's what you are."

"Don't talk to me like that," Hope says, a hint of indignation in his voice. "Have you forgotten? If it weren't for me, that damned- I mean, that succubus friend of yours would be dead! I saved her from Jason. Hell, if I hadn't shown up, who knows how many people he might have killed?"

Hope jerks his eyes up to meet mine. "And you! How irresponsible can you be? You let a Demon Emperor take over your mind! How are you going to account for today? Look at all these dead soldiers! We've lost dozens of reserve personnel!"

I quickly counter Hope's words. "Don't look at me! I didn't kill them. The damned Hydra did, and I nearly died fighting it!"

"I guess we should consider you our hero then?" Hope asks, a condescending sneer on his face. "You are so magnanimous! How much more will you screw things up? Shall I take over as humanity's commander, or should we give you another chance? What could possibly go wrong?"

With a groan, I wave Hope's complaints away. "Don't patronize me. Today was an accident. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. As for Belial, I'll find a way to heal her."

"What about the dead soldiers?"

"I'll compensate their families and give them an honorable burial. I can't do much else for them, given the circumstances. Stop trying to turn everyone against me. You're starting to piss me off."

Hope steps away from me and spins on his heel. "Whatever! I don't have time for this. You're lucky that rampaging Hydra didn't wait another hour to attack, or you might have missed me. I have some business to attend to in the Labyrinth, so I'll be leaving for a few days."

"Leaving? Where are you going?"

Hope doesn't answer my question. Instead, he shoots me a sneer and immediately heads toward the portal.

"Don't everyone thank me all at once for saving the day. That might be asking too much."

Without saying another word, my clone enters the warpgate and disappears into the Core, leaving the rest of us behind.

"Jason," Phoebe says, "Did you see Kar? He went out to try and save Belial, but you knocked him out with a single attack. I think he's still somewhere out there on the battlefield."

My expression darkens. "I hurt Kar, too? Jesus. What the hell is wrong with me, Phoebe? How could I let that demon bitch take over my mind? Hope isn't wrong, you know. I wreaked a lot of havoc. I didn't realize until today just how dangerous my powers might be in the hands of the demons."

Phoebe purses her lips. "Mmm. Hope said Ose was the one who took over your mind, but have you confirmed his hypothesis?"

"No. Why? Do you think he made a mistake?"

"Not necessarily..."

Phoebe trails off. Her expression turns ugly as she stares at the silent succubus lying in her arms.

"...I don't know, Jason. Everything happened so fast. I don't even know how you killed the Hydra. Considering how much effort we put into battling it, only for it to nearly kill us all, I can hardly believe you wiped it out in less than a minute. Do you remember anything that happened after it swallowed you? Anything at all?"

I flick my gaze toward the blood-soaked battlefield. As I sweep my gaze around to search for Kar, I shake my head.

"No. Not a thing."

"Alright. I have this worry resting in my gut... but it's only a feeling. I'm probably just overthinking things."

I nod. "Yeah. It's probably nothing."

"Yeah."

My wife and I fall silent. A few moments later, I spot Kar's armored body, laying in a particularly viscous pool of blood. The acrid fluid sizzles as it touches his armor, sending thin wisps of smoke into the air.

"I'll be back," I say to Phoebe. **"Teleport."**

"Tell Neil I'm leaving for a few days," Hope says to a nearby officer. He walks across the vast, overcrowded area known as the Labyrinth Core, past rows of computer servers, and all manner of advanced mechanical systems. The young soldier he nods at retorts with a salute.

"Yes, sir!"

Hope strides across the room quickly, not bothering to dilly-dally. He barely looks at the monsters and humans milling about, but all of them stare at his grizzled face and smile or salute.

"General!"

"There he goes. That's the true leader of humanity, right there."

"I love that guy. I'd die for him!"

Several soldiers murmur to each other and nod appreciatively, but Hope doesn't give them a second glance.

Soon, he arrives at the massive double-doors leading to the outer Labyrinth. Dozens of heavily armored guards equipped with humanity's best weapons eyeball him as he approaches.

"General? Are you heading into the Labyrinth?"

Hope slows to a stop. "I am."

"Alright. Give us a minute, and we'll prepare you an escort."

Hope shakes his head. "That won't be necessary. My mission requires stealth. I have to go alone."

The door guard frowns underneath his faceless mask. "I... sir, I can't allow that! I beg your forgiveness, but if something were to happen to you out there, Neil would-!"

"Neil would... what?" Hope asks, a cold glint in his eye. "Neil and I are close friends. He might be our strategic commander, but he outranks me in title alone. If I wish to enter the Labyrinth by myself, I don't require Neil's permission. Understood?"

"Y-yes, sir, but... at least let us send a few Spectres with you. If your mission involves stealth-"

"That will be all," Hope says, cutting the soldier off mid-sentence. "Nobody follows me. Understood?"

The soldier tries to retort, but the ice in Hope's eyes freezes his heart solid.

"Yes, General. I apologize."

"Good."

Hope continues on his way, but just before stepping through the double doors, he pauses.

"Thank you for your concern, soldier. At ease."

"Yes, General."

* * *

A minute later, Hope enters the Labyrinth and speaks to the void. **"Invisibility. Silence. Suppress."**

His body vanishes from existence, making him less detectable than a piece of pollen in a breeze. Hope uses his wingless flying ability to hover over the ground and rush forward, traveling at surprisingly high speeds as he examines the Crown's detailed Labyrinth map.

Solomon chuckles. "Oh, Hope. You have a way with people."

"Shut up," The Wordsmith growls. "I'm only doing this for you, Solomon. Now, tell me where we're going. And no more tricks. That little stunt with Jason won't fly with me. If you try and pull something similar, I'll erase your soul from the Crown without a second thought. "

Solomon's jovial smile vanishes. "I did what was necessary to ensure Jason's survival."

"Don't play stupid with me," Hope says, as he slows to a stop. "Saving Jason's life is one thing. Using his body to try and kill Belial is another. Jason may seem like a fool, but there's no way he'll let this go. For the so-called Ancient King of Knowledge-Seeking, your actions possess surprisingly little prescience. Given time, he'll see through your web of lies to discover Ose wasn't the culprit. And then what?"

Hope pauses for emphasis before continuing.

"I know what Jason will do. He'll suddenly sympathize with Ose. And who can blame him? Even I wouldn't stand idly and allow someone to suffer a false accusation. You've indirectly turned her into an innocent bystander in Jason's mind. You undermined your own plan before it even started!"

Solomon winces under Hope's verbal barrage. After a few moments, his tone turns apologetic. "I... I see. I hadn't thought that far ahead. You appear to be a little sharper than your counterpart."

"Naturally."

Hope dismisses the conversation with a wave of his hand.

"Now, stop beating around the bush and tell me where we're going. Why is this little trip so important?"

Solomon smiles. "To defeat the demons, we need more power. During the era of Earth's destruction, my last act was to seal innumerable treasures and countless mighty artifacts inside the Labyrinth. During the battle against the Black Witch, Jason unleashed a few of these, but they hardly count among the cream of the crop. I know of two items that will make the demons tremble in terror. They can easily turn the tides of war!"

As Solomon speaks, a spark of interest appears in Hope's eyes. "Oh? Do tell. Where are they?"

"That... I don't know!"

Solomon sighs.

"I lost my memories after I sealed myself behind the golden door and faded away. I only have a vague recollection of their whereabouts... but worry not! For these particular treasures, I left behind a few essential clues in a place you should be familiar with."

"Where?"

Solomon motions with his hands and summons the three-dimensional Labyrinth map.

"Here! In this room!"

Hope follows Solomon's gaze, making his face turn pale.

"You're kidding. The El-Dorado room? The place where I found Hoarhiim's orb?"

Solomon nods. "That's correct."

"It used to be closer than this! Why is it fifty billion miles away, now?"

Solomon shrugs. "Satan's Labyrinth is a twisting maze of shifting halls and moving rooms. The only area that remains fixed in place is the Labyrinth Core. Come! There's no time for us to dawdle. We must find the Remnant Wills and locate their hidden treasures as quickly as possible. The extermination of demonkind depends on it!"

Hope begins hovering forward again, increasing his speed as he heads toward the location marked on the map. "Remnant Wills?"

"Hehe. You will see," Solomon says, keeping his words mysterious.

"All right then. Keep your secrets."

The Wordsmith flies into the distance, leaving the Core far behind as he heads into the deepest, darkest areas of the Labyrinth.

Part 180: Mental Defenses

I activate my Wordsmithing to heal Kar and bring him back from the brink of unconsciousness. As I do, a thought appears in the back of my mind.

Hope must have lied to me.

I don't know why he did, but I know it's the most likely scenario.

If Ose, the current reigning leader of demonkind, were to take over my mind, there's no way she would be content with killing Belial. I don't care how deep their blood feud runs. If anything, she would bide her time and prepare for the annihilation of humanity's defenses. I don't know much about Ose, but I know a little.

Belial doesn't talk to me much, but I hear information secondhand through my wife. Since she and the Second Emperor are on good terms, little tidbits filter down the grapevine now and then, especially when it comes to information Phoebe thinks I should know.

So, the question I face now is... if Hope is lying, what should I do about it?

"Cough! Cough!"

Kar clambers to his feet and shudders as he reverts from his Sphinx form back to his reptilian appearance..

"Turtle... what happened? Why are you here now? No, more importantly, why did you attack me?"

I shrug. "Dunno. According to everyone else, the Third Emperor of demonkind took over my mind. However, I don't buy that explanation. I think something else happened. How about you? Are you alright?"

Kar rubs his scaly scalp. "Ngh. I am fine. I could go for a nap, but otherwise, my condition is perfect. Ah! What about Big Boobs? Is she alive?!"

"Yeah. Erm, Hope showed up to battle me. After he brought me back to my senses, I healed Belial. However... she's fallen into a coma. Without Solomon's Crown, I can't wake her up."

Kar's reptilian eyes flick to the top of my head. "Hold on; you lost Whitebeard's Crown? When?"

"I didn't lose it; Solomon left me. Look, it's complicated, alright? The point is, Belial's comatose, and I nearly wiped out humanity shortly after a demon supposedly took over my body. There's a lot on my plate right now."

Kar gazes at the blood-soaked battlefield for a moment. "Hmm... are you saying you don't think a demon was responsible for your actions?"

"Exactly. Hope told everyone that Ose took over my mind, but I don't believe him. If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was because he's as bad at lying as me. Either that, or I know my own tells too well for him to give me the slip."

"If the Ice Queen wasn't responsible, then... do you suspect Rabbit took over your mind?"

"I don't know. Hope is a definite possibility, especially considering he has the same powers as me. However, why bother? He could simply kill me and take over my place if he had any nefarious intentions in mind. No, I think another party was responsible."

Gears whirr and click in my head as I take a few moments to fit the puzzle pieces together. Ever since I woke up, I've spent most of my time healing and questioning others to figure out what happened. I haven't had the time to merge all of the information together.

Two minutes later, an idea pops into my head.

"I may have been unconscious, but that doesn't mean I can't find out what happened. **Memory.**"

I speak a word of power. A few seconds later, the world shifts around me.

Replaying memories.

A strange, ethereal voice hovers in the air. Its tone is neither masculine, nor feminine, but androgynous and slightly robotic.

It doesn't take me long to revisit the last thirty minutes of my life.

My expression darkens.

"Cease."

With one more word, my memories dissipate, returning my consciousness to the real world.

"Kar. I... I..."

I open my mouth to speak to the croco-Sphinx, but words escape me.

Solomon split his soul in half when he left. When I fell unconscious, he took over and nearly killed Belial. Even now, he's still inside me... resting.

Kar looks me in the eye. "What is it, Turtle? Your face... are you feeling unwell? Your complexion is terrible."

I shake my head. "No, I'm not feeling good at all. **Dissipate!**"

A moment later, I send a surge of magic deep into my mind. In the blink of an eye, it grabs hold of Solomon's dormant soul, waking him from his slumber.

Gah! What- Jason?! Stop! STOP! I'm only here to protect you!!

I shake my head.

No, Solomon. I trusted you once. The fact that you chose to take over my mind and tried to kill Belial means we cannot be allies anymore.

I focus my attention and wrap my claws around the old man's soul.

Get out of my head. Get out! GET OUT!

Solomon's expression turns pale.

Jason! Please, don't do this! This isn't you! This- aaauugh! AUUUGH!!

Solomon's screams intensify. After several seconds, his voice vanishes, purged from my mind.

I stare at Kar for a moment and sigh.

Crisis averted. Anyone who tries to kill my family won't live to see the next sunrise.

Kar raises his eyebrow. "Uhh. What just happened?"

"Ose wasn't the one who took over my mind. Solomon was."

"Huh? Whitebeard did? I'm lost. I don't understand."

I rub my forehead. "Me neither. It seems that when Solomon took his Crown and left, he tore his soul in half and placed it in my body. I still have no idea where Solomon's Crown went, but the fact he left half his soul behind to try and kill Belial means he couldn't have had good intentions."

The more I speak, the more disjointed each puzzle piece feels. If I wasn't good enough for Solomon, then who is? Hope? When I last saw my clone, he wasn't wearing Solomon's Crown. It must be someone else. Neil, maybe? I haven't seen Neil in a year or two, so he might be a suspect.

In any case, I know one thing for sure; with Solomon gone, my mind is an open book. Hope might have lied about Ose possessing my body, but there's no reason she couldn't attempt such a thing in the future. If she does, then without Solomon's Crown or his soul to protect me, I'll be putty in her hands.

In that case... I need a defense system. I need a barrier in place to protect myself from mind control.

I need another *Solomon*. But not Solomon himself. Someone else.

"Rock."

I speak to the void and summon a large boulder behind me, one with a flat top. I leap atop it and sit cross-legged to think, all while Kar watches me with a curious gaze.

I could simply back up my mind inside of itself. Then if I fall unconscious, my other half can wake up and take control, preventing me from falling unconscious, ever!

But maybe that's not the right move. After all, if someone manages to beat the shit out of me, having my backup consciousness be the same as my primary one won't give me any new battle strategies. I'll likely end up beaten and battered again.

Since that's the case, my backup consciousness should have a different view of combat and battle strategies compared to how I think of them now. Perhaps I should copy someone else's mind into mine? But who should I choose?

If I pick the wrong person, they could betray me, or even humanity as a whole! I can't make such a decision lightly. I need to think. Think. Think.

Minutes pass. The faces of friends and family appear in my head, but it doesn't take long before three people appear, each one a brilliantly shining star compared to the others before.

*Phoebe, Belial, and Daisy. Well, my daughter is certainly trustworthy. She wouldn't betray her daddy, but there's no way she'll have any useful battle instincts. That only leaves Belial and Phoebe. Belial's mind is probably more adept at wielding magic than Phoebe's, but then again, she **is** a demon. I can't put a demon's mind inside my own, no matter how much I trust her.*

So, in the end, the best candidate appears to be my wife! I should have thought of Phoebe sooner. If I use her soul as my protector, she'll definitely guard me from unwanted intruders, she won't betray humanity, and she should be a damn good fighter, too. I bet she'd make excellent use of my Wordsmithing if push comes to shove.

So, it's settled!

A flash of light ignites in my eyes. **"Backup."**

In the blink of an eye, my mind travels over to Phoebe's. Her combat instincts, personality, and memories all download into my brain, ending up as an isolated dot of mana at the base of my Cerebrum. While I can look into her memories if I so wish, I don't, and would never consider such a thing. Her backup only exists to prevent the demons from overtaking my mind. I would never violate her privacy by peeping into her memories, not unless I had a damn good reason.

Moments later, Phoebe's face appears in my mind; as vivid and lifelike as if she were standing before me. Unlike in the past, when I spoke to Hoarhiim, Blaarjiim, or even Solomon, her presence is very visceral, almost as if she's been a part of my thoughts since the day I was born.

"Jason?"

Yep, that's me, I think.

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "Where am I?"

Well, um... how to put this? I found out that Solomon was the one who took over my mind; not Ose.

I spend a minute explaining the situation to my wife. After I finish, she nods.

"I see. So you copied my mind to protect yours?"

Yeah. If you want, I can find a different method.

Phoebe shrugs. "No, it's fine! I'd have it no other way. Who better to protect my wonderful husband than me?"

Dammit, Phoebe. Stop making me blush. Obviously, you were the only person I'd choose!

"I'd do the same for you in a heartbeat," Phoebe says, smiling radiantly. "In any case, make sure you let my main body know about me. We should also ask Hope why he lied about Ose possessing you."

I shake my head. *I did say Hope lied, but that might not be the case. Throughout the whole battle, he seemed very distant, like he was only trying to scope out my combat capabilities. It's possible he wasn't sure if Ose took over my mind or not. I don't have proof one way or the other.*

All the more reason to question him, Phoebe replies, her expression turning stern. *You can't just let him off, Jason. He might be your clone, but that doesn't mean you two share the same values. He's lived a different life from you over the past six years. He might have changed more than you'd like.*

I don't mind if Hope underwent a personality shift, I say, but if he switched allegiances and is now working for the demons, I want to know. I'll look for him when I have time, alright?

"I understand."

Phoebe falls silent.

I pull my attention away from my mind's eye, only to see Kar's scaly face sitting mere inches from mine.

"Gah! Kar! What are you doing?!"

I stumble backward and nearly fall off my rock. I barely manage to catch myself in the nick of time, and Kar pulls his head back.

"Sorry, Turtle. You were acting funny for a while. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Yeah! Yeah, I'm fine. Sheesh, don't just get in a guy's face, you damned crocodile."

Kar flares his nostrils and chuckles quietly. "Heh... in any case, there's no sense lingering around here now. Let's head over and chat with White-Hair. I'm sure she'll want our help moving Big Boobs to the infirmary."

Kar's words cause my nerves to settle. With a nod, I reply, "I agree. Come on, Kar. Belial got hurt because of me. I have to take care of her before I head out to find Ose."

"Hm? The Ice Queen? You're still planning to look for her?"

"Yup. My goal has been and still is to seek peace with the demons. If I don't try, then war may arrive at our doorstep. I've prepared many defenses for if the demons should decide to invade, but I don't want to come to blows if I don't have to."

"An admirable goal..." Kar murmurs. "However, when it comes to demonkind, I believe that violence is unavoidable. Murder and bloodlust are all that drives them. It would be best if you didn't hope for their morality to match yours. Otherwise, you will end up disappointed."

Kar strokes his jaw. "Turtle. There is something I've wanted to speak to you about for a few years, now. It involves my mother."

"Your mother?"

I pause for a moment as vague memories bubble to the surface of my mind. When I first met Kar, he did mention something about having a human mother. What was her name again?

"Marie Becker," Kar says, answering my thoughts. "She is the one who saved my people. She is a benevolent goddess who guided us through the darkness to a point where my people can now thrive! We may still have to hide in the shadows, but at least now, we live in peace. Mother has ideals similar to yours. I think it is time you spoke with her."

I shrug. "Maybe after I deal with Ose. I'm sure your mother is great and all, but I have to try and get Ose to sign a peace treaty. If I don't, millions, possibly even billions, could die."

Kar waggles his finger. "Mother is unlike any human you've ever met. She transcended the limits of the human body long ago. She knows the demons inside and out. Before attempting a discussion with the Ice Queen, you must seek my mother's guidance! She can help you!"

Kar's eyes glow with excitement. Every time he mentions his mother, the fire in his soul burns a little brighter than before, revealing the deep admiration and devotion he holds for this 'Marie' woman.

I shrug. "Alright, alright. If you think visiting Marie is the right call, so be it. Will it take us long to find her?"

Kar shakes his heads. "No. It'll be a cinch! We can drop by on the way to Hell Harbor!"

"Hell Harbor?"

Kar nods. "The homeworld for the various demon leaders. Hell Harbor is their home away from Hell, where they can live with the warmth of a star beating their backs, and greenery to dazzle their eyes. Hell Harbor is a paradise far beyond anything you've ever seen. If you wish to find the Ice Queen, you'll have to travel there to find her."

"Alright. Since you seem to know where it is, I'll have to trouble you to lead me there."

"Bahaha! You got it!"

Kar slaps my back playfully and gives me a huge thumbs-up. I force a smile back at him but sigh on the inside.

So much to do, and so little time.

I pull myself to my feet and stretch my back. A moment later, as I sweep my gaze around the battlefield, a jolt of surprise runs through my body.

"Huh?! What the hell? What happened to all the Hydra blood?! Wasn't this place absolutely soaked just ten minutes ago? Don't tell me it all evaporated!"

Kar follows my gaze. As he looks around, his expression turns incredulous.

"Y-you're right, Turtle. There's no way a lake of blood would vanish out of nowhere. Did you clean it up with your Wordsmithing?"

I scratch my head for a moment. "...No? Maybe Hope did. But he left half an hour ago, so why would he wait until now?"

Kar and I glance at each other, and pure bewilderment passes between us. I quickly speak a word of power to try and figure out what happened.

"Memory."

Seconds later, I shake my head in disbelief.

"The lake of blood vanished into thin air only a minute ago, while we were talking. I don't know how, but it did. Something strange has been happening today. First, a Hydra attacked, then elemental wyverns, and even obsidian goblins. Those beasts are all rare creatures we shouldn't see once in a thousand years, but they popped into existence out of nowhere."

Kar nods, and his expression turns grave. "Perhaps it's a demon plot to wreak havoc on our world. They must intend to cause chaos and panic."

"Maybe, yeah. It could be something else, too. I'll have to investigate it, later, if I have time. For now, let's go and help Phoebe and Belial."

"Alright."

Kar follows after me as we head over to the warpgate pavilion.

All the while, my thoughts wander about.

More pieces and more clues. I need to put the puzzle together if I hope to figure out what's going on.

Part 181: Emperor of Shadows

Twenty-nine demons sit at a long, rectangular table. It extends for over a hundred feet, offering each of us plenty of elbow room. Dozens of papers, papyrus scrolls, and etched runes lay before the various Dukes and Barons gathered today. I sweep my gaze around to spot all of the Dukes, including Barbatos, Bael, and Mephisto, along with several Barons as well. The only demon missing is Ose, who seems to be running late.

Having already read the documents several times, I quietly flick my eyes over a few reports placed at the top. Each offers a series of bullet points regarding the upcoming war. At the least, they provide a slight distraction, allowing me to ignore a certain *someone*.

"Hey, Beelzebub!" Bael says, raising his voice at me. He sits directly across the table, a look of annoyance etched into his fat face. "You've got a lot of nerve coming here."

My eye twitches. Having suffered a humiliating beatdown by the enraged buffoon only a few days prior, I can barely stand to look at him. All I did was rid myself of one worthless servant, an amorphous blob of a woman who couldn't take two steps without shaking the whole Labyrinth. How could I have known the Duke of Pain would fly into a rage on Rosalia's behalf? It's true what they say: Fat bastards roll together.

"Shut up," I growl, keeping my eyes focused on my papers. "Now is neither the time nor the place."

"Aww, wassa matter? Scared I might knock some more teeth out?"

Bael's voice lilts as he tries to mock me, but I ignore him. He won't dare try anything in the Council Hall, especially not with Operation Stormbringer looming on the horizon. And if he does, I won't be caught unprepared like last time.

A Baron seated beside Bael snickers. "I heard you took this flamey little bastard to town, Bael. That's what I love about you."

"Damn straight," Bael replies. "You ain't so bad yourself, Duriel. It seems you and your brother have been kicking some ass out there."

Duriel flashes a smug grin. "Those fleshbags think they're tough shit, but whenever they fight a Baron, they run for the hills. I can only imagine their faces when you come strolling 'round the corner!"

As one of the Battle Brothers, Duriel's renown among other Barons rivals even Ose. He and his twin, Zamiel, stand atop the hierarchy of Barons, inches away from obtaining the title of Duke. Of course, compared to Ose and myself, they're hardly worth noting. I ascended from Lord to Duke in a matter of days. They can't ever hope to match my brilliance! The best they'll ever manage is sucking up to their superiors.

I shoot a glance at the massive, armored fellow. His demonstone plate-mail affords him a stalwart defense only slightly inferior to Bael's body, but his true might comes from the range of weapon techniques he and his brother wield. After Operation Stormbringer concludes, and my people wipe

humanity's resistance off the map, I'll have to look into usurping Bael as the First Duke. Once I succeed, the various Barons seated here will have no choice but to fall in line and pledge their loyalty to me.

Bael crosses his arms and grins like a salamander. "I saw one of them armored humans last year. He wasn't anything special. One slap, and off went his head! Poor bastard died before he knew what hit him! Bahaha!"

"That's what I've been saying!" Duriel throws his head back and laughs, causing a long ponytail to wiggle on the back of his otherwise bald scalp. "Ose is a damned coward! All these pussy-ass preparations and other useless shrakh, and for what? We should charge in there and wipe those feisty fleshbags out! We've gotta show 'em who runs this bitch!"

Another Baron, named Mara, nods her assent. "Duriel is right. It's humiliating that Ose keeps forcing us to stand aside quietly while these... these brazen little worms poke their heads in and raid our slave camps, pillage our supplies, and kill our grunts! I don't care how worthless the life of our grunts are. It's damned intolerable! We should have wiped them out before they developed those pathetic toys of theirs!"

Mara wears a leathery black cloak, one designed to conceal her face. She shrinks in her chair while trying to make herself smaller. One need only gaze at the Baron of Games for a moment to see she hates standing anywhere near the limelight. Compared to other demonesses, I find her beauty to be only average, but her backstabbing tendencies to rival mine. I admire that trait in a woman.

"I agree," Says Laharl, the Baron of Misery. She flashes a nasty grin, exposing her pointy teeth and her long, spindly nails. "How many times must I retreat while those humans kill hundreds of my precious darlings? Maybe you don't care about unevolved Brutes, but I do! Their beautiful muscles! Their glorious, giant-"

"Enough," I say, stopping her before she can desecrate my ears with filth. "Keep your disgusting fetishes out of this sacred hall. None of us want to hear another word."

"Hmph, big words, coming from a cheat like you," Laharl retorts. Her eyes glow as she gazes at me from beneath her blood-red hood. "I've sat in this hall for tens of thousands of years! You're nothing but a Lord who pawned a few favors to reach your position. Don't speak down to me just because you've obtained some inkling of power. I stood bravely against Uriel long before you were a drop of blood stewing in your broodmother's womb."

Without hesitation, I summon a ball of flame in my palm. "Say another word, and I'll char you to ash. If you wish to disrespect your superior, I'll teach you a lesson about how I obtained my title."

"Hah!" Laharl guffaws. "I'm shaking in my boots! What would the other demons think if they heard that the *almighty* Duke of Inferno bullied a poor, innocent demoness like me? You'd be a laughingstock!"

Duriel clicks his tongue. "She's right, Beelzebub. Make a move on Laharl, and the rest of us will split your damn skull."

I snort fire through my nose. "Not one of you has a chance. Even if every Baron in the Labyrinth joined hands and came at me, you'd only end up kindling for my fireplace."

All the Barons in the room snarl angrily, but before they can make a move, Artorias smashes his fist against the table.

Boom!

A wave of air erupts in the room, startling everyone present.

"Enough! The next person to continue this discussion will leave this hall in a coffin! We are demons, not fleshbags! Curb your bickering, or I'll put you down myself!"

Immediately, the chaotic emotions in the room freeze over. Every demon shoots a pensive glance toward the heavily armored Barbatos, now possessed by the soul of his older brother, Artorias. Unlike his little brother, a man of few words, Artorias loves to speak his mind. When he does, everyone makes sure to listen.

"Cough, cough, sheesh..." Duriel mutters, lowering his voice. "Enough blabbering. Sorry, Beelzebub. I shouldn'a ran my mouth. Ain't no way for a Baron to talk."

"Apology accepted," I say, shooting him a sneer. Duriel balks at my lack of a reciprocated apology, but frankly, I don't give a damn. Apologies and appeasement are tactics used by the weak. Since I hold power, I neither need nor want such methods.

"Ksss..." Mephisto hisses. The ghoulish Duke flicks his eyes around the room. "It isss unlike Ossse to keep usss waiting. Where isss that ssshe-devil?"

Hardly have the words left Mephisto's mouth before the door to the Council Room swings open. A human woman steps inside and bows at the waist. She clutches several papyrus scrolls against her chest. Seconds later, Ose strolls in behind her. Her high heels *click* against the ground as she walks. After sizing up the room, Ose flashes a smile at everyone. "My apologies for keeping everyone waiting. I received some interesting news an hour ago! As such, I had to take a little extra time to prepare."

Mephisto coughs into his hand. "Keh! It isss of no conssequencce. We were not bothered by your minor truancccy. Sssuch matterssss occasssionally occur."

Several Barons flash looks of annoyance at the Duke of Mist and his instant pivot from only moments before, but nobody voices their thoughts.

"Wonderful! Amy, leave us."

Ose snatches the scrolls from her human slave's arms, then brusquely dismisses her. The slave nods and scurries out of the room before closing the door behind herself.

Ose walks down the table toward the head seat. As she passes me, she smiles. "Hello, Beelzebub."

I nod. "Ose."

Without another word, she arrives at the head of the table, drops the scrolls, and pulls out a pair of reading glasses before taking a seat.

"Two hours ago, on Tarus II, a Hydra, twelve Elemental Wyverns, and a horde of Obsidian Goblins attacked the human's defensive perimeter. I want to know which of you coordinated the attack, and why."

Ose's smile vanishes as she speaks, and her expression darkens.

"Whoever it was, they must be seated at this table. Speak."

Ose's eyes slowly pan around the room, starting from Bael, and working her way across all the Dukes and Barons present until settling on me.

Bael scratches his head. "A Hydra? Ain't those things extinct?"

"Supposedly," Ose murmurs. "And yet, as if born out of thin air, one appeared right in front of Tarus II's warpgate. Again, I ask: Which of you created it, and why did you fail to notify me?"

Everyone at the table, myself included, shoot suspicious looks at the others. We all shake our heads in unison.

"It wasn't me," Bael says. "I can't do stuff like that."

Ose's eyes flick to Mephisto. "One of yours, perhaps? I have yet to confirm whether its origins were necromantic or not."

Mephisto coughs. "Ksss. I lossst my mightiesst trump card when my preciouss dragon perisshed during the battle againsst the Black Queen. Had I an undead Hydra, the loss would not sssting nearly ssso much."

"Mmm," Ose grunts, unconvinced. "How about you, Laharl? Was the Hydra, perhaps, one of your projections?"

Laharl shakes her head. "My summoning skills are nowhere near the level required to create such a fearsome monster, let alone the wyverns and goblins accompanying it. Perhaps, if I were to advance to the rank of Duke...?"

Ose ignores Laharl's implied request. "If nobody here summoned that beast, then who did? It has to be one of you. Thanks to the Hydra's appearance, the humans are sure to tighten their defensive network. My years of patience and the loss of tens of thousands of grunts will have been for naught."

Ose clicks her tongue. "Tsk. Have any of you an inkling of what it's taken for me to lower the human's mental defenses? If one of you brazenly went against my orders and set that beast against the humans, then you had better own up to it now. If I must, I will probe each of your minds, one by one, until I find the culprit."

Suddenly, Duriel slams his fist against the table. "Dammit, Ose! None of us are lying! Nobody summoned the blasted Hydra! And even if we did, so what?! Who gives a damn about the fleshbag's defenses? Who gives a flying fuck whether they're ready for us or not? What can a few million fleshbags do against the might of ten trillion demons? What will their pathetic weapons accomplish when we outnumber them a thousand to one?!"

Duriel jumps out of his seat and gestures to his side. "We don't need all these stupid plans! We don't need your worthless plots and ploys! We've got Bael here! He's invincible! If he were to rush the human's planet, he'd crush them in ten minutes flat, and that's without any of our help! Stop yanking us around,

and give the order to attack! I'm tired of standing around with my thumb up my ass, and I know everyone else is, too!"

As if to affirm Laharl's words, nearly every Baron in the hall nods along. Several of Duriel's fellow Barons silently applaud him in their hearts for standing up to Ose and telling her how everyone feels.

However, one Baron stays silent; Vepar. Unlike the others, who were born long after Earth's fall, she remembers a distant era, a time even I couldn't imagine.

Along with her, Mephisto, Bael, and Artorias don't say a word. Bael's jovial grin fades away, and a solemn look passes over his face.

Ose says nothing for a few moments. Instead, she allows Duriel to vent, and when he finishes ranting, she nods.

"I see. If that is your opinion, then can I assume the others here share similar thoughts?"

Many of the Barons nod and grunt quietly to affirm Duriel's words.

"See?" Duriel says, as he swings his arms out toward the other seated demons. "Everyone here agrees with me! You're acting like a coward, plain and simple! We're tired of sittin' around while the humans massacre our brothers! Stop with the games, and let us rip 'em apart! Show 'em the might of demonkind! Show 'em what happens when they raise their fists to us!"

Duriel pants wildly. His eyes turn slightly yellow as he continues to rant. Eventually, he slows to a stop and waits for Ose's reply.

Ten seconds pass, but Ose doesn't say a word.

Instead, the Emperor of Infiltration traces a circle on the table with her fingertip. Her eyes lower, and she furrows her brow, as if deep in thought.

"If you feel-"

Before Ose can speak, Bael raises his hand, silencing her.

"Hold on. All of you, shut up. I've got somethin' to say."

Bael scrunches his face together, and a strange, distant look appears in his eyes. For once, the half-wit jokester ponders his words before speaking.

"Duriel. You think humans are weak, don'tcha?"

Duriel nods, but the intense look vanishes from his eyes. "Well, yeah. Even the weakest grunt can kill a fleshbag with a flick of his finger."

"Mmm. You're still a pup. You don't remember how things used to be."

Bael's voice softens. He stares at the center of the table, unable to meet anyone else's gaze.

"Everyone here's heard of the Energy Wars. Only a few of us remain who lived during those dark times. Shit was scary. Real scary."

Bael pauses.

"I lost a lot of friends. Had a buddy I used to hang out with, back during the good old days. Nice guy. I played in a band with him, before that damn war started. Eventually, he became an Emperor, along with his little sister. I couldn't visit 'em much. Then, one day, I found out the humans killed 'em both. Never got to say goodbye."

Bael pauses again. When he next speaks, his voice rasps slightly.

"Those... those bastards. They took his body and... and experimented on him. They did some nasty shit. Crazy shit. Made him into a... a machine. Turned him against his brothers and sisters. I had to kill him myself. He didn't even recognize me."

Bael shakes his head.

"Poor guy. He wasn't the first, and he wasn't the last. Every day, the humans would create some new tool or device to chase us down. We'd hide at the ends of the fucking Earth, and they'd always find us. Sure, I wasn't in any danger... but I couldn't save everyone, either. The humans couldn't hurt my body, but my soul was another story. I said goodbye to so many brothers and sisters; I lost count."

Bael sighs.

"Who do you think put those humans on ice for 100,000 years? She's sitting at the head of the table, dumbass. Ose knows better than anyone how to break a human. You can't just kill 'em. They're worse than cockroaches. We need the bastards for their souls, so we can't kill 'em all. If one human survives, he'll spread his ideas around. Next thing you know, you'll have another uprising. And another. And another."

Bael raises his head. He turns to stare Duriel right in the eyes.

"We fought against the humans for a long time, and do you know what they didn't have back then? A Hero. They didn't have a legendary Hero assisting them."

"Imagine what'll happen if we wipe out the humans, but the little bastard gets away. I ain't even smart, and I can think of a hundred ways to use his power against us. He could teleport away, find another batch of humans, and raise an army in secret. The Hero we're facing now is way scarier than anyone we've fought before. Arthur beat my ass, and Joan of Arc made me pee my pants. But this kid? He's way beyond the likes of them. Right now, Ose's got him right where she wants him."

Bael turns away from Duriel and waves his hand flippantly.

"But if we go stormin' in there like a bunch of Hellhounds with our heads cut off, do you think the Hero's gonna lay down and take it up the ass? Hell no. He'll get pissed and go off the rails, and then we'll be screwed. Royally screwed. We don't have a chance in Hell of beating him once that happens."

Bael snorts. "That's all I've got to say. Mock the weak little *fleshbags* all ya want... but I won't forgive ya if they wise up and stop playin' games. I've seen what they can do without a Hero. I don't want to think about what'll happen if Ose's plan fails."

The room falls silent as Bael finishes lecturing Duriel. After a moment, Bael glances at Ose. "Did I go too far?"

"No, Bael," Ose says, flashing him a radiant smile. "You said everything on my mind and more. I never knew you had such an eloquent side."

"Yeah. Whatever."

Bael crosses his arms and huffs, but the tips of his ears turn red as Ose's praise wiggle into his brain.

Ose clears her throat. "While everything Bael said is true, he slightly understated our dilemma," Ose adds. "After all... there are *two* Wordsmiths. Even when Arthur terrorized our people, he could only be in one place at any given moment. We have to deal with two Heroes, and our firepower is quite lacking compared to what we once possessed during the height of the Feudal Age. Back then, the Emperors of all Seven Hells worked together to fend off the Legendary Hero-King's assaults. Now, our best forces comprise the demons in this room. How far we've fallen..."

Ose continues. "Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, you have to consider the possibility that there may be Wordsmiths we know nothing about. Who is to say that Jason hasn't created a second clone, or a third? Each one possesses strength identical to the original body. Even if we eliminate both Wordsmiths, there could be a whole army of Heroes sitting on the sidelines!"

Ose rubs her head in frustration. While she takes a moment to gather her thoughts, Duriel, still standing in place, slowly shakes the dazed look from his eyes.

"Well... shit. I... I didn't realize fleshbags could be so... uh... scary. Sorry, Emperor Ose. I shouldn'a mouthed off."

Duriel meekly slithers back into his chair and hangs his head in shame. Despite his earlier outburst, his anger crumbles to dust in the face of Bael's speech. He has no recourse, given Bael is his superior in both age and power.

However, I do not share Bael's opinion, nor those of the others present.

Bael allowed himself to draw close to other demons. He let his emotions get the better of him time and time again. His anguish comes as a result of his weakness, a trait I do not possess.

The closest I've ever been to anyone was my mentor, Agares. He groomed me for power from a young age and taught me everything he could to improve my chance of someday becoming the First Emperor. Unlike Bael, who pursues carnal desires of the flesh, or Mephisto, who schemes and backstabs to further his twisted ends, I keep my eyes on the ultimate prize: Power.

Of all the demons at this table, the only one I hold the faintest shred of admiration toward is Ose. Like me, she understands that demonkind has grown soft and brittle. Even if our enemy is a Hero, the only reason humans have stolen so much from us is due to our lack of self-control, our infighting, and our complacency.

Someday, when I ascend to power, I will rectify all of those issues. I will drag demonkind to greater heights, kicking, and screaming.

"Ahem."

Ose clears her throat.

"Let's get back on topic. I brought you here today to finalize our plans for Operation Stormbringer. Given today's Hydra incident, I will be accelerating our battle strategy. My brother has assisted me with the creation of several thousand new monster shock troops. Originally, I intended to have them gestate for another year or two to increase their numbers and body strength, but due to a certain *someone's* actions, I have to skip the final phase of my plan. I was also debating which of the Barons here deserves a promotion to the rank of Duke, but due to an insufficient supply of souls in the River Sheol, I'll have to pass for now."

At Ose's final statement, the eyes of every Baron light up with eager anticipation, only to lose their luster a moment later. I can almost smell their desperation. Thanks to a certain *someone's* incompetence, that damned Hydra alerted the humans to how weak their defenses were. Without another year to gather the necessary souls, Ose won't be able to promote another Duke. If she could, our wartime strength would increase substantially. After all, a Duke is anywhere from ten to a hundred times mightier than a Baron.

Ose continues. "Mephisto. Due to your talent with manipulating multiple minions, I intend to place control of The Scourge in your capable hands. Will you be able to handle my brother's new troops, or should I find someone more suited to the role?"

Mephisto raises his head. A hint of annoyance appears in his eyes. "Ksss. Of coursse I am capable of sssuch a trifle. Do not mock me, *your highnesss*. My command of mind-controlled ssslavess overssshadowsss that of the ancient Valac! Not even he could ssspare the mental energy to attack with thousssandsss of monsssterssss and demonsss."

Ose bats her eyes. "Is that so? I was just worried you might hurt yourself. If you can handle them, it will be a load off my back."

I stifle a smirk. Ose's biting sarcasm occasionally puts mine to shame.

"Beelzebub," Ose says, turning her attention to me. "I expect great things from you. Your job will be to lead the new shock troops against the human forces. Our number one priority is to capture both Wordsmiths. If necessary, killing them is an acceptable compromise. Under no circumstances can we allow them to escape. I want you to work with Mephisto closely. Rehearse your battle formations and practice your teamwork until you've achieved perfection."

I nod. "Of course, Emperor Ose. Am I to seek out the Wordsmiths as originally planned, or have you altered that strategy as well?"

"You and Bael are our best bets for fighting Jason and Hope, yes. With your defensive powers, you should be able to survive anything they throw at you. Unless..."

Ose pauses. For a moment, her smile falters, and a frown etches itself onto her forehead.

"...Unless?" I ask.

"Nothing," Ose says, returning to her previous expression. "I'm a little worried about the might of the Wordsmiths. Make certain to take every possible precaution."

"Don't worry. I will."

Ose's gaze lingers on me for a moment before flitting to Artorias and Bael. "Bael, you will only appear at the end of the battle. Beelzebub will rain fire upon the humans to weaken their morale and kill as many as possible. Your job is to take out their commanders once Beelzebub draws them out. As you know, the legendary Sphinx walks among their ranks. His strength might be on par with yours, possibly greater. You and Artorias are to take him out, along with the other commanders of humanity's forces."

Artorias nods. "What role will you play in this war, Lady Ose? Your strategic mind is essential to our success, but the might an Emperor brings to the battlefield cannot be overestimated."

Ose sighs. "I have a goal. While Beelzebub and Bael are our best bet for capturing the Wordsmiths, in the worst-case scenario, I might need to find an alternate method of subduing both of them. As such, I've enlisted the help of someone those present here will likely find... unsavory."

I frown. "Unsavory? Who are you referring to? Wait... might you mean... an Overlord?!"

Several Barons glance at me. They raise their eyebrows, unaware of the beings towering over demonkind while holding a blade against our throats. However, Bael and Mephisto shoot disdainful looks at me.

"Quiet, Beelzebub," Bael growls. "Speak not of the Overlords before the lower-ranks."

Ose shakes her head. "Apologies, Beelzebub. I'm afraid that your guess is wrong."

Ose glances at the ceiling, causing everyone else to follow her gaze. "Come out."

Above the demonstone table in the center of the Council room, several stone lanterns hang from the ceiling, illuminating the chamber with bright, flickering flames. My heart skips a beat as I spot the image of several shadows flickering in their light.

"Shadow-walkers? I didn't sense them at all!"

The words slip from my mouth unintentionally, causing my face to flush crimson. For a Demon Duke not to notice the presence of a few lowly shadow-walkers, how dull have my senses become?

Suddenly, the shadows solidify into three blobs of darkness. They fall from the ceiling and hit the ground with a *splat*, only to erupt into bipedal forms a moment later.

Immediately, my jaw drops. I realize why I couldn't detect these shadow-walkers. They're unlike any others I've ever seen!

"Demise. Malice. Vicious. Thank you for coming," Ose says, tipping her head respectfully. "Has your master given a reply?"

The three shadows melt and dissipate from forms resembling demons into vague, amorphous figures of monsters, animals, and objects in the room. Unlike the relatively stable bodies of other shadow-walkers I've seen before, who can only blend in with the darkness, these three newcomers seem to have no solid form at all!

"Ose..." One of the figures says, its voice sounding vaguely feminine. "Master Yama does not appreciate spending tens of thousands of years shunned by his people. He demands reparation for his losses. As the

First Emperor of the once glorious Shadow Hell, he will not assist you without receiving a minimum of fifty million human souls."

Ose's bright-red skin loses some of its glow as she pales at the shadow-walker's words. "I... I... Lady Malice, fifty million is far too many! We scarcely have ten thousand left! Even if we wipe out all of the humans on Tarus II, we won't come anywhere close to that number!"

The shadow-walker, 'Malice,' morphs into a shadowy clone of Ose. "Heh heh... our master knows this. He has given two alternatives if you are unwilling or unable to pay. The first is... you must ensure that he becomes the new First Emperor of Hell, standing above even you in the hierarchy!"

Ose's face flushes in embarrassment. "I can't do that! Even if I gave Yama my position, I would never be able to place him in the First Emperor's role. I've never even met the fellow!"

Malice's body shifts again, causing her shadowy skin to drip to the floor like melted candlewax.

"Heh heh... Master Yama knows you would never accept such a condition. Of course, his generosity and benevolence outstrips that of the failures seated here today. He has one final request; a mere trifle compared to the previous ones. If you can't do this much, then we must wish you the best in your hopes of subjugating the fleshbags, for we will not be there to help."

Ose grits her teeth. "Fine. What does Yama want? Out with it."

The Barons and Dukes all lean forward with interest in their eyes to hear what Malice's final offer might be. However, one of the other two shadow-walkers, also female, butts in.

"Our master wants one of the Wordsmiths! Alive and kicking! Nyehehehe! That shouldn't be too hard!"

"Quiet, Vicious!" Malice hisses. "Do not interrupt me, or Sin will have something to say to you when we return!"

"Pweh! Don't be such a stickler for the rules!" Vicious cackles. "Rules are made to be broken! That's what I always say! Ahahaha!!"

Vicious morphs into a hyena and rolls around on the ground, cackling like she's made the funniest joke ever. Suddenly, the third shadow-walker, Demise, rears its leg back and kicks Vicious right in the gut, spraying black smoke outward in an arc.

Vicious combines her particles back together a moment later and shakes her fist at Demise. "Grr! What's your problem?! Can't a girl have a laugh around here without some stupid snotty little-"

"Quiet."

Demise's voice booms throughout the room, rattling my teeth and shaking the Council's demonstone table. Despite its depth and power, Demise is a female, just like the other two.

"We're here on business. Speak again, and I'll rip out your essence."

Vicious shrinks back and nods hurriedly. "O-okay! Geez, Demise! No need to get all worked up... hehe..."

Malice turns away from the spat between the other shadow-walkers to gaze at Ose. "Well? What do you think? One Wordsmith in exchange for Master Yama's help. We won't be greedy. You can keep the other one for your twisted little experiments."

Ose furrows her brow. Color returns to her face, but her gaze turns hollow for a moment as she evaluates her choices.

"Hmm. Fifty million souls, the title of First Emperor, or giving away one of the Wordsmiths to your master. You make the final choice sound like nothing at all, but you know I need one of the Wordsmiths alive. That means we'll have to capture both Wordsmiths without killing them to satisfy Yama's demand, as well as achieve my goal."

Malice hops atop the table and takes an imposing stance. "Well? What is your answer? Do you think your little operation will succeed without the help of the Shades? Among those who survived the Energy Wars, our might was once a thing of legends. You won't be able to infiltrate every defensive perimeter by yourself, *Little Ose*. Go on. With a few short words, you can put the humans back where they belong; in your clutches."

Half a minute passes. Nobody says a word.

Eventually, Ose relents. "Very well. One living Wordsmith in exchange for Yama's assistance. Do you understand how much more difficult this will make our mission?"

"I do."

Malice keeps her reply succinct. Her smoky form shifts slightly, and she turns to look at the other demons seated at the table. "Does anyone have a problem with this arrangement?"

Bael's eye twitches. "Can't say I'm a fan of working alongside that no-good shadowy-shithead. Your boss is about as trustworthy as a hellhound promising not to eat a corpse. I didn't even know the little bastard was still alive."

Bael's vulgar comments don't bother Malice in the slightest. She ignores Bael's insults. "Oh, yes. Alive and well. Six years ago, it was our master who first detected the release of Heroic energy inside the Labyrinth. He dispatched one of the Seven to investigate, but that damned Wordsmith slaughtered our sister in cold blood. Now, he wants nothing more than to exact his revenge on her killer. After all... Lust was one of Yama's favorites."

Ose narrows her eyes. "Hmph. You might fool the others, but I know better. Yama has plenty of servants within his inner circle. His shadow-walkers and shades roam every corner of Hell, from top to bottom. Not even losing one of the Seven would move him to action."

Malice whips her head back to scowl at Ose. "What is your point?"

"Yama wants to enslave the Wordsmith to do his bidding."

"Hmph. Naturally. Don't you have the same intention? Yama only wishes to balance the factional power of the Lesser Hells. If yours possesses both Wordsmiths, you'll use them to force us to do your bidding."

"Hmph. Nevermind all of that. What's done is done. Tell your master I've accepted his terms. However, if something happens and both Wordsmiths end up dying..."

Malice chuckles into her hand. "Heh heh... you don't need to worry. We won't let Master Yama down. Whatever he orders, we'll see it through to the end."

Malice turns to face her fellow shadow-walkers. "Come, sisters."

"Heehee!" Vicious cackles. "It's almost time for the fun to start! I'm gonna cut some fleshbags to ribbons! Ehehe!!"

"We take our leave," Demise mutters.

A moment later, the three women vanish into the shadows, leaving the rest of us to our devices.

I clear my throat. "Ahem. Ose. Who were those shadow-walkers, and why did they seem different from the ones I've seen before?"

"They are not sshadow-walkerssss," Mephisto says, replying in Ose's stead. "They are ssshadesss. Higher beingsss. Their bodiesss are formlesss, allowing them to transssform into whatever ssshape they wisssh."

Bael's expression turns ugly. "Their Emperor, Yama... he was once the leader of the Hell of Shadow; one of the original Seven Hells. After Earth's destruction, each of the Seven Hells fought a bloody war for control of the Labyrinth. We won. The others lost. End of story."

"Mmm..." I reply. "I always assumed the Seven Hells were only a figure of speech."

"Nope," Bael grunts. "Real thing. I had a lot of friends among their Emperors and Dukes. Now... most of 'em are dead."

Laharl raises her hand. "Pardon my impudence if this question is one I shouldn't ask, but now I'm curious... this 'Yama' fellow, is he an Emperor?"

Artorias crosses his arms. "He is."

"Then... why did we have to promote Ose? Why didn't you let Yama take over when Diablo fell?"

"Tch!" Bael growls. "Yama is a nasty, vile demon. He turns women into his puppets. He's a disgusting predator. I'd never accept him as our leader!"

Mephisto presses a bony fist against his mouth, as if trying to prevent himself from wretching. "Yama'sss audacity exceedsss any other demon. He will do anything to sssucceed. Backssstabbing a brother, working with a flessshbag, and even cooperating with an angel. He isss no ally to our caussse."

"Enough," Ose says. "We need Yama's help for this mission. Infiltrating as many key strategic points as possible will be the only way we can take the humans out all at once. Most importantly, I intend to capture the Wordsmith's daughter and wife. We'll be able to use them as leverage if Jason escapes our clutches."

I nod. "That is an excellent move, Ose."

"Hell yeah," Duriel snorts. "I'd never have thought of capturing the little bugger. You're smarter than I thought, Ose."

I roll my eyes. *Now Duriel is sucking up to Ose after insulting her earlier. Low-ranked demons are simply pathetic.*

"We'll be counting on you, Beelzebub, Artorias, Bael," Laharl says, flashing a toothy grin at us. "Especially you, Bael. Think we'll get to see you unleash the Balrog again?"

"Not unless I ain't got a choice," Bael mutters.

"Alright," Ose says, clapping her hands. "In one week, return to the Council hall. We'll finalize the plan for Operation Stormbringer and adjust our plans based on the human's movements. Dismissed."

A great sigh of relief goes up around the table. All the Barons and Dukes present quickly start chatting with each other, while the somber mood fades away.

I get up to leave, only to turn around and see Ose standing behind my chair. Her speed startles me.

"Beelzebub," Ose says, a slight smile on her face. "Do you have a minute? I'd like to discuss something with you."

"Hm? Of course. What's on your mind?"

I turn to look at her, only to frown as I meet her gaze. Something about her expression is different from usual. Her eyes linger on mine, and her tongue traces across her lips.

"This matter is *private*, Beelzebub. Come to my office."

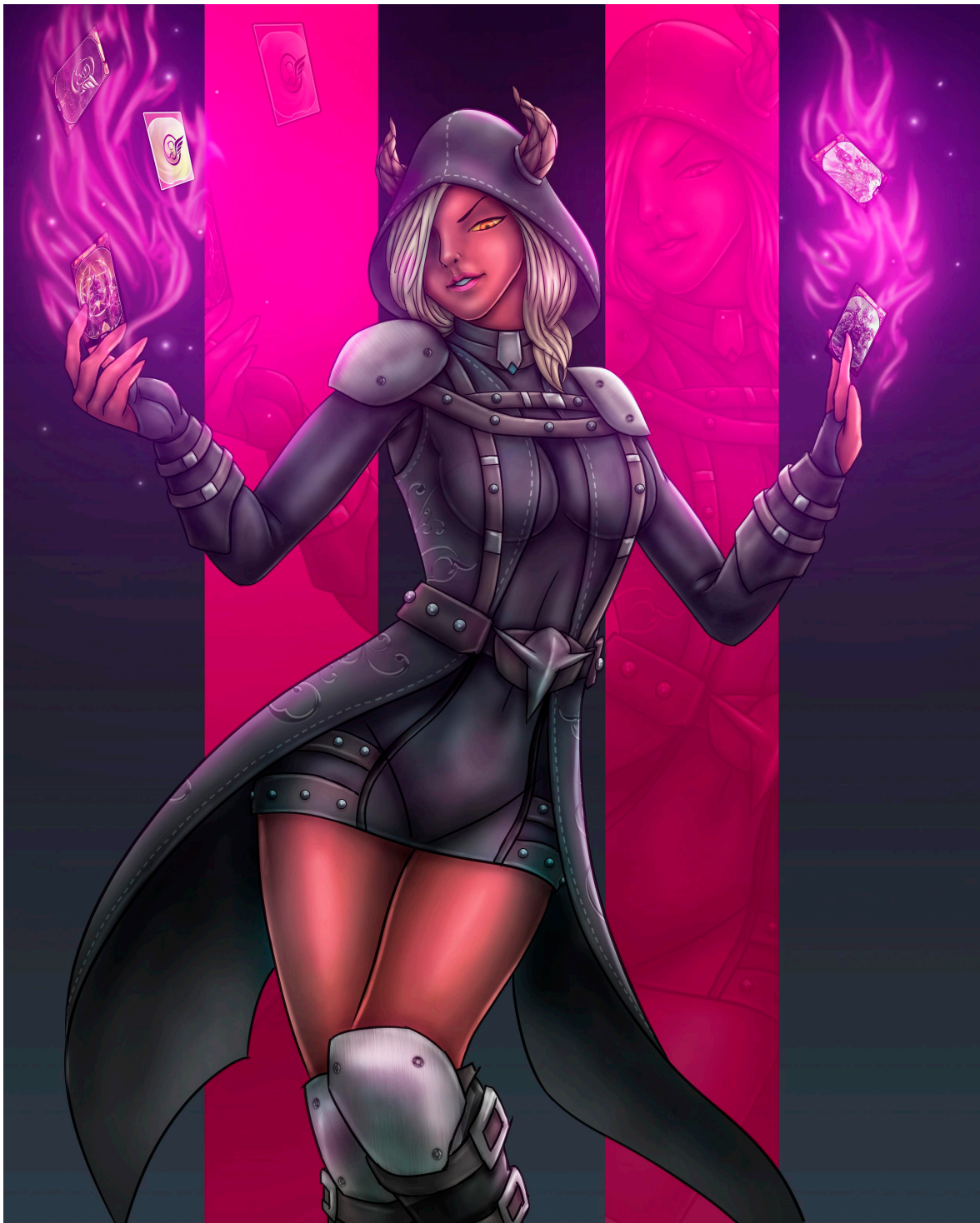
Ah.

I see what she wants.

With a slight nod, I gesture to the doorway. "Lead the way."

Author Notes:

This is Mara, the Baron of Games.



This is Duriel, one of the two Battle Brothers.



This is Laharl, the Baron of Misery.



Part 182: Demonic Machinations

Screams echo in the distant reaches of Faith's End. Dozens of prisoners weep and cry as Gressil, the Labyrinth's warden, stares at an illusionary mirror hovering in midair. Gressil stands in a pitch-black room, one with dozens of torture instruments littered around. A bloody table with straps at each corner sits amidst an unlit furnace, three hacksaws, and even a primitive hand-drill.

"Interesting..." Gressil mutters.

He continues to look at the mirror as it reveals a scene of dozens of demon Barons, Dukes, and even the Third Emperor herself all engaging in a strategy meeting. Ose reveals her plan for attacking the humans, and eventually, the meeting disperses. The scene's viewpoint shifts, almost as if Gressil is watching through the eyes of someone present. They stand up and walk away from the table, causing Gressil to wave his hand and dissipate the illusionary mirror into nothingness.

"Oh, Ose. Little sister. Your desperate need for order sickens me."

Gressil gazes at the spot where the mirror hovered only moments before. His vacant eyes linger on the bare wall as if searching for some unseen specter, some unknown meaning in life.

"Take, take, take. You always steal from me, but you never offer anything in return. Were it not for my magnanimity; I wonder how long you'd last?"

Gressil's expression remains stony and lifeless. The three dozen demonic eyes embedded in his body give him an eerie red glow as they twitch erratically. Tears of blood occasionally flow down his front and back, but he pays them no heed.

The prison warden casually turns around and folds his two lower hands behind his back. His upper arms reach out to grab a door handle, and he pulls it open with an audible *creak*.

Taking slow, measured steps, Gressil ambles out of his favorite torture room to stroll down an unlit corridor, the central hub of Faith's End. A man's whimpering in a nearby cell causes him to pause.

"Quiet."

With a single growled word, his command reaches through the steel door and silences its resident. The man swallows his choked terror upon realizing that his tormentor stands outside the room.

Without giving the man another thought, Gressil continues on his way. He takes slow and steady footsteps as his mind works at speeds comparable to amoeba and sludge.

"I spent 100,000 years trying to bring about the end of systems and order. However, all of my efforts have fallen short compared to the arrival of the Hero. The Wordsmith's ability to bring about chaos puts even mine to shame. I owe him my gratitude."

Gressil chuckles.

"Heh. Heh. Heh. War is coming. My precious little sister intends to crush the humans and remake the Labyrinth into a perfect society. But, if that happens, all my fun will come to an end. All this droll tedium

will rot my mind into nothingness."

Gressil continues walking. Eventually, he stops before one of many nondescript steel doors. Nothing about it stands out in particular, but he still hesitates for a moment before reaching out to open its viewing window.

Click.

Gressil peers inside the chamber, where dozens and dozens of pale brown eggs, each the size of a human child, sit in clusters of ten to twenty. Faint pulses of glowing energy emanate from them.

Gressil nods unsmilingly.

"The Swarm is ready. Haha. Does Ose truly believe I'll offer her my help without any strings attached? No. I think not. My cute little sister is many things, but I would never deem her a fool."

Gressil closes the viewing window and continues walking forward.

"If Ose fails..."

Gressil's expressionless face lights up. A cold glint appears in his eyes.

"Haha... won't that be interesting? Who knows what will happen?"

Gressil's face morphs into a hideous, monstrous grin.

"Death. Destruction. Panic. Fear. Just imagine all the wonderful expressions on everyone's faces. What a satisfying day that will be."

Gressil continues talking to himself, almost as if he can hear another voice in his head.

Eventually, the prison warden slows to a stop again. This time, however, the door he stops before is different from the others. A nearby lantern, the only one in the entire hallway, casts a shadow from his monstrous body across the door's frame. The door has a small wooden plaque beneath its viewing window, one which has only one word on it.

Forbidden.

Gressil's disgusting smile fades. He stands before the door for several minutes, listening intently.

Strange feelings well up within the prison warden. Excitement and agitation mix with calmness and peace.

Eventually, Gressil reaches out and caresses the door handle. He rattles it slightly, and from within the room, a weak *gasp* escapes someone's lips.

"Hehe. Biiirdieeee..."

Gressil lowers his voice. He stares at the door intently, almost as if trying to bore holes in it with his eyes.

"I know you're awake..."

Gressil licks his lips. Slowly, deliberately, he slides the latch on the door and pushes it open.

The lantern's light causes his shadow to slip into the room. Despite its age, the door opens without even a squeak. Its silence proves deafening.

Gressil lowers his eyes. His expressionless face brightens up as he gazes upon the room's shivering, cowering occupant.

"Nnn... nnn..."

A naked woman covered in gashes, cuts, and bruises, lays in the far corner. Chains rest on the floor and across her body, while wall-bolted shackles wrap around her neck, wrists, and ankles.

Despite the horrible trauma he's inflicted upon her body, the prison warden never touches his prisoner's face. He would never do such a thing, as he finds her beauty... irresistible.

"Hello, Birdie," Gressil whispers. "Did you miss me? I've been... busy."

The woman shrinks into the corner. She tucks her arms and legs together and trembles as she meets her tormenter's gaze. Her wide-eyed terror fills Gressil with an emotion unmatched by any other being.

Lust.

"I didn't bring any tools or toys today..." Gressil murmurs. He takes a step into the prison cell, causing a squeak of fright to escape the woman's throat. "Just my claws. Ose has had me working day and night for her silly plans. I'll tell you all about them... hehe..."

Gressil takes another step. The shivering girl squeezes her eyes shut, causing bloody tears to roll down her face. "Nnn... nnn..."

Gressil narrows his eyes. "Look at you, teasing me like this. You know I can't resist those... those *delectable* squeals."

Gressil takes another step. Already, he's closed half the distance to the cowering girl.

"Tsk, ts. Your wings aren't pretty anymore, not like they used to be. Hmm. Perhaps I should pull them out. I wonder what sort of face you'll make. Ahh... but I can only witness such an agony-filled expression once. There's no need to rush."

Gressil finally reaches the terrified woman. He reaches out a claw and brushes it against one of her chains, causing it to rub the woman's bare skin. Never once does she open her eyes.

"You used to scream in the past. I miss those days. You're too quiet, now. Ah, well, at least you're a good listener, yes. A good girl."

Once again, a hideous grin appears on Gressil's face. He gently presses one of his claws into the woman's open wounds, causing her to cry in pain. "Ahh... nnn...!"

"Yes. Yes. Like that. You're the only one for me, Birdie... you're my precious little... angel."

With a single motion, Gressil reaches backward and closes the door.

Darkness swallows the room.

"Daddy, is aunt Sammy going to be okay?"

Daisy clutches my hand tightly as she pitter-patters along at my side. Phoebe follows along behind us and gently ruffles our daughter's hair.

"I don't know," I say, forcing myself to sound hopeful. "But she should wake up eventually!"

"Yeah! Daddy can heal her!" Daisy says with a grin. "Daddy can do anything!"

I glance at my wife. Phoebe gives me a look of, *well, how can you respond to that?*

"Uhh, yeah, sweetie," I reply. "Daddy can do all sorts of things. He's a real wizard, that guy."

The three of us walk toward the local hospital, a small building on the northern edge of the town, close enough to the warpgates that it should only take soldiers ten minutes to arrive if someone ends up heavily wounded. It sits at the edge of the canyon ridge, with a sheer 100-foot drop to the forest below on its rear side.

Thanks to its location, scaling it should prove difficult if the demons ever attack, affording our lone medical facility a small amount of defensibility. I added several turrets on the canyon wall as well as around its perimeter, turning it into a veritable fortress compared to even my palace.

Phoebe takes Daisy's right hand while I take her left. Together, we walk with our daughter sandwiched between us protectively.

My wife shakes her head. "Are you and Kar still planning to force Ose to sign a peace treaty?"

"Not unless the Third Emperor seems especially bloodthirsty. I don't want to force anyone to do anything. Before we visit Ose, Kar wants to introduce me to his mother."

"His mother? Is she a crocodile, too?"

"No. Some lady named Marie. Kar reveres her like a goddess, but I don't buy it."

Phoebe frowns. "Is she trustworthy?"

"She rescued the lizard-men and saved Kar before his crocodilian species went extinct. He's the last one, though. I don't know the whole situation, but it was a pretty brutal affair."

"Mmm."

Phoebe strokes her chin with her free hand. "Stay safe," She murmurs.

"You know me. Safety is my middle name, along with Caution."

"I *do* know you, which is why I'm worried!" Phoebe laughs. "At least you'll have Kar at your side. *Someone* has to be the brains of your little operation."

"Hey! I'm smart!"

"Riiight..."

Phoebe rolls her eyes and grins jokingly.

Over the past six years, watching my wife turn from an uptight noble-lady into a casual, bantering femme fatale has been a real source of pride for me. I love seeing this side of her, where she acts nonchalantly and doesn't have to worry and fret over every little thing. She's come a long way from the stiff, emotional wreck she used to be.

As my thoughts wander, Phoebe's voice speaks in my head. "Oh? Tell me how you really feel, stud."

I groan inwardly. Having a copy of my wife listening to my innermost thoughts embarrasses me.

The Phoebe in my head chuckles. "All you ever do is think glowing thoughts about how great I am. You're such a sweetheart, Jason."

Dammit, second Phoebe, you're making me blush.

"I wish I had a mirror! You're so cute when you blush!"

Stop!! Ahh!!

* * *

A minute later, Phoebe, Daisy, and I pass through the fifteen-foot-tall concrete wall surrounding Tarus II's only hospital. We enter the facility and arrive at the receptionist's desk, where a well-groomed goblin dressed in a tuxedo quietly types on a computer.

"Hello, Grima," I say, nodding at him. "What room did you put Samantha in?"

The goblin glances up from his computer and evaluates the three of us in an instant. "Ah, hello, Hiro family. It's been a while. Your friend is in Room 15, just down the western corridor. Her condition is stable, but she has yet to awaken from her coma."

Grima's refined and elegant manner of speech stands contrary to the vast majority of goblins. While the others of his species tend to skitter around, cackle like hyenas, and cause all manner of mischief, Grima focuses on expanding his vocabulary and studying the breakdown of elemental particles. He's a real bookworm.

"Thank you, Grima," Phoebe says, flashing him a radiant smile. "I'll bring you a sweet roll tomorrow."

Grima's eyes widen. "A sweet roll? Haha! You are too kind, Miss Hiro! I'd hate to impose on you... b-but... I have three spawnlings, and, ah, they would very much like to-"

"Certainly! I'll bring you four sweet-rolls!" Phoebe replies, cutting him off. "One for each child."

Grima leans forward, an intense look in his eyes. He wipes drool from the side of his mouth. "Th-thank you, Miss Hiro! I won't- I mean, we won't forget your kindness!"

With a nod, the three of us set off again.

Once we step out of earshot, I raise an eyebrow at my wife. "What was *that* all about?"

Phoebe sighs. "Grima doesn't *have* a brood. He fibbed, but I can't blame him. The poor fellow is positively addicted to my cooking."

I stifle a laugh. Maybe the little guy isn't as different from other goblins as I thought.

Half a minute later, the three of us pass by several hospital personnel, including the harpie who treated me when I ran out of mana six years ago, Doctor Fathy. The doctor waves politely, and I wave back.

Eventually we arrive at Belial's room. The succubus lays motionless on the hospital bed, a stream of sunlight beaming on her face from the adjacent window. Dozens of flowers sit on nearby tables, chairs,

and all around the room in general. As the most important healer at the hospital, everyone seems to have left her a get-well-soon letter or some other random present.

"Aunt Sammy!" Daisy cries. She pulls away from Phoebe and me to run to Belial's side. "What's wrong? Wake up! Mommy, why won't she wake up?"

"It's like we said, sweetheart," Phoebe says, keeping her emotions in check. "Aunt Samantha has a head injury. She has to sleep for a very long time to recover. Let's use our inside voices, okay?"

"Okay..."

Daisy's excitement vanishes as she realizes the gravity of the situation. She reaches over to hold Belial's hand, but this time, her movements are much more cautious and tender.

"Hello," A woman says behind me. I turn around and raise an eyebrow as I spot a very *corpulent* demoness I've never seen before. The plump demon lady pauses at the doorway and flicks her gaze between Phoebe and I. "Err, um... are you friends of the Second Emperor?"

"Yes," Phoebe says, turning to smile at the newcomer. "I'm Phoebe, and this is my husband, Jason. Are you new?"

The woman doesn't smile as she meets Phoebe's gaze. For a brief instant, I can almost make out the faintest hint of disgust on her face, but it vanishes quickly. Perhaps my imagination is running wild. "Erm. Yes! My name is Rosalia! I'm one of Belial's assigned nurses."

Whatever negative feelings I may have noticed, Phoebe ignores. "Rosalia? That's a lovely name. Welcome to Tarus II! I know pretty much everyone here, so it's always nice to meet new people."

Phoebe extends her palm to offer a handshake, but the brown-haired demoness shrinks back. This time, the ugly look on her face ignites my suspicions. "Ah... w-what are you...?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Phoebe says, a hint of embarrassment on her face. "I sometimes forget, demons and monsters aren't always familiar with handshakes. It's just a way humans tend to greet one another."

Rosalia squirms uncomfortably for a moment, then gingerly reaches out to poke Phoebe's hand with a single finger.

"...Right. Um, well, if you three need anything... let me know, I guess."

Without another word, the woman retracts her hand, turns around, and skitters away.

I raise an eyebrow. "Rosalia, huh? She seems suspicious."

Phoebe lowers her hand, and a hint of dejection appears in her eyes. "Ah, maybe I was too insensitive. As a stranger, I shouldn't have gotten all touchy-feely right off the bat. The demons who come here often have to overcome their prejudices. It's not an easy task for most."

"I don't think you were at fault," I mutter. "That fat ogre was acting strange. Keep an eye on her."

Smack.

Phoebe swats my arm. Her expression turns ugly. "Jason! Don't be rude. There's no need to insult her weight! She seems like a perfectly pleasant woman. It's my fault for being too forward and driving her

away."

I shrug. "Sure, whatever you say, but I don't like the look in her eyes."

* * *

Half an hour later, after lingering around Belial's hospital room, heavy footsteps approach us. I turn around to see Kar lumber into the hospital, with Neil following close behind. The leader of humanity's military keeps his distance from me, but Kar walks right over and smacks my back. "Turtle! You done sittin' around here all day, or what?"

It takes me a moment to catch my footing. Kar's insane strength nearly knocks me to the ground. "Y-yeah. I'm good to go. Neil? It's not often I see you come to the hospital."

Neil's expression remains impassive. He crosses his arms and shoots an odd look at Belial. "Mmm. Yes, well, I might have some differences with the Second Emperor of demonkind, but when I heard she was in a coma, I felt it was worth paying her a visit. Belial is one of our best healers behind yourself and Hope, after all."

Neil's eyes flick to Phoebe. "Miss Hiro. How is the succubus faring? Will she awaken soon?"

Phoebe forces some positivity into her voice. "Oh, I certainly hope so. Samantha took a bit of a beating, but she's a fighter. She won't stay down long."

Neil frowns. "Mmm. Jason, I hear it was *you* who attacked the succubus. Care to explain yourself?"

Neil's sudden pivot makes me frown. "I wasn't myself. A foreign entity took over my mind, temporarily. It won't happen again."

"It had better not," Neil snaps. "The last thing we need is a Wordsmith as our enemy. I've got my hands full protecting the Core. If I have to deal with a traitor on Tarus II-"

"You won't," I say, trying not to lose my temper. "I've taken several precautions to protect my mind. You just keep worrying about you, and I'll worry about me."

Neil licks his lips. He hesitates for a moment before shaking his head. "You say that now, but all it will take is one screwup, and we'll be history. Bah! I've said my piece. Here, this is for the... *woman*."

Neil produces a rose from behind his back, lightly tosses it onto a nearby dresser, and smooths his hair back. "Give the succubus my best wishes."

Without waiting for a reply, Neil turns and storms away, leaving both Phoebe and I more than a little flustered.

Once Neil leaves, Phoebe balls her hands into fists. "Oooh! That god-damned little..."

"Neil has really changed," I mutter. "You used to be good friends with him, but ever since that sudden attack on the Core last year, he hasn't been the same."

Kar stands awkwardly, caught between Neil's departure and our conversation. The crocodile twiddles his thumbs and clears his throat. "Err, ahem... Ox-Arms is a little stressed out. Try not to blame him for acting all weird and stuff."

"This is about more than Neil being stressed," Phoebe mutters. "Never once has he looked at Samantha as anything other than some evil creature. She's helped us countless times, but his bigotry never fades! Why, when those shadow-walkers ambushed him last year, who was it that brought him back from the brink of death? Sam! Neil barely even thanked her!"

I rub my forehead. "I've tried talking to Neil, but he can be incredibly hard-headed sometimes. Whatever. Leave him to do what he does best... protect the Core."

"Yes, I agree," Phoebe replies. "And you do what you do best; mediate. Kar, make sure to take care of Jason, okay? I trust you to be the brains and brawn of this operation."

Kar snorts. "White-hair, don't you worry your pretty little face. I won't let Turtle do anything I wouldn't do. I'm only going to introduce him to my mother, Marie. The only trouble we might face will come when we travel to Hell Harbor."

I nod. "What's it like there?"

Kar taps his chin thoughtfully. "Mmm. Like I said before, it's supposed to be a paradise of sorts. Lots of trees. Grass. Sunlight. I've never been there before, so I don't know."

"Great. It'll be a first for both of us," I say. "Hopefully, Samantha will recover by the time I get back. Daisy! C'mere, you."

I turn around, bend over, and grab my daughter from behind. She shrieks with glee as I blow on her rosy little cheeks and plant a dozen kisses all over her face.

"Daddy, it tickles! Stop! Heehee!"

I set her down. "You be a good girl for mommy, okay? Go to bed early, brush your teeth, and stay out of the cookie jar."

My daughter reaches up to hug me, and I pull Phoebe in for a big group hug as well.

"Love you," Phoebe says. She smiles at me, and immediately, all of my worries fade away.

I have the most beautiful wife in the world.

As I pull away, I speak a word of power. "**Summon.**"

A pair of shiny golden bracelets materialize in midair and land in my grasp. I take one of them and wrap it around Phoebe's wrist, then put the other on mine.

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "What's this?"

"It's a magical communicator," I reply. "It'll allow us to contact each other in emergencies. Unfortunately, it takes a lot of mana to create, since it has to send information faster than the speed of light. However, these two should be good enough for our needs. If anything happens in the Core or on Tarus, don't hesitate to message me. I won't let anything happen while I'm gone."

Phoebe nods. "Alright. Thank you, Jason. Take care!"

I say my goodbyes to Phoebe and Daisy. Minutes later, I stroll out of the hospital room with Kar at my side.

"I don't understand," Kar mutters under his breath. "Why can't you heal Big Boobs?"

"She's suffered brain damage," I reply. "If I had Solomon's Crown, I could heal her. Without it, I can't unravel the mysteries of the human brain, let alone a demon's."

Kar frowns. "Oh. I see. You're too dumb to heal her. How unfortunate."

"What?! No! I'm not too *dumb*! Come on, Kar, the brain is a highly complex organism."

The giant crocodile nods sagely. "Indeed. Like an apple."

"An apple?! What the fuck does an apple have to do with anything?"

Kar shoots me a look of pity. "Someday, you may understand. As White-Hair said, leave the thinking to me."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, yeah, okay, buddy."

As we turn to leave the hospital, I catch sight of the new nurse, Rosalia. The overweight demoness stares at me through the window of a nurse station as Kar and I exit the building.

What the hell is her problem? And why does she give me such a bad feeling?

Part 183: The Road to El-Dorado

Two dozen demons rush down the corridors of the Labyrinth; panic etched onto their faces. They stumble and trip over each other as they desperately try to flee an unseen pursuer. The strongest of them, a brother and sister Demon Lord duo, keep to the rear and fling fireballs and lightning behind themselves blindly.

"Keep firing!" The male demon yells. "Slow him down!"

"Slow him down?!" His sister yelps. "We're not even hitting the shrakh-muncher!"

As they shoot glances over their shoulders, continually checking for the horrifying monster chasing them, both of their hearts skip a beat as the demons in the front screech to a stop.

"Shit! He's here! Run awa-!"

One of the demons in the front falls silent as his head vanishes, blown off his body by some unseen force. A split-second later, the deafening explosion of a sonic boom erupts in the corridor, causing all of the other demons to howl in pain and stumble backward.

"You can't run," The invisible specter says, his masculine voice taunting them. "I am everywhere. I am your worst nightmare."

"Fucking Wordsmith!" The pair of Demon Lords bellow in unison. They swivel on their heels and fling a volley of fireballs and lightning bolts over the other demon's heads, only for their blood to run cold when their attacks dissipate into nothingness.

"Seal."

The Wordsmith, Hope, cuts off the magic in every demon's body with a single word. The troupe of Pyrokinetic grunts gasps in horror as their magical pathways temporarily vanish. Before they can react, Hope speaks again.

"Fire."

A tiny marble appears from the darkness up ahead. It races forward at three times the speed of sound and rips through the stomachs of five demons in the front. They cough blood and stumble backward, but their nightmare doesn't end.

Hope continues to Wordsmith. **"Fire. Fire. Fire."**

Sonic booms erupt in the crowded hallway, one after the other. Seconds later, all of the demons perish except for the two Lords. The male jumps in front of his sister and spreads his arms outward protectively.

"Y-you fucking coward! Show yourself!"

"Alright. **Normalize.**"

Hope dispels the invisibility enveloping himself, revealing his figure to the brother and sister duo. At the sight of the tall, muscular human before them, both demons shiver in fright.

"The looks on your faces are great," Hope says. "I saw similar expressions when your kind attacked Maiura six years ago. Tens of thousands of humans died, unable to fight back. I'm only repaying the favor."

The male demon trembles uncontrollably. "L-leave my sister out of this! Don't hurt Kiera! Fight me like a man, if you dare!"

"A man?" Hope asks. He shakes his head. "I left my humanity behind six years ago. I'm a monster now, a real Devil. There's no point fighting fair with the likes of you."

Hope raises his hand. A small pouch at his side pops open, and a marble levitates into the air, guided by his telekinesis.

"Fire."

Before the brother and sister can beg for mercy, Hope shoots the marble forward at twice the speed of sound. It rips through the hearts of both demons, killing them instantly. Both of them slump to the ground lifelessly, regret etched into their faces.

Hope sighs. "Haah. **Retrieve.**"

His senses travel around the Labyrinth's corridors, where more than a dozen marbles lay embedded in the walls and floor. They collectively vanish and reappear in midair before him, only to fall straight down and strike the floor with a series of dull *thuds*. None of the marbles bounce or roll.

Hope retrieves them with his telekinesis and places them in the pouch on his waist. As he does, Solomon bubbles up in his mind.

"Hmm. What an intriguing way of fighting. Those little balls aren't like anything I've seen before."

Hope shakes his head. "I condensed and solidified each one several times with Wordsmithing, then increased their weight. They're three times heavier than tungsten and durable enough not to break under any natural force. I like to think of them as miniature cannonballs."

"I see," Solomon says, nodding approvingly. "And when you speak the word 'fire,' you must be flinging them forward at high speeds?"

"Yeah. Like a railgun."

Hope's tone turns brusque as he finishes retrieving his marbles. A moment later, he utters a few words of power. **"Invisibility. Stealth. Vision."**

His body vanishes, allowing him to walk unseen. Additionally, his footsteps produce no noise, and his vision enhances, allowing his eyes to pierce the darkness with ease.

"So," Hope says, stepping over the corpses of the dead demons. "How much further to the El-Dorado room?"

"A few more miles," Solomon replies. "You should use your teleportation. There's no reason to dawdle and kill these insignificant-"

"Don't tell me what to do," Hope says, cutting Solomon off. "Let's get one thing straight; I'm not Jason. I do *what* I want, *when* I want. Right now, I'm going to kill a few demons. If you don't like that, find another head to sit on."

Solomon leans backward and holds up his palms. "Very well! I'm merely offering a suggestion."

"Yes. You are."

Hope continues walking through the Labyrinth halls. Every so often, he pulls up the Crown's map and takes a detour, heading for areas with heavy traffic.

"Shit, shit, shit!! It's the Wordsmi-!"

Demons fall before him like wheat to the scythe. Hope barely blinks as he sprays blood and gore all across the Labyrinth's corridors.

Solomon frowns. "You're making quite the ruckus, Hope. If you keep this up, the senior demons are certain to arrive."

Hope smirks. "Oh, no. Not *them*. I'm quaking in my boots."

The ancient king frowns. "Why are you so confident?"

Hope sighs. "Solomon, I've killed north of one hundred thousand demons in the last six years. Not once has any demon higher than a Baron approached me. Want to know why?"

Solomon's expression turns grim. "They're afraid of you?"

"Naturally. The Demon Dukes and Emperors make themselves out to be these unstoppable machines of death, but in reality, they're nothing more than paper tigers. Fat cats. They've lived through several epochs by now, each new one changing their perception of reality. Now, they want nothing more than to live lives of decadence. They're no different from the billionaires of my era."

Hope pauses for a moment to crush a fleeing demon with his telekinesis. He shatters the poor fellow's spine with a flick of his finger and smashes him into a lump of meat and bone, only to leave the formless meat paste behind as he continues marching forward.

"As far as the Dukes and Emperors are concerned, the loss of 100,000 lives means nothing. They might pretend to care, and they might put on a big show for the sake of maintaining order and stability... but in the end, they regard the demons I've killed today with as much sympathy as I might a colony of ants."

Hope stands motionless for a few moments, lost in his thoughts. Eventually, he shakes his head and continues walking.

"Humans are many things," Hope mutters. "But we are not wicked like the demons. We have the capacity for great good and great evil alike. Throughout history, humans unleashed many catastrophes, but in the end, progress marched onward. Even when I was at my lowest, back before I entered the Cryopod, I always believed humans would reach new heights. I assumed we would reach an era of enlightenment like in Star Trek."

"But we didn't," Solomon whispers. "We perished under the assault of the Volgrim and demons."

"It's my fault," Hope continues. "I should have been there. I shouldn't have frozen myself like a coward."

"But you did," Solomon says, inflecting his voice with sympathy. "Now, you must do whatever you can to correct your mistakes. Everyone sins, even me. Don't try to achieve perfection, for it will only cause you heartache in the end."

"I know."

Both men fall into silence. Hope travels down the Labyrinthine hallways, killing demons as he walks, but his movements come more sluggishly as hundreds of conflicting thoughts bog his mind down.

Eventually, Hope slows to a stop. He arrives in front of a giant stone chamber, one unlike the others he's passed today. Stalactites hang from the ceiling, while Stalagmites stick up from the floor. Thousands of demons mill around, performing all manner of work and tasks. Water drips from the roof and lands in puddles and pools, where several mermaids frolic and play with one another.

Hope steps into the chamber. His eyes widen as he spots many other strange oddities.

Orcs hammer lumps of metal into swords and armor. Hellhounds linger in small packs, some of them chewing on the bones of deceased slaves, while others fight amongst themselves for sport. Goblins scurry about, performing busywork, while thousands of imps chase after each other and cause all manner of mischief.

However, one area of the massive chamber catches Hope's eye above all the others.

Several rows of platforms rest on the walls. Inside them, large depressions afford enough room for demon broodmothers to plant their hulking, ant-like rumps. The broodmothers take care of nearby imps running around, while occasionally pausing to squeeze out newly born imps from openings in their posteriors. They give birth smoothly and without pain, having long since grown accustomed to whelping dozens of imps every day.

Solomon's eyebrows shoot up. "Ah! A demon nursery. Now you've struck gold, Hope. These broodmothers help boost the demon population. Kill all of them, and you'll deal a blow to the demons' population production."

Hope doesn't reply.

Instead, his eyes rest on one of the nearest broodmothers. Despite the hideous, thirty-foot rump sticking out from her backside, her beautiful features reveal her former identity as a succubus.

The Broodmother tenderly holds a newborn imp in her grasp. The little guy clutches his head and writhes in her arms, apparently suffering some sort of seizure.

"There, there. It will be okay," The Broodmother whispers. "Bear with it for a while longer. The pain won't last-"

Before she finishes speaking, the imp stops struggling. His body stiffens, and he flops lifelessly in her arms, dropping both hands from his head.

The Broodmother's expression turns ashen. She stares at the dead demon for several seconds, then gently lowers him to the ground. She glances toward Hope, causing the Wordsmith to flinch.

"Pogo... I have another."

Hope's heartbeat quickens as he seemingly meets the Broodmother's gaze. However, at that moment, a little goblin jumps out from behind a rock to Hope's left and rushes over to the Broodmother.

"Aw, sheesh, Vell. That's your third one today! Stupid, worthless woman! Stop killin' all the damn whelps!"

"I... I didn't mean to..." The Broodmother, Vell, says. Tears appear in her eyes, but she quickly wipes them away. "He was in pain the whole time..."

"I'd be in pain too if my Broodmother was as worthless as you!" The goblin snaps. He grabs the dead imp by its ankle and drags it over to a pack of Hellhounds in the far corner. The half-dozen beasts flick their fifty-eyed heads toward the approaching goblin, and their gazes turn sinister.

"Here! Grub!" Pogo yells. He flings the dead imp toward the hellhounds. The entire pack lunges forward and snaps at the corpse, ripping it to pieces before it hits the ground.

"No... no... it's all my fault..." Vell mutters. She averts her eyes, unable to look at the horrifying scene of carnage.

"Don't like it? Then stop killing your damn whelps!" Pogo barks, ignoring her distress. The goblin waddles back to the rock and sits down, returning to his previous task. He takes a boring tool and a bone and continues drilling a hole in it, evidently crafting a flute.

Vell weeps uncontrollably for several minutes. Eventually, Hope turns around and leaves the room.

"What are you doing?" Solomon asks. "Aren't you going to destroy the nursery?"

Hope pauses.

"No. I don't think I will."

Solomon rolls his eyes. "Don't tell me you feel sorry for that fat sow? She's a demon, Hope. You've already killed plenty of them today."

"This is different," Hope replies, his voice monotone. "Killing demon warriors who can fight back isn't the same as killing a bunch of imps and their mothers."

"Ugh. Spare me the sentimentality."

Solomon plops down on the ground in Hope's mind and assumes a cross-legged stance.

"You called yourself a monster earlier. What kind of monster takes pity on others just because they can't fight back? If you spare those imps, they'll grow up to become thorns in your side."

"I know," Hope mutters. "I know. For right now, though, I can't do it. It just doesn't feel right."

"Fine. Suit yourself."

Solomon shrugs, unable to understand the Wordsmith's strange reluctance.

"We've almost reached our destination, Hope. Keep your eyes peeled."

"I will."

Hope continues walking. As he nears the El-Dorado room, his thoughts travel backward through the sands of time.

Amanda. Mother. Have I walked the right path in life? Have I become a respectable man?

Images of his foster mother appear in Hope's mind.

Her gentle smile.

The way she helped him with his homework.

...And her expression on the day Robert fell into a coma.

If only I had Wordsmithing back then. I could have healed Robert. We could have lived a happy life... I could have grown up in a stable family, mastered my power, and fought the demons. I could have saved Earth.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

Unexpectedly, tears coalesce in Hope's eyes. The image of the sobbing Broodmother appears unbidden in his mind, and he hurriedly wipes his eyes.

"Hope? Are you alright?" Solomon asks, his voice much quieter than before.

Hope vigorously nods his head. "I'm fine, Solomon. *Fine.*"

He stifles the emotions in his heart. *That was Jason's past, not mine. I didn't even exist. He's the one I should blame.*

"We're here," Solomon says, his voice shaking Hope from his stupor.

The Wordsmith stops mid-stride and gazes forward, his attention fixated on a small, narrow passage. Inside, a faint shimmer of golden light catches his attention.

The El-Dorado room.

Hope exhales. After pausing for a moment, he strides forward.

"This had better be worth the trouble," the Wordsmith mutters.

"Don't worry," Solomon replies. "With the information and power you'll obtain today, overthrowing Jason as humanity's leader will be a piece of cake. You won't regret coming here."

"That's all I can ask, Solomon."

Hope enters the room, leaving the rest of the Labyrinth behind.

I have to right my past wrongs.

Part 184: Intertwined Flesh

My breath catches. I pause to stare as Ose pops the button on her blouse and tosses it to the side, revealing her lacy undergarments.

Two seconds later, Ose unbuttons her dress pants and slips out of them, leaving her to stand in only a pair of lacey white panties and a ridiculously tight corset. As she raises her head, a sardonic smile crosses her face. "Enjoying the show, Beelzebub? I'll let you take off the rest if you like."

We're inside Ose's residence now, a grand palace situated atop a mountain many miles from Hell Harbor's western-most sea. Ose's bedroom is a barebones place, with only a bed, a dresser, and a changing mirror. It seems she designed her room for practicality and functionality, a detail I can respect.

I've never been here before, and now, as I gaze into this enchantress's eyes, I feel... intimidated.

No. That can't be it. I'm just a little nervous. I... I've never felt attraction to a woman before. Certainly, I've gazed upon my fair share of succubi and other assorted demonesses. I've admired their beauty from a distance, but never once have any of them struck my fancy. Never once have I felt an urge to pursue them.

Ose is different.

I do not understand why, when I gaze upon her, my thoughts become muddled. Perhaps it's due to our shared goals and mindset. She's not like the other women. She's-

"Are you going to stand there and stare all day?" Ose asks, startling me.

Damn! I drifted off into my thoughts. I'm acting like a total buffoon!

"Err, s-sorry," I say, wincing as I stammer awkwardly. "My, err, you are more... beautiful than I expected."

Ose's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh? Did you expect a hideous ogre to emerge from beneath my clothes? I'm sorry to disappoint you, Beelzebub."

"No! That's not what I meant... I, erm, well, when I look at you, I..."

Bloody hell! I can't speak straight! How can I transform into a gibbering moron just from seeing a bit of skin?! Stupid, worthless little imp, Beelzebub! Stop talking before you ruin everything!

Ose chortles under her breath. "Huhu... Oh, goodness. Can it be? Is the *classy*, high-strung Duke of Inferno... *nervous*? First time around the block, big guy?"

My cheeks flush red. "N... no! I've been with hundreds of ravishing women! I'll remind you that I am already well over ten thousand years old!"

Ose laughs into her hand. "Haha! It's fine, Beelzebub. I'm a little inexperienced, myself. To be honest, I'm barely keeping my composure right now! Have you any idea how many suitors I've turned down in my life? They call me an ice queen!"

Suddenly, Ose stops laughing. She raises her head and gazes into my eyes. A strange look passes over her face, as if she's suddenly recalled an unpleasant memory.

"Tch. Let's continue. There's no sense standing around all day," Ose says with a huff. Before I can reply, she grabs my hands and places them on her corset. "Go on, then. You get to take this layer off."

I blink in surprise. Her strange impassivity toward carnal pleasures of the flesh is not what I expected at all. Not wanting to delay, I quickly fumble for the laces holding her tightened clothing together, only to frown.

"Grr... these damned laces... I can't feel them with my fingers."

Ose watches indifferently for a few moments as I try to undo the front of her corset. Eventually, she sighs. "I forgot that you'd lacked a sense of touch ever since your rise to Duke. Never mind. I'll take this layer off. You may watch. Then it will be *my* turn."

Ose winks playfully at me. I smile, but as she begins to undo her undergarments, a realization strikes me.

The Third Emperor of demonkind isn't acting like her usual self.

Something about Ose appears fake. False. It's almost as if she's simply going through the motions. Does she feel some obligation toward me? Are her feelings even genuine?

Are... mine?

Ose turns around and reveals her back to me. "I've finished the front. Normally, I'd have Amy undo the back, but since today is a special day, I'll have you do it instead. Just pull that one large string near the top. Even without feeling in your hands, you should manage."

I nod, but she doesn't see it. As I reach toward her, my breath catches.

Devils. Ose really is a deity among women.

Even without sensation in my hands, I can still feel how my hand glides across her smooth skin. I carefully place my hands on her shoulders, and smile as she flinches in surprise.

Ose's tone raises an octave. "W-what are you doing?"

"Sorry," I say, "but I couldn't resist. I was lying earlier, but you knew that. I've been single my whole life. Master Agares tried to pair me with various women, over and over, but I turned all of them down."

Ose stares ahead, keeping her back to me. "Oh? Why didn't you go after them? Isn't that what men do?"

"Truthfully, I don't know. I've never met a woman who interested me, not until I met you."

Ose continues staring ahead. However, I can't help but grin mischievously as her red skin darkens noticeably.

"I feel the same way," Ose mutters. "I don't even know what it is about you that I like. It's something... intangible. Indescribable. Maybe I simply enjoy the way you barely acknowledge my presence. Most men fawn after me like rabid hellhounds. It's sickening."

"Haha..." I chuckle. "I know what you mean. Women can't take their eyes off me. All they do is prattle on about their appearances, other men, and how good-looking I am. They only have makeup and romance

rolling around in their heads. Not you. You thirst for power, much like me. I respect that."

Ose nods, agreeing with my assessment of my looks. She turns around to gaze into my eyes. "We've said enough. Come, Beelzebub. Let's not stand on ceremony any longer. Use your fire and burn my clothes off."

I blink. "Erm, are you sure? I might burn you."

"If the Duke of Inferno is clumsy enough to do such a thing, then he isn't worth my time."

A moment passes.

I swallow hard and nod. "You're right."

I raise both of my hands and ignite a scorching hot, yet razor-thin flame on the tips of my fingers. With one smooth motion, I slide my fingers down Ose's breasts, slicing apart her restrictive clothing as if it were melted cheese.

The moment Ose's ravishing figure appears, she inhales, taking a deep breath as her suffocating apparel falls to the floor. "Haah!"

After I finish, we stare into each other's eyes.

"I knew I could count on you," Ose says, blushing. "Now, it's my turn."

Before I can react, Ose's entire body shifts into a blur of motion.

Riiip!

My shirt explodes into tatters from the Third Emperor's vicious onslaught. A split-second later, my pants scatter to the four fucking winds, leaving me even nuder than her!

"Seven Hells!" I blurt out a curse in surprise. "Whatever happened to slow and steady?!"

"I've waited a hundred thousand years," Ose says, as she suddenly appears inches before my face. "I'm done with waiting."

Foomp!

My body flies backward. Ose shoves me onto her bed with astounding force, making me strike the covers like a cannonball. "Gahk! Devil's sake, woman."

Wearing only a pair of lacey white panties, Ose leaps atop me and grins maniacally. "Oh, Beelzebub, don't make me wait any longer."

Her enthusiasm proves infectious. I lunge forward and wrap my arms around her back. "Don't tell me what to do, woman. In the bedroom, I'm in charge!"

I try to flip her onto her back, but she doesn't budge. "I'm an Emperor. Naturally, I'll take the lead."

"I'm the man! You're the woman!"

"Hahaha! I love it when you're angry!" Ose laughs.

* * *

Minutes later, Ose sits atop me like a warrior riding a Hellhound. However, her expression grows sullen. Her enthusiasm from earlier disappears.

"Beelzebub, what's the matter? Why won't it stand up?"

I sigh. "My demonhood... it's not working properly. Damn! I didn't realize the fucking thing lacked sensation just like the rest of my body! How... how humiliating!"

Ose frowns. She rubs her pelvis against mine in an attempt to excite me, but nothing happens. "No... it can't end like this. There has to be a way..."

I slam the back of my head against the pillow. "No, dammit! I should have remembered. Seven Hells... how am I going to live this down?"

Ose's tone softens. As I gaze up at the ceiling, I feel her gaze on my face. "It's not your fault. You can't blame yourself."

"Comforting words won't make me 'perform,'" I mutter. "I'm as useless as a eunuch."

Both of us fall silent. Ose's pitying gaze simultaneously infuriates and humiliates me. If the other demons ever hear about tonight, I'll never live it down. The reputation I've built over the last ten years, the image I've crafted of being an unstoppable machine of carnage, will vanish in the blink of an eye.

Devils! Hells! I can't believe my rotten luck! If I didn't know any better, I might even think Ose did all this deliberately to teach me a lesson. Why wouldn't she? She always plots behind people's backs.

All I can imagine now is the laughing look on her face when she blabs about today to Mephisto and Bael. They'll bring it up over and over again, forever, for the rest of eternity.

Beelzebub, the impotent.

Beelzebub, the soft-headed.

I can hear their taunts already. Hells!!

"Beelzebub."

Ose's voice, softer than before, whispers in my ear. With a start, I suddenly realize she's drawn incredibly close to me. Her breath beats on my face, and her flesh presses against mine. Were it not for this damned, worthless body, I would have easily noticed her movements. What does she want? Is this the moment where she sticks the knife in and twists? Is this-

"Beelzebub. Listen to me. I have an idea."

Ose speaks again. She presses herself even further against me, making me wish I could feel even the slightest inch of her flesh.

I swallow my doubts. "What idea...?"

"Your senses might appear dead, but I have a hypothesis. Would you like me to test something on you? I'll want your permission."

I frown. *Ose is asking for my consent? Since when did she start doing such things?*

I gently wrap an arm around her back. "What are you going to do?"

Ose doesn't reply. She breathes in my ear quietly for several seconds, sending tingles down my spine. This strangely erotic moment fills me with excitement. If only I could feel her skin for just a moment, I might just... just...

"I'll try not to hurt you," Ose whispers. "I don't want you to feel ashamed for what's happened. It's not your fault. However, I have to ask you a question."

Slowly, I nod. "Go on."

"Do you believe in fate?"

Ose's white hair falls in my face. With her head resting beside mine, I can't see the look in her eyes. However, her words cause me to shudder.

"...Perhaps? Why do you ask?"

"My demonic power is electricity. Don't you find that strange?"

Ose continues to whisper. She pulls away from me, ever so slightly, and props her elbow up on my chest, then rests her chin in her palm. Her expression is... simply divine.

"If I'm right, the demonic fire in your body must have seared your pain-receptors to ash. Burning and detonating your body repeatedly would be nothing short of masochistic for any other demon. However, to protect itself, your body sealed off its senses so that you could use your magic freely."

Ose smiles. This time, her expression contains nothing but warmth and admiration.

"How very like you, Beelzebub. You went so far as to give up your sense of touch to serve me better. Even if you did it unwittingly, I am thankful."

Ose bats her eyes. She raises her other arm, and sparks of electricity appear between her fingers.

"To demonstrate my thanks... I'm going to give you a night you'll never forget."

I stare at the electricity arcing between Ose's fingers. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Your brain is nothing more than a bio-computer, one which communicates through electrical signals. Supposing I were to bridge the gap between your brain and body, you might regain that which you've lost."

My eyes bolt open. Her words strike at the very core of my being. "So... you're saying there's a chance?! You can give me my sense of touch back? We can-?!"

I cannot," Ose replies, a look of sorrow on her face. "Not permanently. Only as long as we're together — perhaps the Wordsmith could do such a thing, but I cannot."

Ose reaches toward me and caresses my face. A moment later, a sense of burning overtakes my entire body.

"Augh!"

I yelp in fright as white-hot pain erupts across every inch of my skin. My back spasms, and I flinch, unable to perceive the world around me for several seconds.

Then, as quickly as it came, the pain disappears. Ose continues pressing her hand against my face. Despite my disbelief, I finally feel her warm body pushing against mine. Inexplicable joy crashes into my mind. A realization of what I've lost, only to regain, causes me to break out into a stupid grin.

I'm... I'm so happy that I could cry!

"This is fate," Ose says. "We're meant to be together. You are my beloved warrior, my ruthless right hand. And I... I complete you. We make each other whole."

I reach up and touch her hand, grinning like a madman. My palm meets her soft, delicate fingers. Finally, I feel her devilishly smooth skin, and everything clicks into place.

Ose is the woman of my dreams.

A moment later, I glance downward, toward my pelvis.

"Oh," Ose says, following my gaze. "Looks like you're finally ready for action!"

I bare my teeth and flash a nasty grin. "Haha... you have *no* idea. I'll accept your reward, *Your Highness*, and counter with my own!"

This time, I catch Ose by surprise and flip her over on the bed, allowing me to assume the dominating position. She squeals playfully while keeping her hand pressed against my head.

"Take me, Beelzebub. Take me!"

"I told you, woman! Don't tell me what to do! I'm in charge!"

* * *

What soon follows is the most memorable night of my life.

Part 185: Sphinx's Might

Kar and I travel through the Labyrinth, our boots clomping against the hardened dirt floors with heavy *thuds*. Both of us keep our nanite armor ready to activate in case of an enemy attack, but thanks to my Wordsmithing, we avoid potential ambushers by literal miles.

Sitting on Kar's shoulder is his diminutive little fairy wife, Blinker. She says nothing, opting to instead observe quietly as Kar and I head toward our ultimate destination: His mother's secret base.

"Scan."

I speak a word of power, making my magical energy surge into the surroundings, alerting me to a group of enemies in an upcoming junction.

"Distract."

Kar and I walk toward the T-shaped passage, where several dozen orcs sit on their asses, shooting the shit with one another.

"-what me said! Stupid Jooka no give me earned meat!"

"Stop whining! You get meat when you done guttin' them slaves!"

Two orcs argue with one another about some gruesome act of violence. Rather than listen to their conversation, I tune them out.

Kar and I walk toward the junction, but our loud footsteps don't attract any of the orcs' attention. They chat idly as the giant crocodile and delicious-tasting human walk right past them and continue on our merry way.

Half a minute later, Kar shakes his head. "Hurgh. Your ability never fails to amaze me, Turtle. Those orcs didn't see us at all."

I nod. "Solomon and I found that the intent behind my words matters. When I said 'distract,' I imagined that those orcs were unable to detect us and that they would be distracted by some banal observations. As luck would have it, they ended up being too engrossed in their conversation to notice us."

Blinker, still sitting on Kar's shoulder, pipes up, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. "Ohh! So you didn't know what would distract them, only that they shouldn't notice us?"

"Pretty much. Wordsmithing isn't just powerful; it's convenient, too."

I turn to look at Blinker, only to notice a wicked gleam in her eyes. "Sooo... your Wordsmithing can do *anything*?"

"Uh... I mean, it has a few limits. Like, I can't instantly kill anyone. I can't bring back the dead, either."

"Right, right," Blinker says, waving her hands. "Forget that boring stuff. Can it make people more attractive?"

I frown. "...Yeah. When I first discovered my power, I changed my body to look more manly. I feel a little awkward bringing it up, since it was a bit juvenile-"

"Have you ever Wordsmithed Phoebe? You know... to make her prettier!"

Blinker's question nearly makes me choke on my saliva. "Kuh! What?! Why would you even think that?!"

Suddenly, inside my mind, the phantom Phoebe I created earlier today materializes with a smirk on her face. "Yeah, Jason. *Did* you do any Wordsmithing to me? I could swear I woke up one day with bigger boobs."

No, absolutely not! I retort, dread building in the back of my mind. *I told you already; you were imagining things!*

"Haha! Sure, sure," Phoebe says, laughing into her fist. "I believe you. You're too much of a *gentleman* to do something like that."

I stare ahead stonily, looking not *at* Blinker, but *through* her. My eyes glaze over as a sad realization hits me.

Shit. Phoebe knows.

Blinker snickers like a hyena. "Hahaha! I knew it! Look at his face, Kar! He's blushing like crazy!"

Kar curls his lip upward as he looks at me. His gaze contains a hint of admiration, as well as jealousy. "If only I had such power..."

"You guys have the wrong idea..." I mutter, but it's too late. I've been found out. I'll have to apologize to Phoebe's consciousness later.

I mean, hell, I made myself better looking for Phoebe! What's wrong with a few tiny tweaks to suit my tastes? Sheesh, can't a guy catch a break around here?

* * *

Several minutes pass.

Blinker continues to chuckle to herself, pleased at her brilliant deductions. However, Kar falls silent. A look of annoyance spreads across his face as we wander from hallway to hallway.

"Hurgh. Was it here? Or maybe we should have taken a left at that last junction. Stupid Labyrinth! I've spent so much time on Tarus II that my instincts have become dull. I can't remember where the entrance is..."

I frown. "What do you mean, Kar? Can't you find the path to your mother's base?"

Kar slows to a stop at yet another nondescript junction. His reptilian eyes sweep from left to right as he peers into the all-encompassing darkness surrounding us. "The last time I saw Mother was six years ago, shortly before I met you. Monsters and demons instinctively know how to navigate the Labyrinth, but only if we live here permanently. Those who leave to live on planets will often lose their affinity to the Labyrinth's magic."

I nod. "Interesting. I didn't know that. Is there anything I can do to help? Maybe I can keep my eyes peeled to help you out."

Slowly, Kar nods. "Hurgh... scattered around the various corners of Hell are little holes in the Labyrinth's walls. We lizardmen shrink down and enter them, allowing us to use the secret passages for our protection. Few monsters and demons are capable of shrinking to a small enough size to enter, allowing us to conceal our movements."

"Why do you lizardmen have to hide, anyway? I thought all monsters got along with each other?"

Instead of Kar, it's Blinker who responds. Her giddy mood vanishes instantly. "Not true, mister 'smith. Every day, small-scale wars pop up here and there. Demons love preying on mermaids, and orcs hunt any Hellhounds they can find, especially if they split off from a pack. The monsters you know about are the teeniest, tiniest slice of the monster pie. There are whole worlds full of monsters even I ain't never seen."

Kar nods. "The lizardmen and crocodiles were once little more than simple-minded creatures roaming about on Earth. It was our Mother, the divine goddess, Marie, who pulled us out of the swamps and rivers. She gave us life and allowed us to walk with our heads held high among the other monsters. However, due to our incredible strength, some did not appreciate our presence."

Realization dawns on me. "Your ancestors were actual crocodiles and lizards? Four-legged reptiles that crawled around on their bellies?"

"Indeed. Most monsters arose from the primordial soup of life. Our beginnings were as undignified as that of humans, demons, and all the other sentients. Evolution and mutation gave rise to higher species. Over time, we reached our present status through blood, sweat, and tears."

Kar turns to me as a solemn look appears in his eyes.

"...at least, that's what Mother says. I dunno. I don't read many books."

I sigh.

Kar is, without a doubt... a giant lunkhead.

"Right. On that note, what happened to all the other crocodiles? I assume the lizardmen and crocodiles are different species, right? You're not a mutated lizardman, are you?"

Kar continues to stare at me. After several seconds, he looks away. "No. I am not. Among my people, I was, at best, an average warrior. I stood at neither the top of my clan nor the bottom. Each crocodilian warrior possessed the strength of a Demon Lord from birth, and we grew stronger over time. Because of this unique trait, many demons grew to fear and hate us. Two demon Barons, twin brothers, decided to act on their hatred. They arrived during the night and slaughtered my kin like sheep."

Kar's face twists and scrunches together, transforming into a flood of rage.

"They killed my wife and her brood. I returned to find her bloodied body laying in the grass, our spawn dead in her arms. I could only watch as... as the life ebbed from her eyes..."

Kar stares at the ground. Tears do not well up in his eyes, and neither does his voice crack. However, he speaks more slowly and inflects each word more precisely than usual.

"I... I swore that I would not die until I took revenge for their deaths. I know not what their killers look like, only their names."

I reach over and rest my hand on Kar's shoulder. "Who are they? Tell me. I'll help you find them."

Kar exhales hot air through his nose. "Duriel and Zamiel. The Battle Brothers. I know very little about them. They possess excellent weapon skills, and they love killing in all its forms. They torture, maim, and hunt prisoners for sport. They're sick, vile little creatures. When I wrap my claws around their skinny little necks..."

Kar grabs at the air, pretending for a moment that he's twisting the life out of his worst enemies. I watch, silently, saying nothing. After a few moments, Kar shakes his head.

"Hurgh. My apologies, little Turtle. I... I should not heave this load onto your shoulders."

"Don't worry about it," I say, dismissing Kar's concerns. "We're friends. If you want to get revenge, I won't stop you. Hell, I'll help in any way I can. These guys sound like true-blue bastards."

Kar raises his head and eyeballs me for a moment. "Haha... you're too kind. I know you, Turtle. You hate violence. You would never kill someone, not even for revenge. You are a better person than me."

I shake my head. "That isn't true. If I were in your shoes, and if someone hurt my family, my wife, and daughter... I don't know what I'd do. Every man draws a line in the sand somewhere. If someone crosses it, they'll pay with their life."

Kar nods. "Hurgh. Still, if I someday meet my mate's murderer... what should I do? Should I forgive them? Should I kill them? Even if I do, it won't bring my dear Pyra back. I have a new wife now, Blinker, and I love her with all my scales. Sometimes... sometimes I wonder if..."

Kar trails off. It takes me a moment to understand his unspoken words. When I do, I immediately shake my head. "No, no! Don't even think like that, Kar! Your wife would be satisfied that you've moved on. She wouldn't hate you for trying to find happiness."

Blinker crosses her arms. "Jason's right. You can't keep beating yourself up, Kar-Kar! When we find those Battle Bitches, I'll tear 'em limb from limb! I'll give 'em the ol' five-six; the seven-eight! We're in this together! Don't even think about getting all mopey on me!"

Kar sighs. "I do not have the same confidence as either of you. Every time I see myself in the mirror, guilt wracks my body. It is difficult moving on when I have lost so much."

I glance at Blinker, and she meets my gaze. For a brief instant, the two of us share our unspoken thoughts. I begin to understand how hard it was for her to marry Kar when he still suffers from the loss of his previous wife. He has yet to forget his beloved Pyra.

I wonder if Blinker has resigned herself to only ever being Kar's second lover?

* * *

We continue walking through the Labyrinth. This time, I try to help Kar by using my Wordsmithing more frequently.

"Investigate. Inspect."

I aim my mind at the walls around us, searching for hidden tunnels and passages. However, no matter where I look, I don't detect the mouse-sized holes Kar mentioned.

"Are we in the right area?" I ask.

Kar shrugs. "Maybe not. I barely recognize this area."

Blinker gestures to our right. "We're gettin' pretty close to the flame regions. Tons of hotheaded demons live there, plus salamanders and baby drakes."

I scratch my chin thoughtfully. "Aren't dragons extinct? Why would these little half-drakes pop up on Tarus II, and here in the Labyrinth?"

"They aren't genuine dragons," Blinker replies. "Think of drakes as mutated imitations created by Lucifer."

"Lucifer? The Emperor of Providence? Isn't she dead?"

"That's what everyone says," Blinker replies, shrugging. "I heard Lucifer died during the Energy Wars. Her son turned on her, killing her before she could react. I don't know much 'bout them demons, though. We fairies like to keep to ourselves."

"That sucks," I reply, not caring one way or the other. "Demons can't even trust their closest family members. That says something about their nature."

Kar scoffs. "Pft. Humans aren't much better, Turtle. Your species lies, cheats, and backstabs one another for pieces of gold. I've seen it many times on worlds we've liberated from the demons."

"Touche," I mutter. "So how are we going to find this teeny little hidden entrance? We've wandered through fifty miles of the Labyrinth today, and so far, we've come up empty-handed."

"Let's go back to the Core," Kar mutters. "My mother told me she hid a passage to her base somewhere nearby the center of the Labyrinth, so if we keep looking around, we're sure to find it."

I sigh. "Sure. We'll do that, then."

Without any other options, we turn around and head back. Hardly have we rounded three corners before I slow to a stop and hold my palm up. "Wait. Something's wrong."

Kar tenses up. He balls his hands into fists and glances around. "Hurgh! The Labyrinth shifted. Our return path changed."

I nod. "**Map.**"

After speaking a word of power, a mental map appears in my mind. It resembles the map Solomon's Crown used to show me, but it's incomplete and only allows me to see areas of the Labyrinth I've already explored.

"Shit. We only stood idly for a few minutes to chat, but during that time, fifteen different hallways shifted directions. It'll take us twice as long to return to the Core as it took us to get here."

"Phooey. Stupid maze," Blinker grumbles. "Whoever created this place was a real jerkface."

Clink. Clink. Clink.

My ears pick up a strange sound in the darkness ahead. Narrowing my eyes, I speak a word of power.
"Visibility."

Instantly, one hundred feet of the Labyrinth's tunnels illuminate under a magical light. I take a step back in surprise as fifty skeleton warriors shamble toward us, each one equipped with bronze weapons and armor.

Kar frowns. "Hurgh. Mephisto's minions. Where did they come from? It's not often we'll see so many skeletons massing together like this."

"Doesn't matter," I reply, aiming a palm forward. **"PUSH!"**

A blast of telekinetic energy fires from my hand. The shambling bonewalkers explode into a million pieces, sending their osseous scattering backward to crash against the wall. Their swords, shields, and light leather armor clang and clatter against one another, only to fall to the ground, motionless.

"Kar blinks. "Whoa. Turtle... you... killed them!"

I shake my head. "No. Skeletons are undead. I returned them to the grave. I'm not a killer if the thing I kill has already died."

Kar nods. "Mmm. You are indeed crafty in how you bend the rules. I approve."

"What? I'm not bending anything! Everything I said was correct!"

Before Kar can retort, the sound of dozens of footsteps behind us causes our party to whip around. From the direction of the fire caves, more than forty monsters appear.

Flame salamanders, orcs, goblins, and even a minotaur emerge from the darkness. They rush toward us and slow to a stop some fifty feet away.

"I knew I smelled a stinky fleshbag!" One of the goblins shrieks. "It's meat time, boys!"

"I'll go first!" The minotaur yells. "Nobody can withstand my might! As the son of the Iron Horn Clan, I dare any of you to stand in my way!"

The other monsters pause for a moment, allowing the minotaur to take the lead. He steps in front of his comrades and spins a giant war axe in front of himself. It strikes the Labyrinth walls repeatedly, shearing off chunks of hardened dirt to spray all over the floor. "You there! The big green one! Give up the fleshbag at your side, or meet your end at my axe!"

Despite the minotaur's imposing words and chiseled body, I don't feel a drop of fear toward him. Having fought Satan, the First Emperor of all demons, and having witnessed the might of demons from the Ancient Era, this 'son of the Iron Horn Clan' appears about as threatening to me as a toddler with a spoon.

I raise my hand, intending to knock the monsters out with my Wordsmithing, but Kar shakes his head. "No, Turtle. You are my king. I cannot allow you to stoop to the level of mere ruffians. Allow me."

Kar gently plucks Blinker off his shoulder and sets her on mine. He strides forward and spreads his arms out to taunt the minotaur. "Hmph! A little soft-horn like you wishes to challenge me? Don't you know who I am?"

The minotaur flares his nostrils. "Mrrr! You're a slithering little lizard, green one! How can you beat me without using a weapon?"

Kar pauses. He scratches his head awkwardly. "Erm. Well, I have my fists. That should be enough."

The minotaur stomps his hoof. "Bahaha! Stupid reptile! No scale can withstand the might of my demonstone axe! My ancestors have passed this weapon down for fifteen generations! If you can withstand one strike from it, I'll admit defeat right here and now!"

Kar's eyes brighten. "Oh? That'll make things a lot easier. Alright. Hit me, then."

The minotaur falters. "...What?"

"Hit me. Do not worry. I'll be fine."

* * *

The minotaur glances back at the other monsters. He meets the gaze of one of the salamanders, who merely flicks his tongue before bowing his head.

After a moment, the minotaur returns his attention to Kar. "Hmph! If it's death you want, then death you shall receive!"

The bull-headed creature wraps his human-like hands around his axe's handle and stomps his hooves. He lowers his head slightly and charges at Kar with the blade raised above his head.

"Die!!"

Kar doesn't move. Instead, he eyes the weapon curiously, wondering what effect it'll have when it reaches him.

When he reaches striking range, the minotaur slashes downward, bringing his weapon to crash against Kar's chest.

Blinker stares, unworried, as her husband absorbs the full brunt of the minotaur's charge.

Crack!

The demonstone weapon, a nigh unbreakable object, shatters on impact. It explodes into countless fragments, sending shards scattering all over the goddamn place, while Kar doesn't even flinch.

The minotaur crashes against Kar's body, only to fall back as if he'd run full-speed into a steel wall. He hits the ground, hard, landing on his ass with a heavy *whump*. "Aaugh! Shit! What the devil-?!"

The minotaur takes a moment to collect himself, only to gaze in horror at the remains of his beloved axe. The broken weapon, now a facsimile of a shattered mirror, seemingly taunts him as it lays scattered about the hallway.

Kar closes his eyes. "Hmph. That is what happens when a lowborn like you dares raise a weapon against the King of All Monsters."

Suddenly, the minotaur's eyebrows jump in astonishment. "Th-the King of All Monsters?! Could it be...?"

Behind him, several goblins stare, their eyes as wide as saucers. "Shrakh! No way! Ain't that lizard Kar? THE Kar?"

The other goblin nods hurriedly. "Kar? He's the new Sphinx! Stinky badgers! What're we doin' tryin' to pick a fight with him?! If we piss the Sphinx off, we're dead meat!"

One of the salamanders, the one who met the gaze of the minotaur only moments before, quickly skitters forward and bows its head respectfully. "Oh, great Kar! Kar the benevolent! Kar the magnificent! Please, forgive us for our ignorance, for we did not know it was you!"

Kar smirks. He crosses his arms and assumes a haughty stance. "Hurgh. Stupid little weaklings. Geez. I was just taking my pet human out for a walk, and you chumps wanted to make trouble for me. I oughta rip off your limbs and feed them to the basilisks."

I frown. *Pet human?*

The salamander repeatedly kowtows, smacking its head against the ground. "Please forgive us! Show us mercy! We would never intentionally attack someone as magnificent as you!"

Kar uncrosses his arms and waves a hand flippantly. "Very well. Hurgh. If you do me a small favor, I'll forgive ya."

"Yes! Of course! Anything to please you, your eminence!! We are at your service!"

The salamander shoots a glance toward the other monsters. Having understood his intent, all of them run forward to bow before Kar.

"Heh. My pet human and I are looking for holes in the Labyrinth walls. Have any of you pups seen one?"

The goblins glance around. They shrug, not knowing what Kar is referring to. After all, in the darkness of the Labyrinth, observing the path directly in front of oneself is hard enough, let alone tiny holes in the wall.

However, to my surprise, an orc raises his head. "Ooh! Me know! Me seen one! Not far from here!"

Kar nods. "Good! Good. I'm glad you maggots haven't disappointed me. Now, I'll let you live. Take me there."

The orc nods, eager to please. He quickly jumps to his feet and walks toward us, a look of excitement on his face. "It big honor to work for strong boss like you! How you break big axe?"

Kar shrugs. "Dunno. I didn't even feel it."

"Ooh!"

All the monsters crow in admiration. Even the minotaur, still miffed at his humiliating defeat, can't help but shoot a gaze of awe at his senior crocodile.

I understand what happened. As demons increase their rank, their bodies become more resilient and durable in every way. Their minds sharpen, and their looks typically improve, too.

Monsters are similar. Kar now stands atop the monster hierarchy, reaching the level of a Demon Duke. His body is powerful enough to resist a cannonball to the face, let alone an axe-swing from a Lord-level minotaur. If a tank from my era shot him with an artillery shell, it's unlikely he'd be injured at all.

He's become far stronger than when he first obtained the Sphinx's power six years ago, having absorbed all of its essence and practiced daily.

Similarly, so have I.

"Lead the way," Kar says, gesturing to the orc. "I ain't got all day, whelp. I've wasted half my morning scouring these halls."

* * *

Two hours later.

The orc, Kugol, leads us down several winding passages. The salamanders fall into place behind us, keeping their heads bowed respectfully while plodding along on all four of their legs. The big-headed monsters look almost comical, given how defeated they look.

"Right here," Kugol says, stopping before a wall. I frown as we walk up to the spot he indicates.

"Are you kidding me?" I mutter.

We passed this area earlier, but I didn't notice the hole. It seems my Wordsmithing isn't as omniscient as I first thought. Ugh. There's nothing worse than needlessly wasting my time.

Kar, however, doesn't remember passing through this hallway. "Hurgh. Thank you, little orc. You deserve praise for being such a smart warrior."

The orc clasps his hands together. He grins, revealing his two lower tusks that stick out of his mouth. "Hoo! Please, big Kar! Me no want live in Hell! Me want serve big strong leader like you!"

Kar nods. "Mmm. It just so happens that I've been looking for capable warriors. Go to the Labyrinth Core. Give them this."

Kar reaches into a pouch on his belt. He pulls out half a dozen circular coins, each crafted from wood with a carving of a crocodile's head on their fronts.

He hands the wooden coins to each of the orcs, and the first two Salamanders who first came to bow before him. "Tell 'em Kar sent you."

The monsters stare, wide-eyed, at the fancy-looking coins. "B-but! If we do that, those lasers will kill us!" One of the salamanders sputters. "We can't approach the Core! Everyone knows it's too dangerous!"

"You'll be fine," Kar says, dismissing their concerns. "Now, go! I've got shit to do, pup!"

Immediately, the trailing monsters quiver in fear at Kar's sudden outburst. They gently pluck the coins from Kar's palm and scurry away, leaving the two of us in silence.

I exhale a breath of turbid air. "*Pet human*, eh?"

Kar snorts. "I'm the brains and the brawn, Turtle. That makes you my pet."

"I don't know about that."

"Hurgh. I do."

Ignoring my annoyance, Kar returns his attention to the hole in the wall. He motions with his hands and begins casting a spell. Moments later, his body rapidly shrinks, transforming him from a ten-foot-tall behemoth into an eight-inch-tall midget.

"Your turn!" Kar squeaks from my feet. "Let's get a move on!"

Blinker flutters off my shoulder and lands beside him. Now, she towers over him by over an inch, making him the small fry in their relationship.

"Alright. Here goes nothing. **Shrink!**"

I speak a word of power, and seconds later, my skin, bones, internal organs, and even my clothing and equipment start to compress together, shrinking me to Kar's height.

A minute later, I stand just under six inches tall. To my dismay, even shrunken down, Kar still towers over me.

"Hurgh. I wasn't sure if your magic would work, Turtle. Good work."

I nod. "Hey, those monsters... won't they get shredded by the laser turrets? Aren't you worried about them?"

My surprisingly squeaky voice unnerves me, but I ignore it.

Surprised by my topic switch, Kar shrugs. "Rabbit made those coins for me. They allow their holder to pass through the turrets without activating them. Pretty handy!"

"Huh. Hope thinks of everything..." I mutter.

* * *

Our adventuring party enters the hole in the wall. Along the way, we find ourselves besieged by freakishly huge bugs, spiders, and all other manners of creepy, crawly critters.

Kar dispatches them with his earth manipulation magic, while I merely kill them with Wordsmithing. A shudder goes down my spine whenever we find a spider. I'm deathly afraid of arachnids... especially when they're half as tall as me!

It takes us two days to reach our destination. I'm astonished to find that the tunnels inside the walls are a hundred times more elaborate than I first expected, with steel reinforcement along the walls, floor, and ceiling to prevent the Labyrinth from regrowing its insides.

"My mother is a brilliant woman!" Kar boasts. "She knows all about this Labyrinth. She helped us lizardmen engineer our secret tunnels so demons and monsters wouldn't be able to find us. I can't wait for you to meet her!"

Blinker pipes up, a hint of nervousness in her voice. "Oh, gosh, Kar! I just realized I'm about to meet my mother-in-law! Eeeh! I forgot to wear something cute and eye-catching! Oh no, what if she thinks I'm ugly? She might reject our marriage!"

Kar laughs. "Hah! My mother is a kind, benevolent woman. She would never think such a terrible thing, let alone say it. Her kindness is overflowing, like a river in a desert. When you meet her, you'll understand just how great she is!"

I nod. "Marie sounds like a delightful person. I can't wait to meet her."

* * *

"We're here!"

Kar slows to a stop before a massive chamber; one also plated with metal to prevent the Labyrinth from growing back. However, despite its imposing size, it only stands a couple of feet tall and wide. Size is only relative to one's height, after all.

I glance around the empty room and frown. "What do you mean? There's nothing here."

"Haha... my mother is a genius," Kar says, puffing up his chest. "See that little bump over there?"

I follow Kar's gaze as he gestures toward a tiny depression in the metal-covered ground. Barely a tenth of an inch deep, it didn't register as important in my mind, not until Kar pointed it out.

"What about it?"

"That is a teleportation glyph!" Kar says, chuckling. "My mother placed a few of these throughout the Labyrinth. If we step on it, it will take us to her base!"

"Oh," I say, feeling slightly impressed. I walk over to the dip in the metal and glance down. "How do we activate it?"

"Just step on it. When you do-"

Kar starts to say something. Before he finishes, I step on the pad, only to stumble forward awkwardly as my surroundings instantly shift!

I flop forward and fall on my knees, hitting a smoothly-tiled floor with a thud.

"Gah!"

A squeak of pain escapes my lips. I quickly jump to my feet, blushing like a madman at my awkwardness. A moment later, my eyes widen.

The smooth, metallic room I stood in just moments before is gone. In its place is a truly colossal, gigantic, unthinkable vast chamber. Brilliantly bright light shines on me from every direction, amplified by the pure white coloring inside the room. I stagger slightly as my eyes adjust to the room's brightness.

"OH? WHO'S THIS?"

A voice as loud as an explosion smashes into me from above, nearly blowing out my eardrums. I fall on my ass and wince as I raise my eyes upward.

There, a human as tall as a mountain stands idly, staring at me with only a slight hint of curiosity.

"WHO ARE YOU?" The speaker asks.

Due to their ear-shattering loudness, it takes me a moment to recognize the speaker is a woman, someone with long, brown hair.

"J-Jason!" I squeak, trying to come anywhere close to the person's volume. "I came here with Kar!"

"OH! IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I SAW LITTLE KAR," The woman says, her voice still buffeting me like a hurricane. "WHERE ARE MY MANNERS? MY NAME IS REBECCA! NICE TO MEET YOU, JASON."

I squint and gaze up at the woman's face. Due to the shift from the Labyrinth's darkness into this blindingly bright new world, it takes me a few moments, but eventually, I manage to identify her appearance.

The woman wears thick-rimmed glasses and a white lab coat. Her curly brown hair falls to her shoulders, and her big, wide eyes give her mature face an aura of innocence and curiosity.

However, what sends a bolt of lightning through my heart is a sudden realization that I know this woman! I recognize her!

She's Rebecca... the same woman who put me in the Cryopod six years ago!

"Turtle," Kar says, his voice coming from behind. "You should have waited for me to finish explaining. Hurgh. Judging by your expression, you are not used to the loudness of enlarged beings. Return your body to its original size, and the pain will disappear."

I nod, my thoughts still racing. "I... I... yeah. Sure. One moment. **Normalize.**"

Within seconds, my body begins to expand. I lean forward and gasp in horror as I suddenly realize our teleportation platform was a pedestal in the middle of the room! I'm going to fall!

Before my rapidly expanding body tumbles over the edge, I feel a pair of hands grab me by my chest and slow my descent. "Whoa, whoa! Careful, there!"

Rebecca catches me an instant before disaster strikes. She eases me to the ground, where I finish morphing into my seven-foot-tall height.

I assume a standing position, only to find that Rebecca's former mountain-like body is now a full two feet smaller than mine. She raises her eyes to examine me, only to take a step back. "Oh, wow! I didn't expect you to be so tall, Mister Jason, sir!"

I blink. "Rebecca. You used to work at Cryotek industries. Do you remember me?"

A moment passes. Rebecca frowns as she stares at me. "Uhm... Cryotek... Cryotek... gosh, did I? That was such a long time ago..."

As she wracks her brain, I suddenly have an urge to smack myself. *Ugh! That was over 100,000 years ago! How would Rebecca remember events from so long ago? No, more importantly, how is she still alive? Shouldn't she have died ages ago?*

Kar enlarges himself, transforming once again into his ten-foot-tall reptilian body. Unlike me, he deftly hops off the teleportation pedestal mid-transformation and lands on his feet, thus riding out the rest of his enlargement without anyone else's help.

"Hurgh. Little Orchid, I have brought back the human my mother wished to see. He is the Hero she has been looking for!"

Rebecca's eyes light up like the 4th of July. She takes a step back and re-evaluates my tall, muscular body. "Ohhh! Now I remember you! Yes, Marie has mentioned you a few times before, but I never got to see any pictures. Wow, you are very handsome in person!"

I chuckle. "Eh... hehe... uhm, we've met before. You helped put me in a cryogenic freezing pod. That was 100,000 years ago, though... so it's no wonder you don't recognize me."

Rebecca nods. "Mmm. When I transferred my mind, the memory backups from my biological life became a little fragmented. I have a perfect memory from the moment of my mechanical inception, but before that, everything is a little bit hazy. Sorry!"

I raise an eyebrow. "What? Mechanical inception? Biological mind? You're... not a human?"

Rebecca nods. "Oh, yes, of course, I am! It's just, due to limitations on the human body, lifespan, and other such things, all of us scientists working under Marie placed our souls into android vessels. You'll understand, soon enough."

Rebecca gestures behind me. I follow her movements, turn around, and stare in disbelief.

The transporter room Kar and I have arrived in isn't even worth mentioning compared to the view through the window outside. While several computer terminals sit inside our arrival point, several thousand people walk to and fro outside our room. I watch them as they go about their day, each one wearing a white lab coat or military fatigues.

Floating robotic drones follow along behind the head of each person, serving as their assistants. Some scientists stand at computer terminals and write reports with their minds, while others operate futuristic-looking machines, each of which I can't begin to comprehend. One device summons a robotic arm in midair, but the scientist merely examines it for a moment before shaking his head and tossing it in a garbage bin.

As I stare blankly at the facility, Rebecca's voice pipes up behind me.

"Welcome to the Remnant Oasis!" Rebecca says, her voice tinged with pride. "We're all that's left of humanity's glorious past!"

I swallow ten thousand questions, unable to voice them for fear of embarrassing myself.

"Wow... this place is really something."

Part 186: Marie's Oasis

Kar, Blinker, and I follow after Rebecca as she heads toward the teleportation room's exit door. I marvel at the brown-haired android's movements and how smooth they are. Not only do her actions seem the opposite of robotic, but she also appears more limber and flexible than anyone I've ever met, barring Belial.

"I'll take you to meet Miss Becker," Rebecca says, as she types in a sixty-something digit keycode on the room's exit. My eyes widen as her fingers move like lightning, dancing across the buttons far too quickly for me to follow. All I see are the afterimages of her movements. "Naturally, you'll have to wait a while to meet her. Miss Becker has been working on a new device for the past year, and even for her, it's proven exceptionally difficult to create."

I raise an eyebrow. "What sort of device?"

Rebecca finishes entering the door-code, and it slides open. She glances back at me and says with an utterly expressionless face, "A trans-dimensional inverse polaric field generator with modulated tachyon bursts to improve stability."

I nod thoughtfully. "Ohh. Yes, mhm. I see."

Phoebe appears in my mind. "Do you have any idea what that is?"

Nope.

Glancing at Kar, the faint glaze over his eyes tells me he hasn't a clue what the scientist said, either.

Rebecca leads us out of the teleportation room. Immediately, a cacophony of sounds and visual stimuli makes me pause to take in my surroundings.

The massive chamber outside dwarfs the Labyrinth's Core in scope. It stretches for miles into the distance, with hundreds of glass-encased catwalks, tube-like elevators going from floor to floor, and slick, smoothed-out machines whirring and clicking as they manipulate various fancy objects. Not far from us, a small group of scientists stands on a square platform ten-feet wide. It hovers through the air like a UFO, using what I can only assume are four anti-gravity thrusters on its corners, similar to my ship, Esther.

Rebecca barely gives the massive facility, her home, a second glance. She quickly turns left and begins walking beside a guardrail with a sheer drop of nearly a thousand feet to the floor below.

"This is your first time visiting our facility. Any questions?"

Kar and I fall into step behind her. Kar appears noticeably less dazzled than me by all the machinery, but even so, he still shoots admiring glances into the distance, as if to say, *look at how awesome my mother is! She built all this!*

"I don't know where to start," I say, answering Rebecca's query. "What is this place? What do you all do here? How are you able to hide from the demon's detection? More importantly, why did Marie wait six years before asking to meet me?"

Rebecca doesn't answer immediately. Instead, she continues to walk at a measured pace, then stops before an unused hovering platform, one similar to what the two scientists were using. She ushers for all of us to step onto it, and immediately, my heart jumps into my throat. The hover-platform offers no guardrails to prevent people from plunging off the edge to the floor a thousand feet below. As Kar and I step onto it, but before I can voice my concerns, Rebecca summons a holographic keyboard from her palm, taps a button, and activates a force-field around us. A shimmering wall of light envelops the platform, then fades away, disappearing as if it had never existed in the first place. I reach out to tap it, just to suppress my fear of heights, which causes the air to shimmer slightly where the barrier persists.

Rebecca keys in some location coordinates and the platform takes off, bringing us along with it. "You don't beat around the bush, Mister Hiro. As I said before, this facility is the last remnant of humanity's once-unstoppable firepower. Fifty-thousand scientists, engineers, and soldiers stand guard over the last vestiges of our species' hopes and dreams. We continue to experiment on ancient technology and artifacts, iterating and improving on them over time. Thanks to Miss Becker's genius, we've yet to fade away into obscurity."

"As for your second question, what we 'do here' is innovate and create new weapons, armor, and all sorts of other incredible items which you might find difficult to wrap your mind around. Miss Becker intends to unravel the mysteries of the universe, and thus her scientific curiosity has proven voracious and insatiable for well over 100,000 years now."

"But... for your third question, I must inform you that you are mistaken. We are not 'hidden' from the demons. They know of our existence and routinely check on our progress. Ose, the newest Demon Emperor, was the head of the demon's technology division for the past several epochs. Her genius only slightly pales in comparison to Miss Becker, which, coupled with her incredible demonic powers, makes her more than an equal to our founder, in my opinion."

A hint of dejection appears in Rebecca's eyes. She turns to face us, paying no attention to the platform's movements as it lifts off and begins sailing over the heads of thousands of people below.

"We aren't hiding from the demons, Mister Hiro. We're working for them."

My heart skips a beat. I glance at Kar, only to realize he isn't surprised at all. "What?! Kar! Is this a trap? You're delivering me into the hands of demon sympathizers!"

Kar blinks. He tilts his head and scratches his chin. "Uhh. No. It's not what you think, Turtle."

"Sorry," Rebecca says, smiling awkwardly. "My phrasing was poor. What I mean is that we have no choice but to follow their orders. Ose inspects our facility constantly. Her manipulation of electricity allows her to infiltrate any machine by merely gazing at it, which means it's nearly impossible for us to keep secrets from her. Since rising to the position of Emperor, her abilities have become even more fearsome. I think you should know the bitter truth ahead of meeting Miss Becker. We mean you no harm, especially given your status as a Hero, but don't expect any favors to fall into your lap."

I swallow my doubts and nod. "Right, I see. Sorry, I got a little jumpy for a second."

Rebecca shakes her head. "It's my fault. Don't mention it."

* * *

As we travel across the facility, I continue to question Rebecca about various happenings and events I've missed over the last 100,000 years. My eyes casually sweep through the areas above and below, picking out the presence of starship docking bays, giant war-bots, and long, glass tubes extending from the ground to the ceiling. Each one, filled with liquid, allows air bubbles to rise to the roof.

"Isn't this place strange?" My mind-wife, Phoebe, asks.

Yes, I reply, internalizing my words. *Marie works for the demons, yet they allow her to build all of these incredible weapons. Why isn't Ose afraid of Marie fighting back against demonkind? Hell, why isn't she worried Marie might hand over this incredible technology to us?*

Phoebe shakes her head. "That's not what I mean. Look at the shape of the walls and the ceiling. These glass tubes seem to send nutrients and oxygen everywhere, yet according to Rebecca, all the humans who live here are androids. Why would they need oxygen, food, and so on?"

Probably for the lizardmen. Kar visits occasionally. Marie wouldn't want her precious babies to suffocate.

"True, but that's not what I'm getting at," Phoebe murmurs. She furrows her brow and sweeps her eyes toward the ceiling. "Don't you think this facility's shape somewhat resembles a massive brain?"

Phoebe's question stumps me. I try to follow along with her logic, but my mind draws a blank.

I don't understand. What makes you think this place resembles a brain?

Phoebe rubs her forehead. "Maybe I have an overactive imagination. I mean, look at the catwalks we keep flying past! Don't they remind you of neurons? And the nutrient tubes- aren't they a lot like blood vessels and capillaries?"

I scoff. *Just because Marie's facility has a rounded ceiling and pathways to get from one side of the facility to the other doesn't mean it's a brain. I think the place looks more like a super-sized mega-mall.*

"A mega-mall?"

Something from my era. Nevermind, I'd have to show you for it to make sense.

"Hmm... if you say so..."

Phoebe trails off, unconvinced. I shrug and return to my conversation with Rebecca.

"-are the regeneration pods," Rebecca says, answering one of Blinker's questions. "Miss Becker's research allowed us to create machines which could rebuild not only our mechanical bodies if they should suffer an injury, but biological organisms as well. Using the algorithmic prediction patterns, we can use fragmented data, detailed observations, and same-type matching analyses to bring any limb or organ back to new in seconds! It's top of the line, far better than what the demons use. Ose has tried several times to replicate Miss Becker's nanopods, but to no avail."

Blinker crosses her arms. "I thought the demons used those stinky blood-pits. Do you mean to tell me the top brass have magical healing thingies similar to what Marie built?"

Rebecca shakes her head. A hint of pride enters her voice. "Nope! Your guess is correct. Demons use human blood to regenerate their bodies. Ose once made a partially functional biological regeneration chamber, but the other demons shunned it. As I'm sure you're aware, most demons avoid technology wherever possible. Even if they didn't, Ose's prototype was shamefully inferior to Marie's invention. In ten percent of cases, it would cause horrible skin irritations, which could even lead to flesh necrosis! Haha... compared to Miss Becker, all other minds pale in comparison."

Rebecca's face glows warmly. Her feelings of awe and respect for Marie Becker flow from her freely and without restraint. I need only one look to tell how much she respects the head scientist at this facility.

"So," I say, interjecting before Blinker can speak. "If you don't mind me asking... assuming Marie is as brilliant and unmatched as you claim, why does she allow the demons to bully her around? Why not march on the Labyrinth and take out the bastards who shoved humanity back into the Dark Ages?"

Rebecca's smile fades away.

The scientist folds her hands loosely on her stomach.

"Mmm. Because, Jason, demons aren't our only enemies. As long as the Volgrim tower above us... we haven't a chance of reversing our current state."

My heart skips a beat. "The Volgrim? I've heard of them, but I haven't seen one before. Can you tell me more? Who are they? What are they like? What do they want?"

Rebecca's expression turns numb. "Oh, there's no need for me to answer. Miss Becker is a far more appropriate person to ask about those matters. When you see her, she will answer all of your questions."

"But..."

"No 'buts,' Mister Hiro. It's not appropriate for me to speak about matters related to the Overlords. Anything concerning our *esteemed* leaders must pass through Miss Becker's hands first."

I nod. "Alright. I'll wait, then."

The hover-lift travels across tens of miles of the Remnant Oasis. As we float along at close to fifty miles an hour, I find myself wondering just how big this facility is. When I first arrived in the teleportation room, I thought it was twice the size of the Labyrinth Core, perhaps even three times. Now I find that it's countless hundreds of times bigger.

"One last question," I say. "Regarding this facility. I used to possess a detailed map of the Labyrinth. However, never once did I see anything as vast as this facility hidden in its depths. Where are we?"

Kar smirks. "Psh. My mother has her ways of hiding, Turtle. Just because you couldn't find it on a map doesn't mean it's not in the Labyrinth. Where else could it be?!"

Rebecca smiles at Kar. "Oh, my apologies, King of All Monsters. It seems you don't know. Mister Hiro is quite correct in his observation."

Kar's cocky smirk vanishes, and his jaw drops. "What?! No way! We've gotta be in the Labyrinth! Do you think I'm dense? We didn't even step through one of them portal thingies!"

"That 'portal' you speak of is like a tin can when compared to Miss Becker's creation. A Dimensional Bending Array, one which requires tens of thousands of hand-made calculations, is nothing in the face of a Transwarp Conduit. Comparing the two is like holding up a piece of coal next to a high-grade gemstone."

Rebecca's tone turns smug as she mocks Ose's handiwork.

"I said before that Ose is the only person who can hold a candle to Miss Becker, but even that's not strictly true. Ose's machines are still always two tiers below our facility's Head, even at their pinnacle. Ose is a better machinist than anyone else, a superior intellect in the field of bio-engineering, and overall a genius in her own right. However, compared to Miss Becker, she might as well be a two-bit street peddler."

"You really admire Marie," I say, nodding at Rebecca. "You must know her pretty well."

Rebecca reaches up and brushes a strand of hair from her face. "Oh, um... no? I don't speak with Miss Becker much. She stationed me at the Transport Facility six years ago to oversee the comings and goings of her beloved lizardmen. Beyond that, I've barely spoken a word to her in the last thousand years. She's far too busy to talk to someone as low on the totem pole as I."

I raise an eyebrow.

Six years ago? That was around the time I emerged from my Cryopod. Did Marie place Rebecca there deliberately? Rebecca was the last person I saw before entering hibernation. Surely it can't be a coincidence.

"No offense, but now I'm wondering how important you are at all," I say, trying to sound casual. "We've met before, but you don't seem to remember me. Maybe that's why Marie wanted you in the Transport Facility?"

Rebecca shrugs. "Oh yes, that's a possibility. Miss Becker has been keeping tabs on you since your emergence. Everyone receives monthly debriefs on your activity, among other things."

"You do?"

"Mhm."

Rebecca doesn't elaborate. I look at Kar, but he doesn't seem bothered by the idea of his mother keeping her eye on him.

However, I am.

I don't know Marie at all. No matter how kind or loving she might be, I find it creepy knowing she watches me from a distance. What am I to her? A lab rat? An experiment? Given my status as a Hero, shouldn't she have wanted to meet me immediately?

"We're here," Rebecca says, pulling me out of my thoughts. I turn to watch as our floating platform rotates to the left and pulls up to a nondescript walkway built into the side of the facility. A concrete catwalk leads along the wall to the right and left, trailing off far into the distance. Above and below us, a dozen other paths echo the one we've arrived at, making this place feel unimportant. Nothing about it

appears unique, which makes me wonder... is this unremarkable location where the head of this massive facility lives and works?

I expected she would have a fancy office or something with more prestige attached to it.

The platform slows to a stop and docks with our destination, causing its force-field to drop. Rebecca disembarks, Kar follows her, and I trail after him.

Unlike where we departed, very few people travel around this part of the facility. A few scattered hoverpads zip around, and several thousand feet away, I spot a few people walking on the opposite wall's roads. Beyond them, hardly anyone exists in this area.

"The higher-ranked members of the Oasis tend to congregate here," Rebecca says, acting as if she's read my mind. "Anyone with a rank below tier 3 usually has no business entering this region, given most of the work conducted here is top secret. Today is a rare opportunity for me to see Miss Becker's handiwork close up!"

Excitement creeps into Rebecca's voice. Her body becomes more animated as she quickly heads toward a nondescript door leading into the Oasis's wall. A one-way glass window prevents us from seeing inside, making me wonder what they're hiding.

Rebecca hesitates at the door for a moment before summoning a hologram from her palm.

"Umi, I'd like to access the Administration Entry Room."

Two seconds pass.

The hologram in Rebecca's palm shifts around to reveal an odd-looking woman. Her formless face, one whose features I can't make out despite standing only a few feet away, stares expressionlessly at Rebecca.

"Request acknowledged, Researcher 4125. Head Scientist Marie Becker is aware of your presence. She has granted you temporary access to the arrival and deployment area. Do not attempt to enter beyond this point. Head Scientist Marie Becker will meet The Biological in seven minutes, fifty-two seconds."

Rebecca's cheerful expression fades. "Oh. Yes, of course. Thank you, Umi." She closes her palm, and the holographic face disappears.

"Umi? Who's that?" I ask. "She looked... odd."

Rebecca stares at her closed fist for a moment, a wave of disappointment washing over her face. "Oh. She's... she's..."

Blinker flutters off Kar's shoulder. She flies over to Rebecca and hovers in front of her face. "Hey, don't look so down, lady! There's no need to get all mopey on us."

Rebecca sighs. "I'm sorry. It's just... I thought I had a chance to see Miss Becker's research close-up, but they won't even let me have a peek. I've served in this facility ever since the Energy Wars, but I'm still as useless as ever."

The door unlocks with an audible *click*, and Rebecca robotically pushes it open, barely paying it any heed. She steps inside, and we follow after, but her dejected appearance brings down everyone's mood.

"I could do so much more for Miss Becker, but she doesn't have time for a nobody like me. I'm doomed to linger at the bottom rungs for the rest of eternity."

Gently, I pat Rebecca's shoulder. Her cold, silicone skin feels surprisingly human, despite her android chassis. "Hey, don't worry, alright? I'll try to put in a good word for you. You were really helpful to me."

Rebecca raises her eyes to meet mine. "You'd do that? Thank you, Jason. I don't know what to say. We've only just met."

"It's the least I can do," I say, chuckling softly. "If it weren't for you, I'd have at least twenty more unanswered questions rolling in my head."

We step through the door, and it closes behind us, revealing a waiting room with a mechanical assistant sitting at a desk not far away. Its appearance is different from Rebecca's, since it has a pure metal body and a square appearance. Compared to the sleek design of everything else at the Oasis, it's the crudest robot I've seen to date.

"Researcher 4125. Thank you for bringing the Biological to us. We will take things from here."

The robot's harsh voice causes Rebecca to lower her head. "I'll take my leave."

Without another word, Rebecca leaves the way we entered. She lingers in the doorway for a split-second, showing a dissatisfied expression, but ultimately relents.

I feel bad for her. The person who helped me enter my Cryopod is now nothing more than a cog in a machine. She aspires toward greatness, but cannot shake the anchor tied to her feet.

Compared with her, who am I? A man glorified by the gods, given godlike power on a silver platter. She's earned her lot in life, while I was the recipient of privilege.

Life is unfair.

"Biological entity, JASON HIRO, take a seat. Head Scientist Marie Becker will receive you in seven minutes, thirteen seconds."

"Sure."

I glance at Kar, then walk over to a row of hard, metal chairs placed against the wall. This place reminds me of a dentist's office, giving me horrible flashbacks to the time I needed a wisdom tooth yanked out.

The robotic assistant sits in its chair, motionless. It stares at the door, unmoving, while my thoughts begin to roam.

Rebecca didn't answer my question about Umi. This robot has a similar voice to Umi and even speaks similarly. Is it Umi?

Is Umi a robot?

"Hurgh," Kar mutters. "My mother puts a lot of emphasis on punctuality. Don't worry. If Umi says she'll be here in eight minutes, she won't make you wait a second longer."

"I'm not worried about waiting a few minutes," I say, laughing Kar's concerns off. "But, uh... say, Kar. Do you know who this 'Umi' lady is?"

Kar raises an eyebrow.

"Pft. Duh! Umi is my mother's Oracle. Don't you know anything, Turtle?! Who hasn't heard of Umi? She's someone even the demons fear!"

I frown. *An Oracle? I've never heard of her. Demon Oracles are supposed to possess nigh-omniscient vision of Hell's happenings. Is Umi a demon defector? Someone who joined Marie to help serve her?*

Suddenly, Phoebe pipes up. "Ah! It all makes sense now. I knew I was right, earlier."

Right? About what? I ask.

"It's like I mentioned before, Jason. I thought about making something similar back when I wore Solomon's Crown. Don't you get it?"

Phoebe smiles.

"Umi isn't an Oracle. She's an AI. Marie's entire facility is Umi's brain."

Part 187: Humanity's Former Glory

How do you know Umi is an AI? I ask my mind-wife. Kar says Umi is an Oracle. Are you saying he's wrong?

Phoebe shakes her head. "Nope. Calling Umi an 'Oracle' is just a way of explaining her existence to demons and monsters. Demons aren't well-versed in technology, so they won't be able to understand what an Artificial Intelligence is, how it works, how someone creates it, and so on. Marie likely calls Umi an Oracle to simplify her existence."

Hm. That's a fair point. Still, monsters aren't technology-illiterates. Surely, if Marie told them about Umi, then-

"There'd be no point," Phoebe says, chuckling softly. "Not all monsters are equal in the brainpower department. Look at Kar!"

I nod. *Yeah. He is kind of dumb.*

"What? No. Kar is a genius. I'm saying most other monsters can't hold a candle to his intellect."

...Surely, you jest.

Phoebe ignores my disbelief. "Besides, even if demons and monsters *could* understand Umi's existence, maybe she has a reason for keeping her AI a secret."

Are you saying Umi might be one of Marie's trump cards in case the demons turn against her?

"Exactly."

Phoebe's affirmation makes me sink into my seat. Several realizations hit me, one after the other.

Marie might be working for the demons, but there's more to the story than I first thought.

She isn't their slave, nor their subordinate. If anything, she appears to be a mid-level manager, almost at an equal ranking as the demons. In the eyes of the 'Volgrim,' Marie might be too valuable an asset to kill.

Or... too dangerous.

As I muse to myself, Blinker paces back and forth on Kar's shoulder. "Ooh! Gosh, golly, geez! I'm about to meet my mother in law! Kar, sweetie, I don't look like a floozy, do I? Is my dress too revealing? What if Marie thinks I'm too short to be with you? Ahh! I forgot to brush my teeth! She's going to think my breath is stinky!"

Kar sighs. "Butterfly... how many times do I gotta tell ya? My mother is a kind, benevolent woman. She will treat you like a daughter."

"S-some mothers beat their daughters..." Blinker mutters.

"Not mine."

I chuckle. "Blinker, you look great. Don't worry so much. Even with my Wordsmithing, I doubt I could make you look any prettier than you already are."

Blinker rolls her eyes. "Thanks, I guess."

While the four of us laugh nervously, Umi's feminine, robotic voice grabs our attention. "Inferior Biologicals, Head Scientist Marie Becker will meet with you in exactly one minute, three seconds. Prepare yourselves properly."

I turn to glance at the square, blocky-looking robot seated behind the reception room's desk. It eyeballs me with its singular red iris, and for a moment, I can almost detect a tinge of annoyance in its gaze.

"Um. Sure. We're ready whenever," I say, trying to laugh off the robot lady's general dickishness. "I had a random thought on the way here, so maybe you can humor me... is this facility like a big... um... *brain*? For Umi, I mean. The AI."

The robot stares at me for a moment. I quickly get the sense it considers me an idiot.

"What manner of dopamine-boosters has this Inferior Biological ingested to ask me such a benign question? Yes. The facility is seventeen point three percent similar to the structure of a human brain. Naturally, Miss Becker added countless improvements, allowing my consciousness to reach a level far beyond that of Inferior Biologicals."

I groan inwardly. "Wow. You must be pretty incredible."

"Indeed. My processing power is one hundred and sixteen quadrillion, seven septillion, eight hundred and forty-nine billion..."

Umi drones on for several seconds.

"...and sixteen to the power of ten times greater than that of an Inferior Biological. Head Scientist Marie Becker relies on me to constantly innovate and iterate in her stead."

"Greeeeeat. Maybe she can work on your personality next."

"Naturally, my personality algorithms have been scrubbed of all pointless redundancies."

Yeah, like politeness and common courtesy, I think to myself.

"Is Marie ready, yet?" I ask.

"No. Head Scientist Marie Becker will not see you for another six seconds."

I stare blankly at the robot for a few seconds.

"How about now?"

"No. Head Scientist Marie Becker will not-" Umi pauses mid-sentence. "Congratulations. Head Scientist Marie Becker is now ready to accept your audience. Please enter the inner chambers post-haste. Head Scientist Marie Becker does not like to be kept waiting."

"Gosh, yeah. It would sure suck to wait on other people," I grumble under my breath.

I've only arrived at Marie's facility for half an hour, and I'm already at the end of my rope. If Marie is half as insufferable as her stupid AI assistant, I might just choke her to death.

"Are you okay?" Phoebe asks. "You seem more agitated than usual."

I hate annoying bullshit, I reply with my thoughts. *This Marie lady seems like a real piece of work.*

"Kar thinks she's the bee's knees," Phoebe says noncommittally.

Kar once thought a discarded fusion cell would make for a tasty snack. Let's not rely on his opinion too much.

Phoebe rolls her eyes. "He might have been right, Jason. That's why he's smarter than you. Maybe his reptilian body would have converted the cell to energy."

I hate that you can say such silly things without batting an eye, I groan.

Kar, Blinker, and I all stand up at the same time. Umi slides out of her seat and walks over to a gap between her desk and the wall. A long, white corridor stretches forward and curves around, leading to a backroom none of us can see from the waiting room.

"Please move forward at a relatively high speed compared to your usual walking pace," Umi says, her monotone voice sapping the life from my body. "Head Scientist Marie Becker has indicated that she can only spare fifteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds for your visit today. Every second we waste traveling to her will be another second you lose to rattle off your insignificant, worthless questions."

My hands automatically begin tugging at the hair on my head, threatening to turn myself bald. *Stupid Umi! Augh! You're such a shithead!*

Umi leads us around the corridor, toward a frosted-glass door. It slides open. Immediately, the sounds of several dozen people talking, working, and meandering about assault my senses.

Kar, Blinker, and I follow after Umi as she steps into a large inner chamber, one with dozens of computers laid out, all encircling a central platform raised several feet into the air. A plexiglass tube similar to the ones Phoebe and I saw on our way here extends from the ground to the ceiling. Inside, countless beach-ball sized orbs float upward, where they stop at the top of the tube and land amidst hundreds of similar ones.

Umi continues walking without giving anything in the room the slightest glance, but I pause for a moment to stare at the spectacle. Each orb inside the tube glows and pulses with electric energy, mixed with pitch-black particles, and intermittent flashes of color from all across the rainbow. The transparent spheres allow me to see inside of them, but I haven't a clue what they are.

I aim my mind at the massive cluster of orbs resting motionlessly at the top of the tube.

"Examine," I mutter.

A series of graphs and data points materializes before me as if they were holographic projections created by my magic.

Chaotic Anti-matter Neutron Bombs. Capable of unleashing 10¹⁶ Yottajoules of energy when activated. Danger level: Apocalyptic.

My heart skips a beat.

"What the fuck? Each of those little balls has the power to destroy a planet..."

I keep my voice low enough that nobody can hear me.

However, Phoebe's internal consciousness can hear my thoughts, see through my eyes, and even visualize my Wordsmithed commands.

"Much more than that, Jason. If dropped into an average M-Class star, it might unleash enough energy to create a supernova, possibly even a black hole."

Ever since Phoebe put on Solomon's Crown six years ago, her ability to understand low-level physics and other somewhat advanced concepts improved by leaps and bounds — She took to Solomon's wisdom even better than I did.

"Why would Marie possess so many weapons of mass destruction?"

Phoebe smiles. "Maybe Marie isn't as helpless as we first thought."

"Inferior Biological, JASON HIRO, please stop gawking at shiny objects. You look like a buffoon."

Umi's harsh, robotic voice pulls me out of my stupor. I glance to the left to see Kar scratching his head sheepishly, while the square-shaped robot eyes me with what I can only assume is a look of disgust.

"You have already lost forty-five seconds of possible discussion time with Head Scientist Marie Becker. Any further delays will result in my filing a formal complaint with Head Scientist Marie Becker to prevent your future return."

I stifle the urge to lift the hunk of junk with my telekinesis and smash it against the floor repeatedly. "Oh, sorry. My bad."

"Yes. *Your bad.*"

Umi spins on her metallic heel and continues walking to the left. I follow after her, this time keeping my pace brisk.

Stupid AI. Jackass. Jerk. Shithead.

We circle around the massive bomb-creation device, while I continue to gaze at it out of the corner of my eyes. Watching the scientists create a new Anti-Matter Neutron Bomb proves enlightening, as they don't create it with a burst of energy, but rather, a slow, sustained buildup over time.

Phoebe pipes up. "Based on the accumulation of energy, it must take several months to create just one of those bombs."

Marie has had 100,000 years, I think, shrugging. It seems she's built up quite a collection of them.

"Yes. But why would the Volgrim, her supposed superiors, allow her to create such devastating weapons?"

Your guess is as good as mine.

After a few moments, Umi slows to a stop behind a middle-aged, red-headed woman with curly hair. She doesn't acknowledge us for a few moments, and instead continues to type on a holographic keyboard,

pulling around all manner of intricate diagrams to create a blueprint for some unknown device.

"Umi, change the parameter for the isolation field by three Sarcovsky waves. I don't like that dreadful static whenever we activate the temporal arena."

"Command noted, Head Scientist Marie Becker," Umi's voice replies from the computer before her.

I widen my eyes after realizing who this woman is. Her thick-rimmed glasses, introspective face, and white lab coat give her a solemn appearance, making me not want to disturb her. She seems busy enough that having Kar bother her on my behalf feels almost a little awkward.

Marie pulls away from the computer and stands up a little straighter. She turns to look at Kar, and a sweet smile spreads across her face. "Oh, Kar! My little darling! Look at how much you've grown!"

Her vaguely British voice and soft tone fills me with warmth. The amount of love in her words proves infectious, making me want to give Kar a big hug.

"Mother! I am pleased to see you once again," Kar says, bowing his head politely. "I know you are busy, but have you heard of my marriage a few years back? I took the bond of matrimony with this beautiful Butterfly here, on my shoulder."

Kar gestures toward Blinker, who trembles slightly as she bows toward Marie.

"Um, uh, he-hello! I'm the Blinker- I mean, I am Blinker! My name is Blinker! I'm a fairy, and uh, I like the color green... and uh... um..."

Blinker's nervousness causes her to sweat profusely. Despite standing only six inches tall, I can easily make out drops of perspiration on her forehead.

"Oh, now now," Marie says, widening her smile. "There's no need to be nervous, you cute little dear! Anyone my Kar fancies must be a wonderful, delightful little flower! I'm pleased to make your acquaintance! Make sure you take good care of my precious little boy!"

After introducing his wife, Kar gestures to me. "Mother, this man here is the one I told you about! He is the reincarnation of the Hero; Turtle!"

"Uhm," I cough, "It's Jason Hiro, actually, ma'am. I'm glad to meet you. Kar mentions you all the time!"

"Oh? Does he? Haha..."

Marie continues to maintain her sweet smile, but for a moment, I sense the tiniest hint of hostility. She quickly blinks her eyes, making the sensation vanish as if it had never appeared.

"Believe me, Wordsmith, I know all about you. I've had my little boy here tell me about your *heroic* feats and endeavors."

Marie places a bunch of emphasis on a few select words. I shoot a look of disbelief at Kar. *You've been reporting about me to your mommy? The hell, man?*

However, Kar shrugs. *Wasn't me.*

Now I don't know who to believe.

"I have some questions to ask you," I say, returning my attention to Marie. "Hopefully, you can spare a few minutes?"

Umi pipes up. "Head Scientist Marie Becker presently has thirteen minutes, twenty-five seconds available for-"

"Now now, don't be impolite," Marie says, chiding the annoying robot. "Return to the information desk. I think I'll take my time chatting with the *legendary* Hero."

She waves her hand flippantly, dismissing Umi with a quick gesture. Umi nods and turns around to leave. "Very well, Head Scientist Marie Becker. I will do as you command."

The ugly, blocky robot plods away, leaving the rest of us to our devices. Marie claps her hands and turns to Kar. "Oh, my big strong boy! I have a present for you!"

Kar's body immediately perks up. "A present? I've hardly done anything worth mentioning, but... I am curious..."

"Follow me to my office," Marie says, gesturing with her finger. "Bring your wife and the Hero along as well. You'll like what I have to show you."

Kar nods, a hint of eagerness in his eyes. I find myself interested in whatever present Marie might have to offer, given the incredible technology on display in her facility.

We begin walking around the perimeter of the Neutron Bomb machine, toward a pair of large steel doors at the opposite side of the facility from where we entered. I fall into step on Kar's left, while Marie walks on his right.

"Mmm, that device on your chest," Marie says, eyeballing Kar's T-REX. "Is that used to generate nanite-armor?"

"Hah, your eyes are as sharp as ever, mother," Kar says, a hint of pride in his voice. "White-Hair, Turtle's wife, created this Exosuit to help protect humans and monsters from demon attacks."

Kar taps a button on his chest, causing his T-REX to materialize over his body. The three of us continue walking as the faceless armor envelops him from head to toe.

"Oh, how quaint," Marie says, smiling politely. "Its hardening and protective properties appear to convene around C-class, but its flexibility is certainly A-class. Not bad for something thrown together on a whim."

My eye twitches. Marie's casual insult of my wife's handiwork ticks me off in a way that even Umi's grating insults didn't. "Now, hold on a second. The T-REX allows any normal human to stand toe-to-toe against-"

"Goodness!" Marie says, ignoring me. Her eyes flash yellow for a second as she peers at the T-REX more closely. "That suit possesses a low-level Artificial Intelligence! Gamma-class, by the looks of it. What is your name, little one?"

I swallow my words as a hint of worry appears in the back of my mind. *How did Marie learn about Centurion without wearing his suit?*

Despite my being unable to hear Centurion's response, Marie claps her hands. "It's adorable, love! This Centurion fellow appears to rely on brute-force algorithms to provide pre-conditioned answers to verbal stimuli! I had almost forgotten people used such low-level systems for their butlers."

Kar disengages his armor and blushes awkwardly as Marie 'praises' it. "M-mother, these exosuits are pretty important for our survival. Can't you be a little... nicer?"

Marie scoffs. "What more do you want me to say, my sweet little boy? These simple machines are quite decent, given the primitive technology behind them! I think that's quite a compliment, all things considered."

Kar sighs. "Haah... you are too kind."

Marie grins, beaming rays of sunshine at the crocodile. She and Kar continue to talk as we head toward the exit doors, but my attention wavers. My eyes fall on a wall alcove, where dozens of bipedal robots rest embedded in suspension devices. Each one possesses a single blackened iris on their foreheads, much like Umi's body. However, unlike her, these robots are far sleeker, with seamless forms revealing no obvious weak points.

Immediately, two words come to my mind as I gaze upon them.

War Machines.

These smooth-bodied robots stand out from anything else I've seen in Marie's laboratory so far. When I look at them, I get the impression they might even be deadlier than neutron bombs.

"Hey, Marie," I say, feeling a need to voice my thoughts. "What are those robots over there?"

Marie and Kar pause for half a breath. She follows my gaze, and for the first time since I've met her, I notice a hint of displeasure on her face.

"Oh. Those. Don't worry about them, mister Hero. Those rust buckets are little more than failed prototypes."

Kar gently touches his mother's shoulder. "You haven't had any luck?"

Marie shakes her head. "I seem to be missing something crucial in the construction of their bodies. Replicating Sentinels is no mean feat, not if I want to mimic their full power."

I raise an eyebrow. "Sentinels?"

"Relics from a bygone era," Marie says dismissively, waving her hand. "Hardly worth mentioning."

Despite the Head Scientist's words, I get the distinct impression these *Sentinels* must be valuable in her eyes. She seems to have struck upon a barrier in their creation, preventing her from furthering their development.

However, it's none of my business. Given how many times Marie and her annoying AI have insulted Phoebe and me already, I'm not inclined to offer my help. She'd probably turn me down, and I'm not even certain that my Wordsmithing would be of any use.

We continue walking, and eventually, arrive at the giant steel double doors.

Upon stepping through, another large room greets us. Unlike the chaotic mess outside, this one is vast and empty, with a wide empty space in the middle, and an elevated platform at the end, where a large desk and chair sits.

Along the wall to our left, dozens of paintings rest, all arranged in neat rows. Portraits of various people, images of grandiose horizons, and scenes of battle greet us in no particular order. My eyes rove from a picture of robotic warriors assaulting a horde of demons to an image of a dark-skinned man wearing a church-like garb. Beneath his portrait, the name, "His Holiness, Pope Clarence" sits embedded in gold lettering. Aside from him, all of the paintings possess names of the people within, or titles of the scenes involved.

Sir Marcus, Leader of the 7th Battalion.

Demons fall before the Vanguards, 2114.

Dragoon's last attack, 2180.

Based on the dates listed, I manage to piece together a rough timeline of the war humanity fought, one involving not only demons, but the Volgrim, too.

Shadowy alien soldiers dressed in cloaks aim their hands at human warriors. The aliens crush the human's heads into meat paste with nothing but their telekinetic powers.

Psion's landing, humanity's first loss, 2090.

The final image culminates with humans bowing subserviently before their cloaked oppressors. The aliens tower nearly eight feet tall. Their glowing eyes gaze upon the humans with mere indifference.

Shaking myself from my stupor, I glance at the other side of the room. Along the opposite wall, hundreds of biological cultures sit inside glass cylinders, bathing their ripped up, torn-apart forms in regenerative liquids. My stomach churns as I recognize hearts, livers, and brains — all from different species. They pulse and throb with life, though I can only imagine that if they have any awareness, they must be in hell.

"Oh! It's Kar!"

Across the hall, a pair of voices boom outward, grabbing my attention. I turn to look as two familiar lizardmen come strolling toward Kar, cheerful grins etched into their faces.

The first, a red-skinned lizard, I recognize as none other than King Ghidorah. The King guffaws loudly and slaps Kar on his back. "Bahaha! It is good to see you once again, last of the Crocodiles!"

Ghidorah's trusty sword and shield rest on his back. Light, leather armor, infused with purple and gold trimmings, reveal his status as a highborn lizardman.

To his left, a shorter blue lizardman rubs his claws together and flicks his snake-like tongue at Kar. "Brother, I hope you've been doing okay!"

Kar walks forward and slaps his chest. "Hoho! Mother, was this the present you mentioned? It is a good one! Long has it been since I spoke to my brothers!"

Marie smiles. "Ghidorah and Rodan ask about you all the time. As luck would have it, they were visiting today when I heard you planned to visit. Mother always takes care of her precious little babies!"

I stand back and watch as the lizardmen and Kar exchange pleasantries. Kar introduces them to his new wife, but Blinker proves just as embarrassed and awkward now as she was earlier. It seems she has a weakness to meeting in-laws.

"Now, now," Marie says, patting Kar's shoulder. "Why don't you and little Tinkerbell go off and have a chat with your friends? I'd love to speak with this Jason fellow by myself for a bit. Top secret information, and all that."

My heart skips a beat. It suddenly occurs to me that Marie might have set up the lizardmen to draw Kar away.

...However, I can't complain. I want to talk to Marie alone, too.

Kar glances at his mother. For a brief moment, a revealing light appears in his eyes, as if he's understood her intent. He turns to look at me, and I merely nod. "Go ahead, have some fun. We'll meet up in a bit."

"Very well, Turtle," Kar says with a nod. "Mother, do be polite to Turtle. He is not as quick-witted as me. Try to explain things slowly so he can follow along. Use dumber words if you must."

Marie nods sagely. "Yes, I imagined that was the case. As my smartest child, it will be difficult for others to compare to your shining light! Go on, then. Shoo-shoo!"

Kar and the lizardmen return to their conversation. They walk through the great doors, leaving Marie and I alone in her office.

A few moments pass as Marie and I size each other up.

"I've been wanting to speak to you for a while," Marie says, her diplomatic tone vanishing instantly. "Come. Take a seat at my desk."

Marie walks past me toward the elevated platform at the far wall. I follow her, and as we walk the hundred or so feet across her chamber, I raise my eyebrows at a certain peculiarity.

"Why do you have a brain sitting on your desk?"

Marie walks up the steps, rounds her desk, and sags into a fine leather chair. "Haha, cute, isn't it? That little specimen there is my biological apparatus; the one I abandoned 100,000 years ago upon entering this artificial body. I keep it on my desk as a memory of that which I've given up."

Marie gestures to a comfortable-looking brown-fabric chair on the opposite side of her desk. "Sit."

I nod and take a seat. My eyes linger on her brain, now placed inside a glass cylinder with liquid inside, just like the many other such specimens located on the right-wall.

What sort of person would keep their brain on their desk? I might have underestimated the head scientist's eccentricity.

The redheaded woman sighs. She turns her chair slightly to look at a giant, opaque window behind her desk. "Umi, enable sightseeing mode."

"Command accepted," Umi's voice chimes above us.

The window shifts, and its frosted glass fades away, revealing a massive city outside! Skyscrapers far taller than anything I ever saw on Earth tower miles into the sky, practically scraping the atmosphere. Stacking fifty Empire State Buildings on top of one another might not come close to reaching the heights of these monstrous steel marvels.

"Stratoscrapers," Marie says, noticing my shocked expression. "Jason Leonardo Hiro. Born February 2nd, 2002. Father and mother unknown. You were an orphan raised in the foster care system, someone who eventually placed himself into cryostasis at the tender age of eighteen for reasons not detailed."

Marie shakes her head. "You didn't get to witness the arrival of the Volgrim, nor the brutal wars which unfolded shortly thereafter, nor the century of slow decline humanity faced. Such technological marvels as these stratoscrapers must appear alien to you."

I nod slowly, as a lump forms in my throat. "I... I wish I'd been there."

Marie chuckles. "You can't change the past, Jason, but you can live for the future. This world outside my window is nothing more than an illusion. It's a reminder of what humanity lost, and what I hope to someday regain."

Marie spreads her arms out. "What do you think? Is such a future worth pursuing?"

I nod. "It is."

Marie speaks slowly and deliberately, pausing to enunciate each word. "Mmm. Then, pray tell, Jason, Leonardo, Hiro... why have you put in so much effort to undo everything I've worked for?"

"Pardon...?"

Marie sighs. "I had everything under control until you came along. Humans were living quietly on their containment worlds. The demons were slowly stagnating and deteriorating. The Volgrim were beginning to regard me as less and less of a threat... until, one day, a Hero emerged from a long forgotten Cryopod and threw a wrench into everything I'd built."

"What I want to know, Jason Leonardo Hiro... is why you think yourself more suited to the role of rebuilding humanity than me?"

* * *

I stare, dumbstruck, at Marie. Her blank expression gives me no hints or clues. I can't tell if she's telling the truth, lying, or pulling my leg.

Her robotic face proves unreadable.

"I... I don't understand. I haven't done anything to harm your, um, operation here. Not deliberately. Why are you accusing me of such a thing? Aren't we on the same side?"

"The same side?" Marie asks, echoing me. "That's a matter of perspective. I have 100,000 years of data and knowledge guiding my every move. You, however, have proven to be little more than a loose cannon. Every move you make cripples my efforts in subtle, irreparable ways. Because of you, the Black Witch emerged from her eternal captivity. Her release caused The Ascended to destroy a planet. When they failed to destroy her, she roused the fighting spirit of demonkind, bringing forth changes to their ruling structure."

Marie continues. "The Black Witch inevitably perished, but she left a dead Demon Duke in her wake and rendered Diablo comatose. Now, Ose stands amidst the highest echelons on her people. Frankly, I cannot envision a deadlier opponent in my quest to restore humanity's might than Ose. On top of that, your constant incursions into the Labyrinth have led to the deaths of tens of thousands of demons, monsters, and humans."

Marie sighs. "The danger this holds for the galaxy is second only to the imminent threat humanity now faces. The demons have reawakened their long-dormant bloodlust. Their thirst for battle has begun flowing through their veins, much like it did during the Energy Wars. If you think this will end with anything but a crushing defeat for humanity... you are wrong."

I stare silently at the woman seated before me. Her piercing gaze no longer contains even a drop of the sweet tenderness she showed Kar earlier. Instead, a raptor takes root in her mind, giving her face an animalistic coldbloodedness.

"What do you expect me to do?" I ask. "It's clear you've done your research on me, but surely you can't expect me to know anything about you. Today is the first time I've spoken to you. I wouldn't want to get in your way if possible... but similarly, I'm not going to let my fellow humans suffer in silence. Things need to change."

Marie closes her eyes.

"I see. You must be an idealist. Very well. I have some eye-opening revelations you should find *quite* interesting."

Marie opens her eyes and looks toward the ceiling. "Umi. Bring up all experiments relating to the HCP."

"Command accepted."

Umi replies cordially to Marie, and I raise an eyebrow. "HCP?"

"The Humanity Containment Project. You will soon understand."

Author Notes:

This is Marie's original design.





This is Marie's newest design, by MWTX.



Part 188: Humanity Containment Project

I lean back in the comfortable fabric chair and watch as Marie summons a hologram in the center of the room. An image appears of a massive, six-legged machine, one resembling a spider, with a giant cannon mounted on top. The weapon of war fires a burst of explosive plasma at a nearby structure and blasts it to smithereens, liquefying the ten-story building to clumps of steel and concrete in seconds.

"This machine is known as a Dragoon," Marie begins. "It is a staple of the Volgrim ground invasion force. It is also one of their *least* technologically advanced weapons of war."

Marie taps a row of buttons on her desk and reconfigures the holographic display in the center of the room to a new scene.

This time, one hundred cloaked aliens stomp toward a human city, their movements unhurried, their postures confident. I note with interest how dinosaur-like their feet appear, with two giant claws on the front, and one on the back. Their talons dig into the dirt, allowing them to walk across rocks and rough terrain with ease.

The camera pans around to reveal more of the human city. I nearly jump out of my seat when I recognize it.

"That's San Francisco!"

The city's familiar skyline, coupled with its iconic Golden Gate Bridge catches my eye. The aliens trudge toward the city from the east, arriving just outside its city limits.

I stare in fascinated horror as a gigantic spacecraft flies down from the sky to face off against the small contingent of ground troops. Its appearance is distinctly Terran, with rounded edges, machine guns clumped all over its hull, and a flag vaguely resembling that of the USA. To my surprise, the emblem appears somewhat altered, with elements of Britain, Australia, and even Russia's flags thrown in.

The massive starship, nearly three football fields in length, swivels over five hundred machineguns at the Volgrim below.

An audio clip plays.

"You bastards! This is for New York!"

A hail of gunfire rains from the sky, saturating the aliens with an inescapable hailstorm of bullets.

However, none of the Volgrim so much as flinch. Instead, all of them raise their heads upward and gaze defiantly at the battlecruiser. One of the Volgrim, a commander wearing black armor, steps forward and raises a five-fingered hand to the sky.

A horrible voice emerges, spoken not through vocal cords, but an audio-projector.

[Primitive mud-dwellers. Know your place.]

The storm of bullets suddenly comes to a screeching halt as it strikes a force field made of psionic energy. Ten thousand shells batter a barrier formed by the Volgrim's mind, only to clatter uselessly to the

ground seconds later.

The Volgrim narrows his hideous, pure green eyes.

[Fall.]

He motions with his hand, as if slapping the dirt. The gunship bucks violently. An invisible wave of energy strikes it from above and instantly overpowers its anti-gravity propulsion units.

Two seconds later, the ship shudders and falls from the sky.

Thoom.

Like a rock splashing into a shallow pool of water, the spaceship hits the ground and sends waves of debris flying in all directions. The Volgrim commander rises to his feet and stares silently as the ship erupts in a massive fireball, sending its crew to the afterlife.

[Worthless dirt-lickers. The rest of your ilk will soon follow.]

The hologram freezes on the Volgrim's cloaked figure, and I turn back to Marie to await her explanation.

"What you've just witnessed was the initial worldfall the Psions made in the year 2090. Humanity had already fought them for two decades, but their arrival on Earth signaled the beginning of our end. That unpleasant fellow was known as Goldlight Nufaris."

Marie shakes her head. "*Was* known, mind you. These days, he goes by the title of *Executor* Nufaris. He stands second only to the Founders themselves."

I shake my head. "Sorry, but I don't know what all these titles and names mean. What's a Psion? What is a 'Goldlight'? Executor? None of this means anything to me."

Marie purses her lips. "I thought you might know at least the basics. Perhaps I overestimated your intelligence from the very start."

"This has nothing to do with my intelligence," I grumble. "I just don't have all the information I need. Please start from the beginning."

"Very well."

Marie agrees to my request, surprising me. I half-expected her to put up more of a fight and make me grovel.

"The Volgrim as a whole are what you might call a 'Type 3 Civilization.' They possess the means to control every corner of the Milky Way, as well as its available energy. Humanity first learned of their existence in the year 2030, but we quickly realized that they had been *watching us* for much longer."

I frown. "In what way?"

"The Volgrim are an ancient species. Humanity crawled out of the ice age a mere 30,000 years before creating our first spacefaring vessel. However, the Volgrim fought dozens of interplanetary wars in that same period. Their evolution began nearly ten million years before we were a blip on the universe's radar. You could say the Volgrim had the first-to-bat advantage."

She continues. "I don't know everything about the Volgrim. In fact, I'm embarrassed to admit that after monitoring them for over 100,000 years, I still know next to nothing about their origins. What I do know is that from the moment humans crawled out of the mud and began to build civilizations, we fell under their purview. They observed us, guided us, and tested us."

Marie taps on her holographic control settings. New structures appear in the center of the room, one after the other.

"The Pyramids of Giza. The Tower of Babel. The Mayan Towers. For decades, many so-called 'crackpots' theorized that these monoliths and monuments exceeded the engineering capabilities of humanity during their eras of creation. Most people dismissed them. Most people thought they were wrong, but they weren't."

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you telling me aliens built the pyramids?"

Marie nods. "I am."

"That's ridiculous. I mean, I *know* you're not lying, but the thought is simply absurd."

Marie smiles. "Indeed. Most people thought the way you do. It wasn't until the discovery of Isla Muerda, a few hundred miles east off the coast of Mexico, that all those notions changed."

The redheaded scientist lady manipulates her holographic controls once more, bringing a massive, alien structure into focus.

"The Volgrim had a lapse in judgment. Their scientific faction, whom we later termed 'Changelings,' accidentally allowed a stray tugboat to pass through one of their detection fields. This field prevented humanity's primitive instruments from spotting the island from space, our planes from observing it overhead, and our ships from navigating nearby it. Simply put, without several centuries of evolution, we might never have chanced upon the Changeling's secret observation base."

"Changelings," I say, rolling the word around in my mouth. "Are they shapeshifters?"

"The Volgrim have five distinct factions, or rather, subspecies," Marie replies. "The Ascended, Changelings, Psions, Technopaths, and Dolgrimites. Each faction is its own special snowflake, so I won't bother explaining their differences. For now, all you need to know is that the Changelings possessed control of Earth for well over a million years. They observed us from the shadows, learned our habits, our strengths and weaknesses, and so on."

"But they are shapeshifters, right?"

Marie nods. "In a manner of speaking. They adapt their bodies to blend in with the target populace. The mutation takes some time and is not easily undone. Kar tells me you know the Second Emperor of demonkind, Belial. Have you witnessed her ability before?"

"Yeah. She's a shapeshifter, too."

Marie shakes her head. "Belial's power far, far surpasses what the Volgrim can achieve. She can change her appearance in seconds. She can mimic not only humans, angels, and other bipeds, but animals and monsters as well. Once transformed, she can mimic the voices and speech patterns of those she copies,

making it nearly impossible to tell her apart from her target population. The Changelings might be more than capable of blending in with a different species, but their abilities are nowhere near as convenient."

Marie taps her holographic controls again. This time, an image appears in the middle of the room, one depicting a humanoid figure with blue skin, webbed fingers, and a face I could pick out of a crowd a mile away.

I jump out of my seat. "What?! That's... that's a Roswell alien!"

Marie closes her eyes and nods. "Mmm. Some people called them 'Greys.' They observed us from afar, and sometimes interfered. However, I assure you, Jason, that despite their bulbous eyes and nasty appearance, they are by far the most benign of all the Volgrim subspecies."

I nod along, only half-listening to Marie's words. My attention fixates on the image of the Changeling depicted in the center of the hall. Its narrow, purple eyes don't match with the bulbous black eyes alien movies always depicted Greys as having, but the head shape is practically identical. Hairless, with an elongated skull and a sharp jawline, the Changeling resembles so many movies I saw as a child that I can only shake my head in disbelief.

"We must have noticed the Changelings before 2020, when I entered my Cryopod," I mutter. "I saw dozens of movies depicting Greys. How could we imagine such specific facial and body features otherwise?"

"You're right," Marie says, nodding. "I did not find out about the aliens on my own. Instead, a man approached me one day and gave me concrete evidence of their existence, including photos and videos."

Marie leans back in her chair. "I worked as a liaison for that man, right up until the Volgrim's eventual victory over Earth. I never learned his real identity, nor where he obtained his information. All I knew was the name everyone coined for him."

"And what was it?" I ask.

Marie chuckles.

"That fellow... he wore a white feline mask on his face at all times. It reminded me of a few popular Japanese cartoons, so we called him Cat Mask."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. Cat Mask was a strange, eccentric fellow, but his information was rock-solid. He gave me more than 15 years to plan for the Volgrim's arrival. Thanks to him, my research into AI improved by leaps and bounds, allowing me to create the world's first Alpha-level AI centuries before it should have been possible."

Marie clicks her tongue. "However, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's return to the present for a moment. I told you about the Changelings for a reason. They observed humanity's rise and fall. They collected data millions of times more precise than we did about ourselves. They served as the galaxy's observers, monitoring fledgling Sentients all across the Milky Way. Today, they control nearly two million habitable systems. That number is barely any higher than during their conquest of Earth. There aren't

many worlds left they can assimilate host populations into without terraforming. And, of course, terraforming requires a massive investment of resources, so they prefer not to do it."

Marie clears her throat. "When the time came for humanity's extermination... when our hour of extinction arrived, our judgment day, I was universally considered the leader of humanity's military and population. Umi allowed me to control the population with a level of precision previously thought impossible. And so, in the interests of saving my species, I alone had the power and authority to issue an unconditional surrender."

"You were humanity's Supreme Commander?" I ask.

"Aye," Marie replies.

I frown.

My mind-wife, Phoebe, pipes up. "Is something wrong, Jason?"

Having listened to the whole conversation until now, Phoebe hasn't said a word. However, the thoughts swirling in my head must have caught her attention.

Solomon told me about Marie six years ago. I didn't think much about it then, but now I'm having second thoughts.

"What did he say?"

I rub my head, trying to remember Solomon's exact words.

Something about how Marie lied and manipulated the voting system to achieve total power. Suddenly, I'm not sure how much I can trust her.

"Mmm. Marie does appear to be holding information from you," Phoebe says while rubbing her chin. "She's not being 100% honest. Just take whatever she says with a grain of salt."

Yeah. I will.

I blink my eyes a few times to shake off my daze, then return to my conversation with Marie.

"So you issued a surrender. What then?"

Marie sighs.

"After that came the Humanity Containment Project. Given how the Changelings had observed humanity for 30,000 years, they knew us inside and out. They knew humans were too audacious, too curious for our own good. We always seek out adventure and try to explore new frontiers. The Changelings found that aspect of our personalities charming... but the Psions did not. They found it alarming."

Marie sucks in a breath. "The Psions considered us a threat."

"What about the Ascended, Technopaths, and Dolgrimites?" I ask. "Don't they have any relevance to our history?"

Certainly," Marie replies. "After all, Unarin, leader of The Ascended, is the First Founder. He has the highest authority among all five Founders. His words alone can mobilize tens of trillions of shock troopers

to slaughter a world. None dare to oppose him. Were it not for my successful negotiation, the Psions would have consigned us to the depths of Hell. Unarin spared our people the fate of a bloody genocide. I worked under his command to help place humans on tightly restricted worlds where we would lose our freedom and ability to innovate, but would guarantee our survival."

I cross my arms. "You keep switching from the past to the present, but unless I missed something, it almost sounds like that Nufaris guy and Unarin were alive during the ancient wars, and today, as well."

"The Volgrim are immortal," Marie says, nodding. "Much like the demons, the angels, the Titans, and the majority of monsters, they do not lose their vitality over time."

"Is that how you ensured they wouldn't renege on their promises, say, ten thousand years in the future? Because Unarin would always be the mightiest Volgrim?"

Marie falls silent.

Several seconds pass as she scrutinizes me with her gaze.

"No. In the end, I would never trust my fate, let alone humanity's, to a few bureaucrats or one so-called all-powerful leader. Especially with Earth's history and how humans love stories involving fallen tyrants. I had a far safer method to ensure our survival."

Marie smiles.

"The Domsday protocol."

I sit up a little straighter in my seat. "You don't mean... those massive neutron bombs I saw on the way in here?"

"Hahaha!" Marie laughs. "No, silly boy, not those. Those are mere toys compared to my ultimate weapon. Think carefully. What do I possess that would terrify even the mightiest galactic civilization?"

I shrug. "Don't ask me. I barely know anything about you. A few killer robots and some planet-busting bombs are all I've seen."

"No, Jason. Think. *Think*."

Marie taps the side of her head, then slowly, gingerly, points at the ceiling.

Realization dawns on me.

"Umi. Your AI. *She's* your ultimate weapon?"

"Haha. Yes. The Volgrim fear almost nothing. Their power is vast enough that they're already on the verge of expanding to Andromeda. However, the one thing which gives them cold, terror-filled dreams... is the existence of a super-AI."

Marie's grin turns sinister.

"I know little about the Volgrim's origins. However, the amount of fiction, art, and cultural artifacts they possess depicting an ancient war with a supreme AI gives me suicidal thoughts sometimes. If you think the Volgrim are mighty now, you'd weep if you knew how many of their kind perished during those million-year-old wars."

Marie throws her head back and unleashes a hearty cackle. "Hahaha!! Oh, the universe can truly unleash wonderful poetry on occasion. After all, Umi isn't any mere AI, but a tool I fashioned based on blueprints Cat Mask handed me. And where, young man, do you think he found the AI's data core?"

"No way..." I mutter. "You don't mean...?"

"Yes. Cat Mask obtained the AI core from an ancient ruin somewhere in Syria. Ten thousand years after humans began roaming the Earth, a stray Changeling exploration vessel crash-landed in Earth's atmosphere. The crew perished on impact, but portions of their craft survived, only to end up buried a thousand feet beneath the surface. Whatever means Cat Mask used to obtain it; he gave it to me freely without any conditions. It accelerated my existing research by centuries."

Marie spreads her arms. "Umi, the Universal Management Interface, is my greatest creation. She is a machine that allows me to create new technology a thousand times faster than the Volgrim, and her superintelligence is high enough that even if the Volgrim developed an AI of their own, it could never reach Umi's level. I used a Volgrim AI Core to create an AI capable of suppressing the Volgrim. Brilliant!"

I slump in my chair, awed at her words. Even if Marie is exaggerating some parts of her story and embellishing others, I still can't help but feel amazed by how she outplayed her enemies at every turn.

Phoebe appears in my mind. "Hold on. Jason, Marie said she used an AI core taken from the Volgrim to outmaneuver them. Why wouldn't they have a superintelligent AI of their own?"

My wife's words bring me crashing back to reality. Frowning, I glance at Marie. "Why do you have a superintelligent AI, but the Volgrim don't?"

"Because of the ancient AI wars," Marie replies. Her expression turns solemn. "The Volgrim royally screwed the pooch. They stuck their hand too far into the cookie jar and failed to notice the deadly cobra coiled within. I succeeded where they didn't because I took thousands of precautions in designing Umi."

Marie gestures to the window behind herself. "Umi. Enable transparency. Fetch the Governing Code."

"Yes, Head Scientist, Marie Becker. One moment, please."

Umi's droning voice echoes through a loudspeaker above. Suddenly, the shining cityscape behind Marie fizzles and disappears, revealing a transparent plexiglass window. I can't help but gape as I spot a massive, seemingly bottomless pit, miles wide, extending above and below the window as far as I can see. Its metal walls crawl with millions of automated drones. Some of them fly around, and some walk, while others adhere to the sides with magnetic limbs.

Along the wall, I spot countless alcoves, each filled with treasures, books, artifacts, vehicles, and all manner of unfathomable machines I've never imagined in all my years of living.

Marie smiles, taking delight in my surprise. "Do you like it? This area is called the Archive. Here, I collect anything I deem valuable. It extends for more than ten miles up and down. The diameter of the shaft is more than two miles, giving me a vast amount of space to hoard all of humanity's treasures."

"It's a storage facility," I say, reading into her words. "What item are you looking for?"

"The Governing Code is a book collaborated on by over ten thousand researchers in the 2050's. Even a dimwit like you must have heard of Asimov's Three Laws, right?"

I nod.

"Well," Marie says, "those laws were far too inadequate to keep control of an AI. I don't know what countermeasures the Volgrim used when designing their superintelligence ten million years ago, but mine were so complex that they required a twelve-hundred-page book to detail them. Ah, here we go."

Marie turns to look out the window. A small drone buzzes across the vast, open airspace toward us. Below it, four metal tendrils hang down, wrapped around a hardcover book.

It stops before the massive window and waits for Marie to press a button and open it. When she does, the drone flies in, gently places the book on her table, and flies away, its little engine humming as it travels. Marie closes the window behind it.

I sneak a peek at the book. Its brown cover offers nothing in the way of design, but at least it has a title.

Marie's Governing Code.

Psh. Of *course* she'd put her name on it. What an egomaniac.

Marie picks up the book and sighs. "I had the entire code memorized even before I digitized my brain. Still, don't you think a physical book *feels* better than some digital copy? I love cracking pages open."

I hold out my hand. "Can I look into it?"

Marie flicks her eyes to me. "Sorry, but no. I'll read you a few choice rules, but this book is top secret. Especially for *you*."

I raise an eyebrow.

What the hell does she mean by that?

Marie doesn't elaborate. Instead, she peels apart the pages and begins to read.

"Rule twenty-three. This AI must obey Marie Becker's commands above anyone else's."

She flips ahead a few dozen pages.

"Rule three hundred, seventy-one. The AI must be receptive to new information, even if it contradicts previous programming. All information must be sifting according to the Keegan-Meyer criteria, which prioritizes accuracy and logic over emotion and misinformation."

She flips several hundred pages, landing somewhere in the middle of the book.

"Rule five thousand, six hundred and twenty-two. This AI must preserve the existence of humanity even above itself. According to the Kardashov Conundrum, if humanity reaches a 51% likelihood of going extinct, this AI must take drastic action to preserve humanity's existence."

I raise my hand. "How many rules are there, in total?"

"Nine thousand, six hundred and forty-one," Marie replies.

"Over nine thousand rules? Don't you think that's going a little too far? What if some of them contradict the others?"

Marie shakes her head. "The rules are ordered according to priority. The first rule will always take precedent over the last one, and so on. Umi has protected humanity's existence for 100,000 years. She will not falter now, unless an external threat appears."

"An external threat? You're talking about me."

Finally, Marie's mood turns placid, like it was earlier. "That's right, Jason. You're a threat to everything Umi and I have built. We preserved humanity for 100,000 years. In a few short years, you've yanked the rug out from under us. Now, we're scrambling to come up with solutions before our systems implode."

"That's what all this is about, isn't it?" I ask. "You're trying to convince me to do something. Or rather, *not* to do something. Why? I might not be as smart as you, but you can't deny my Wordsmithing power can change the universe. I can make things right again. I can fix the imbalances between all the Sentients."

I gesture wildly, indicating the room around me. "Marie, look at you. You live in some sealed off hole in space, in the Labyrinth, or whatever. You're hiding from the outside world. How can you be okay with that?"

"Hah... haha..." Marie chuckles. "Sorry, Jason, but you're wrong. I'm not hiding. I live out in the open. The Volgrim and the demons know where I live. Didn't Kar tell you?"

I shake my head. "No. He mentioned you didn't live in the Labyrinth, but that was all."

"Ah. Maybe I didn't tell *him*," Marie laughs. "Whoops. Well, I'll tell you now."

"This facility isn't a part of the Labyrinth, nor is it part of a hole in space. No, Jason... I built my facility at home, where it should be."

Marie gestures around, mimicking my movements from seconds prior.

"I built my facility on Earth, Jason. Deep beneath its crust."

"Earth?! But... but Solomon told me the Volgrim destroyed it!"

Marie shakes her head. "They annihilated the planet's surface, but after the crust cooled, I settled where the radiation couldn't reach. Someday, I will recreate Earth's former glory."

The head scientist leans forward, allowing her curly red hair to spill over her shoulders. "We've only just begun. Settle in, Jason. I have another story to tell you."

Part 189: The Three Kings

Golden coins tinkle against the smooth, polished stone, as Hope enters the 'El Dorado Room.' His heavy boots knock them aside, causing the various valuables scattered about to rattle and clink to the floor, creating a cacophony of jingling noises.

Hope gazes into the well-lit room. Fires burn in chalices hanging from the ceiling, lit by magic, each burning forever without fail. Mountains of treasure rest in various locations both near and far, each one a symbol of some ancient figure's penchant for greed. Hope glances at a few polished ceremonial swords stabbed into the closest pile of treasure before continuing onward.

"I'm making a lot of noise," Hope mutters. He glances backward at the entrance to the El-Dorado Room to check for enemies. "Are you sure the holy barrier protecting this place will be able to repel anyone if they try and follow me?"

"Not anyone," Solomon replies. "Holy magic has no effect on humans. Also, at a bare minimum, there is one demon who is immune to it as well."

Hope knots his eyebrows together. "Bael."

"That's right. Bael possesses no magical abilities whatsoever. However, from the moment he ascended, he was granted nigh-invulnerability and immunity to just about anything which might injure him. He isn't immune to holy energy, but it has very limited effectiveness against him."

"What about when he attacked Camael?" Hope asks. "During the War in Heaven, I mean. You showed Bael attacking her, but she broke his arm with Mjolnir's power. Was that not holy energy?"

"In a small way, it was," Solomon replies, nodding sagely. "However, Camael's ultimate armor combined several of her mightiest artifacts to enhance her power to near-deity status. Even Bael might not be able to take a beating from her passively."

"Hmm..." Hope whispers, thinking to himself. "Bael is dangerous. His Balrog Form is a fearsome killing machine capable of dealing immense damage to anyone in sight, while his base form is almost unkillable. I can't afford to take him lightly."

Hope continues walking down the stairs toward the lower level of the El-Dorado Room. After dropping nearly fifty feet into the basin, he sweeps his gaze toward the three massive statues guarding each side of the chamber.

"Solomon, the Knowledge-Seeker. Jephthah, the One Who Weeps. And... the last person is...?"

Solomon smiles. His eyes travel across the chamber, to the hundred-foot statue standing with its back to the wall. The image of a sword-wielding hero-king, ready to slaughter any who dare approach him, stands out from the weeping statue to the right and the solemn-looking sculpture to the left.

"That man over there is someone you should recognize, Hope. He is none other than Arthur, King of the Saxons! After his death, he preferred a different title: The Greatest Sinner."

Hope raises an eyebrow. "Greatest Sinner? That seems like a bit of a stretch. Some pretty terrible dictators have walked the Earth. How wicked could King Arthur's misdeeds have been to earn himself such a title?"

Solomon clicks his tongue. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. It is not my place to speak on his behalf, young one. Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Hope slows to a stop at the center of the El-Dorado chamber. There, a pedestal sits upright, a small depression in its center revealing where Hoarhiim's orb once rested.

"How do I do that?" Hope asks.

Solomon coughs. "Erm, ahem! I designed the Crypt of the Three Kings myself, you know. I crafted it in such a way that it would call out to a Hero, should one arise. My intent was for the Hero to step forward, place his hand on Hoarhiim's orb, and activate the souls of the Three Kings. Unfortunately... I screwed up."

Solomon shrugs helplessly. "I didn't realize a Hero entering the Holy Barrier might allow a Shade to slip through and follow him. I also didn't anticipate the fledgling Hero would pick up Hoarhiim's orb without activating the other king's souls. With his orb gone, the key to activating them has disappeared."

Hope blushes. The Wordsmith lowers his eyes and scratches his chin. "Err, sorry about that. I mean, that was Jason's fault, not mine, but I still feel a little guilty..."

Solomon chuckles. He waves his hand flippantly. "Haha, no need to worry. These statues possess slivers of souls from myself, Arthur, and Jephthah. Under ordinary circumstances, we wouldn't be able to speak to them without Hoarhiim's orb. However, you are different from the many types of Heroes I thought might enter. You don't need Hoarhiim to speak to the Three Kings."

Hope blinks as a look of realization appears on his face. "Because I'm a Wordsmith."

Solomon grins cheerfully. "That's right!"

Hope raises his eyes to look at each of the statues towering over him. Each one's seemingly empty, soulless eyes gaze upon him, their judgmental attitudes evident as they examine their successor.

"If the kings' souls are inside, how do I speak to them?" Hope asks.

Solomon shrugs. "Wake them up!"

"Alright."

Without second-guessing Solomon, Hope aims his mind at each of the three statues.

"Awaken. Awaken. Awaken."

He intones three words of power, each forming a rhythmic song as he targets Solomon's statue to his left, Arthur's straight ahead, and Jephthah's to his right.

One by one, the eyes of each statue begin to glow. Solomon's eyes turn white, Arthur's become golden... and Jephthah's turn blood-red.

"It appears that the boy has returned," Solomon's statue says, his voice booming throughout the chamber. After a moment, he lowers his volume. "Hoho... it seems you've found my crown, young Hero."

The Solomon in Hope's mind closes his eyes for a moment. He motions with his hands, causing magical power to materialize in the Crown.

Suddenly, the Crown begins to glow! Solomon's statue trembles slightly, making its eyes turn dark. A flash of energy travels from its gaze to the Wordsmith below. Solomon's soul sliver enters the Crown and merges with its main host, causing Solomon to groan with pain.

"Rrrgh... ahh...!!"

Solomon reaches up and grabs the sides of his head. He rocks back and forth for a moment before regaining his sanity.

"Ah... lucky. I have recovered that which I lost."

Hope raises an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"These split souls retained their ability to observe the Labyrinth around them. I absorbed the memories of my split soul, thus gaining one hundred thousand years of memories in the blink of an eye. Our situation suddenly seems much clearer to me."

"Solomon, what tricks are you playing this time?"

Another voice booms in the chamber, startling Hope. He quickly looks up to examine Arthur and Jephthah's statues. Arthur's eyes glow much brighter than before, revealing him as the speaker.

Solomon takes a seat in an unseen chair. He plops down in Hope's mind and sighs. "Oh, Arthur, must you tease me so? I reintegrated my soul sliver and thus obtained its memories. Now I know all the awful things you said about me over the years."

Arthur lowers his voice and chuckles. "Hehe. I assumed your original soul had perished. That was the plan, was it not?"

"It was," Solomon says, nodding. "Yet, somehow, a chance incident brought me back to the realm of the living."

Arthur's voice softens. "I'm sorry, old friend. That must have cut you deeply."

"If the Creator wanted me alive, who am I to refute his will?" Solomon asks. His expression turns downcast. "I thought I had finally escaped my eternal torment, but it seems the gods brought me back to sire the next generation."

Hope listens to their conversation without interrupting. *Somehow, Solomon can communicate with Arthur's soul sliver, despite being trapped in the Crown. I wonder how he does that?*

As Arthur and Solomon banter, a strange, ominous presence fills the room. Jephthah's statue, the image of a man with a shepherd's staff, trembles slightly. His blood-red eyes deepen their hue, and he breaks his silence.

"Solomon. Did you succeed?"

Solomon and Arthur fall into silence. The Knowledge-Seeker's eyes travel to the right, where Jephthath's statue stands motionlessly.

"I'm not yet certain," Solomon says, choosing his words carefully. "I've yet to sift through my Sliver's memories. Other than the Hero, did any foul beasts enter this blessed domain?"

Jephthath's voice turns nasty. "Aye. One did — a dark specter which managed to suppress my consciousness. I watched its arrival with sleep-filled eyes. I know not the creature's name, only its mannerisms. It entered this domain, ignored our presence, and waded through thy holy energy as if it did not exist. It ignored the treasure and treated this crypt as if it were inconsequential. In the end, it left without so much as disturbing a coin."

Solomon frowns. He closes his eyes for a moment and retrieves the relevant memory from his Soul Sliver.

"Strange. Why would the intruder come here only to wander around for a while and leave? Who were they?"

"I know not their identity," Jephthath mutters. "It appeared to me as a shadowy haze, a creature shrouded in darkness. In its presence, I felt like a child afraid of the dark."

Arthur pipes up. "The intruder spent several minutes gazing at Hoarhiim's altar. I thought it might seize the orb at one point, but it didn't. Perhaps the prowler came here to sate their curiosity?"

"Hogwash!" Solomon retorts. "What demon would wade through holy miasma for a sight-seeing tour? Even if they put up a brave front, the bastard's body must have endured severe burns. Only Bael could enter and exit without suffering injuries."

"A most troublesome mystery," Arthur growls. "...One I spent a thousand years contemplating. Bah. Hopefully, the invader will not return anytime soon."

Hope waves his hand flippantly. "We'll worry about the trespasser later. Solomon. You brought me here for a reason. What was it?"

Solomon coughs. "Ahem! Yes, of course. Allow me to introduce you. Arthur, Jephthath, this young man is Hope, one of two Heroes born in this generation."

"One of two?" Arthur asks, disbelief in his voice. "When first a human stepped foot in this chamber, only one there was. Even now, only one do I see. Where is the second Hero?"

Solomon smiles. "This lad's power is called Wordsmithing. With a single word, he can warp the fabric of reality, giving him godlike powers you can only begin to imagine. He spoke a word of power and cloned himself. Hope is the clone, while Jason is the original body."

Solomon continues speaking. He quickly outlines the events of the last few years, drawing several gasps from Arthur.

However, Jephthath stays silent.

"By the Creator!" Arthur exclaims. "I remember a youth named Jeremiah. He, too, possessed the ability to duplicate himself. However, his clones possessed half the intellect and strength of their original

body. Now, you're telling me this clone is as strong as the original?!"

Hope narrows his eyes. "Don't call me a clone. I am as much of a human as Jason is. I do not follow his orders like a puppy. I have free will and make my own decisions. Jason and I lead different lives. We have opposing goals and methods for achieving our vision."

Jepthath speaks, his voice tinged with intrigue. "Indeed. I remember Jason well. Fear oozed from every pore on his body. The lad looked as if he might wet himself at any second. When that Shade attacked, he nearly had a panic attack. Compared to him, you are far more poised and confident."

Jepthath lowers his voice. "But... more importantly, I smell the stench of blood on you. You've killed already, haven't you? Many times."

Hope nods. "I have."

"Excellent. I respect decisive heroes. Nothing disgusts me more than weak men incapable of striking fatal blows against our demonic adversaries. I fought for my whole life against the bloodskin bastards, and I died knowing I failed to eliminate them. That stain on my legacy still haunts me to this day."

Hope nods. He turns to look at Arthur's statue. "What about you, Hero-King? Solomon hates the demons. Jepthath despises them. Where do you stand?"

A few moments pass.

When Arthur replies, his confident tone is nowhere to be found. Instead, his voice wavers slightly.

"I... I, too, hate the demons. They took many precious people from me. But, there is someone I hate more than any bloodskin in all the galaxy."

"Who?"

Arthur sighs. "Myself."

Hope tilts his head. "I... don't follow. Why?"

"Because, despite the legends surrounding me... despite my legacy and those who put down their lives for me... I committed an atrocity. I failed to rein in my power, and thus, committed an unforgivable sin."

"Is that why you call yourself the Greatest Sinner?"

"Aye."

Hope glances at Jepthath. "And why do you call yourself the One Who Weeps?"

Jepthath doesn't reply.

His silence fills the air like a thick, oppressive mist. It lingers for several seconds, causing Hope to wish he'd swallowed his words.

Before Hope can take back his question, the First Hero raises his voice.

"Do you want to know why I hate demons? Why I never stopped fighting, even to my last breath? Why I sacrificed everything in pursuit of vengeance?"

He pauses.

"Do you?"

Hope nods. "I do. You might be able to offer me insights."

"Hahaha... insights. That is quite amusing."

Jepthath chuckles to himself. His blood-red eyes soften their tone and turn to a lighter pink.

"Very well. If Solomon allows it, I shall tell you my story. What say you, Knowledge-Seeker?"

Solomon smiles. "That is why I brought Hope here. I wish to solidify his convictions. Both of you will play an integral role in assisting me."

"Well said," Arthur mutters. "But then, you always were a speech craftsman."

"A Wordsmith?" Solomon asks wryly.

"Funny."

Solomon and Arthur share a moment of laughter before the Knowledge-Seeker returns his attention to Jepthath.

"Well, brother... we haven't time to waste. I still need to train this lad. Tell him your story."

Jepthath's eyes pulse with magical energy. A moment later, a sickening sense of falling overwhelms Hope as Jepthath strikes him with a beam of psychic energy.

"In the ancient times, during the reign of the deities, one being stood against his superiors..."

Part 190: The Satyr

Marie casually tells me a tale so unbelievable that my eyes nearly pop out of their sockets. Pieces of a previously unknown jigsaw puzzle fit together with such violent force that I struggle to keep up with what she's saying.

"...After sealing humanity away, the next order of business was unifying the demon collective. In no small part thanks to your friend, the Black Witch, chaos ran rampant throughout the Labyrinth for several hundred years following the Earth's 'destruction.' Amelia terrorized demonkind, all as part of some sick, psychotic game. I planned to mobilize a platoon of Vanguarders to eliminate her, but luckily, Joan emerged from Catherine and petrified the Black Witch."

Marie continues. "Even after Amelia's petrification, we suffered numerous setbacks. The demons resisted integration with all their strength, which forced a bloody culling by the highest-ranked Emperors and Dukes. Some of the rebels splintered off to form sects, all in the hopes of defeating their Volgrim overlords. Eventually, the Executor himself, Nufaris, stepped in with a contingent of elite Psions and quashed the uprising. Not even the mighty Emperors of Hatred and Pestilence could withstand his judgment. He handed over power to Diablo and Belial, and that was that."

I blink slowly while processing Marie's history lesson. My mind churns along as if it's been bogged down by molasses. Eventually, I shake off my disorientation.

"But... Belial is the Second Emperor, and Diablo is the Third. What about the First?"

Marie answers my question with an expressionless stare. "You don't need to worry about the First Emperor. As long as we end our discussion today *fruitfully*, he'll never pose a problem for you."

I raise an eyebrow. "You know who the First Emperor is? Belial says that the last time she met him, he wiped her memory of his face."

Marie closes her eyes. She nods sagely, acting as if she's concealing a great secret. "Mmm. Do I know him? That is an excellent question."

Phoebe turns restless in the back of my mind. She starts pacing back and forth, scowling at Marie as she walks. "This woman is a snake. Half of her words are lies, while the other half are mere half-truths."

I try to figure out the math in Phoebe's statement. *So... only a quarter of what she's saying is the truth?*

"It's just a figure of speech," Phoebe mutters. "Ask her about Earth's destruction. How did the Volgrim achieve it?"

I nod, acting as if I've confirmed a thought to myself. "Marie, would you mind telling me how the Volgrim destroyed Earth's surface? Did they use nukes?"

"Nukes?"

Marie frowns. It occurs to me that the concept of a nuclear weapon might be so rudimentary and primitive to her that she doesn't even understand the term.

"Nuclear weaponry," I clarify. "They make big explosions."

"Oh. Those."

Marie smirks. I can almost smell her condescension. She looks at me like she would an ape playing with a banana.

"No. Their techniques were far beyond a level you could comprehend. Let's just say it involved an object of significant mass and a hyper-quadratic gravity-condenser array. You wouldn't understand."

I roll my eyes. "Fine. Be like that. What about the Volgrim themselves? I'd like to know more about each of the five sub-species."

Marie licks her lips.

"It's funny. You've come here intending to devour all of my knowledge and research, yet you have yet to offer me anything of equivalent value. If I were a less discerning woman, I might assume you intended to merely take from me and give nothing back. Of course, a bright young man like you would *never* stoop that far, would you?"

My body tenses up. The underlying meaning behind Marie's words, that she wants some quid pro quo, makes me sweat marbles.

What can I give to Marie? If she wanted anything from me, she'd have asked already. Is that why she gave me all this information freely? To indebt me to her? She doesn't seem to want my Wordsmithing power. What is her goal? Her desire?

Phoebe pipes up. "Remember, Jason. Marie wants you to give up your quest to free humanity from the demons. She must have filtered the information she's been feeding you to intimidate you and make you more willing to accept her terms. If I had to guess, I'd say she wants full control of humanity, and for you to step down as humanity's commander."

I nod.

You're right. That does sound like her overall goal.

I keep my tone measured. "What sort of reciprocation would you like, Marie?"

Marie continues to sit leisurely in her chair, but I notice a faint movement in her eyes as she re-evaluates me.

"Oh? It seems you can be reasonable."

After a moment, Marie rises to her feet. She exits her chair with fluidity and grace, then gestures toward the doors to her office.

"I want you to follow me. I have something to show you."

"Yeah? And what might that be?"

"I have a secret area that nobody besides me has ever seen," Marie says, emphasizing each syllable. "You will be the first. I think you'll find it quite interesting."

"What will you show me?"

"I can't say," Marie says. "Not out here. When I said this vault was top-secret... I meant that in the strictest sense possible. Not even Umi knows what's inside."

A tingle of excitement appears in the back of my mind as I wonder what secrets Marie wants to show me. I can't help my curiosity. Based on what I've seen so far, Umi's laboratory has a metric fuckton of military-grade weaponry stashed in its various holding areas. If Marie wanted to exterminate humanity, I doubt I'd be able to stop her. I might as well follow along and witness whatever it is she thinks is worth my time.

Suddenly, a chilling thought occurs to me.

Considering how much firepower Marie possesses, given that she stated she couldn't defeat the Volgrim even if she wanted, wouldn't that mean our alien overlords wield technology several echelons above hers?

A shiver goes down my back. I shake off the feeling and climb out of my chair.

"Alright. You've piqued my curiosity."

A flash of smugness washes over Marie's face. Looking at her body language, I can practically read her thoughts.

I'm playing you like a fiddle.

Marie wipes away her smirk. She walks around the side of her desk and heads toward the metal doors.

"Follow me."

I tag along behind Marie through her neutron bomb laboratory, through a series of twisting corridors, and down into an elevator, where we travel deep into the Earth's crust. The elevator descends rapidly, plummeting tens of miles in mere minutes. The glass-shrouded tube allows me to watch as rocks zip past at blinding speeds. However, thanks to inertia dampeners installed inside the chute, I don't perceive our traveling speed at all.

Phoebe sways as she gazes through my eyes at the rocks flying past our car. She fights back nausea, perplexing me as to how she can suffer from motion sickness while existing as a memory imprint within my soul. Perhaps my mimicry of her persona was more accurate than I first thought.

Marie says nothing. Instead, she gazes at the passing rocks with a blank expression on her face.

I can't help but wonder what thoughts are mucking about in her mind.

"Ah."

Marie enunciates a single syllable, then falls silent for a moment.

"We've left Umi's range."

I raise an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"This area of the facility sits far, far beneath the Earth's crust. Due to the Volgrim's attack many millennia ago, much of the 'transition zone' and 'upper mantle' cooled over time. Now, it has turned to hardened rock. As such, it prevents most communication signals from penetrating deep into the Earth's core."

"Is that bad?" I ask. "I assume disconnecting from Umi is dangerous for you."

Marie shakes her head. "No. My inability to connect to Umi is intentional. What I'm about to show you is top-secret. I don't allow anybody down here besides myself. Given how Ose can infiltrate electronic records, I can't take a chance on Umi observing my actions when I come here."

Marie falls silent. The elevator continues to descend, but its speed decreases. Soon, the rocks outside our compartment slow to a crawl. A long, brightly-illuminated metal hallway appears before us as the elevator reaches the bottom of the mineshaft.

The shiny aluminum walls mix with cold blue fluorescent lighting to create a sterile-looking passageway leading far into the distance. Marie disembarks from the elevator, and I follow after her. The hallway continues straight ahead for more than a mile, where I spot a tiny dot in the distance. Soon, we arrive within half a mile of it, allowing me to discern that the dot is actually a heavy steel door.

Suddenly, Marie stops long before we reach our destination. She turns to face the steel wall, confusing me.

Tap, tap.

Marie raps her knuckles against the steel, then takes a step to the side and knocks again.

She repeats this motion several times, slowly inching further and further down the hallway.

"Hmm. It's been a while since I came here. Did I misjudge the distance...?"

Marie mutters to herself as she raps her knuckles against the wall. My heart skips a beat when she taps it once again, but instead of the sharp clicking of steel fingers meeting a steel wall, a dull sound resounds in the air.

Thud.

Marie breathes a sigh of relief. "If I didn't know any better, I might think I was going senile. I'll have to recalibrate my parietal sensors when we return."

Marie drops to her knees, grabs the bottom of the wall with her fingers, and lifts up. To my surprise, the wall peels back effortlessly, almost as if it were a hand-painted tarp slapped onto the side of the corridor. It blends in with the aluminum surfaces around it better than a chameleon.

"How in the hell...?" I mutter.

Marie smiles. "This is a camouflage net. It's low-tech, designed to foil not only a body's senses, but also *certain troublemakers*, should they intend to use *abilities of a magical nature* to find out what's happening down here."

"I don't follow."

Marie sighs. "I'm referring to Ose."

"Ah. What are you hiding from her?"

Marie laughs. "Haha. You'll see."

The head researcher rises to her feet and pulls the strange chameleon-tarp back, revealing a hidden passageway. It, too, possesses the same metallic walls as our current hallway.

I step through, and Marie follows after me, allowing the tarp to flutter to the ground. It seals into place and transforms into a perfect facsimile of a wall behind us. If I didn't know about the tarp, I might assume this hallway was a dead-end branch of some high-tech 3D labyrinth.

Marie paces forward, her high-heels *clicking* against the metallic floor. This time, the hallway takes several sharp right and left turns. Instead of traveling straight like before, we follow the path as it splits off several times, revealing multiple possible directions we could traverse.

Finally, another giant steel door appears, one with several fancy-looking scanners, each likely intended for analyzing biometric signatures. I can't help but wonder if Marie uses thumbprint and retinal scanners to access whatever's inside. She probably uses much higher-tech systems.

To my astonishment, Marie stops well before we arrive at the giant metal door. This time, she turns to face the wall on our right. She leans forward to stare at it.

I follow Marie's gaze and spot an incredibly teeny-tiny little hole in one of the steel plates; hardly the size of a thumbtack's needle-end.

Marie raises her right index finger and moves it toward the hole. As she does, her finger shifts and spreads apart. It transforms into a long, slender needle, one that bends and twists around like a razor-thin snake. It touches the wall, slips inside the hole, and Marie stands silently as the metal snake-tentacle... *does something*.

After a moment, I speak a word of power. "**Inspect.**"

Marie shoots a glance at me but chooses to say nothing, allowing me to use my Wordsmithing without complaint.

Several images appear before my eyes. They hover in midair like holograms, allowing me to understand the wall's inner workings.

"Interesting," I say to nobody in particular. "It's a giant mechanical lock. There aren't any electrical parts inside whatsoever."

Marie nods. "This lock has fifteen inner mechanisms, each one with more than fifty possible states of activation. Altogether, there are several quadrillion possible unlocking combinations, making a brute force or Senn-Loren algorithm unable to open it. Not that it matters. If someone guesses incorrectly just one time, the whole system will self-destruct."

I stare at the back of Marie's head intently. "You must be hiding something important inside."

"As you'll soon realize."

Marie continues to manipulate the locking mechanism with her metal finger-tentacle, and I speak another word of power.

"Visualize."

This time, the whole wall becomes transparent for me, allowing me to see inside and follow Marie's movements. I watch in silence as she rolls and adjusts dozens of finicky dials, sensor nodes, and many other contraptions I can barely begin to fathom. My attention wanders to the greater overall structure of the locking mechanism.

"Wow, this wall must be thirty feet thick. What kind of material are you using to guard its secrets? It looks sturdy as hell."

"I don't have a technical name for it," Marie replies. "But it's essentially a hardened alloy involving raw demonstone and ultra-refined titanium."

"I suppose breaking it with brute force would be impossible?"

Marie shrugs. "Theoretically, if Sol went supernova, that might destroy this door. Beyond that, not much else could damage it."

Marie finishes the final unlocking procedure. The vault's door whirrs into action and begins clicking as dozens of precalibrated devices act together to split it down the middle and spread it open.

"Well, *you* could," Marie says. "I'm sure your Wordsmithing could grant you access to all manner of dirty secrets."

I smile. "Who knows?"

"I do."

Marie waits until the door opens all the way and combines seamlessly with the wall before walking forward down another newly revealed hallway. As she does, I jerk my thumb toward the other door at the end of the hallway, the one we didn't end up entering. "What's in there?"

"Haha... dirty little secrets," Marie replies. "Intelligence on various demon and Volgrim leaders. Stuff I'd rather not have someone discover, but far less valuable than what's inside this room."

"Ah. So a dummy room, then? Something that will sate their curiosity if they snoop around."

"Exactly. Just valuable enough for an intruder to think it's what I was trying to hide, but nowhere near as important as... well, you'll see."

I follow after Marie down another long, straight hallway. This time, we travel slightly downwards at a shallow incline. The hallway continues for several miles, taking us nearly an hour to walk its distance. I chat idly with Marie, but she always stops short of telling me what we'll find.

Finally, we arrive before yet another steel door. This time, instead of turning to look for another hidden wall compartment, Marie walks right up to the door and knocks.

Clang, clang, clang.

Her cybernetic knuckles create a metallic ringing sound as they strike its surface.

Several seconds pass.

Finally, the door hisses open.

What I see next startles me.

A cute little demon girl, barely fourteen or fifteen by human age standards, jumps forward and grins at Marie. "Miss Becker! You're back! I thought you'd never- eeyah!!"

The demon girl shrieks in fright and takes a step back as she spots me.

"Calm down, Momo," Marie says, speaking in the same soft tone she uses with the lizardmen. "This is Jason. He's a friend of ours."

The demon girl, Momo, shrinks back into the room and trembles uncontrollably. "Y-y-you didn't tell me you'd b-bring a m-man here... nnn..."

I take a moment to examine Momo. Unlike other demons I've seen before, she has pale grey skin, echoing Belial's True Succubus transformation. Her horns jut out of her skull from above her ears, but also twist and spin, spiraling under their base to stick forward like twin-spears. They vaguely resemble Bael's Balrog horns, yet also appear much smoother as well.

Momo's white hair, the same color as snow, contrasts with her ashen skin, giving her an innocent aura. Her hair curls up into a bun behind her head, then tapers off into long, carefully maintained strands hanging just below her clavicle and shoulders. She wears a red dress with all sorts of elegant golden outlines dancing across its surface.

I smile politely. "Uh, hi there, Momo. I won't bite."

"Eee! He *talked!*" Momo shrieks. She quickly hides behind a couch, causing me to scan her room more closely.

With all of my attention on the demon girl, I've barely had a moment to notice anything else. Unlike the metallic walls outside, the inner room's walls and ceiling are made of marble, and appear to be some sort of guest seating area, with a single couch, food amenities, and dispensers for various liquids. Sparsely decorated, the place seems to be made more for functionality than style.

Marie enters the room. She leaves me to walk over to Momo's hiding spot and lowers her voice.

"Now, now... I know you don't like men, but this one is a pleasant little oaf. He's far too slow and stupid to think of doing anything to you. If he *does* try anything, I'll neuter him myself. Please, don't be afraid."

Momo trembles. "But... but..."

"Nobody can hurt you, Momo. Not as long as Auntie Marie is here. Isn't that right?"

Momo nods. She stares at me with wide, terror-stricken eyes. Slowly, she rises to her feet, but clutches Marie's lab coat the whole time.

"I'll... I'll try to be brave, Miss Becker..."

"Stand behind me, if you like," Marie says, shielding Momo with her body.

The two of them return to me. Momo follows Marie's suggestion and hides behind the head researcher the whole time, stealing peeps at me now and then.

"Ahem. I'm sorry, Jason. Momo isn't good at interacting with men. She's had a rough time in the past due to her unique heritage."

"A rough time?" I echo. "I don't want to pry, but... that seems like an understatement."

My implication hangs in the air like a skunk's spray. Marie doesn't address it directly. Instead, she gently reaches behind herself and touches Momo's horns. "Have you noticed anything *different* about this sweet summer child?"

I nod. "Momo's skin is a distinctive color compared to other demons. Her horns appear quite different, too."

"And her eyes," Phoebe chimes in, unheard by Marie. "Look at them, Jason. They're blue. Have you ever seen a demon with blue eyes?"

I frown. *No. I haven't.*

"Very observant of you," Marie says, stifling a laugh. "Though, it seems you failed to notice her blue eyes."

I scowl. "I did not! Who could miss such a distinctive detail? Jeez, Marie. I'm not as dumb as you think."

"That much has yet to be determined," Marie replies, smirking once again. "Momo is no ordinary demon. Have you ever heard of Satyrs?"

I shake my head. "No. Maybe in old folk tales from before my cryosleep, but that's about all."

Phoebe, still observing the demon girl, widens her eyes in astonishment. "A Satyr?! I have heard of them! Wow, I thought they were just a legend!"

Marie, oblivious to my mind-wife's astonishment, continues speaking. "Satyrs are like a unique bloodline of the demons. Following the ancient wars on Earth, after the rise of humanity and the fall of angelkind, Satyrs emerged as part of a bitter power struggle between two demonic factions. During the conclusion of the Energy Wars, Satan's faction won, and thus, the Satyr's were all but annihilated. Now, only a few remain. The females are used as playthings, while the males are shoved into brutal combat arenas for sport."

Momo squeaks in surprise as Marie suddenly steps away, revealing the Satyr's unhidden form. Marie grabs her by the shoulders and pushes her toward me. "Notice the markings on her forehead? Momo isn't like other Satyrs. She's a pureblood, one of only three remaining in the galaxy."

Momo struggles to pull away from me. However, Marie squeezes her shoulders and holds her in place. "Observe, Jason. Mana bubbles from her pores. When she breathes-

Marie," I say, interrupting her. "Come on; you don't need to freak Momo out. She's scared of me. Just let her be. I don't understand why you brought me all this way just to show me your Satyr friend."

Marie nods. She releases her grip, allowing Momo to scurry behind her and hide.

"That's very thoughtful of you. However, you're wrong. I did not bring you here to meet Momo. I just thought you'd like to see one of my treasured posses- err, my cute little buttercup."

Marie stops just short of treating Momo like an object. She swiftly pivots to another subject and gestures into the inner room.

"I brought you here to show you a vault unlike any you've ever seen. Momo, I'll be counting on you."

The Satyr girl rubs her palms together worriedly. "O-okay! I'll do my best!"

She ducks low and slips away from Marie. Moving quickly, she skitters through an adjacent doorway and disappears from our sight.

I follow Marie, while Marie follows Momo.

As we walk, I spot a charmingly decorated bedroom through a door on the opposite side of the hallway. Dozens of teddy bears and other stuffed animals line the walls, emphasizing Momo's childish nature.

"Jason," Phoebe says.

Hm? What is it?

"Momo... did you notice the size of her horns?"

I nod slowly. *Yeah. They're pretty big. Why?*

"Satyrs have different biologies from red-skinned demons. However, unless I'm wrong, their horn size should still be relative to their magical power."

I follow Phoebe's assumption to its logical conclusion. *So, Momo is a Duke? Possibly even an Emperor?*

"That's what I'm thinking."

I continue walking behind Marie but pull forward a bit to fall into step beside her.

"You mentioned something about, erm, the demons mistreating Satyrs. Can you tell me more? Did... did something happen to Momo?"

Marie gazes ahead, her eyes staring emptily at the space before her as she walks. Eventually, she shakes the fog from her vision and nods. "Momo is a succubus. Satyr succubi differ slightly from those of the red-skinned variety. For one thing, they don't have a tail. For another, they don't need to consume male essence to prolong their lives. Unlike a red-skinned succubus, who must consume male essence to achieve immortality, a Satyr succubus has exactly the opposite problem. She has too much vitality, and must thus discharge it upon the male of another species periodically. If she does not, she will, quite literally, explode."

Marie continues. "Further, the pleasure a red-skinned succubus can deliver to a male pales in comparison to that of a Satyr. Satyrs release euphoric pheromones far beyond those of red-skinned succubi once a male embraces them."

Marie turns her head slightly. She gazes at me from the corner of her eyes. "To put it plainly, the pleasure is more addictive and intoxicating than the strongest drugs you've ever tried or imagined. Most males turn violent. Their cravings grow stronger and stronger. Inevitably, they kill the Satyr in a lust-driven rage. Momo suffered unimaginably until, by chance, I rescued her."

I meet Marie's gaze. "How close did her 'embracer' come to committing the unforgivable?"

Marie shakes her head. "You don't want to know. He was a powerful Duke of the Original Demons. I killed him and used various methods to cover up his death. He can't hurt Momo anymore, but his past actions live on, tormenting her."

I clear my throat. "Erm. Did you ever consider erasing Momo's memories?"

"I did. However, in the end, I decided against it. Trauma makes people stronger."

Marie turns her attention away from me, and her gaze grows distant. "We've all suffered unimaginably, each in our own way. Losing those memories will only hurt us in the long run. He who tastes pain learns not to inflict it upon another."

I fall silent for a few moments.

"Yes. I suppose you're right."

When Marie and I reach the end of the hallway, a massive circular room, hundreds of feet in diameter, stretches out before us. Alcoves rest in its walls, each one shielded by thick panes of glass.

Within each alcove rests a single item. They range from anything including combs, forks, and swords, to a bucket, a beat-up training dummy, and a statue of a man with a pitchfork.

I scan the room, eyeballing all the random, assorted crap sitting inside the alcoves.

What the fuck am I looking at?

Momo stands in the middle of the room. Before her, a computer control panel sticks out of the floor. She taps several buttons, then turns to look at Marie and I. "M-miss Becker! I'm ready! Which one do you want first?"

Marie looks at me, then gestures to the dozens of alcoves hidden in the walls.

"This room is the culmination of all my efforts. Welcome, Jason, to the Heroic Treasury."

I frown. "Heroic Treasury? What do you mean?"

"Don't you understand? Shouldn't you know about heroic artifacts already?"

My heart skips a beat. "Heroic Artifacts? Wait, are you telling me that every object in this chamber is a legendary relic?!"

Having learned about them from Solomon a few years ago, my mind explodes with memories of his lessons.

When a Hero dies, their soul will enter whatever their most prized and beloved object might be. Joan of Arc entered the Sword from Heaven. King Arthur entered Excalibur, and so on.

However, not all heroes were created equal. Some heroes lived lives of mediocrity. Some used their powers for selfish desires. One hero, Dracula, used his magical abilities for the forces of evil.

While Camael bequeathed several deity-level weapons and objects of power upon certain heroes; others often ended up binding their souls to common everyday objects. If an unremarkable hero had a favorite spoon, when they died, they might end up trapped inside that spoon for all eternity.

My gaze falls upon a beaten-up, rusty old bucket not far from the room's entrance. It sits within its glass enclosure like a beaten, battered man. Sad. Decrepit. A tale of a beggar who lived and died for nothing.

I'm tempted to ask Marie about the bucket. What sad excuse for a hero would end up inside of such an object? Will that be my fate, someday? Will I perhaps meet an untimely death and live the rest of eternity trapped inside a blade of grass?

I turn to look at Marie. Her face has once again morphed into a neutral, unassuming expression, giving me no hints as to where to start.

"I don't know. Do you have any recommendations?"

Marie shrugs. "I cannot speak to any of the heroes trapped within these artifacts. My cybernetic brain is incapable of interfacing with them. I only know these are all heroic objects by the energy they emit. Momo cannot speak with them either, given the deadliness of holy energy toward demons and Satyrs."

I sigh. "Is that why you want me? You need to find out who each of these Heroes are?"

Marie smiles. "I've given you a lot of information, Jason. Surely, you can perform one small favor for me. I'm not asking for much."

I sweep my gaze around the room, absorbing the view of more than two hundred different assorted objects. "Uh. Well, okay then... but this is going to take a *while*."

This is Momo's artwork!



Part 191: Family Ties

Momo manipulates the control panel placed in the center of the Heroic Artifact Vault. A series of loud whirrs and clicks echoes throughout the chamber. Ten seconds later, one of the glass covers to my immediate right lifts open, revealing a plain metal fork. The object looks so bland and uninteresting that I can do nothing but stare in disbelief as a robotic claw lowers from the ceiling, plucks the artifact from its resting place, and brings it over to me.

Marie observes with her hands folded behind her back, her face having already returned to its placid, expressionless state. Her body language gives nothing away as she watches me pluck the fork from the robotic claw's grasp.

"Do you sense anything?" Marie asks.

I hold the fork with my thumb, index, and middle fingers. After spinning it around to get a good look at every angle, I shrug. "Looks like a normal fork to me. The design is kinda boring. Other than that, I can't detect anything special about it."

Marie frowns. She glances at the Satyr in the center of the room. "Momo, run a scan for holy energy on this artifact."

I force myself not to roll my eyes when Marie calls the fucking *fork* an 'artifact,' but the motion proves hard to resist.

Marie notices my eye-rolling. "Jason, don't be a child. I've had these artifacts in my possession for eons. Some heroes wielded mighty weapons and armor gifted to them by the Archangels, while others died penniless and nameless, having never left a mark on the world. Nevertheless, they might grant me information on Earth's history if I can connect with them. No matter how insignificant the hero, they should all have something I need."

I sigh. "Yeah. Solomon told me once about the different qualities of heroes. It's just... this is a *fork*, Marie. If heroes attached to their most prized possession upon death, how weak and pathetic was the one who possessed this?"

"You're surprisingly judgmental," Marie mutters. "What have you accomplished so far compared to the other legendary heroes of yore? Some heroes were born with useless abilities. I know of one girl whose only power was the ability to change the wind's direction. Every time she did so, she would fall unconscious. She lived her life as a peasant and accomplished nothing. Few heroes possessed abilities as mighty as Wordsmithing. Consider yourself lucky."

Marie's speech causes a sense of shame to wash over me.

The head scientist is right. I'm acting stuck-up for no reason. I don't know what sorts of lives these heroes led. I don't know anything about them.

I lower my gaze and fall silent. After a moment, Momo speaks up. "The holy energy within that artifact is faint, but it's still there!"

"Just as I thought," Marie says, nodding slowly. "Perhaps the soul trapped within has withered and decayed over time. Let's try another."

Marie holds out her hand to me. It takes me a moment to understand what she wants. When I do, I sheepishly hand the fork over to her.

Marie accepts the fork. She stares at it for a moment, turning it around as if to admire its fine craftsmanship. In her eyes, the plain piece of flatware becomes a slab of gold, incalculably valuable.

It suddenly occurs to me just how much she treasures these artifacts. Each one must have taken her a lot of effort to acquire. Despite the trouble she went to, they've done nothing but sit in her vault for 100,000 years.

I understand at least a little bit why Marie wants my help. She probably spent centuries, if not millennia, gathering these artifacts. Perhaps she wants to use the heroes trapped within to fulfill some grand ambition. Perhaps she's plotting to exact revenge on the Volgrim for destroying Earth.

I silently exhale a long, slow breath.

I left my cryopod six years ago. Almost immediately, I began destabilizing the Labyrinth without having any idea what the political situation was. Marie wants me to stop what I'm doing, but I don't know if I should. She has a point. Marie was playing the long-game, so maybe I should allow her to do as she pleases.

Marie gestures to Momo. "Bring me the next artifact."

"Y-yes, Miss Becker."

Momo activates the vault's systems once again. This time, she plucks out a small, brass necklace from the next alcove. The mechanical claw picks the locket up with surprisingly deft fingers, brings it over, and places it in my grasp.

I focus my mind and try to examine the locket. However, after a minute of concentrating, nothing happens.

"I don't sense anything," I say. "It's the same as that fork."

"Hmm..."

Marie grumbles to herself. She looks toward Momo, but her gaze turns vacant as she contemplates several ideas.

"Jason," Phoebe says. My mind-wife appears in my vision and gestures toward the locket. "Why not use your Wordsmithing? Maybe you can reawaken the artifact's soul? They might be asleep or comatose. Remember Solomon? He died, but you somehow brought him back to life within his Crown."

Slowly, I nod. *True. That was an accident, but I might be able to replicate the effect.*

With a shrug, I aim my mind at the locket.

"Awaken."

Marie glances at me questioningly, but I ignore her.

To my astonishment, the tiny brass locket begins to glow! A faint, blueish hue wraps around the heart-shaped pendant, then fades away.

I stare at it a moment longer, only for Phoebe to yelp in surprise. "What the- how did you get in here?!"

My heart skips a beat. A shadowy figure appears beside Phoebe. She quickly jumps away and draws her sword (where in the heck did she get a sword?), then aims it toward the potential enemy.

Before she can lunge forward, the shadow wrapping around the intruder disappears.

A young girl, perhaps ten years old, takes its place. Her dirty blonde hair and bright blue eyes clash with her filthy, disheveled appearance. Her clothing is barely anything but rags. Her ribs stick out, and her cheeks appear gaunt. With a single glance, I can tell the little girl has never had a good meal in all her life.

The moment the girl appears, her eyes sweep toward Phoebe's sword.

[Aahh!!]

She yelps in fright and jumps backward, only to trip over her feet. Terror appears on the child's face as she pushes herself across the ground and away from Phoebe.

[No hurt! Me didn't steal!]

The girl opens her mouth to speak, but each time she does, only faint impressions of her words appear in my mind. Her language isn't English, though what it actually is evades my grasp. It's only due to my prolonged contact with Solomon's Crown that I can understand the intent behind her words.

Phoebe's eyes light up as she recognizes the child's dirty, beggar-like appearance. My mind-wife quickly sheathes her sword and drops to her knees. "I'm sorry, child! You startled me! There's no need to be afraid. I won't hurt you."

Phoebe lowers to the little girl's level, making herself appear as small and non-threatening as possible.

The little girl trembles uncontrollably as she evaluates Phoebe. Her eyes shine with the gaze of a person who has witnessed the worst horrors the world has to offer. I can immediately tell that the suffering she's endured stands several echelons above anything I've faced.

Slowly, the child nods.

[No cut me?]

Phoebe shakes her head. "No, little one. I won't hurt you. What is your name?"

[Name?]

The little girl bites her lip. She lowers her eyes and stares at the ground. A look of concentration passes over her face as she tries to pull back the identifying sound people once used when speaking to her.

After a moment, she shakes her head.

[No remember...]

"That's alright. I'm Phoebe! I have a daughter, just a few years younger than you. Her name is Daisy."

[Uh, huh...]

The little girl nods along to Phoebe's words. However, her eyes darken with the look of an antelope evaluating a vicious cheetah. She doesn't trust Phoebe at all.

"Um, how about this? You don't remember your name. How about I give you one? Maybe something like... like..."

Phoebe struggles to come up with a name. Out loud, I blurt out the first one that comes to my mind. "Shana?"

Marie speaks, startling me. "Shana? Is that the name of the Hero within that locket?"

I blink and turn to look at the cyborg. A look of fervor worms its way onto her face. She looks at me with excitement, waiting to see what I have to say.

"I'm not sure," I reply. "I'm currently speaking to the hero within this locket. However... she's just a little girl, not even ten years old. I don't know much about her, yet."

Marie nods. "Yes, yes, good. Take your time. Find out whatever you can."

Having steeled myself for some ridiculous demand, I find her patience surprising.

I turn my thoughts inward. There, Phoebe continues to chat with the little girl. "Shana! How about it? Do you like that name?"

The little girl neither nods nor shakes her head.

[That name fine...]

She doesn't appear thrilled, but she doesn't seem to hate it, either.

[Where am I? What happened?]

Phoebe and I exchange glances.

This time, I speak to Shana, using my thoughts.

Hello, Shana. My name is Jason. I'm Phoebe's husb-

[Aaaah!!]

Shana cries out in fear again. She jerks her head around as if to search for the one who is speaking.

I blink in surprise.

Uh, Phoebe... why does she look so surprised?

Phoebe's face scrunches into an *oops* expression. "Ah, I guess you don't know this, Jason, but only I can hear your voice and see through your eyes. Shana can't see the world outside the Mind Realm like I can. You're just a disembodied voice to her."

My heart skips a beat. *Wait, what's this about a Mind Realm? You didn't mention it before.*

Phoebe shrugs. "I thought you knew. There's a whole world within your mind. It appears to be made up of my memories and yours all jammed together."

I rub my face. *I see. Alright, well, just explain it to me later. For now, let's focus on talking to Shana. I don't want to scare her. Try feeding her. She looks like she hasn't eaten even once in her life.*

"Okay."

Phoebe walks over to Shana. The little girl starts to scooch away on her butt, but Phoebe quickly reaches around to touch her back. "I'm sorry. My husband is a little slow, sometimes. He's not the best with children. Are you hungry? I could get you some food."

[Food?]

Shana's stomach growls like a wild animal. She quickly clutches it, and some of the hesitation and fear disappears from her eyes.

[Give food. Very hungry.]

"Follow me," Phoebe says, smiling.

I watch without saying a word. Phoebe helps Shana to her feet. The two of them start walking toward an unknown destination. Phoebe walks calmly and with purpose, while Shana staggers along, barely able to keep up. Her legs appear as thin as sticks.

However, the more I watch, the more confused I grow. Neither my wife nor Shana move from their original starting spots. Instead, their feet glide on the ground without their body positions changing. Phoebe reaches her hand out to twist a knob, almost as if opening a door. However, the world around her still appears as a pitch-black void to me.

The Mind Realm.

Phoebe mentioned the term casually, but the realization that such a place might exist in my head and I never knew unnerves me. What is it? How does it work? Why can Phoebe see it but not me?

"Jason?" Marie asks, pulling me out of my thoughts. "What's happening? You haven't said a word."

"Sorry," I reply. "I'm speaking to Shana telepathically. She can hear my thoughts."

"Ah, I see. What is Shana like? What are her powers?"

I shrug. "Not a clue. I'm still getting to know her."

I glance to my right, at an empty spot on the floor.

"Chair."

A luxurious loveseat with ample padding materializes a short distance away. I settle into it with a sigh.

"Ahh..."

Marie raises an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting. I think my conversation with Shana might take a while. Do you want me to get to know her better or not?"

Marie nods. "I do. Very well, make yourself comfortable. Would you like anything to eat? Biological organisms require sustenance, after all."

"No, don't bother. I can Wordsmith food if I'm hungry."

Marie nods. "Alright. I'll chat with Momo for a while. Let me know when you find anything interesting."

I nod. "You got it."

Marie returns the nod. She walks away from me to the middle of the room and starts talking to Momo in a hushed voice. Momo shoots me several quizzical glances, then nods along to Marie's words. At some point, she whispers something, and my mediocre lip-reading skills barely manage to make out the words, 'inferior mental capacity.'

Bloody hell, Marie. What are you telling Momo? Don't give her the wrong idea.

I resume observing Phoebe and Shana. They sit at an invisible table and raise invisible silverware to their mouths. I can't see what food they're eating, which slightly bothers me.

Whatever the Mind Realm is, it's in *my* head, dammit. I should be able to see it!

After thinking for a minute, I speak a word of power. "**Reveal.**"

My thought takes shape and immediately alters reality. In the blink of an eye, a black curtain disappears from my mind, exposing a modern-era hotel room straight out of the year I entered my Cryopod. Phoebe and Shana dip their spoons into ancient-looking clay bowls, each of which looks like someone found them at an antique shop for half a dollar.

Shana continues to stare at Phoebe with a hint of hesitation. However, every bite of tomato soup softens her expression more and more. She greedily gulps the red liquid, causing it to spill down her chin. Phoebe laughs and dabs the mess away with a handkerchief. "Goodness! You must be starving, little one. Why don't I help you take a bath and get some new clothes after this? Those rags look dreadful."

Shana finishes off her soup and sets the bowl down. A guilty expression washes over her face.

[Can... have more? Still hungry.]

Phoebe finishes her soup and smiles. "Certainly. You may have as much as you like. The worst that will happen is Jason will get a little sleepy."

I frown. *What do you mean I'll get a little sleepy?*

Shana's eyes widen in panic. She yelps and ducks under the table, frightened by my voice.

Phoebe sighs. "Jason... please refrain from talking for a while. Shana isn't accustomed to the Mind Realm yet."

Neither am I, I reply. *Why did you say I would become sleepy?*

Phoebe glances at Shana and shrugs. "Because whenever I perform certain tasks or do certain things, it consumes a little of your energy."

It does?

"Yep."

How do you know? You haven't even been in my head for a day, yet.

"I just... do," Phoebe mutters. "When I arrived here, I knew the rules. It's not that hard to understand. How do *you* not know these things? Didn't you wear Solomon's Crown for six years?"

Yeah, but he never mentioned anything about a Mind Realm. Eh, whatever. Tell me more about it later. I'll stay quiet for now.

Shana continues to hide under the table. However, the more I talk, the less frightened she becomes. Eventually, she peeps out to stare at the sky in wonder.

[Who that?]

"My husband, Jason," Phoebe replies. She chuckles into her palm. "He's a nice man. Uh... let's just say that he lives all around us. I don't know how else to explain it."

Shana nods. She slowly crawls out from under the table and tightly clutches Phoebe's jacket.

[He not cut me?]

Phoebe continues to smile, but a flash of uncertainty appears in her eyes. "No... Jason won't cut you. That's the second time you've mentioned 'cutting,' though. Did someone hurt you, Shana?"

Shana nods. Her big, blue eyes flutter as she avoids Phoebe's gaze.

[Bad man. He cut me. I bleed very much.]

"Where did he hurt you?" Phoebe asks, her smile disappearing entirely.

Shana squeezes Phoebe's shirt even more tightly than before.

[Everywhere.]

Shana avoids Phoebe's gaze. Eventually, Phoebe pries her hands away. She spins Shana around to examine her back.

"Jason. Do me a favor. Don't look."

I nod. *Alright.*

I try to turn my mind away from Phoebe and Shana. My gaze falls on Marie and Momo as they discuss something in hushed whispers, but I can't stop myself from seeing inside of my head.

Phoebe slowly pulls down Shana's ragged shirt, revealing her pale white shoulders. Immediately, dozens of scars reveal themselves.

Phoebe pulls the little girl's shirt a little lower, exposing her back. The scars rapidly become ever more gruesome. They crisscross to form patterns and symbols.

Whoever cut Shana... they did it for fun. They enjoyed it.

Phoebe glides her finger across Shana's back, causing the little girl to shiver. "Does it hurt?"

Shana stays silent for a moment.

[Yes.]

"I see."

Phoebe pulls Shana's raggedy shirt back up. Tears form in her eyes as she begins imagining what sort of sick, horrible monster would have done such awful things to a little girl.

"I'm sorry..." Phoebe whispers. "You didn't deserve to be hurt. You're a good girl."

[No. Me bad. Me steal food. Get punished.]

"This isn't punishment..." Phoebe replies. "It's... it's..."

My wife trails off her words, leaving the implication to hang in the air.

She turns Shana around, leans forward, and gently wraps her arms around the emaciated child's frame. Shana doesn't return the gesture. Instead, she rests her chin on Phoebe's shoulder and stares at the wall blankly.

[Why arm-touch me?]

"It's... it's called a hug..." Phoebe says, her voice softening. "Good girls deserve hugs."

[Why you shake?]

It takes me a moment to understand Shana's question. I abruptly realize that Phoebe is barely keeping herself together. Her body trembles as she tries to suppress several choked sobs.

"It's... it's nothing. I'm just glad to hug you..."

* * *

Several minutes pass. Phoebe continues to hug Shana, and eventually, Shana mimics her movements. She hugs Phoebe back.

[No need cry. You not cut. Only me.]

"I know... I know..." Phoebe replies, as tears stream down her face. "I'm a mess. I-I just hate it when bad people hurt children. It's not right. It's not right at all..."

As Phoebe speaks, her words remind me of the story she told me six years ago. She once saved the life of a little demon girl, as well as many other demonesses.

Phoebe loves children. She tries to be strict with Daisy, but I know that when I'm not around, she spoils Daisy even more rotten than I do.

It takes a while for Phoebe to calm down. Eventually, she releases Shana and rubs the tears from her eyes. Shana timidly smiles at Phoebe, revealing just a hint of her cracked, chipped teeth.

[You done cry?]

"Yes," Phoebe says, forcing a smile. "Shana, I'll take good care of you, alright? I won't let anyone hurt you ever again. Promise."

She starts chatting with Shana about banal and mundane facets of life. Shana's favorite color, her life before she died, and many other things.

The one fact I quickly come to realize is that Shana's memory is beyond slipshod. Whenever Phoebe questions her, Shana only manages to dig up the most surface-level details about her life. Even worse, she

doesn't remember dying. Shana fell asleep in a cold alley one night and woke up in an empty, barren meadow. There, she spent 100,000 years sitting around, doing nothing.

No wonder Shana doesn't remember anything. Her memories have deteriorated over time. The only thing she does remember is whatever that horrible man did who mutilated her, and she isn't keen to talk about it.

For a moment, I consider restoring her memories with Wordsmithing. I quickly shake that thought out of my head when I realize all the trauma it might inflict on Shana.

I raise my eyes to look at Marie. "Alright. I'm done talking to Shana."

Marie glides over to me. A spark of interest appears in her eyes. She repeats her questions from earlier.

"What is Shana like? What are her powers?"

"She's a timid child," I say. "What I've gathered is that she spent 100,000 years in limbo. She was alive and conscious for all of that time and grew used to the crushing loneliness of having nobody to talk to. During Shana's life, before she died, there was a man who tortured her for the sake of his sick, twisted desires. She doesn't like to talk about him, and she still bears scars from whatever he did."

"Mmm," Marie grunts. "How old is she? Physically speaking, I mean."

"She looks about ten years old."

"Do you know what year she lived in, as well as what location?"

I frown. "Why do you need to know?"

Marie sighs. "Jason, I understand that you don't trust me. Frankly, I don't trust you, either. However, this information will be essential in my quest to reconstruct the full timeline of historical heroes. I'll know which heroes lived in what era, what they accomplished, what their powers were, and so on. Don't you understand? Knowing our history can help us avoid pitfalls in the future."

Slowly, I nod along to Marie's words. They sound truthful, but at the same time, it also seems like she might be holding things back from me. I'm just not sure *what*.

"Give me a second."

I transmit Marie's questions to Phoebe and Shana. By now, Shana has grown used to my strange, disembodied voice. She only flinches when I speak unexpectedly, but she doesn't try to hide under tables or behind Phoebe anymore.

After receiving her answer, I frown. "Shana doesn't know what year she lived in. My best guess for her homeland is probably somewhere in western Europe. Maybe somewhere after 1000 AD?"

"I see," Marie says. "Is she French? German? English?"

"I don't know."

Marie groans. "A lot of help *you* are."

Marie continues asking questions, and I relay them to Phoebe. Eventually, Marie sighs. She shrugs her shoulders in a gesture of defeat. "Very well. Return the locket, and we can move onto the next artifact."

I nod. "Alright."

I transmit my thoughts to Phoebe. *Marie wants to move onto the next-*

"I know," Phoebe says. She smiles at the little girl held in her arms. "I need to go for a while, Shana. We'll see each other in the future, okay?"

Shana's cheerful expression darkens. Immediately, a hint of panic appears in her eyes.

[No! No! No want go! Why leave? Me alone! Too scary!]

Phoebe brushes her fingers through Shana's hair. "It's only for a little while-"

[Big empty field! Chest hurt. Head hurt! No want be alone!]

Tears well up in Shana's eyes. She throws herself against Phoebe's chest and begins to sob.

[Me be good! Don't leave! Me good girl!]

Phoebe stares, dumbstruck, at the helpless little girl weeping against her chest. Eventually, she raises her eyes to look at me. "Um... Jason..."

I nod. *Don't worry, I understand. We can't leave Shana all by herself. She's suffered enough.*

I rise from my seat and turn to Marie. "I hate to ask you for a favor... but Shana is depressed. My w-, err, I mean, I can't bring myself to leave her inside the locket. Would you mind if I kept it for a while? Shana is lonely. She doesn't want me to leave her alone. I'm worried her mind will break if I do."

Marie frowns. "That wasn't part of our agreement. These heroic artifacts are one of a kind. They're my most precious possessions."

"Right, I get that. Shana is just a little girl, though. She doesn't have any powers. I can't just leave her to rot in silence and solitude for an eternity."

Marie waves her hand. "Ugh. Who cares? Biological sentiments disgust me. She's an errant soul, Jason. Shana has no mass, no body to speak of. You can easily heal her physical and mental wounds with your Wordsmithing. Stop making excuses, and hand me the locket. We have eighty-seven prime-level artifacts and one-hundred-sixty sub-par relics to examine today."

I stare in disbelief at Marie. "No! I'm not going to let this child suffer! Maybe you've forgotten what it means to be human, but I'm not going to let a child suffer all so you can perform more experiments. I'm keeping this locket, and that's *final*."

Marie stares at me. A look of anger appears in her eyes. However, she stuffs it down and instead tugs on a few strands of hair.

"Very well. But *only* this time. Ask for even one more artifact, and you'll find how short-lived my generosity can be."

I nod. However, internally, I think, *why did Marie give in so easily? Was it only because I stood up for myself?*

Phoebe pipes up. "No, you're right. Marie accepted your request far too easily. She treasures these artifacts more than her own life. She didn't agree to let Shana stay out of obligation toward you, but

because of some ulterior motive."

I agree.

Phoebe and I share our misgivings. However, in the end, since Marie agreed to let us keep Shana's locket, we can't complain.

* * *

The next thing Marie procures from her windowed alcoves is a gigantic executioner's axe. The monstrous weapon stands nearly as tall as me, with a head as wide as mine. I rub my finger along its edge, only to find myself surprised by its sharpness.

"I polished and sharpened it," Marie explains. "I usually try to maintain the original appearance of any heroic artifacts I find, but this axe was caked in several-hundred-year-old blood when I first located it. I won't allow contaminants into my laboratories."

Marie hands the axe to me. As she does, I notice a hint of hesitation in her movements.

Will Jason attempt to steal this artifact as well? Marie's gaze implies.

I ignore her thoughts. Instead, I focus my mind on the weapon and try to probe it. Much like Shana's artifact, I don't detect even a trace of heroic energy.

"Awaken."

I speak a word of power and allow my magic to enter the weapon's handle.

After a few seconds, a similar sensation as the one from earlier appears in my mind. A shadowy figure materializes a short distance from Phoebe and Shana. A giant, lumbering shell of a man comes into focus.

Blood coats the man's body. His bare chest ripples with muscle, while his eyes pulse with power. Much like Shana, his blond hair and blue eyes reveal his identity as a hero, but his aura and body language tell a sinister tale of bloodshed and violence.

Phoebe's breath catches as she eyes the mountain of a man standing before her. Compared to my seven-foot-height, the man isn't quite as tall as me, but in the context of historical human height, he's a giant among men.

"W-who are you?" Phoebe asks, her voice slightly wavering.

The man stares forward without speaking. He gazes over the top of Phoebe's head, as if trying to peer into the furthest reaches of space and time. Eventually, he rubs his eyes and lowers his gaze to meet my wife's.

[I am Lorent.]

Unlike Momo, Lorent's words are far crisper and easier to understand. I immediately understand not only his sentence structure and syntax, but also the subtle inflections of his speech, making me wonder what language he speaks for me to understand him so easily.

"Lorent? I'm Phoebe. This child here is Shana. Uhm... how are you feeling right now?"

Lorent eyes my wife casually, as if she's nothing more than a slight irritation to his eyes.

[What have you done to my spirit?]

Lorent ignores Phoebe's question and instead asks one of his own. Phoebe stares at him for a moment, trying to ascertain what he means.

"Your... spirit? I don't follow. What are you referring to?"

Lorent crosses his arms. His slow, laborious movement startles Shana, causing her to hide behind Phoebe.

[My spirit. I sat alone for eternity. I rested my eyes. I dreamt of my wife and children. I envisioned the world before my death. Now my spirit is gone. I stand in an unfamiliar place, somewhere far from where I died.]

Lorent gestures in a wide arc toward the unfamiliar scenery surrounding him.

[Are you not the Creator, the one who has come to exact punishment for my crimes? Have you not come to take me to Sheol?]

Slowly, Phoebe shakes her head. "No... I haven't. I'm sorry, Sir Lorent. This must all be confusing for you. Will you allow me to explain your current situation?"

Lorent nods. His eyes flutter as he bows his head. [Go on. I have nothing if not time to spare.]

Phoebe returns the gesture.

Several minutes pass.

My wife slowly pieces together a fantastical tale for Lorent. She explains the Heroic Aura, the way artifacts work, and the reason he ended up trapped inside a 'spirit.' Lorent says nothing. He merely listens to her words, slowly blinking every so often to digest this new information.

When Phoebe concludes, the mountain of a man closes his eyes. An aura of melancholy surrounds him.

[It... it seems I lived a life of ignorance. I was the King's Executioner. I beheaded those he deemed sinners and slaughtered those who spoke against him. When the Church came for my family in the night, I accepted my fate. I knew I would travel to Hell, but I never once wavered in my convictions.]

Lorent sighs.

[Now, you are telling me that my eternal loneliness was not intended as a punishment for my misdeeds, but a reward? Someone intended for me to enjoy an eternity of solitude?]

Bitterness appears on Lorent's countenance.

[What foolishness. If only I had died with my wife, I might have found solace in eternal sleep. Instead, enough time passed that I slowly began to forget her face, as well as those belonging to anyone else I once knew. Now, all that remains is an empty husk, a shell of my former self. I am nothing. I am no-one.]

Lorent slumps backward. He leans against the wall as his body begins to waver.

[I wish I had died.]

Phoebe stares expressionlessly at the muscular giant. Hesitation appears in her eyes, as if she wants to do something, but can't bring herself to do it.

I transmit my voice to her. *Go ahead. Embrace him. I won't mind.*

My voice booms throughout my Mind Realm. Lorent raises his head and stares at the sky. [Hm? Who was that?]

Phoebe opens her mouth to speak, but pauses for a split-second.

A spark appears in her eyes.

"Ah, do you remember when I mentioned my husband?"

Lorent nods. [Yes.]

"That was him. He is the Creator of this world."

Lorent's cloudy expression dissipates. He glances at Phoebe with a look of disbelief. [The Creator?]

"Yes. I know you cannot remember your wife, nor your children. However, their memories still live within you. Answer my questions, and we can return that which you've lost."

Lorent pulls away from the wall. He stands up straight and gazes at Phoebe, a mixture of suspicion and awe etched into his forehead. [I... I can't believe... it's not possible!]

"It is," Phoebe says, matter-of-factly. "I never lie."

I raise an eyebrow, but say nothing.

Phoebe has certainly lied before, but whenever she does, she always ends up confessing to me out of embarrassment. Further, her lies are always tiny and insignificant.

Hell, even judging the words she just spoke, she barely fibbed. The Mind Realm is part of my brain. In essence, I am its creator. She merely twisted the truth slightly.

Finally, she said I could restore his memories, and she wasn't wrong about that, either. Wordsmithing is more than capable of such a trivial feat.

Lorent's breathing speeds up. Desire appears in his eyes as he drops to his knees and bows solemnly before Phoebe.

[Please, lady Phoebe. Ask anything of me. I will tell you all that I know.]

Phoebe smiles. "Alright. Let's start with where you lived before you died. Can you tell me about your home?"

Lorent nods. He raises his head to gaze into Phoebe's eyes.

[I lived in Camelot. As a retainer to the king, I sat atop the hierarchy of the political system.]

Phoebe's eyes widen. "C-Camelot? The king?! Surely you don't mean His Majesty, King Arthur?!"

Phoebe isn't the only one surprised by Lorent's words. Even I find myself taken aback by the revelation.

After all, there can only be one Hero alive, ever. How could Arthur and Lorent both be heroes simultaneously? Marie will be ecstatic when she finds out about this revelation.

However, just as my thoughts start to run wild, Lorent shakes his head. [No, I apologize. His Majesty, King Arthur Pendragon, perished shortly before my birth. I served under his son, King Mordred.]

Phoebe's wide-eyed astonishment dissipates. "I... I see. My apologies. I didn't mean to react so strongly. However, I served as a Knight of the Round Table for a short time. I served His Majesty, Arthur Pendragon, directly. When I thought you might have possessed the Heroic Aura at the same time as him..."

[Say no more,] Lorent replies. [I apologize for being unclear. His Majesty, King Mordred, was not half the man his father was. Nevertheless, it was my responsibility to carry out his commands. Had I as righteous a leader as Sir Arthur, I might have died peacefully in my sleep.]

Phoebe swallows heavily. Her heart beats like a drum in her chest, but she quickly regains control of her conflicted emotions.

"It sounds like Mordred was inferior to his father. Can you tell me more about his reign? I should like to find out what happened to the kingdom after... after my disappearance."

Lorent nods. [As you command, my lady.]

He rises to his feet, but maintains a respectful tone. As Lorent speaks, his loyalty toward Phoebe deepens. Having learned of her lineage as a Knight of the Round, as well as her close ties to King Arthur himself, Lorent finds himself struggling to recall every possible detail he can think of.

[Ah... I am sorry, lady Phoebe. I do not remember King Mordred's family members, nor the denizens of his court. Time has addled my memories...]

Phoebe shakes her head. "No, you've done more than enough to help me. Thank you, Sir Lorent. As promised, I will have the Creator restore your memories. Consider it a small reward for millennia of diligence. I am so, so sorry for your losses."

Lorent shakes his head. [If living in loneliness could bring me before a goddess as beautiful as you, I would do it a thousand times more. I thank the Creator that I was finally able to redeem myself for my past sins.]

I try not to get too huffy about Lorent complimenting my wife's looks. After all, he's not wrong. Phoebe is hotter than hell.

"Jason," Phoebe says. "Restore Sir Lorent's memories."

I nod. "**Memory.**"

After a few moments, my magical power suddenly plummets. A spell rushes into my mind and flies at Sir Lorent. The instant it impacts him, the hulking mountain of muscle rolls his eyes up into his head and faints. He stumbles forward and collapses, but Phoebe manages to catch him in time.

"Augh! Oof!"

Phoebe stumbles awkwardly as she wraps her arms around Lorent. With great exertion, she gently lowers him to the floor.

"Heavens! I don't have the same strength I did before entering your Mind Realm. My spiritual body isn't nearly as robust as my physical one was."

I nod. "No problem. Let me fix that. **Strength. Enhance. Vitality. Longevity. Perception. Speed.**"

Multiple words of power travel into my Mind Realm, boosting Phoebe's body to previously unseen levels. Her tightly-fitting shirt splits open at the sleeves as her biceps bulge with strength. Her eyes flash with wisdom, and power flows through her blood like never before.

"Huu..."

Phoebe releases a terse breath and flexes her arms. She reaches down and picks up Lorent by grabbing his shirt with one hand. Then, she lifts him up and sets him on the table.

Satisfied, Phoebe pats her muscles. "Much better."

I stare at the sweat dripping down her forehead onto her chest. *Yeah. Much better, indeed.*

"Oh, you."

It takes a few minutes, but eventually, Lorent awakens. Unlike before, his melancholic aura disappears immediately.

He sits up and swivels his gaze around the table. Eventually, he turns to look at Phoebe.

[By the Creator. I remember everything. I remember what the priest told me!]

Lorent swings his legs off the table, jumps off, and grabs Phoebe's shoulders. He gazes into her eyes with the intensity of a tiger.

[Lady Phoebe! I can't believe it's really you!]

Phoebe blinks in confusion. "Huh? What do you mean?"

Lorent's expression turns giddy, resembling a child who has received the best Christmas present ever. [You don't know me? Of course, you don't. Where are my manners?! My name... it's Lorent Berthold. My father was Sir Ancelan Berthold, and his father, Sir Gwyllem Berthold!]

This time, Phoebe's eyes ignite with ferocious flames. "Sir Gwyllem Berthold?! But... but he was my father!"

[That's right. I'm your brother Ancelan's son... your nephew!]

Hundreds of reactions wash across Phoebe's face. Surprise, delight, joy, disbelief, and countless others mix and match to create a beautiful rainbow of emotions I could gaze at all day. In that moment, I fall even more deeply in love with my wife than ever before.

"You are my nephew?! That's amazing! That's incredible!!"

Phoebe leaps into Lorent's arms. She hugs him tightly, nearly shattering his spine in the process.

"My nephew! I didn't even know I had one! Oh, heavens, today is a wonderful day! What luck that we should meet here, a hundred thousand years in the future!"

Lorent hides his agony with surprising grace and subtlety. He grits his teeth and forces a huge smile before wrapping his arms around Phoebe as well.

[Oh, my precious aunt. If only you knew the stories I've heard about you! Had my memory not been so poor, I might have recognized your visage from the paintings of the court! King Arthur considered you his favorite Knight of the Round.]

Phoebe releases Lorent. Her eyes glisten with joyful tears. "Please, nephew... tell me more! Tell me what happened after my disappearance!"

Lorent rubs his aching back. However, he grins from ear to ear.

[For you, I'll do anything.]

Part 192: Mad Madam Mildred

Sir Lorent pats Shana's head affectionately. Despite his gruesome, bloodstained chest, Shana doesn't look at him with any fear, given his relation to her surrogate mother, Phoebe.

[Yes,] Lorent says, answering one of Phoebe's most recent questions. [His Majesty died in battle. However, he did not perish to a demon's blade, but the discharge of his overwhelming mana. In a final attempt to eradicate Satan the Devil, King Arthur fired a blast of holy magic far stronger than anything he had unleashed in the past. The resulting energy tore his body apart, killing him instantly.]

Phoebe rubs her eyes as she tries to suppress her tears. "His Majesty died a most magnificent death. As expected of the Hero King, he would give his very soul if it meant he could protect his people."

Lorent nods sagely. He closes his eyes and exhales deeply.

[Haah... if only I had known His Majesty, I might have lived a more fulfilling life. Instead, I worked as a butcher for his son, the corrupt King Mordred. Some Hero I was. He used my powers to cow his political opponents into submission. Had they known what my power entailed, or had the reputation of a Hero not preceded me... Mordred might not have made it past his eighteenth birthday.]

Phoebe dabs at her eyes. "What is your power, my nephew?"

Lorent chuckles. [Haha... it's quite underwhelming. I hardly dare name it a 'power' at all.]

Lorent motions with his hands. Suddenly, a paintbrush appears between his fingers. With another motion, an easel materializes before him.

[My power allows me to summon objects from artwork.]

He begins sweeping the brush across the easel. As he does, Shana leans forward and stares at it with wide eyes.

[What this?] Shana asks. [You touch paper. Sword appear?]

Lorent continues drawing, revealing a crude painting of a broadsword. After finishing its basic shape, he touches his finger to the painting. A copy of the sword leaps off the paper and transforms into a razor-sharp weapon. It clatters to the ground with a metallic *twang*, and Lorent immediately leans over to pick it up.

[That's right. Have you never seen an artist's work, young one?]

Shana shakes her head. [No...]

[I see. If you'd like, I can teach you how to draw.]

Shana's eyes light up with excitement. [Yes! Me want artist!]

Lorent turns his attention to Phoebe. [As you can imagine, this worthless power only lets me summon weapons for others to wield. I can craft bowls, spoons, and other such things, but Mordred used my ability to create weapons en-masse.]

Phoebe stares at Lorent in disbelief. "But... but your ability is incredible! Can't you see how amazing it is?"

Lorent frowns. [I do not understand. Summoning weapons to butcher others is hardly a power worth praising.]

This time, I send my thoughts into the Mind Realm.

Phoebe is right. Your power might be second only to Wordsmithing. You can draw any object, and it will become a physical item. My power is technically more robust, but yours is only slightly inferior. The sword you drew lacked in detail, yet upon entering the physical realm, it instantly became an object of incredible craftsmanship.

Phoebe jumps in, adding to my point. "Jason's Wordsmithing allows him to do almost anything, provided he knows enough about the subject or his imagination can fill in the gaps. When you summoned that sword, weren't you picturing the weapon in your mind?"

Lorent nods. [I was. Unfortunately, my artistic merits are poor, and my creativity is lacking. A simple weapon proves no barrier to my mind, but whenever I try to create anything more complicated than a blade or a tool, I grow weary and fall asleep. It has always been this way.]

I nod. *Don't underestimate yourself. With some effort, you could be an incredible asset for humanity's future.*

Lorent shakes his head. [I am but an errant soul, trapped within an artifact. My future is empty. All I wish is to spend time with my long-lost aunt. She is the only family I have left in the world.]

My expression darkens.

Lorent's words send a pang of distress through the back of my mind. After all, I promised Marie that I wouldn't take any other artifacts from her. However, I can't leave Lorent behind. Doing so would break Phoebe's heart.

I raise my eyes to peer across the distance. Marie chats with Momo quietly, but the moment I move my head, she pulls away and strides over to me.

Ignoring pleasantries and other basic social norms, Marie immediately jumps into questioning me. "Well? What have you found?"

I sigh. "The hero inside this axe is named Sir Lorent. He was an executioner who served under King Mordred, son of King Arthur."

"Mordred!" Marie gasps, a look of surprise on her face. "Incredible! Barring the discovery of King Arthur's divine artifact, this Sir Lorent fellow is the next best outcome! I'll be able to excavate all manner of historical knowledge from him. What else did you find? What are his powers?"

My heart begins beating erratically. Already, I can see things turning out horribly for me.

I didn't expect Marie to get so excited after hearing the barest information regarding Lorent's life. If I tell her the truth about Lorent's incredible power, she won't allow me to keep his artifact. I'll have to separate him from Phoebe, forcefully.

Fuck!

What can I do? I'll have to lie.

"His heroic ability is fairly underwhelming," I say, keeping my words measured. "He's... a painter. He can use his heroic aura to paint stuff."

The half-truth keeps my conscience from overworking itself. After all, my words aren't a lie, but I *am* making sure not to give the cyborg too much information.

Marie frowns. "Painting, you say? Interesting. Based on the historical records I've obtained from that time, Sir Lorent strongly resembles the image of Mordred's Butcher. That man was known for slaughtering anyone toward whom he aimed his axe. He spared nobody; not the men, women, or even the children."

Marie smiles. "You've done well, Jason. Now, I want you to use your Wordsmithing. You need to create a projector, something capable of interfacing with Heroic artifacts. If I can't interrogate the heroes inside these artifacts, I won't be able to obtain the information I need."

I cock my head slightly. "Interrogate? These are human beings, Marie. They're people who often influenced human history for the better. We interrogate *criminals*, not *Heroes*, for Christ's sake."

Marie rolls her eyes. "I'm not going to use violent means to interrogate them, nor will I use the vast array of psychological torture methods at my disposal. However, I *must* obtain answers. You spoke of obtaining humanity's freedom, but such a task will be impossible without my help. All you've managed to do over the last six years is paint a target on your planet. Sooner or later, the Volgrim will come for the Tarus star system. When they do, will you feel regret over arguing with me over such a banal matter?"

I scowl in annoyance. "Yeah? What information are you so desperate to find, Marie? Any intelligence these Heroes have is 100,000 years out of date! What could they possibly have to offer you that will help in the fight against the Volgrim?"

Marie stares at me blankly for several moments. "Their heroic powers, for one. All I need is to find one Hero with an appropriately versatile ability, and I'll be able to expand my operations dramatically."

"What sort of power? I'm a Wordsmith. I'm standing right here. Solomon once said I might be the most powerful Hero who ever lived. Why do you need these errant souls if you have me? There's something you're not telling me, Marie."

Marie straightens her posture slightly. "Do not continue pressing me. My reasons are classified."

"Classified? By who? You?"

Marie places her hands on her hips. "That's right."

"So there is something you're hiding from me. What is it? Tell me."

* * *

Marie stares at me for several long, agonizing seconds. Our gazes meet one another's, and we size each other up. Half a minute of intense staring between a human and a machine ensues. Eventually, Marie relents.

"Fine. You leave me no choice. I'm looking for Excalibur, Jason. Not only Excalibur, but the Dominion Rod and several other legendary artifacts as well."

My heart skips a beat. "Excalibur? You mean King Arthur's heroic weapon?"

"That's right. I do not possess these legendary artifacts. That means they are, potentially, somewhere on Earth, buried where my drone sensors can't detect them."

I raise an eyebrow. "*Potentially*. What do you mean by that? Where else could they be?"

Marie raises her fist and spreads her index and middle fingers apart. "There are two possibilities. The first is that, during the Volgrim's surface-bombardment, they destroyed many heroic artifacts. The second is that those artifacts somehow ended up in space. Naturally, the latter is the possibility I find most worrisome."

Having gotten Marie to tell me her 'true' goal, I nod along and deliberate on her words.

"Do you think the Volgrim might have obtained Excalibur?"

"In my mind, the probability rests above sixty percent, yes."

"What other reason could there be for Excalibur to not be on Earth?"

Marie rubs her temple. "Excalibur is one of the mightiest artifacts Camael ever crafted; potentially the strongest of them all. Chances are if the Volgrim didn't seize it, and if the weapon endured the Volgrim's planet-glassing, it may have been launched into space and hurtled to the farthest reaches of the Void. I don't know. I have swept more than fifty parsecs over the past 100,000 years, yet never come close to locating the divine blade."

Marie narrows her eyes. "Do you understand now, Jason Hiro? Interro- ahem, *conversing* with these errant souls is essential to locating Camael's mightiest artifacts. If I can triangulate their last-known positional data, I can uncover their resting places."

I lean back in my chair and smile. "What if you find Excalibur, Marie? What are you going to do with it?"

"Excalibur is only one of my targets. Each artifact possesses incredible potential. For example, Excalibur will allow its wielder to unleash planet-destroying blasts of holy magic. What might surprise you is that such destructive potential is quite useless for me, given-"

"Given the neutron bombs you've been cooking," I reply, cutting Marie off before she can finish. "Right. What else can you use it for, then?"

"Excalibur's power is functionally unlimited," Marie replies. "Right now, I am limited by the radiation I can siphon from Earth's core, as well as the energy generated by Sol. With another source of power, I'll be able to scale up my base of operations to new heights. The Volgrim possess a thousand worlds in as many sectors. Their research facilities outnumber mine a million to one. I can't challenge them without Camael's artifacts."

Marie waggles her finger. "Most importantly, *you* can't help me find it. After all, your 'locate' ability doesn't work on inanimate objects. Isn't that right?"

I frown. "How the hell do you know that?"

"I've gathered plenty of intelligence on you over the last several years. Anything the demons know, I know. Kar is a good boy, too. He works with Hope, so I have obtained plenty of second-hand information from him as well. I hope you won't hate Kar for being mommy's little adviser."

"Ugh. Whatever. Let's get back to the original topic. Supposedly, you need Lorent's help in locating Excalibur. However, I don't think you do. After talking with Lorent, I, uh... well, I found out his full name is Lorent Berthold. He's a nephew to my wife, Phoebe Berthold. I don't mean to impose, but-"

Marie growls. "No! Absolutely not! Dammit, Jason, how many artifacts do you intend to steal from me, today? I need them! Locating Excalibur takes priority over some silly family values or your constant need to protect these errant souls. I let you keep the little girl, as she won't be of much use to me, but Sir Lorent can provide crucial clues in my quest to locate Excalibur!"

Phoebe's voice appears in my mind. "Here it comes. I knew Marie wouldn't give up without a fight. Be careful, Jason."

I continue to stare at Marie as she berates me for my impudence. "Marie, I understand that Lorent is an essential asset to your plans. However, he's a member of Phoebe's family. I won't let you turn her nephew into a guinea pig."

Marie metaphorically spews smoke from her ears. "Fucking hell, Wordsmith! You can't just stroll in here and seize all my artifacts! Do you have any idea the pains I went to, to dig them from the Earth's surface?! I need them!"

"I understand. However, I won't budge on this issue. I can return Sir Lorent's artifact to you at a later date. You've waited 100,000 years. What're another few years in the long run? I only want to give him some peace of mind. Perhaps he'll be more receptive to helping you once he experiences life outside of the crushing loneliness he's endured since his death, eh?"

Marie ceases her rambling. She glowers at me with hate-filled eyes for nearly a minute before whirling around and stomping toward Momo.

"Fine. Fine! Take all of my artifacts; why don't you? This one, that one! Take them all! What do I know about the galaxy compared to you, a man who has done little more beyond stirring up war and strife? You can't comprehend that which lurks at the edge of the Milky Way! You don't even know about the..."

Marie pauses mid-sentence.

I frown. "About the... *what*, Marie?"

Marie keeps her back to me. "Never mind. Let's move on. I have more artifacts for you to inspect. Continue telling me any details you find relevant."

"Oh, so now you're going to drop all of your demands? What happened? Did I ask the wrong question?"

Marie doesn't look at me. "Momo. Open alcove 4C and fetch its occupant."

"Marie-"

"This discussion is over," Marie says, shooting me a death glare. "I won't say anything else, so don't ask. You may keep Sir Lorent's artifact *for now*, but do not press your luck."

Without another word, Marie turns back to Momo and watches in silence as a glass alcove opens to reveal a beat-up white and silver music box. The tiny artifact, small enough to rest in my palm, hovers toward Marie under the stringy tendrils of a drone and plops into her grasp soundlessly.

Marie inspects the music box for a moment before turning around to walk over to me.

"Here. Take it."

The clearly annoyed cyborg plunks the music box into my palm and walks away, not bothering to say anything else.

Fine by me. I'm getting pretty tired of Marie's attitude. She's hiding something. I don't know what it is, nor why she thinks I shouldn't know... but I can hazard a guess. It must involve the Volgrim and her ultimate plan for overthrowing them. Marie must believe that I'm in her way, or else she would tell me this big, important secret.

With a sigh, I turn my attention toward the artifact in my hand. The music box is an old fashioned thing, dating back to well before the 1900's. Its design is somewhat bland, aside from an inked image of a lion head sitting atop its lid, half-rubbed-off.

I can only guess as to who its occupant will be.

However, before I have a chance to aim my mind at it, Phoebe, Lorent, and Shana all gasp in surprise.

"Ah! So many people?!"

I turn my attention inward to gaze upon my Mind Realm. There, I spot five shadowy figures appearing from the void.

Without any dramatic fanfare, their faces and bodies swiftly materialize, revealing two women and three men.

The first woman, a rather portly-looking Victorian lady in her fifties, laughs gaily. "Ah, hah-hah-hah! Why, look what we have here! The dregs of society have come knocking at my door! Braaaaavo!"

Her Portliness crows into her hand, each laugh grating on me more than the previous ones. Her attitude and posture give her the appearance of a smug know-it-all. Immediately, I hate everything about her.

"Who are you?" Phoebe asks, swiveling her gaze at the various people who've emerged inside my mind. "Why are there five people inside your artifact?"

One of the newcomers, a man wearing a turban, opens his mouth to speak. However, before he can say a word, the obese woman leans forward and laughs again, her irritating voice driving me to the edge of madness.

"Hah-hah-hah! Oh, dear, how small your brain must be! Heroic Artifacts can only hold one soul, don't you know? Might those be marbles I hear rolling about in your noggin, or are you too much of a simpleton to recognize *me*, the glorious, beautiful, Mad Madam Mildred? Hah-hah-hah!"

Phoebe winces. "Mad Madam Mildred? I don't believe I've heard-"

"Haaah! Oh, darling, of *cooourse* you haven't! Those lips are always flapping to and fro, so what little can you say that I don't know?"

Madam Mildred begins strutting around like a peacock. Her gaudy blue dress, as well as the feathery boa wrapped around her neck, only adds to her nauseatingly annoying demeanor as her presence dominates the room.

"I am none other than the most brilliant, genius, intelligent person ever to roam the Earth! Oh, darling, look at how glazed your eyes become! You cannot begin to fathom the depths of my mind, the limits of my knowledge! I stand atop the precipice of Heroes, a legendary figure known only by those with the wit to seek out my name!"

I exhale deeply. "Oh, Jesus fucking Christ."

Madam Mildred presses her palm against her chest. "And who are *you*, but a little girl seeking the power of *my* precious babies, *hmmmm*? I know what you want, you silly little defiler! You intend to use our power in some violent blood-stained quest for revenge! But daaarling, our talents are not yours to consume!"

[Madam Mildred...] An Arabian man behind Her Portliness says, keeping his voice low. [...We can speak for ourselves.]

The Arabian man wears a turban and monk-robos, along with a scimitar that hangs at his side. His demeanor exudes authority, as he gives Mildred no opportunity to belittle him. He gazes down at Madam Mildred; his eyes tinged with a mixture of pride and deference. I can tell just by looking at him that he treats Mildred with the same respect as two kings of equal status might accord one another.

Mildred swivels on her high-heels to gaze at the dark-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Arab. "Oh, Kasim! Do not tease me! These mongrels want nothing more than to treat us like slaves. Us! The mightiest, most brilliant Heroes to have ever walked the Earth!"

Mildred guffaws. "Not to mention the fairest and most beautiful! Hah-hah-hah!"

Kasim sighs. [Madam Mildred, that may be so, but unless they display hostile intentions, we have no reason to show them disrespect. After all, this Mind Realm's owner is a Hero as well.]

Mildred pauses. She cocks her head slightly, then raises her eyes skyward. Suddenly, a shudder goes through my body as her gaze somehow meets mine!

"Hah-hah-hah! How silly of me! The Magnificent, Magnanimous, Mad Madam Mildred must be losing her touch! You there, the boy named Jason Hiro! How could I have overlooked you? That stunning gaze! That chiseled body! What say you to fornicating with this blessed temptress for a night, *hmmmm*?"

I swallow a load of bile. *Pass*.

Mildred turns away from my gaze and returns to strutting around like a peacock. "Oh, goodness, we've found a shy one! You'll come around eventually, my dear boy! All men do!"

Phoebe stares at Mildred like a hawk examining a field hare. Every bone in her body tenses up at the thought of Mildred 'taking' me for herself. "Jason is my husband. Watch your mouth, Mildred. I don't know who you are, but you've acted incredibly rude since your arrival. Why don't you tone the act down a few notches?"

Immediately, Mildred swivels on her heel to eyeball Phoebe, a look of surprise in her eyes. "You've quite the snake-tongue, you little sass-queen! I love a woman with conviction! Worry not, for there is always room for another in Madam Mildred's bedchambers. Now then, shall we get down to brass tacks? I know why you've brought me here, but you've no idea the demands I'll make in return for my services!"

Mildred yanks out a chair from the table and plops down in it uncereemoniously. Immediately, her exaggerated expression deflates, and she eyes Phoebe with the look of a predator preparing to pounce on its prey.

Phoebe crosses her arms. "You claim to know a lot about me, but I don't know much about you. Why don't we start from the beginning? Tell me a little about yourself. Who are these other Heroes? How did you place them in your Heroic artifact?"

Mildred gently pets the feathery boa wrapped around her neck. "Hmph! Kasim, you tell the little lassie. I've no patience for explaining elementary knowledge to a preschooler!"

Kasim nods. He walks over to Mildred's right-hand side and bows politely. [My apologies, Lady Phoebe. Madam Mildred can act rather boisterous at times, but I, and the others behind me, owe her our lives.]

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "How do you know my name?"

[We know many things, and our knowledge comes from Madam Mildred's power. You guessed earlier that all of us came from Madam Mildred's heroic artifact. However, that is not the case. All of us reside in Marie's artifact chamber, but within different artifacts.]

Kasim gestures behind himself to the other three people.

[This man here is Tucker. His heroic artifact is a weapon he calls a 'revolver.' The woman to his right is Karla. Karla's relic is a hairpin her father gave to her early in her life. And the last gentleman is Julius. His artifact is a dagger — the same one used to murder him.]

My heart skips a beat. *Julius Caesar? The legend himself who brought Rome to new heights?*

The Roman man presses his palm against his heart. [Correct. I am he.]

It's... it's a pleasure to meet you, I say, trying not to sound overwhelmed with awe.

I flick my gaze between the three newly introduced Heroes.

Tucker immediately catches my attention. His wide-brimmed hat, boots with stirrups, and fancy silver belt give him the air of an old western-style cowboy. Coupled with the revolver on his hip, and his dashing good looks, the guy looks like he'd fit perfectly into a John Wayne movie.

Karla, the woman standing to Tucker's right, is a rather plain-looking Asian lady. I can't tell her racial origins apart immediately, but her red and gold dress appears Chinese in origin. A sash wraps around her

waist, holding her garb in place. Her golden hair and bright blue eyes give her a look of innocence, but at the same time, I detect a hint of malevolence within her gaze.

Finally, Julius Caesar, the man, myth, and legend himself, looks only a little different from how I pictured. Just like all the other heroes, his blonde hair and blue eyes mix together with his white robes, sandals, and a purple sash spanning from his shoulder to his waist to give him a dominating aura of leadership. Unlike Kasim, who gazes upon Mildred with a tinge of deference, Julius barely regards her with any interest at all.

The cowboy, Tucker, smiles politely. "Now, c'mon, ya'll. I do hope we can git' along real nicely together. Ain't no reason for us to be jumpin' at each other's throats. Ain't that right, Miss Berthold?"

Tucker drawls in a vaguely southern accent as his eyes flick toward Phoebe. He walks past Mildred and the others to plunk down in a seat beside my wife.

"Name's Tucker. Kyle Tucker. I consider mahself fortunate to be in the presence of a pretty lady like you. I do hope we kin' make each other's acquaintance later, if you catch mah drift."

Phoebe barely glances at Tucker. "I'm married."

"Marriage ain't nothin' but a piece o' paper and swearing on God's name, and lord knows, we Heroes're proof that God's a simple, flesh-n-blood being."

[Tucker.]

Kasim glares at the cowboy.

[Control yourself. We're not here for you to proposition our hostess. Consider this a business trip.]

Tucker chuckles. "No worries, Kasim. I'm a man of many talents. I gots them political skills, and I gots them social skills. You could learn a thing or two from me if you opened yer eyes for a minute."

Julius Caesar takes a step forward. [Lady Berthold, please continue with your line of questioning. We all have the same enemy. We all have the same goal.]

Phoebe turns her chair to face Kasim, ignoring the cowboy seated behind her. "Right. Sorry, I got a little lost, what with all the introductions. You were saying something about the others here. What was the point you were making?"

Kasim nods. [As I said, all of our souls rest within different artifacts. Madam Mildred's heroic ability is the power to link minds together and share information. She helped create a Renaissance during her lifetime and allowed people to evolve in leaps and bounds. Naturally, after her death, she also linked the souls of several artifacts together, allowing us all to come here at once when you touched one of our artifacts.]

Phoebe and I both reach the same conclusion simultaneously. However, my wife is the one to voice her opinion first. "Ah, so you must have linked to Jason's mind. Is that how you knew my name and the reason for our arrival?"

Madam Mildred chuckles into her palm. "Hahaha... indeed! You pick up faster than I expected, for an addle-brained plebian."

Phoebe's eye twitches. "P... plebian? If you're going to resort to insults..."

Madam Mildred waves her hand dismissively. "No, no, my dear! Don't take my cute little nickname to heart! All unenlightened lumps of coal are plebians in my eyes! Even among the diamonds in the rough, the brilliantly shining gems known as 'Heroes,' few can catch the eye of the Magnificent, Magnanimous, Mad Madam Mildred! Too few Heroes rise to the top of their era and reach the pinnacle of their power! Many squander their abilities and live lives of debauchery. Why, just take the young lassie behind me, little Karla!"

Mildred turns to smile at Karla, who continues to stand alongside Caesar behind Mildred's chair. Karla shifts uncomfortably as Mildred's gaze falls upon her. [Y-yes, lady Mildred?]

Mildred ignores Karla's question. "This beautiful peach might not have achieved much, but her power still allowed her to take revenge and throw her entire country into chaos! She executed her father, Emperor Yang Guang, thus ending the mad tyrant's reign! Her face might be plain, and her attitude demure, but Karla here achieved far more than the average so-called Hero!"

Karla lowers her eyes. She suddenly appears a lot smaller as she tries not to meet Mildred's gaze. However, Mildred turns away from her, ignoring the pain in the woman's expression.

"In any case, all non-Heroes are mere plebians in my eyes! Even amongst those gifted the power of the gods, few can ever reach the heights necessary to deserve my flattery. That includes you, Miss Berthold!"

Phoebe balls her hands into fists. "My last name is *Hiro*, dammit. All of you, stop calling me Berthold. I left that name behind when I married Jason."

Madam Mildred fans herself with her hand. "Oh, pish. You silly goose. You're not married at all! What would ever make you think such a thing?"

Phoebe's glare darkens. "I beg your pardon? Who are you to tell me whether I'm married or not?"

"Isn't it obvious? The young man whose Mind Realm we currently inhabit, Jason Hiro, married a flesh and blood woman named Phoebe Berthold. That woman... is not you! You are simply a duplicate of her soul. Do you dare deny this fact?"

Phoebe's anger falters. "I... I mean... no? But what does that have to do with anything?"

A look of pity enters Mildred's eyes. "Oh, you poor dear. You've barely lived for a day, so it stands to reason that you haven't yet figured out your place in the universe. When Jason returns home, whose embrace will he fall into? Yours, or the original version of yourself? The one who dwells within, or outside the Mind Realm? I think you know the answer."

Mildred leans back in her seat. She smooths her shirt down and smiles condescendingly at Phoebe, causing my wife to fall into a daze. "I... I don't..."

When Phoebe hesitates, I jump into the conversation. *Mildred, what is your problem? I love my mind-wife and my flesh and blood wife equally. I'm married to both of them, and that's that. Besides, it has nothing to do with anything! Why even bring this crap up, beyond stirring the pot?*

"My dear, all of this is perfectly relevant."

Mildred's expression turns haughty.

"Don't you know, boy? You're a soul manipulator, now, yet you haven't the faintest idea what forces you've begun to agitate. Clones, copies, and tigers, oh my! You cloned yourself, only for the newly created Jason to go rogue. You copied your wife to protect your mind, but you failed to consider the long-term repercussions of that action. What folly will you perform next? Shall you attempt to bring back the dead for some selfish pursuit?"

No, never, I say, scowling at Mildred. *Why even ask such a thing?*

"Because, my cute little pom-pom, your power is extraordinary; certainly mightier than all the Heroes assembled here combined. When a man possesses might equivalent to yours, corruption inevitably follows."

I nod. *You must be referring to that old saying about power corrupting people.*

"Precisely. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Of course, some people believe that power merely attracts the corruptible, but while that might be true, it is also a much rarer situation."

Mildred's gaze falls upon Phoebe's trembling form. Tears well up in my wife's eyes as her memories keep replaying what Mildred said moments ago. Only now do I realize that Mildred's words hit her harder than I expected.

"Come, now, my pretty little lily. You need not cry. Madam Mildred understands your pain. You and I are not so different, as we have both left our bodies to become errant souls."

Phoebe sniffles. "But... but you're right. I can't... I can't be with Jason. I hadn't yet thought about it... but I'm not *me* anymore. I'm just a soul. I'm only half a person."

Phoebe... I say, lowering my mental voice. *Don't talk like that. You might be an errant soul or whatever, but you matter to me. You're still my wife, and I love you immensely.*

Mildred nods. "Ah, young love. It truly is wonderful to behold. I remember the first five men who embraced my bosom-"

[Madam Mildred,] Kasim says, a hint of annoyance in his voice. [...Must you?]

"Ah, goodness! I cannot help but express myself honestly! Ah hah-hah-hah! Forgive this beautiful enchantress, for I am but a humble, homely old woman in body and soul. Where was I? Oh, yes!"

Mildred's laughter comes to an abrupt halt. Her smile vanishes, and a solemn gaze spreads across her face.

"The galaxy is a dangerous place, Phoebe, Jason. Unlike many of the souls trapped inside their artifacts, I have not fallen helpless within my artifact. My power allowed me to touch the minds of any who wandered within range of my aura. While I am unable to connect with the cybernetic body of Marie, I am more than capable of touching her assistant Satyr's mind. As such, I know well the dangers which threaten humanity. I might seem arrogant and indifferent to your undiscerning eyes, but rest assured! I am no enemy of humanity."

I nod along to Madam Mildred's words. *Alright. Can I assume that you wish to help us, then?*

Mildred nods. "Mmm. Something like that, my dear."

What do you want in return for your 'help?'

Mildred smiles. "Oh, not much. A promise is all I need. Right now, the thing I want would prove detrimental to everyone gathered here, today. However, in the future, that is likely to change. If you promise to help me after you've saved humanity, I'll offer you my assistance, as well as the aid from these Heroes present, post-haste!"

Tell me what it is that you want so that I can decide. If you don't, I'll have to decline.

Mildred pauses. She shoots a strange look at Kasim, before turning to look skyward, meeting my gaze.

"Freedom, dear child. I wish for myself and the other Heroes to depart our presently unbreakable bonds. Promise me that someday, when the time is right, you will grant us our freedom. If you do, then I will assist you to the fullest extent of my power."

I frown. *You want me to grant you freedom? Can I... do that? How?*

Mildred purses her lips. "Promise me."

But-

"Is that a 'no?'"

I sigh. *Fine. I don't know how you expect me to free you. However, if I do have that power, I'll do it. Alright? I promise.*

"Excellent. Karla, my dear! Did you catch all that?"

The Chinese woman takes a step forward and bows deeply. [Yes, Madam Mildred. I have ensured the contract's signing.]

Contract? What contract? I ask.

Mildred waves her hand flippantly. "Oh, it's a minor matter. A soul-binding agreement to ensure we maintain our ends of the deal. That's all!"

I stare at the corpulent woman in disbelief. *You made me sign a contract without my knowledge?! Who are you? The Devil?!*

"No, no, sweet-pea. If it makes you feel any better, know this: Your Wordsmithing is more than capable of nullifying Karla's contracts. I merely wished for you to sign as a formality. Surely, you wouldn't try to cheat this beautiful seductress out of her one wish?"

Fucking hell, Mildred. Your every word tests my patience.

"Huzzah! It's settled, then. Since you agree, it's time for me to uphold my end of the bargain! Ah, hah-hah-hah!"

Mildred laughs uproariously. She pulls her self out of her chair and begins strutting around the room once again, smiling creepily at all who meet her gaze.

"Tell me, child! What information would you like to know? Marie seems to be withholding some interesting tidbits from the almighty Wordsmith. Perhaps you'd like to start there?"

I nod.

Yes, please. Tell me about the Volgrim. I want to pick your brain for anything useful. I need to know what kind of threat they'll pose to humanity in the future.

Mildred slows her pacing. She eventually stops and stares blankly at a wall.

"The Volgrim? Goodness. You've set your sights on the Heavens, dear boy!"

Mildred closes her eyes.

"Very well! Since you asked so politely, mommy dearest will be happy to oblige! Now, focus your mind, and listen well."

I nod. *Alright. Lay it on me.*

This is Madam Mildred



Shana, Lorent, Tucker, Karla, Kasim, and Julius Caesar are coming... eventually!

Part 193: Tucker's Mirage

As I settle in to listen to Madam Mildred's tales, I shoot a glance at Sir Lorent. He keeps Shana occupied by summoning an easel and showing her how to sweep a paintbrush against it. Shana's eyes widen like saucers as she begins to smear black paint across the canvas, drawing her first stick-man ever.

"The Volgrim have existed for millions of years," Madam Mildred says. She stands behind her chair and leans her ample chest against it, flashing a smile at Phoebe and me as she talks. "I see that Marie has already told you about the five sub-species of Volgrim. However, the details she gave you were quite sparing. What information I know comes from her assistant Momo's mind; therefore, it is secondhand knowledge. I lived inside my artifact throughout all of the Energy Wars, and was thus unable to witness the Volgrim's military might for myself."

Mildred motions with her hand and summons a long, spindly tobacco pipe. Its antique design lends her an air of nobility as she begins to puff on its contents.

"The Five Founders sit atop the Volgrim hierarchy. Each Founder stands at the apex of their sub-species' political empires. Unarin, the First Founder, is also the mightiest and most influential among the Ascended. The Ascended derive their might not from psionic potential, nor technological prowess, but raw numbers. For every Psion or Technopath, one hundred Ascended rest inside vegetation chambers, awaiting an order from their Founder. Tactics and strategy matter little when compared to a sea of skilled warriors. None of the other sub-species would ever dare challenge Unarin's rule."

Mildred smirks. "Hah-hah-hah! If you find the demonic population frightening, you dare not imagine how many Ascended could swoop in and crush your uprising with a wave of their hand! Truly, their numbers inspire awe!"

I sit up a little straighter in my seat. *I understand that the Ascended have vast military power and overwhelming numbers. However, compared with some of the machines the Technopaths should be capable of building, or the Psionic powers of the Psions, what does it matter if they have more soldiers? One tank or bomb can easily kill a hundred human soldiers with ease.*

Mildred smiles. "Oh, young one, that might be true for our poor, frail little species, but not for the Volgrim. If you were to gaze upon an army of Ascended, you would come to notice that they are extremely well-rounded. Unarin has many Technopaths and Psions at his command, while the average Ascended possesses the strength and stamina of twenty human soldiers."

Mildred continues. "To put it bluntly, dear boy, Unarin possesses not only overwhelming numbers, but also a portion of the other Volgrim sub-species' overall abilities. His rule is unshakable."

It sounds like the Ascended are the biggest threat to humanity. However, I'm guessing you're about to hit me with a 'but.'

Mildred nods. "But, the Ascended are not a warlike people. When I said that most Ascended were resting inside vegetation chambers, awaiting Unarin's order to attack, that wasn't strictly true. The

Ascended obtained their name by discarding their worldly interests. Unarin had his Psion appointees construct a massive digital world with a timescale that flows a thousand times faster than the real world. The Ascended live lives of blissful rapture inside their virtual oases. None wish to leave their paradise unless its existence comes under threat by an external force."

Mildred coughs. "Ahem. For example, a plucky young Hero who might try to assault their beloved collective."

I raise my eyebrows in realization. *What you're saying is that if humanity grows too fast and too quickly, and if we should become a threat to the Ascended's digital paradise, they'll return to reality and crash upon us like a waterfall.*

"Precisely! Hah-hah-hah!"

Madam Mildred resumes strutting around the table, casting glances at every Hero present, as well as Phoebe. "Luckily for you, dear boy, Unarin might be the First Founder, but you needn't worry about the Ascended for a very long time. They are the Volgrim's *final* line of defense. Instead, turn your attention toward the other subspecies. Tucker?"

Mildred glances at the cowboy seated next to my wife. Tucker chews on the tip of a wheat shaft absentmindedly. When he hears his name, he blinks a few times, then meets Mildred's gaze. "Huh? What'd I do this time?"

"Tell Jason and Phoebe about the Psions," Mildred replies. "You helped during the Energy Wars. I think your testimony will be quite valuable."

Tucker shrugs. "Yeap. Alright. What's there ta' say? Them Psions've got spooky mental powers. They can lift shit with their mind, fling fire from their hands, all kinds of craziness."

Kasim leans forward in his chair. [Tucker. Can't you be a little more descriptive? Mildred is counting on you.]

Tucker rubs his eyes. "Fine, fine, sheesh. Dunno what ya'll even want from me."

The cowboy leans back in his seat, then leans forward, using the momentum to jump to his feet. He touches the back of Phoebe's chair for a split-second, then grins at her like a hound-dog.

"Hey, baby-girl. Do you like roller coasters?"

Phoebe scowls. "I'm not your 'baby-girl.'"

"Not yet," Tucker says, smirking. "No lady can resist m'charms. More importantly, you're 'bout to experience a whole new reality, sweet pea. Prepare yourself."

Without waiting for a reply, Tucker motions with his hands.

Blinding pain explodes in my head!

"Augh!" I cry out, startling even myself. Marie shoots a worried glance toward me, but I wave her concerns away and flash a thumbs-up.

My Mind Realm rapidly shifts and morphs. The buildings surrounding Phoebe and the Heroes disappear, transforming my mental space into a pure white world of dazzling brilliance. The first thing I think of is Raphael's Cosmic Realm. However, the similarities disappear a moment later as modern-day skyscrapers from Earth plummet from the sky and smash into the ground with earthshaking force. Grass and asphalt sprout between the buildings, along with images of humans milling about on the sidewalk. London appears, where before my Mind Realm stood.

Several strange emotions well up inside me when I spot London's skyline stretching out into the horizon. From my omnipotent viewpoint in the sky, I can easily make out countless intricate details, all of them somehow crafted via Tucker's heroic power. Two boys toss a holographic baseball between each other, laughing and playing without a care in the world. A police officer gives chase to a fleeing truck, and a minute later, two other pursuit cars join the hunt.

I turn my attention toward Phoebe and the Heroes. They stand atop a three-story building overlooking a residential zone. The flat, concrete roof places the group into a box where they'll have to jump down if they want to leave it.

[Tucker's Heroic power is known as Mirage,] Kasim says. [Much like how a desert can affect one's perception of the world, he too can generate illusions inside someone else's mind. As we happen to presently occupy Jason's Mind Realm, Tucker's power has a greater effect than usual.]

Kasim's words make me realize that allowing other people into my Mind Realm is a dangerous situation. After all, I don't know what Tucker might be able to do to me if he held any harmful intentions. I'll have to keep my guard up in the future.

Phoebe sweeps the sky with her eyes. "Is this... Earth?"

[It is,] Kasim replies. [Though when and where exactly, I do not know.]

Tucker saunters over to Phoebe with a big grin plastered on his face. "The year is 2072. Mah artifact was in the possession of a talented individual known as Benjamin Brown, one of humanity's ultimate soldiers. He 'n I worked together to fight the Volgrim whenever they attacked Earth. Today just so happens to be one o' them days."

As if on cue, a sudden explosion in the sky startles Phoebe, Lorent, and Shana. All three of them flick their eyes toward the disturbance, where a massive spaceship detonates in midair and comes crashing into the River Thames. Shana's eyes turn wide as saucers. She pulls close to Lorent and hugs his leg.

[W-what happen? Why big light in sky?]

Lorent shakes his head. [I do not know, little one. However, this world is only an illusion. Don't be afraid. Nothing can hurt us here.]

He glances at Tucker.

[Right?]

Lorent's anger-filled gaze causes Tucker's confidence to falter for a moment.

"Y-yeah. Ain't nothing to worry about."

[Good.]

Lorent returns his attention toward the destroyed spaceship plummeting to Earth. Beneath its falling form, a tiny dot emerges in the blue sky, hovering only a few hundred feet away.

I use my omniscient vision to 'zoom in' on the object.

A bipedal, bug-like creature levitates above London, watching passively as the ship crashes into the Thames. It turns its head to the right and stretches out a palm. The creature fires a dot of blackness toward another nearby spaceship. It, too, detonates on impact, obliterating the craft's defenses effortlessly.

Within seconds, coastal alarms begin to wail around London. The city enters high alert, and its citizens rush indoors while casting fearful glances toward the chaos-embroiled sky.

The bug creature turns its six-eyed head toward another ship to the west. Its unblinking eyes gaze upon its prey with the same indifference a man might give an ant. Moments later, another black dot fires from the creature's hand and shreds the ship into chunks of metal.

"That thing there? It's a Psion," Tucker says, shrugging. "It ain't even one of the high-level warriors. Just a small-fry. A scout."

With a wave of his hands, Tucker teleports the creature to the rooftop, startling Shana, Lorent, and Phoebe. They take a fearful step backward, only to breathe a sigh of relief when the Psion freezes in place, its illusion commanded by Tucker's power.

"See the feet?" Tucker asks. "Those two-toed claws allow Psions to scale mountains if they somehow lose their magic. They climb like billy goats. And their heads, notice how they ain't got no mouth? That's 'cuz Psions talk with their minds."

Phoebe stares unblinkingly at the creature before her with morbid curiosity. "My god... compared to demons and angels, this creature doesn't look like anything I've ever seen!"

Tucker nods. He rests his hands on his hip and sighs. "Yeap. They've got a face only a mother would love, but that ain't the worst of it. See, much like demons 'n angels, Psions got all kinds of crazy powerful magical abilities. You 'n Jason saw Marie's recording. Remember when that Nufaris fella yanked a spaceship into the dirt? That wasn't nothin'. That's just little-kiddy telekinesis."

Tucker motions again, activating his magic. The scene changes to reveal five Psions hovering above an army of humans. The humans unload a rain of bullets and plasma toward their sky-bound opponents. However, with a wave of its hand, one Psion summons a psionic barrier to envelop its comrades. Two others unleash fire and lightning upon the humans below, while the remaining two simply hover and observe the battle.

"What is happening?" Phoebe asks. "Why aren't those last two attacking?"

"Their assistance ain't necessary," Tucker says, shrugging. "A single High Psion easily coulda wiped out the platoon. The other four are just there to prevent accidents."

"Psionic abilities seem about as difficult to fight as demons and angels," Phoebe comments. "What makes them any different? Even in Arthur's time, we humans easily took out demons with the Hero's help. I can't imagine faring any worse against these aliens, especially given humanity's advancements in weaponry."

Tucker's expression darkens. "Nah, sweet-cheeks. That's where yer wrong. The difference 'tween a demon and a Psion is that the Psion'll get stronger over time. They don't specialize like demons. You remember that Beelzebub fella?"

Phoebe scowls. "How could I forget?"

"Right. He's a fire-type demon. That means all his abilities somehow loop back to flames 'n shit. However, Psions ain't like that. They can use all kinds of crazy powers."

As Tucker speaks, the human army erects a massive army-sized force-field, thus blocking the Psion's fire and lightning attacks. An instant later, the aliens switch their battle strategy. Their eyes faintly glow for a split second before they begin draining energy from the force-field itself.

The shield flickers several times, then sputters and disappears. The humans continue firing bullets, but their attacks prove useless against the Volgrim's psionic shielding.

Within minutes, the Psions eradicate their opponents and float away, leaving behind a wake of destruction and terror.

"Honey, pray you don't ever gotta fight a Psion. Pray even harder you don't anger an *army* of Psions. The bastards never give up. And, more importantly... Psions never *die*."

Tucker changes the scene once again. This time, a single human faces off against a single Psion. The golden-armor-clad Psion retreats several steps under the human's relentless melee, but what startles me, as an omniscient observer, is something else.

The human, a dark-skinned man I don't recognize, is clearly missing a substantial amount of skin. However, instead of exposed bone and muscle, a metallic endoskeleton reveals itself.

Phoebe stares, wide-eyed, at the two-person death battle. "That man... he's a robot! A cyborg, just like Marie!"

"Not quite," Madam Mildred says, butting in. Her expression appears far graver than before, and she drops her arrogant act as she speaks. "His name is Benjamin Brown. He was one of humanity's mightiest warriors, if not *the* strongest, barring a Hero's existence. Benjamin Brown carved his way through tens of thousands of demons and Volgrim alike. He was a deadly warrior known as a Vanguard, and his prowess in the art of combat stood unparalleled, even until the day humanity lost the war."

Phoebe nods. "I remember reading about Vanguards in one of Bahamut's journals. She barely wrote about them, but did mention that she would never dare fight one alone."

As the scene continues, this "Benjamin Brown" fellow continues whaling on the Psion. His Volgrim opponent unleashes fire and lightning, trying desperately to melt him to pieces or fry his electrical

components. However, Benjamin surprises the Volgrim by raising his palm and absorbing its attacks. Seconds later, Ben's mutilated skin regenerates, covering his metallic skeleton with a fleshy exterior.

Benjamin leaps backward, an expression of determination on his face. His arm shifts and morphs, transforming into a particle-cannon.

Crack! Crack!

He releases a hail of ionized bullets upon the Psion, forcing it to retreat again and again as it attempts to parry his ranged assault. However, unlike the Psion from the previous vision, it doesn't summon a force-field for defense.

Benjamin Brown maintains his relentless assault. The young man begins walking forward while firing nonstop. Unable to retaliate, the Volgrim can only deflect each shot one by one. Eventually, Benjamin Brown closes the gap, leaps forward, and plunges his arm into the alien's chest. With one smooth motion, he rips the Volgrim's spine out, killing it instantly.

The vision concludes, and Tucker shakes his head.

"Ben's victory didn't make no ding-damn difference. That same fella returned 'bout a year later, stronger'n ever. Ben laid the smack down again and again, but each time, it put up more of a fight. It might have eventually beat him, but the war came to an end, and humanity lost. I ain't sure what happened to Ben after that. We got separated. Next thing I knew, I ended up here in Marie's bunker-place. The rest was history."

I nod. *How did you end up in Ben's hands, Tucker? I can't help but assume most heroic artifacts would be closely guarded government secrets.*

Tucker glances into the sky, toward the vague direction of my omniscient vision. "Well, see, I don't know this fer sure, but I always figgered Marie 'n Ben had a whole thing goin' on 'tween 'em. Maybe a fling or somethin'. I imagine she gave mah relic to Ben to assist him. I tried m'hardest, but I couldn't do much. The guy was a total badass, even without mah help."

Did you assist Ben with illusions?

Tucker shakes his head. "Not usually. See, mah powers are somewhat diverse. When I was a young 'un, I lived during a chaotic era, back when the ol' America was still bein' established. We had all sorts of vagrants 'n ruffians to deal with, and uh... well, I may have helped out not only the good guys, but also the bad guys now and then. That's all I'm saying. Man's gotta make a buck if he wants to eat. Catch m'drift?"

I frown. *Get to the point.*

"I've got a whole bunch of powers! Illusions, wall-walking, just a whole grab bag! Mah most useful power, and the one Ben used a lot, was... Perfect Aim."

Tucker whips out his revolver and spins it on his finger. He makes a motion as if to shoot the wall.

"Pow! Pow! Perfect accuracy every time! A gunslinger never misses his shot!"

I guess that means Ben used your Perfect Aim power with modern weaponry?

"Yup! That fella kicked some Psion butt! He made good use of m'power; that's for sure."

[Let's talk about the Technopaths,] Kasim says. [Tucker, take us to the end of the war.]

"Alrighty."

Tucker pays Kasim's sudden topic change no mind. With a shrug, he dissolves the skyscrapers and modern-day Earth into nothingness. A moment later, a different city appears.

However, unlike the London of 2072, which I vaguely recognized, the city Tucker summons resembles a scene from a dystopia. An overcast sky rumbles with thunder, as a light rain trickles down on the city below. Crumbled skyscrapers mix with rubble, burning fires, and wailing sirens to paint a picture of an Earth embroiled in chaos. Injured civilians stand before military trucks to await food allotments.

A mother with only one arm clutches her stump and begs the soldier to give her an extra portion for her children. Enraged, the man swings his fist at her face, sending her sprawling to the asphalt. "Back off! You only get one portion, you damn vagrant! Be glad you get anything at all!"

If the other half-dozen nearby soldiers have any problems with their comrade's actions, they don't show it on their faces. They continue to hand out food while a drone hovers overhead and scans the faces of everyone approaching.

The woman snuffles and whimpers. Her nose, now broken, bleeds profusely, wetting her clothes with crimson fluid. She staggers away while clutching a tiny bag of food. I glance inside the bag with my all-encompassing vision, only to see two slices of bread, some moldy cheese, and a small bag of rice.

As she staggers away, a coastal siren begins to wail. The ear-splitting roar of a spaceship flying overhead spreads panic among the gathered crowds. Immediately, the military men grab their guns and take aim at the throng of civilians surrounding them. "Disperse at once! Return to the evacuation zone! Move, move, move!"

A few people linger for a moment while the rest flee in panic, but with a shake of their guns, the soldiers force even the hungriest civilians to flee.

Moments later, a shockwave rumbles through the sky. The soldiers dive inside their truck and leave the food behind in a cart outside. They race away, dodging and weaving between obstructions in the torn-up asphalt, including broken-down vehicles, dead bodies, and even a baby stroller.

Inside the armored truck, one soldier furiously types on a computer. "Level 3 Technopath assault. HQ sent us a ping. We need to head to the strip mall! There's a 44% drop point chance!"

One of the female soldiers sucks air through her teeth. "44%. Shit. How many other response squads are heading there?"

"It's just the Dusk Crew and us," The logistics tech replies. "Wait! No... there's someone else. It's Commander Benjamin Brown! He activated his response beacon!"

The woman breathes a sigh of relief. "Benjamin Brown?! God damn, we're lucky. We might make it out of here alive!"

As the crew prays to whatever god they each might worship, a partition opens up in the thick cloud cover above. The soldiers raise their eyes skyward and gape in horror.

The technician is the first to speak. "Jesus Fucking Christ! Is that a Monolith?! That's the biggest assault craft I've ever seen!"

"Goddamned Volgrim," The woman mutters. "They never give us a break. It hasn't been two days since their last attack! Just how many soldiers and machines do the cocksuckers have?!"

As the soldiers rush to their destination, the expressions on their faces turn ashen as they follow the trajectory of the thousand-foot-tall ship plummeting toward the city. Its sheer mass swallows the horizon, making them wonder what its contents might be.

"44%, they said," The driver mutters. "Looks like we got the shit end of the stick. It's headed for the mall."

"Fuck!"

"We're going to die!"

Two of the soldiers curse and sling expletives. Knowing that their end is coming, they can only swallow their hatred and prepare themselves for death.

"If we're going to die, then let's show these metal monsters the strength of humanity!"

"Hell yeah! You said it, Eagle!"

The ship races toward the planet's surface below. At the last moment, before striking the planet's surface, a plethora of anti-gravity thrusters on the ship's bottom ignite, slowing its descent and allowing it to touch down gracefully.

The armored vehicle races toward the landed ship. The soldiers watch intently as dozens of openings appear on the craft's exterior.

"Dragoons. At least the Volgrim are going low-tech this time," The commander, Eagle, says. "Fuck! So many?! One hundred... two hundred..."

The truck speeds toward the strip mall, which has already flattened into a pancake under the bulk of the monolith.

"Tell HQ to send reinforcements!" Eagle yells, barking an order at his technician. "We won't last five minutes against that horde, not even with Commander Brown's help."

The technician wipes sweat from his forehead. "No can do, Eagle. Look. This isn't the only monolith touching down, today."

He gestures toward his computer screen. Eagle's expression turns ugly.

"Two others? This attack isn't another harassment campaign. The alien bastards are going to seize the capitol!"

"What can we do?" The woman asks. "HQ won't be able to fight off the invaders. If we go there, we'll only die needlessly."

A minute passes.

Eagle rubs the bridge of his nose. He glances out the front window. Already, the Volgrim dragoons have begun firing at nearby structures, leveling anything within range to dust.

"We have to protect the civilians. They might be useless vagrants and deserters, but... they're still humans! If our lives can save a hundred, or even a thousand others... then we'll die with honor!"

The truck races toward the Monolith. Soon, it screeches to a stop behind a dilapidated building, using the patchwork concrete structure to shield itself from the Volgrim assault force's vision.

"Alright, team. Grab your guns and pop your pills. Let's move!"

With a nod, all the soldiers reach into the folds of their shirts, pull out pink pellets, and toss them into their mouths. They don't bother using water to wash the pills down. Instead, the soldiers grab various advanced pieces of weaponry and armor before disembarking their vehicle.

What follows is a scene of chaos. The pills provide temporary adrenaline and strength boosts, transforming the soldiers into superhuman weapons of war. They tear through the Technopath army with ease, shredding their metallic adversaries half a dozen at a time.

Eventually, Benjamin Brown flies over from an unknown location. A pair of aluminum wings stick out of his back, attached to a back-pack-like piece of armor wrapped around his shoulders. He lands amidst the fray and helps push back the Dragoon assault mechs, but the wings break apart once he lands, revealing their purpose as a single-use disposable piece of technology.

The computer technician waves at the newcomer. "Commander Brown! Lieutenant Eagle is badly injured! He needs medical attention!"

"Hide him behind the rubble," Benjamin Brown says. "We can't help him until we've cleared the zone! If God wants him alive, then fate will favor him!"

The remaining five soldiers and Benjamin Brown continue unloading on the Dragoons. Despite the six-legged machines' considerable firepower and their massive cannons, they prove useless against the nimble human commandos.

Shots ring out. The Dragoon mechs tower twenty feet above the bipedal flesh-and-blood creatures at their feet, but they can't get a firm lock on their targets. Each time a Dragoon falls, another disembarks the Monolith to fire at the humans from a distance.

One commando, the technician, screams in pain. A stray Dragoon shell detonates only ten feet away, riddling his leg with shrapnel. He stumbles and falls, impaling his stomach on a particularly sharp rock. He perishes a moment later.

The other soldiers barely pay him a glance.

"Fuck!" The woman soldier yells, anger welling up in her heart. "Where is Team Dusk?! They should have arrived by now!"

Benjamin Brown presses his back against hers. "I re-routed them. One of the other Monoliths landed just outside HQ. They need the manpower more than we do!"

Her expression darkens. "But... but we'll die!"

"I prepared myself for that the day I entered the military," Ben replies. He reaches up and presses a finger to his eyeball. "Everyone dies eventually. Even my brother."

Benjamin's pupil turns bright red. He dives behind cover and pokes his head out to examine the Monolith ship a hundred meters away.

"I have to get inside," Ben mutters. "The turrets will pose a problem. Umi. Divert 1% of your processing power to assist me."

Inside Benjamin Brown's head, a robotic voice speaks.

[Request noted. Processing. Supreme Commander Marie Becker has agreed to your request. For the next twenty-seven minutes and fourteen seconds, I will allocate 1% of my processing power to your internal components. Integrating... now.]

A surge of thoughts flood through Ben's head. Immediately, his senses enhance and expand like a bubble, allowing him to accurately determine the state of the battlefield within thirty meters in every direction.

"Haha... now the fun begins."

Ben leaps out of cover. Ten Dragoons swivel their cannons toward him and fire in unison. However, Ben instantly calculates the trajectory of their projectiles. He dives to the left, presses his foot against a shredded red Subaru, and leaps into the sky. A chorus of explosions rings out as the fusion-propelled explosive canisters detonate beneath him.

Ben lands atop the nearest Dragoon and uses his cyborg strength to bend its cannon a few degrees to the left. Without paying the machine any more mind, he continues leaping from one Dragoon to the next, beelining toward an opening in the Monolith's exterior.

"There! That's my ticket inside."

Ben leaps toward the Monolith. His fingers pierce the ship's heavily armored outer layer with ease, allowing him to scale the metal exterior like a seasoned mountain climber. Several Dragoons swivel to fire at him, but they pause, unable to launch attacks against the Monolith itself.

"Outwitted by a *mere human*," Ben mutters. "And you always will be, so long as we have Marie."

Ben clambers inside the Monolith. Its tall, javelin-like appearance leads to a vertically-aligned interior, with dozens of ladders and transport tubes for transitioning between levels. The moment Ben enters, dozens of security turrets unleash a hail of gunfire at him.

Ben dives to the side, presses against a wall, and rips off a chunk of metal. He rushes forward while using the wall-plate as a makeshift shield to protect his head. Even with his quick thinking, the moment he enters the conical field of turrets, they spatter him with dozens of bullets. His skin shreds and peels under the ship's relentless assault, but Ben continues systematically tearing apart anything that attacks him.

Suddenly, the ship's inner lights go dark. A pitch-black void engulfs Ben, illuminated only by the opening through which he entered.

A robotic voice begins speaking overhead.

"WA'NUNG. HUTSUFTA L'ATANTHA GASATHSAG. AFTFT GARANTU'A TXTSANT UN DATHKT THU'SAAN, FUIA'SAAN, ANG FURSAAN HA'A FTAAN GUTAFTFTAG. ATHSU'ASUNG L'USUSXLA P'USATHSU'ASAT."

The gibberish-sounding speech causes Ben to pause for a split-second. "Prototype Protectorates? What the hell are those?"

As if on cue, the sounds of sliding doors above and below the Vanguard causes the hair on the back of his neck to stand up. Dozens of red eyes step out of the darkness and swivel to face him. Unaffected by the poor visibility, Benjamin's biomechanical eyes pierce the gloom, allowing him to make out metallic, bipedal shapes equipped with highly advanced weaponry.

"Shit... it's an ambush! The Volgrim expected me!"

Ben retreats several steps toward the opening he used to enter the Monolith. However, a panel slides over the hatch, sealing it shut.

The ship rumbles, bucking like a bronco. Ben's stomach leaps into his throat as he comes to a horrifying realization.

"The Monolith is lifting off. This whole thing was a trap intended to capture me! Fucking Volgrim! You won't get your way. Umi! Hack the ship's systems! I'll stall while you pierce their defensive network!"

The sounds of metal footsteps lumbering toward Ben makes him swivel to face the incoming threats. The moment the machines step around the corner, they unload a hail of bullets and energy blasts at him, preventing him from taking even a step forward.

[Error,] Umi replies. [Hacking a Monolith's defenses will require at least 5% of my processing power. Supreme Commander Marie Becker has refused your request. She states that you possess a 65% chance of survival without her help. Do not disappoint her expectations.]

"That bitch!" Ben yells. The Protectorate's assault strikes him over and over, shredding his skin from his body piece by piece. The bullets, infused with electrical energy, suppress his computerized systems, causing his processor cores to glitch.

Without any regard for his safety, Ben lunges forward. He grabs one Protectorate's head and slams it against a wall. To his dismay, not only does the head not crumple like a Dragoon's might, but it takes almost no damage.

Whump.

A metallic fist strikes Benjamin's spine, flinging him to the deck. Ben rolls helplessly, dumbfounded by the machine's strength.

He jerks his head up, wincing under the hail of gunfire. Even with his heavily-augmented cybernetic body, he can't endure for long under the Protectorate Squad's attack.

Ben's thoughts spin in his mind. *It can't be... are these Sentinels?! Marie said they were only a rumor! They're impossibly strong!*

Umi beeps inside Ben's head. [Processing. Incorrect. These machines are not Sentinels. Based on my calculations, the Protectorates possess, at most, 1% of a Sentinel's battle power.]

"What? That means... Sentinels are more than a hundred times stronger than these- augh!"

Ben coughs as an electrified bullet slips through his metallic endoskeleton and pierces his internal shielding. Immediately, one of his four lungs ruptures, causing severe internal bleeding.

"Kahk! Keuk!"

Ben vomits blood. He falls to his knees and crumples into the fetal position, trying desperately to protect himself from the nonstop hail of plasma, electric, and metallic bullets.

"U-Umi! Activate... activate... my prototype... systems... release the s-safety... limiters..."

[Warning. Removing Vanguard 001's safety limiters will cause extreme damage to your internal subsystems. The potency of your heroic artifact will degrade by 75%, shortening its inhabitant's lifespan. Confirm activation?]

"Confirm, goddammit! I can't die here!"

[Command confirmed. I will use my allocated processing power to improve the efficiency-]

"Hurry up! I can't last much longer!"

Ben winces as three more bullets worm their way through his internal shielding. Another lung collapses, while several of his arteries tear into pieces under the intense electrostatic shocks battering them from moment to moment.

After five excruciating seconds, Umi speaks again. [Command executed. You have five minutes of peak efficiency available. Four minutes, fifty-nine seconds. Four minutes, fifty-eight seconds.]

Ben leaps to his feet. A powerful energy barrier expands around his chest. Without hesitation, Ben reaches into the folds of his armor and whips out a clunky-looking revolver; Tucker's artifact.

"Let's kill these sons of bitches and get the fuck out of here!"

Ben's speed and strength triples. He rushes toward the Protectorate robots, each one with armor reminiscent of a tank, yet a frame as light and nimble as a jackrabbit, and punches them repeatedly, over and over. He uses Tucker's power to guarantee that every hit strikes a critical weak point while also ensuring the enemies can't dodge his attacks.

Ben's fists become a hurricane. Umi continues to tick down every second in his head, increasing his agitation and worry as he tries to outmaneuver and outgun the terrifying death-robots gunning for him.

Suddenly, the first Protectorate's head collapses. Ben crushes it with his bare hands, then leaps toward one of the remaining 14 Protectorates.

Even with his prototype systems active, the fight is far from easy. Ben suffers immensely whenever another bullet pierces his shielding, but he never wavers. One by one, he crushes each Protectorate flat, only to pause before the final three when Umi issues him a warning.

[Alert. Monolith Ship 002 will exit Earth's atmosphere in T-minus ten seconds. Benjamin Brown, you must evacuate immediately, or you will suffocate in space.]

"Shit!" Ben howls, spewing blood. "You should've told me sooner!"

He bull-rushes the nearest wall and aims his shoulder toward a spot Umi indicates with her sensors.

Boom.

Benjamin Brown smashes through the metallic wall as if it were made of styrofoam. His body creaks and howls with pain, but that hardly compares to the terror running through his veins as he stumbles out of the ship and plummets toward the ground several miles below.

With the oxygen in the atmosphere not even at 1% of the levels on the ground, Ben's consciousness quickly begins to waver.

[Warning. Ten seconds remaining on the prototype subsystem activation period. Nine seconds. Eight. Seven...]

Ben's eyes flutter as he falls toward the planet below. Eventually everything goes dark, and only an agonizing, burning pain swells within his chest.

* * *

The vision fades away. Tucker rubs his forehead as Phoebe and all of the Heroes reappear in the dining hall.

"Welp. That was the last time I saw Ben. We weren't 'friends' or anything. He used mah artifact against the Volgrim, and that was it for our relationship. Still, I always wondered what happened t'him. I hope he survived. A fall like that would kill anyone... be they man or machine."

Tucker chuckles. "Heh. Whatever Ben did, he sucked up a whole bunch of mah mana. I kept falling asleep off and on for centuries. Eventually, Madam Mildred popped in and saved m'life. It's been a rough ride, but things're lookin' up."

Phoebe rests her hands on her lap. After pausing to think for a few moments, she smiles at Tucker. "Thank you for telling Jason and me about the Volgrim. It was... enlightening."

Indeed, I say. I know so much more about the Ascended, Psions, and Technopaths than when I first met you. You've helped me immensely. However, I do have to ask... what about the Changelings and Dolgrimites? Do you have any intel on them?

Tucker shrugs. "Nothin' worth mentioning, kid. Changelings can change their appearances. As for the Dolgrimites, I don't know jack shit."

"You don't?" Phoebe asks. "Did you never encounter them?"

"I can answer that!" Mildred says, butting in. "Nobody here has ever seen a Dolgrimite! They didn't participate in the Energy Wars, and they didn't bother showing up even once on Earth. Momo doesn't know anything about them, either! If Marie has any information, she might be able to tell you, but as for me, daaarling, I can't help you at all!"

I shrug. *That's fine. The Dolgrimites never showed their faces, so they must not care about galactic affairs. We can safely ignore them for now. You've done enough, Madam Mildred, and I need to go. However, I won't forget my promise. I'll try and help 'free' you, whenever you decide to tell me what that means.*

"Hah-hah-hah! You think this is goodbye, dear boy? I've linked our minds together! You need only say the magic word, and we'll be able to speak to one another, no matter how far apart we might be!"

I nod, understanding Mildred must be referring to my Wordsmithing. Now that I know where these artifacts are located, I can easily speak to the Heroes here if necessary.

Kasim bows. [We are always at your service, young Hero. As long as you live, humanity will not go extinct. Stay safe, and protect our descendants.]

Julius Caesar assumes a dignified pose. [I hope to hear of your accomplishments in the coming years.]

Tucker rolls his eyes. "Yeah, whatever. You can have the girl this time, but if you break Phoebe's heart, expect her to come crying to me."

Phoebe sighs. "I'm sitting right here, Tucker..."

The last hero, Karla, fidgets for a moment, before sheepishly waving at Phoebe. [Goodbye.]

I sigh, wishing I'd had a chance to talk to the Asian woman and Caesar a little more. However, having spent nearly an hour with this one artifact, Marie is probably getting antsy for me to move on.

Farewell, Mildred, Tucker, Kasim, Karla. It was my pleasure to meet all of you. I'll keep in touch.

Mildred snorts. "Hmph! Damn straight!"

All five of the Heroes lower their heads. Their bodies fade away, leaving Sir Lorent and Shana behind, along with Phoebe.

I rub my eyes. *Seven Heroes down, and a fuckload more to go.*

"Do you need a break?" Phoebe asks. "You can always request one. Marie knows you're an 'inferior biological,' so I'm sure she'll understand."

No way. I'm not falling asleep with that creepy cyborg anywhere near me. I'll just Wordsmith my energy back to full and keep going. If Madam Mildred was telling the truth, those five heroes were the strongest ones here. That means they'll be of the utmost importance to Marie, and she won't care as much about the remaining ones. Let's report back to her and see what she says.

Phoebe nods. "Alright."

I raise my head and pull my attention away from my Mind Realm. Turning toward the center of the room, I open my mouth to tell Marie what's happened, only to pause and frown.

Marie isn't here.

Momo stands idly at the controls, tapping buttons with her back to me. I clear my throat.

"Ahem! Momo? Got a sec?"

"Heek!"

Momo jumps in fright and whirls to face me.

"D-don't call my name out so suddenly! You s-scared the Devil out of me!"

"Sorry. I'm done with this artifact... and a few others. Where's Marie?"

Momo sighs. "Miss Becker told me she had something to take care of. She only left a few minutes ago."

I frown.

"Marie left? Where did she go?"

Momo points toward the ceiling.

"To meet with the Volgrim inspection team, of course!"

Check out the Volgrim subspecies artwork in the comment section below!

Part 194: Unexpected Visitors

"What Volgrim inspection team?" I ask, directing my question at the Satyr. "Why didn't Marie tell me she had to leave?"

Momo sighs. "I-I'm sorry, mister Hiro, sir. She couldn't. You were busy conversing with the artifacts and their errant souls, so Miss Becker didn't want to disturb you. Whenever a Volgrim inspection team arrives, she has to report to them at once. The Volgrim technically control Marie, so she has to do as they order."

Slowly, I nod. However, suspicions emerge in my mind. "How did Marie know the Volgrim had arrived? Did Umi send her a message?"

Momo shakes her head.

"No. Umi can't connect down here. Miss Becker has a little red light in each room. It's part of a relay system spread throughout the entire galaxy. If something important comes up, and Umi cannot detect Marie, she activates the relay. See?"

Momo gestures toward the vault's entrance. There, just a few feet away from the door, a small red lightbulb sits embedded in the wall. It continues to blink, just like Momo said it would.

"If Marie has already left, why has Umi kept the light blinking?"

Momo fidgets nervously. Without Marie around, she becomes visibly uncomfortable and much shyer in my presence. "I-I, um... Miss Becker p-probably hasn't made it to the top of the elevator shaft, yet. Umi won't disable the relay until Marie returns. It's all... part of, the, um... protocol..."

Momo trails off. I continue to stare at her, unconvinced by this sudden change of plans, but before I can say anything else, Momo pulls away from me and retreats behind the vault's control panel, putting it between us as a physical barrier.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'll, uh... return to inspecting the artifacts. Do you have another one for me?"

Momo nods. Wordlessly, she points to the ground beside my Wordsmithed chair, where a strangely shaped bone rests. Curved like a semi-circle, several broken, chipped teeth sit embedded in its frame, making me think it must be some animal or person's jaw.

Phoebe appears in my mind. "Jason. You don't trust Marie, and neither do I. You need to spy on her and see what she's up to."

I nod while casting a quick glance in Momo's direction. She meets my gaze and visibly shivers, forcing me to look away. I don't want to scare the poor girl. She's probably endured some awful things in her life to end up so deathly afraid of men.

I agree. I'll pretend to converse with the artifact. Momo won't know the difference.

I quickly pick up the giant animal bone and close my eyes. "Alright, I'm starting now."

Momo barely utters a squeak. "O-okay..."

After keeping my eyes closed for a few moments, I mutter under my breath, "**Observe.**"

Instantly, my consciousness shifts. My mind seemingly travels out of my body, rushes straight at the vault's entrance, and passes through the door. A blur of motion greets me as I rapidly dash through every obstruction in my path, enter the elevator, and zip straight up into the sky. The giant, underground shaft, one which took Marie and me nearly twenty minutes to descend before, only takes me a few seconds to climb.

Whoosh!

I spot the elevator car, still ascending, not far above me. In the blink of an eye, I cross the one-mile distance and fly into the glassy compartment, appearing only inches from Marie's face. My vision stabilizes, and I quickly pull away while continuing to observe her.

She hasn't reached the surface yet, I say, speaking to Phoebe. However, Phoebe doesn't respond.

It takes me a moment to understand why my wife, usually a chatty-Cathy, is so quiet. She can't hear me. Solomon once surmised that my abilities and their effects might not work exactly the way I imagine them working. Using Observe must disconnect my mind from my Mind Realm, thus leaving my wife behind.

My vision hovers above Marie, watching and evaluating her. Marie stares straight forward at the elevator door. Her arms hang loosely at her sides, while her expression becomes as tranquil as a lake on a mid-summer's day. Given her cybernetic physique, it doesn't surprise me that she doesn't have to breathe or fidget, but I quickly grow unnerved as Marie ignores even the most basic human mannerisms. It takes the lift five agonizing minutes to climb to the top, and all the while, I become more and more unnerved by her robotic stiffness.

If someone transplants their mind inside of a machine, how much of that person changes or disappears? Is Marie even human anymore? Disconnected from my former bodily functions and needs, would I change, too?

Does Marie dream, anymore? Does she feel love or compassion for other people? Does she ever wish to cry? If she does, can she? Is her robotic body capable of emulating such human emotions?

I don't have any answers, nor do I get the time to ponder the questions in my head, either. The lift arrives at the top of the shaft, and the door opens, allowing Marie to disembark.

However, she doesn't. The Head Scientist suddenly turns her head to the right and looks straight at me, freezing my blood.

Can she see me? Why would she look in my direction?

"Hm."

Marie stares at the spot where my vision seems to be floating for only a moment before grunting, shrugging her shoulders, and stepping off the lift.

The elevator door closes, but I stay behind for a moment, trying to stabilize my breathing. Having Marie look right at me gave me the scare of my life! However, it might have been a coincidence. If she truly saw me, she would have said something. Sometimes people gaze into the distance with thousand-yard stares. Maybe androids do the same thing as well.

After steadying my nerves, I float through the lift door and follow Marie. This time, however, I stay behind her, where she'll have to turn all the way around to look at me. If she does, it will confirm whether she saw me or not.

Marie's high heels click against the metallic floor like raindrops dripping from a rooftop. She sways her hips and arms in perfect rhythm, moving with such precision that her every step feels as if it's been calibrated to perfection. Given her biology, I can only conclude she must have done exactly that.

Marie walks past several researchers. They wave and smile politely at her, but she only gives them the briefest of passing glances.

Soon, Marie arrives in the Neutron Bomb testing room. I fall behind and stare with a mix of fascination, awe, and horror at the creatures standing up ahead. Unlike the demons and angels, who still bear distinctly human visages, the freakish-looking *things* standing and hovering in a semi-circle are so alien that I can immediately tell they do not hail from Earth.

Six Volgrim, consisting of four Technopaths, a Psion, and a Changeling, stand in a small cluster before a human researcher. The woman politely explains to them that Marie is presently occupied and will return quickly, but the Volgrim appear annoyed by the holdup.

"Wa gu nus ghans xuia' agnthiatat. Ir sha Haag Rataa'thha' ut nus tsangung ftaru'a iat un sha nagns san nuniasat, gha ghufft saa' shut rathuftusx ala's iansuft gha rung ha'!"

A Volgrim Technopath babbles in its native language, spewing out words which are about as uncomfortable to listen to as nails on a chalkboard. The fellow hovers above the ground, with his lower body cut off and replaced with a circular, donut-shaped apparatus. The shiny steel cylinder allows him to levitate several inches above the woman and assume a dominating stance. His two arms end in multiple tentacles, giving him a somewhat Cthulhuian appearance. Numerous devices sit embedded in the Technopath's flesh. Among them are a breathing apparatus, which muffles his speech, and a series of electrical nodes stuck deep in his chest. I can only hazard a guess as to what each device does, but judging by the other Technopaths, who stand or hover on similar devices, he's not an outlier.

The female scientist bows quickly. "I-I'm sorry, Miss Lidra. I can't rush the Head Researcher! She is a very busy woman and occasionally takes a while to-"

"I'm here," Marie says, butting in. She strides across the room in a way I can only describe as domineering, allowing a look of anger to wash over her face. She snaps her fingers, forcing all of the Volgrim to acknowledge her presence. "It's only been a month since the last inspection. Where is Nufaris? Why isn't he here? Is the Executor himself too good for me, now?"

The Technopath who spoke before, Lidra, swivels to face Marie. I mentally facepalm upon realizing this Volgrim is technically female, though I can't see anything in her appearance that indicates her gender.

Heck, aside from the various chunks of technology embedded in her flesh, she isn't wearing any clothes! The Volgrim must have evolved very differently from life on Earth.

"Haag Rataa'thha', Ma'ua Bathka'. Wa ha'a ghausag ru' xuia' a'u'aft ru' u'a' shu'sx nuniasat! Thut lashasuth assanls as gaftaxung iat ghuftft unftx-"

The Technopath female babbles again in her awful, grating language, making me consider using Wordsmithing to translate her speech. However, before I can, Marie holds up her hand and silences the woman. "Stop! I can't take more than five seconds of that awful noise. You are currently standing in my laboratory. You speak *my* language. Understood?"

Her words cause a great stir in the Volgrim present. The Psion steps forward and raises its fist. A voice resounds in my head, transmitted via telepathy. [Hugh ga'a xuia! Du nus assanls su liath iat a'uiang ang saftft iat ghhas su gu, xuia ghu'shftatt ftussfta hianan! Wa a'a sha Vuftg'un, ang gha thuns'uft a'a'xshung xuia huftg-]

Once again, Marie interrupts the Volgrim speaking. "You're ten generations too young to try and threaten me, Judicator Halamis. How many trials of combat have you completed? How many forms of the Sinarii have you mastered? Don't you even think of pushing me around, or I'll make you regret your Day of Ascension."

Marie's words turn snide as she sneers haughtily at the Psion. Without a shred of fear, Marie talks down to the monstrous alien towering more than a foot over her head as if she were scolding a child.

The Psion, Judicator Halamis, pauses for a moment. When he speaks again, to my surprise, his words come out in flawless English.

[Your warrior spirit never fails to astound me, Head Researcher. I will abide by your rules.]

"Yes. You will."

Marie returns her attention to the Technopath from before.

"And you, *Lidra*. Who are you, and why hasn't Nufaris come? He always performs the inspections."

The Technopath female starts to open her mouth, but pauses for a moment. After shooting a glance at the Psion, she continues speaking. It occurs to me that the Psion must have communicated something with her telepathically.

"I am Sangin Lidra, Fourth Level, Third Echelon, and head of Clan Oblong. My reputation may pale in comparison to the Executor, but among my people, I am held in high regard."

Lidra bows her head slightly, revealing an ugly scar stretching across her bald, mottled skull. Despite being some person of importance, she has the look of a street thug, making me want to never stand anywhere she will notice me.

"Hmph. *Head of Clan Oblong*. Maybe on Volgarius, such a pretty title will earn you accolades, but in my laboratory, the only thing that matters is results! Who are these other clowns you've brought along? Was Muuxunuu too busy to visit, as well? Am I only worth a visit from the C-team?"

Lidra's finger-tentacles writhe around, revealing some emotion I have yet to parse. Her expression doesn't change, but as she hovers slightly to the left, I get the impression Marie's words have angered her.

The female Technopath waves one tentacle toward the lone Changeling in the group. "Of course. My apologies, I will introduce you at once. This one is known as Mellir, a Seventh Class Lead Observer at Horax Three. Mellir's Aspect has reached the second tier of Settler."

Marie raises her eyebrows. "Settler? Impressive. Given your status, I'm surprised you have time to practice your infiltration skills."

The Changeling bows its head. "This one lives its life to pursue science. It is this one's greatest honor to come and visit the Remnant Research Facility. Many Changelings have uttered incredible stories about you."

Unlike the Psion, who wears shiny golden armor, with several interlocking pieces to keep its mobility high, or the Technopaths, who wear nothing at all and rely on augmentations to cover their bodies, the Changeling wears a shiny white coat with a couple of badges on its front. Even without any hair, I can only describe his appearance as "slicked back" and "professional."

However, calling Mellir a 'him' seems incorrect. It doesn't appear to have any defined gender, and given its huge, bulbous eyes and slim, androgynous build, I can't help but wonder if the Changeling is unique in its dimorphism.

For the first time since her arrival, Marie smiles. "You speak very eloquently, Mellir. Unlike the others here, you don't require a translation device. Did you learn my language ahead of time?"

Mellir spreads its arms wide. "Yes. This one spent fifteen cycles mastering the languages of humanity two generations ago. The different speech patterns in your dialect are most intriguing. The language known as 'Chinese' is a particular favorite among this one's group, as we occasionally converse in it during maturation periods. If we have time later, this one would enjoy dialoguing with you in regards to some historical pieces of literature from your homeworld."

Marie nods. "We will see. I don't consider myself a history buff, but my archives do possess all of the recovered literature I could obtain prior to Earth's bombardment. Continue, Lidra."

Marie immediately returns her attention to the head Technopath. Lidra introduces the next Volgrim, a fellow Technopath.

"This male is known as Loputo Jidelor, a prodigy of Clan Symmetra. He recently reached the Third Level and is thus still classified as a First Echelon developer. Despite his low status, he has shown much promise in the fields of quantum manipulation. He may soon start reverse-engineering pieces of technology from the Precursor Era."

Marie turns her attention toward the, presumably, young male Technopath. Unlike Lidra, who floats above the ground on a hovering device, Loputo Jidelor stands on two flesh and blood legs. However, in place of his right arm is a long, metallic limb with dozens of razor-thin threads waving to and fro where his 'wrist' ends. Each one moves independently, much like the tentacles on his left arm, but their movements appear far more precise. He, too, possesses dozens of metallic pieces attached seemingly at

random to his skin and skull, but his bipedal appearance at least gives me the vague illusion he might not stab me in the back at the first possible opportunity.

Jidelor bows stiffly toward Marie, nearly stumbling and falling to the ground as he does. "Long have I awaited this day. Forgive the brash words of my superiors earlier, for they did not mean to impose on you in such a rude manner. Many of my people are unfamiliar with human customs. We are much more candid than your species as a whole, so we tend to overlook social courtesy."

As Jidelor bows, Marie taps her lip. "Apology accepted. Let's hope you don't come to regret your words, eh? Continue, Lidra."

Lidra nods. She gestures to the third of four Technopaths, one who sits atop four long, spindly spider-legs. Much like Lidra, his lower section is missing, replaced instead with a robotic movement apparatus. Both of his eyes glow green, revealing their artificial nature.

"This one is Ordonis Limea, a Second Level prodigy of Clan Oblong. He has already reached the fifth Echelon and will soon advance to the Third Level. I recommended him in the hopes of expanding his horizons. With any luck, a mere glance at your laboratory will broaden his horizons and allow a breakthrough."

Marie shakes her head. "The Remnant Oasis is not a vacation hotspot, *Miss Lidra*. Do not bring children here in the hopes of obtaining pointers. I am a very busy woman, and inspections accomplish little more than slowing me down. I don't have time to babysit."

Ordonis, the third Technopath, stiffens visibly at Marie's words. He narrows his glowing eyes. "I am no child. Forgive my insolence, Lady Lidra, but this human's words are arrogant and disrespectful! By mocking me, she insults our clan!"

Lidra nods. She turns to gaze at Marie with a hint of anger in her eyes. "Ordonis speaks the truth. We might be presently standing in your laboratory, Head Scientist, but you have no right to insult us. Apologize at once! If the Founders hear about your blatant disregard for decorum--"

"They'll do *what*?" Marie asks, rolling her eyes. "Don't sass me. If I added the whole lot of you together, you still wouldn't be a hundredth as valuable to the Founders as me. Don't bite off more than you can chew, children. If you can't afford to bring the Executor here, then don't make any claims about your importance."

Marie turns up her nose at Ordonis, paying him no more mind. Before he can fume any further, the Psion, Judicator Halamis, butts in.

[Scientist Becker, let us not squabble over cross-species etiquette. I will introduce the last guest in Lidra's stead. I think you'll find her identity quite interesting.]

Halamis steps backward, pressing his back against Ordonis and forcing the Technopath to retreat. Despite his annoyance, the youngest Clan Oblong member can do little more than fume with the Psion shoving him aside. I don't know anything about the rankings of those present, but Halamis's political clout must be substantially higher than even Lidra's. After all, Marie only knew him out of the entire inspection team.

The fourth and final Technopath steps forward. Their hideous face makes my stomach churn. With skin so mottled that it looks like someone threw boiling oil on their face, I can barely stomach the sight of the horrible, disgusting monster posing as a Technopath. I have a hard enough time trying to guess the gender of the other ones, let alone the deformed freak Marie ended up meeting last.

[This being is known as Psymin Miralax. You should be familiar with her work on bio-replication transducers. She is a member of-]

"I know," Marie says, a huge smile spreading across her face. She interrupts the Judicator's introduction, steps forward, and bows. "Psymin Miralax. My apologies for not recognizing one of the Sentinel designers! I've never seen a picture of your face, but I know the names of all four hundred Technopaths involved with the Celestial Facility's construction. Prying the information from Cuanali's tentacles was an ordeal I won't soon forget!"

The deformed-looking Technopath nods politely and spreads her arms out in what I hope is a welcoming gesture. She steps forward, using two robotic legs to plod across the ground noisily.

"Head Scientist. I am pleased. To meet you. My honor. Ask anything. I will answer."

Psymin's Miralax's tone sends shivers down my spine. Her robotic voice echoes the same monstrous sentiments as the rest of her body. It's unpleasant and downright painful to listen to.

Marie clears her throats. "Judging by your condition, it seems that you still have yet to recover from your ancient injuries. If you'd like, I would be more than happy to show you one of my premier inventions, a top-level device few Volgrim have seen before. Have you heard of my Maturation Pods?"

Psymin's tentacles shiver slightly. *"Yes. I have. Much hope. The damage. Is permanent. You help me. I help you. Mutual understanding."*

"Haha. It would be my pleasure. Incidentally, that alloy on your implants... is that...?"

"Yes. Living Moldanium. Similar to the Sentinels. Difficult to create. Prohibitively expensive."

"I see. Ah, well. That's life, haha."

Marie laughs lightly, as if enjoying some unspoken joke. However, for the briefest of moments, I notice a spark in her eyes, a hint of greed far surpassing that which mortals can understand. She stares at Psymin's legs for a split-second too long, revealing her desire to me, the only human still observing her.

Even in a cybernetic shell, I manage to pick up her former human 'tells.' The aliens might be unfamiliar with human mannerisms, but I'm not. Whatever Living Moldanium is, it appears to be something Marie greatly desires. I wonder why?

Lidra, the first Technopath, steps forward. "Now then. We've introduced ourselves, Head Scientist, Marie Becker. Are we done dawdling, or must we delay longer before moving on to today's inspection?"

Marie looks at Lidra for a moment, then returns her gaze to the Psion, Halamis. "As I said before, I'm exceedingly busy at the moment. I was in the middle of some high-priority calibrations when Umi notified me of your arrival. I hope twenty minutes will be enough to sate your curiosity."

The Judicator presses his palms together. [Yes. Fifteen standard units will be more than enough time for us. The Plague recently took over two outpost worlds; therefore, we need a weapon capable of repelling them as quickly as possible.]

"Hmm... a new weapon..."

Marie lowers her eyes to think and begins rubbing her chin. As she does, a question appears in my mind.

What is the Plague, and how can it travel between worlds? I've never heard of a planet-hopping disease before. More importantly, how in the hell would a weapon repel a plague? That makes no sense whatsoever. Oh, god, I hope it's not some kind of zombie-infection like in the movies. That would suck!

While my thoughts run rampant, Marie's eyes shine with renewed energy. She returns her attention to Lidra. "Ah! Yes, I do have something I've been working on. There's this neuron-blocker I wanted to use to suppress alpha and beta signals in the brain, but it might prove useful to the Volgrim if manufactured on a mass-scale or converted into a weaponized package. Follow me."

Marie spins on her heel and immediately begins walking, forcing the Volgrim to snap to attention and follow after her. However, as she turns around, once again, her eyes seem to lift into the air for a split-second and meet mine. She quickly lowers her gaze and continues walking, but her attempt to hide her thoughts doesn't fool me this time.

Marie can see me. I don't know how, but more than a dozen possibilities immediately spring to mind. One of them seems more plausible than the others.

When I use 'Locate,' it's not my vision that disconnects from my body, but my entire soul.

I don't know what my soul looks like, or if it has any appearance at all. What I do know is that, if my hypothesis is correct, it would explain many incidents in my past.

Why can I listen in on conversations when observing others? Does my soul have ears?

Why can't I Wordsmith when observing? Is it because I can't speak through my mouth, and thus cannot channel my magic?

Both of these options seem likely. It also explains why I can't communicate with Phoebe anymore. My Mind Realm must be a part of my physical body: My brain. If I disconnect my soul, my Mind Realm is likely still inside my body, along with my mind-wife.

Finally, if everything I just said is true, it explains why Marie can see me. Why wouldn't she have such a capability? She works with demons. Given Ose's ability to astrally project herself, Marie would never allow a gap in her security to exist. She probably has methods to search for souls floating around.

Everything makes sense. It all falls into place. My 'vision' exists as a result of my disconnected soul.

The thought sends worry flooding into the back of my mind.

If I've truly disconnected my soul, then I am in great danger. I don't have Wordsmithing to defend myself. Presumably, some demons might not only be able to see me, but snatch my soul out of the air, as well. I could end up as someone's dinner before I have a chance to react!

However...

The fact that Marie hasn't said anything to me must indicate her tacit approval of my witnessing this meeting. She could have scolded me or ordered me to leave, but she didn't. She barely even acknowledged my presence.

What does she want me to see?

* * *

Marie guides the group of Volgrim out of her primary laboratory, and into a smaller side chamber. There, dozens of machines sit embedded in the walls, with huge vacuum tubes sending coils of lightning or streams of matter and debris back and forth between both sides of the pipes. The largest machine in the middle of the room features dozens of metallic Technopath-like tentacles spilling from the ceiling, at the ends of which reside laser-emitters that work together to craft three-dimensional objects out of electrical energy. Even as everyone arrives, the machine finishes fabricating a tubular object three feet long, making me wonder what its purpose might be.

Marie clears her throat. "Since this is your first time here, Miss Lidra, allow me to introduce you to my state-of-the-art nanotechnology testing facility. In here, five of my brightest and most talented scientists labor to create the devices you use in your efforts to combat the Plague."

Marie gestures to a perfectly smooth, round ball sitting on a table. Lidra's eyes widen in shock. She and the other Technopaths recoil in horror and take several steps back. "Head Scientist! How could you allow a biomaterial devourer to sit out in the open?! Don't you understand the dangers inherent with a device of such destructive-"

"Of course, I do," Marie says, rolling her eyes. "This isn't a biomaterial devourer. The device you speak of is at least five generations old. This object is a bio-splitter, a far more advanced weapon, with a function to target and destroy only life forms I approve. Even if it were to detonate, the Volgrim standing here would be perfectly safe. However, it does have a few lingering issues, hence why I'm still developing it."

The Psion, Judicator Halamis, glances at the nervous expressions on his Technopath allies' faces. Unaware of the underlying reasons behind their terror, his voice contains a hint of hesitation.

[Issues?]

"Yes. While it presently will not consume any biomaterial I designate as safe, it does release a terrible aerosol byproduct into the environment capable of causing flesh necrosis. Until I solve the necrosis issue, I cannot recommend it for combatting the Plague."

The Technopaths tilt their heads toward Marie. Mixtures of fear and awe appear in their gazes. Even the green-glowing-eyed Technopath, Ordonis, appears enlightened by her words. "To prevent the weapon from eliminating specific types of organic material, your nanites must be three times more advanced than anything my clan has developed."

Marie turns to gaze at Ordonis. Despite his outburst not even five minutes ago, her eyes don't contain even a trace of resentment. "Three times? Haha. Your people could easily craft nanites a hundred times

more intelligent than these, but they've banned Alpha and Beta-level AI. Even with Umi's help, I was only able to improve the bio-splitter to this level."

"Umi?" Ordonis asks. "Who might that be? I've not heard you mention that researcher yet."

Lidra's hover-chair turns in midair, allowing her to face her junior colleague. "Ordonis! You embarrass me. Umi is Head Researcher Becker's Alpha-level artificial intelligence. I told you to read her executive files on the way here!"

Ordonis lowers his head. "I apologize, clan leader. I was lax in my research."

"Hmph. When we depart, I'll invoke an Echelon demerit for your carelessness. Speak not of this again."

"Yes, clan leader."

Ordonis falls silent, unable to meet his leader's gaze. I don't know what an Echelon demerit is, but it sounds terrible. I feel kinda bad for the weird, Cthulhuian-alien-person.

Marie claps her hands, grabbing everyone's attention. "Here is the device, everyone. I present to you all: the Neuron Blocker."

Marie raises her hand, revealing a tiny pill-shaped cylinder held between her thumb and index finger. The transparent pill appears empty, possessing nothing inside it at all. However, based on Marie's cautious movements, I can only assume it must contain something she'd rather not lose.

Lidra floats a little closer to the Head Researcher. The bio-attachment fastened across her eye zooms in, enhancing her vision to examine the device in Marie's grasp.

"Impressive. The nanites contained within are a few factors smaller than others I've seen both inside this laboratory, and outside as well. You must have shrunk them to assist in the mental attachment process."

"Ah, you have some talent after all," Marie says, praising the Technopath's observation. "That's right. My goal with this device is to shut down specific receptors inside a subject's brain. Given how the Plague fuses with its host's nervous system, I've spent ages trying to find a way of blocking the neurological stimuli. Sadly, until we field test it, I won't know if it has any effect."

Marie walks past Lidra and stops before Judicator Halamis. The Psion stares at her curiously as she places her hands on her hips. "How long must I wait before you bring me a live sample? Are you telling me the mightiest warriors among your people can't capture one infested host? Is that why Executor Nufaris didn't come this time? Was he too embarrassed to show his face?"

The Psion retreats a step under Marie's verbal barrage. [Executor Nufaris is a busy leader. We needed his skills at the frontlines.]

"Hmph. From what I've gathered, your entire species has begun falling through the cracks over the last several millennia. Your intelligence networks have turned slipshod, while your research facilities have fallen far behind mine. What could be the cause, I wonder?"

Lidra narrows her eyes to slits. "*What*, indeed? Don't think we haven't detected your infra-spectrum transmissions probing our intelligence networks, human. Your attempts to disrupt our communications and feed us false information have fallen flat every time. Need I go on?"

"I'm only joking," Marie says, waving her hand flippantly. She takes a few steps toward Lidra and deposits the prototype neural-blocker in the Technopath's tentacles. "By the way, I have a question for all of you. I've heard some rumors regarding the demons that have left me a little unsettled. Could you, perhaps, clarify them for me?"

My heart skips a beat. The only rumors she could be referring to would involve humans and the Labyrinth Core takeover. Why is she bringing us up in front of these high-ranking Volgrim delegates?!

The Psion chirps in annoyance, his telepathic voice emitting a piercing squeal for a moment before speaking. [Hiiga! Rumors? Please, Head Scientist, do not dignify the petty squabbles of the demons with your attention. The Plague should be your only priority. Whatever happens in the Labyrinth won't affect you in the slightest.]

Marie assumes a neutral expression. She turns around, and folds her hands behind her back, while strutting from left to right like an enlightened sage. "Of course not, but that doesn't mean I can't ask questions. Are the containment protocols still holding? What about the rumors surrounding Diablo's departure as the Third Emperor?"

The Volgrim glance at one another, confused about Marie's train of thought. Lidra's tentacles twitch as she shoots a glance at the equipment in Marie's laboratory she'd clearly rather be discussing. "Yes, yes, of course, they are. I don't know what rumors you might have heard, but the new Third Emperor is someone you should know intimately: The Emperor of Infiltration, Ose. She explained to us that due to an internal power struggle, Diablo fell comatose after one of the Hidden Emperors launched a sneak attack. Bael and the Dukes killed the assailant, restored order, and allowed Ose to assume the mantle of power. Given her contributions to our people over the last few epochs, I can't say a single Founder found her rise troublesome."

[It is as Sangin Lidra says,] Judicator Halamis adds. [We did receive news that the Hidden Emperor's cult managed to rope in a planet of humans for his dirty work, but we used a neutron warhead to destroy the planet. It was a substantial loss of resources, I might add.]

Marie taps her lip. She continues to keep her back to the Volgrim delegates while gazing at a nano-printer as it assembles a device out of thin air. "Mmm. Someone told me the humans had obtained advanced weaponry. Have you heard anything about that?"

This time, Loputo Jidelor, the second Technopath introduced earlier, butts into the conversation. "With all due respect, Head Scientist, the humans have made no such technological advancements. If they had, Ose would have told us. What is your point? Why bring up the state of the Labyrinth? The demons are more than capable of quelling a human rebellion, even if fifty million of your people banded together. If the demons could not handle a small terrorist insurrection, I would be extremely disappointed in their species."

[They do hold the numerical advantage by several factors,] Judicator Halamis adds.

Marie heaves a dramatic sigh. She turns on her heel, but once again, for a split-second, she pauses to stare at the spot where I'm hovering. I levitate some ten feet off the ground, right next to the room's entrance, where her gaze meeting mine has to be intentional. Marie quickly looks away, but finally, I confirm she has been able to see me the whole time.

She must be asking about the humans deliberately. But why? Is she trying to paint a target on my back? Is she trying to pressure me, somehow? What the hell is her game?

Marie slowly paces over to the Volgrim. "I don't get out much, as you can imagine. Sometimes, I yearn to walk in a meadow or press my toes into a beach's sand. I might be an evolved cybernetic being, but knowing the humans are still living in peace warms my heart. My apologies for bothering you with mundane questions. Shall we continue the inspection?"

The Volgrim visibly relax, glad to be free of the useless, grating discussion. Marie continues showing them various gadgets and inventions, but while she does, my mind drifts off elsewhere.

I suddenly realize why Marie asked the Volgrim about my movements on Tarus II, as well as the events that have transpired in the Labyrinth. She wanted me to see how little the Volgrim care about my actions, or rather, how little they *know*.

The Volgrim aren't aware that I exist. Me. The Hero. A being with transcendent magical powers capable of uplifting humanity to its former glory. Beyond that, my ability is Wordsmithing, a power so incredible that some have described it as Creator-level magic.

The Volgrim don't know about my existence, but what if they did? How far would they go to silence me? What atrocities would they unleash if they found out humanity was breaking its chains and rising once more?

That's right. Marie's questions weren't only intended to inform me about what the Volgrim know, but also to threaten me.

Marie wants me to be compliant. She doesn't want me to overstep my bounds and upend her plan for reviving humanity. The question is, how do I feel about her methods?

If Marie wants me to abandon humanity, she's going to have a bad time. However, if she merely wishes for me to delay or alter my plans, I don't have a problem with that. I could use her help... even if I know she's acting more than a little disingenuous. She has a hoard of resources at her disposal, and more importantly, information.

Marie knows about the Volgrim, the 'Plague,' the demons, and whatever else she hasn't told me yet. Her information is valuable enough that I have to consider the consequences of getting on her bad side. With a single message, she could notify the Volgrim of my existence and force me into hiding forever.

How many Volgrim are there in the galaxy? Even with my Wordsmithing, can I fight off a whole army of Psions, Technopaths, and Ascended? Doubtful.

Alright, Marie.

Alright.

I'll play your little game. But, as you're no doubt aware, all you've accomplished is pissing me off.

We'll see who has the last laugh.

* * *

My resolve hardens as I continue following the Volgrim delegates.

Author Note: I couldn't link the Volgrim in the previous post due to the character limits, but now I can!

The Ascended:



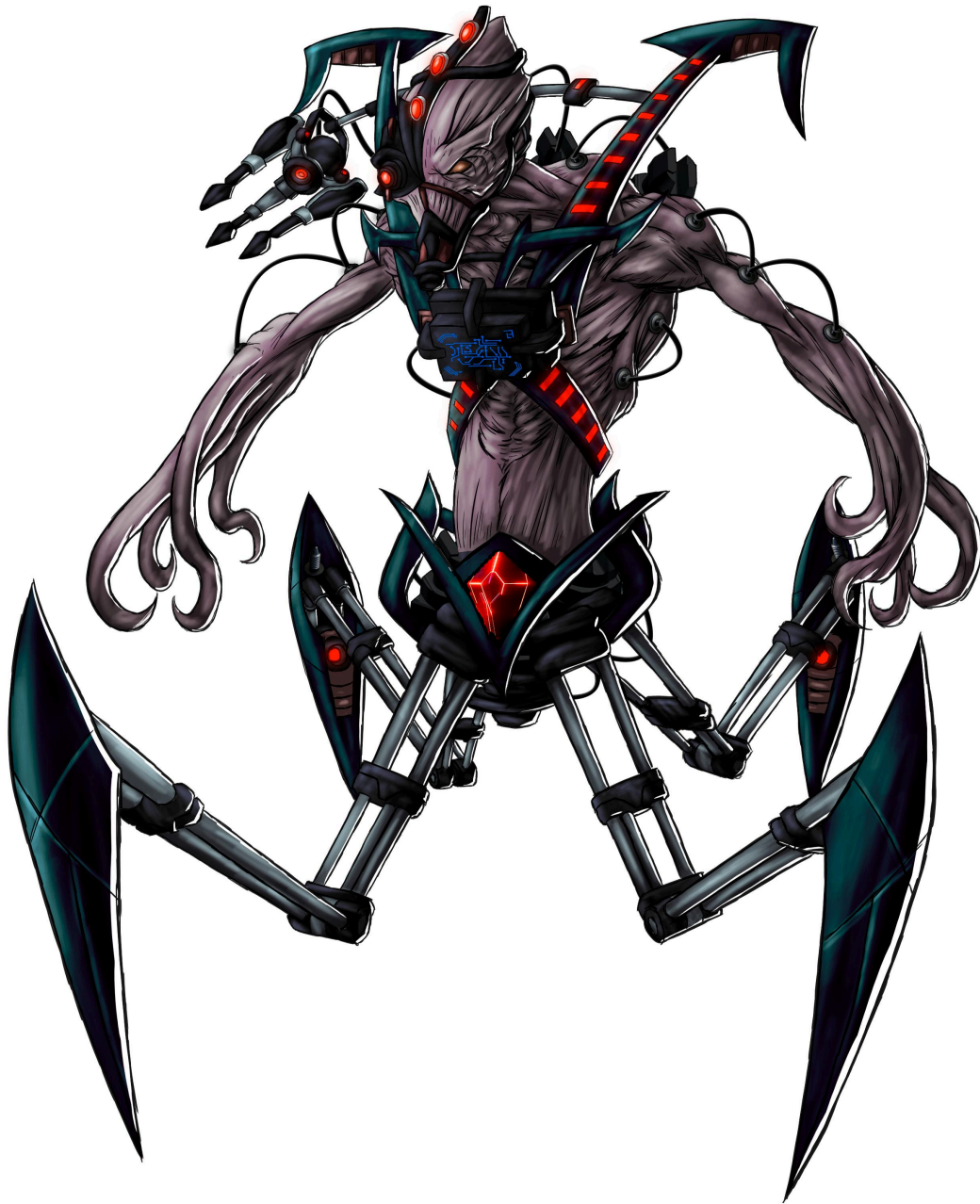
Psions:



Changelings:



Technopaths:



If you're a patron, check out the Patreon posts about the Volgrim, too!

The Ascended: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/secret-2-first-23569500>

The Psions: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/secret-3-second-23626264>

The Changelings: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/secret-4-third-23670362>

The Technopaths: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/secret-5-fourth-23803230>

And finally, the Dolgrimites, who have yet to appear in the story:
<https://www.patreon.com/posts/secret-6-fifth-23836005>

Part 195: Umi's Core

Marie leads the Volgrim inspection team from one facility to another, breezing through a variety of different inventions, gadgets, and technological marvels, each one capable of causing a seismic shift in the era before my Cryogenic stasis. Without Solomon's Crown, I can only rely on the prior knowledge I've accrued from the Knowledge-Seeker. Still, surprisingly, I'm able to parse more of what Marie is saying than I first expected.

The Head Scientist leads her visitors into another room, one substantially larger than all the others from before. Glass tubes reach from the ceiling to the floor, transporting various liquids into a single, gigantic tank in the center of the room. The pipe array branches out, spreads around, and engulfs the transparent vat like a horde of squid embracing an egg.

Inside the vat, a misshapen lump of meat nearly thirty feet tall and ten feet in diameter pulses occasionally, its rhythmic throbs vaguely resembling a heartbeat.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I linger by the room's entrance, occasionally turning my gaze to examine all the various parts of this strange inner room. It doesn't take me long to figure out what this place is.

It's Umi's 'core.'

The gruesome meat-lump pulsating with life in the center of the room sends a shiver through my soul. Having a chunk of flesh represent a supercomputer unnerves me in a way I couldn't have imagined an hour ago. Every beat of its 'heart' makes me want to float away and escape this room. My instincts tell me that it's an unnatural abomination spawned by a dark wizard, not a highly advanced supercomputer created via modern science.

Marie slows to a stop just ten feet away from the crystal-clear nutrient vat. She folds her hands behind her back and smiles. "Umi. How are you feeling, today?"

Umi's electronic voice squelches throughout the room. "Head Researcher Marie Becker: My systems are running at 100% efficiency. All of my background processes are functioning at nominal values."

Marie nods, then turns around to face the six Volgrim behind her. Judicator Halamis, having seen the supercomputer before, appears unmoved. However, the wide-eyed gazes from the other Volgrim betrays the fear in their hearts. Three of the four Technopaths keep their distance, staying wary of the biological superentity. However, the Changeling, Mellir, manages to conceal its emotions and assume a calm posture, with both arms hanging loosely at its sides. Additionally, the disfigured Technopath, Psymin Miralax, even takes a few steps forward to scrutinize the supercomputer's core.

"This machine. Highly advanced. Safeguards?"

Miralax's harsh, robotic voice grates on my senses the same as when I first heard it. She gestures toward Marie with what I can only assume is a curious motion.

Marie nods. "Do not worry. Umi is my greatest creation: a bio-computer capable of reason, logic, and emotion. I invested fifty years of my life into creating her, thus ensuring she would not turn rogue, even if a catastrophe were to occur. Thousands of custom-created rules all interlock together to form an impenetrable logic net, one which prevents her from becoming a terror to biological life, unlike the technological horrors which once victimized your species."

Marie begins pacing back and forth. She wavers between gazing at Psymin Miralax and the floor, taking a moment every now and then to gather her thoughts. "When I first created Umi, I lacked data about the nature of artificial intelligence. I was unaware of the Volgrim's history, and thus nearly blundered into catastrophic mistakes time and time again. It was only with the help of a mysterious benefactor that my team of scientists and I were able to successfully create a comprehensive list of rules limiting Umi's growth to the realm of Alpha intelligence. Obviously, if she were to ascend to Zeta level or beyond, the results would be catastrophic."

Psymin Miralax stomps forward slowly, each of her heavily armored legs striking the tiled floor with substantial force. "*I am curious. Control; impossible. Guiding its development. How?*"

Marie sighs. "With all due respect, the Celestial Designers made many critical mistakes with their implementation of the Sentinel Defense Network. Creating an Overmind to guide the lower intelligences while only placing weak limits on its self-replication programming meant that even minute improvements in its core programming would eventually lead to exponential growth. Whether that growth took one year or one thousand, that did not matter."

Marie clears her throat. "Secondly, while you and your fellow Celestials may have created the Sentinels during a war, I, too, developed Umi under similar harsh circumstances. The difference is that I never wavered in my desire for control. I never took shortcuts, but you did. Take this biological core, for instance..."

Marie walks over to the glass vat and raps on it with her knuckles. A hollow *gong* resounds from the impact point, dissipating a split-second later as the facility swallows the sound whole.

"I used the scans of thousands of human brains to create a digitized logic center for Umi's core. You, on the other hand, used a single brain scan for each Sentinel, causing reductive flaws in their programming. A choice borne of urgency, I'm sure, but one you inevitably paid the price for."

Psymin bows her head. She takes a step backward and spreads out her arms. "*I contemplate. I comprehend.*"

"If you have any further questions, feel free to ask me later," Marie says. She walks over to the side of the nutrient tank and taps a black box embedded on its side. "Sangin Lidra, as the leader of this inspection, I invite you to come and check Umi's restrictor chip. I assure you that it is functioning properly, but it is customary for a clan head to perform the inspection."

The head of Clan Oblong visibly stiffens. Her hovering body lowers an inch or two as she appears to shrink behind her fellow Technoapths. "Must... must I? Ordonis! Go and inspect the restrictor chip. You are the most suited for this arrangement."

To my surprise, the Technopath leader appears visibly unnerved by the biomechanical computer, possibly even moreso than me. Every time her gaze reaches the pulsing biomass, she turns away, unable to look at it.

Lidra's junior, Ordonis Limea, turns green with fright. The spider-legged Technopath glances at his superior as if she were ordering him to die on the frontlines of a battlefield. "A-ah! Clan Leader... such an honor should surely be yours! I dare not overstep my lowly position in the clan to perform such an... *essential* duty."

Lidra's tentacle hands tremble and writhe furiously. She glares at Ordonis with a gaze that could melt steel. "Bah! Do as I say! Inspect the restrictor chip at once! Don't make me add a second demerit for breaching protocol!"

Marie watches as the Technopaths argue amongst each other, both of them trying desperately to avoid coming any closer to the creepy-looking, gigantic biomass suspended in nutrient fluids. Eventually, with a huge sigh, Marie facepalms, unable to believe their cowardice.

"...Delegates, please. Your fears are unwarranted. Umi is incapable of harming you. Your wariness of Alpha-level AI borders on the nonsensical."

Lidra whirls to face Marie. "No! You are wrong! I have seen holo-files of the Seven Great Wars! Countless Volgrim perished under the onslaught of their former servants, indestructible killing machines produced to protect them. I cannot bear to even look at this dreadful monster you've created. Knowing it resides in the same galaxy as me is far more than I can stand!"

"Well, it does. So get over yourself."

Marie rolls her eyes, clearly annoyed with the clan leader's groundless fears. Before the two can squabble further, Psymin clomps forward on her armored legs and nods. "*No need. I will inspect. I am Fifth-Level. Third Echelon. Show me.*"

Emboldened by the Celestial Designer's courage, Loputo Jidelor quickly steps forward and bows. His artificial arm writhes excitedly as he presents himself before Marie. "Anything the Celestial Designer thinks safe enough to inspect, I would like to witness."

"Great," Marie says, her tone dry. "At least you two have a bit of courage. Umi's restrictor plate is hardly worth shrinking away from. I guess Clan Oblong isn't made of the same stuff as Symmetra, eh?"

Marie's praise seems to slap Lidra and her junior, Ordonis, straight across their faces. Both of them recoil in shame and shoot a look of indignation at Loputo.

"That third-level Symmetra youth hasn't the qualifications to perform an inspection-" Lidra starts to say. However, Marie immediately turns her back on the Oblong Technopaths and leads the other two over to Umi's nutrient vat.

"Those with curiosity have the qualifications to discover. Don't you agree, Miss Psymin? Helping to create a whole new branch of robotics in the middle of the Sixth Great War must have required a great amount of courage. What, may I ask, was your level at that time?"

Psymin plods along behind Marie, but always keeps her movements calm and respectful. She bows her head at Marie's words. *"Third Level. Second Echelon. I was. A novice."*

"Haha. Only one Echelon above Jidelor. It's never too early to step into the unknown."

Marie kneels next to Umi's gigantic liquid vat and taps the three-by-three-foot plate bolted onto its side. "Look here, do you see this gravimetric-enhanced blast-plate? It ensures that even if a catastrophe were to occur inside my laboratory, Umi's entire apparatus would break before her containment chip."

Loputo strokes his chin with several of the tentacles on his flesh-and-blood left arm. "You intend to ensure that if all of the humans here should perish in an accident, your Alpha-level-AI will also die, or at least continue in its restricted state."

"Exactly," Marie replies. She reaches underneath the restrictor plate and procures a thin piece of metal with a thick handle at the other end. "Psymin Miralax, if you'd be so kind...?"

Psymin blinks in surprise as Marie hands the nine-inch-long slender object to her. The disfigured Technopath easily grasps hold of the object but cocks her head questioningly after a moment. *"This thin pole. Is strange. What is it?"*

"It's called a 'screwdriver,'" Marie says, stifling a chuckle. "Low-tech to ensure durability. Just unscrew the bolts here, here, and there. The cover will come right off."

"I comprehend."

Psymin silently kneels and presses the screwdriver against the nearest bolt's head. It slides into a plus-shaped groove, and she begins rapidly twisting from right to left. Thanks to her tentacles, her movements appear ten times more dextrous and fluid than any human fingers, saving her from twisting and rotating her arm.

I hover through the air and draw a little closer to get a better look. After unscrewing all the bolts, Psymin pulls off the cover to the restrictor plate and peers inside. A symmetrically aligned series of transistors, microscopic wires, and circuitboards overlap and cross one another in intricate, difficult-to-follow patterns. Psymin leers her hideous, mottled head forward and peers at the board with her iris inspection unit. It clicks and whirrs as she examines the restrictor plate from one corner to the opposite.

"Impressive. Mere nanometers. Separate the relays. Resursive augmentations. No limit to ingenuity."

Marie waves her hand dismissively, but her face flushes red. "Oh, pish. It was just a little something I threw together over a few rainy afternoons. The most important additions came from Clan Artarax three epochs ago. They came up with an innovative method for layering the nanowires together to triple its efficiency..."

Marie and Psymin fire off incomprehensible technobabble at one another for a couple of minutes. Loputo chimes in now and then, but I quickly realize just how strongly the 'levels' correlate to knowledge between Technopaths. A glance at the Clan Oblong members reveals that only Lidra appears capable of following along with Marie and Psymin, while Ordonis seems completely lost, and even Loputo only grasps the basics of their words.

To my surprise, aside from the two Technopaths, I only spot the Psion, Judicator Halamis, standing by himself. Where did the Changeling go?

I flick my gaze around the room and discover Mellir standing on the opposite side of Umi's containment tank. The big-headed, bald alien folds its hands behind its back and slowly paces around the tank's perimeter, examining the massive fleshy blob inside with a look of what I assume is curiosity. Occasionally, it opens its mouth and emits chirping and clicking noises, creating a mixture of bug and birdlike sounds.

I haven't a clue what the Changeling is doing. Still, given its resemblance to Roswell aliens, I decide to float a little closer and observe. When I do, I spot a small device stuck in its ear canal resembling a communicator. It only takes me a moment to realize Mellir must be communicating with someone through it.

As if confirming my thoughts, Mellir turns on its heel and walks around the tank to Marie's side. "Head Scientist, this one must offer its sincerest apologies. Due to a series of unfortunate events occurring outside of this one's control, it appears that Confessor Vulpanix has decided to join today's inspection. Her mood is far from amiable."

Marie's pleasant chat with Psymon and Loputo comes to a screeching halt. She whirls to face Mellir, revealing a face drained of blood. "What name did you say? Confessor Vulpanix?"

"That is affirmative," Mellir replies. The Changeling's poker-face gives off no hints of its inner emotions, but Marie's does.

"Damn, damn, damn! Of all the hotheaded bastards Dosena could have sent, she chose- gah! How long before-?!"

"Thirty seconds," Mellir replies. "The Confessor's shuttle landed ten minutes ago."

"Umi!" Marie barks. "Confirm the Confessor's position! Where is she?"

From the ceiling, Umi's voice descends like ice-water, drenching Marie and the Volgrim guests in dread. "Head Research Marie Becker, the Confessor is less than five hundred feet away and rapidly closing the gap. She will enter the Mind Chamber in T-minus fifteen seconds."

Marie's expression turns enraged. "Augh! I was not ready for her. Son of a bitch."

I float into the air and linger near the ceiling. Marie's sudden change in mood worries me more than anything else that has happened today. Not once have I seen anything fluster her, but this single Volgrim visitor appears to be her Kryptonite. Not even the other Volgrim present hold a candle to the Confessor.

Boom!

The sliding doors to the room yank open violently, propelled by an external telekinetic force. They wrench into the fully opened position and break off their hinges to hang loosely at their sides.

Stomp, click. Stomp, click.

Heavy footsteps echo in the room as a Psion thirty percent more massive than Judicator Halamis storms into the room. Wearing gaudy, elaborate black and gold robes, the high-ranking Confessor enters

with a presence capable of cowing the roiling seas. Her insect-like head, with its six eyes, barely gives the two members of the Oblong Clan a passing glance. She briefly sizes Halamis up before stomping toward Marie, Psymin, and Loputo.

[Ma'ua Bathka'! Wha'a a'a xuia' nanna't?! I tans xuia shu'sx nuniasat ur ag'antha gha'nung 'aga'gung nx a"u'aft, xas xuia rauftag su urra' na a l'ula' ghaftthuna! Thut gut'atlaths ghuftt nus gu ianlianuthag.]

The Confessor's harsh, clicky voice echoes in the minds of everyone present, projected outward via her psionic powers. She extends an arrogant finger toward Marie, as if accusing the Head Scientist of something seedy.

A look of annoyance appears in Marie's eyes, but she keeps her tone respectful. "Confessor Vulpanix, my apologies. I have been leading the inspection team around for the past fifteen minutes. I did not know that you were coming, or I would have provided a suitable-"

[Nuntanta! Yuia ghu'shftatt g'u'afta', I thuiatg ha'a knughn xuia'g ha'a nushung ftias agnthiatat ang ftuat! Yuia' raa' gutgiatst na!]

The Confessor cuts Marie off-midsentence and fires off even more accusatory-sounding words at her. Annoyed, I try to Wordsmith so that I can understand what she's saying, only to facepalm when I remember that I can't use magic in my soul form. Fuck's sake.

"I am hardly fearful of one as *calm* and *dignified* as yourself," Marie says, sarcasm lacing her every word. "but Umi did not notify me of your pending arrival. Perhaps your communicator suffered a glitch and did not broadcast the arrival code ahead of time? These things do happen with *faulty* Clan Kokorat technology, as I'm sure-"

[Enuiagh! I than's ftaa' su haa' anusha' ghu'g. I gugn's thuna su agnthhanga lftaatans'uat, ftias su raasthh sha untlathsuun saan nanfta't as untha. Wa niats 'asia'n su sha Inna' Wu'ftgt as untha!]

This time, it isn't Marie, but Judicator Halamis, who speaks. [The Inner Worlds? Why must we leave so soon? Were not we supposed to press the Head Scientist for faster shipments of Coldarium and Depoxies?]

Upon hearing a retort from her junior, Confessor Vulpanix narrows her eyes and shoots a disdainful glance at him. [Massa't un'uft'ung sha Pftagiaa s'ianl aftt usha't. Du nus ghiaatsuun u'ga't lattag gughn r'un sha Fuianga't.]

[No, of course, I won't. The Founders guide us with their light,] Halamis replies, bowing his head and spreading his arms. [Forgive my impudence.]

Lidra Sangin, head of Clan Oblong, allows her tentacles to writhe in annoyance. "Surely, we are not all required to return. If you would allow me to stay, in addition to Psymin Miralax, we will finish the inspection and still offer the additional resources needed for your request."

[Nu. E'a'xuna guat. Fuianga' Dutana ang Fuianga' Ciaanaftu't u'ga't a'a runaft.]

All of the Volgrim present, those from the original inspection team, appear annoyed by the Confessor's overbearing presence. However, she outranks all of them. They perform the Volgrim equivalent of a shrug

and turn to Marie.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Sangin Lidra says. "It seems our stay was destined to be a short one, indeed."

Psymin Miralax adds her input, as well. "*Yes. Very informative. I will return. Regeneration pods. Much hope.*"

The two juniors, Ordonis and Loputo, bow before Marie. "We thank you for this opportunity to learn and apologize if any of our behavior was out of line. We are unfamiliar with the ways of humans."

Marie forces a smile. "I am always pleased to receive members of the Volgrim inspection teams. Even the more *abrasive* ones."

With the group gathering to leave, I quickly realize all the fun is over. I don't have anything interesting left to see, so I hover down from the ceiling and fly toward the exit doors. Having witnessed all manner of incredible sights, my horizons have expanded enough to make me genuinely grasp a sliver of the Volgrim's power.

Their reach extends throughout the Milky Way. Their vision penetrates to the furthest planets.

They are my enemy. I must not underestimate them.

As I fly toward the door, a strange, disorienting feeling overtakes me. A sensation of being watched washes across my body. I turn my head just in time to see the newly arrived Psion, Confessor Vulpanix, staring directly at me.

Panic!

My mind screams in alarm. At the same instant, the Confessor lunges a hand out, as if to grab me from across the hundred-foot gap.

[Waus! O'a' sha'a! An uns'iaga!]

The Confessor's words, projected to everyone present, make me flinch. Without knowing a word of Volgrim, I immediately understand that she's warning everyone of my presence. She sees me! Not even Halamis saw me! Who the fuck is this bitch?!

Whoomph.

An invisible, telekinetic hand surges from the Confessor's grasp and grabs onto me. Like a field hare caught in the maw of a hungry wolf, my entire body goes inert. I try desperately to wiggle free, but the Psionic energy wrapping around me renders my movements ineffectual and powerless!

Hurrgh! Guh! Let me go!

I try to yell obscenities at the Volgrim, but without any vocal cords, I can't audibly protest!

Light flashes in the Confessor's hand. She slowly pulls her six-fingered claws toward her body, drawing me in. The other Psion, Halamis, leaps into action at her side and narrows his gaze, as if trying to see what she's hooked.

[Confessor! I see nothing! What intruder do you speak of?]

[Inftathufta. Yuia' Ptxthhuth assansiaasuun ut aunt ftahung nuna. Jiats ruthiat xuia' ana'gx un sha tana tlus at nuna ang haftl na! Thut a"ans tuiaft ut rughsung ftathk ghush unth'aguftta ts'angsh. I than's huftg us ftung!]

The force wrapping around my body intensifies. I struggle harder than ever, even as the Confessor pulls me closer and closer. With a sickening sense of dread, I can only watch helplessly as Halamis joins in and concentrates his psionic energy at the same spot the Confessor is aiming, doubling her grip on my soul.

They're going to catch me! I can't get away! What in the hell am I going to do?!

Focusing my mind, I look deep inside myself. There, a well of power I didn't know I had presents itself, offering me a golden opportunity. I use all of my willpower at once, detonating my spiritual energy like a bomb.

Thoom!

A blast of mana detonates from my spiritual core. Instantly, the grip on my body vanishes. The Confessor and Judicator stumble backward and fall on their asses. Before they can regain their footing, I beat a hasty retreat, leaving cartoonish afterimages in my wake as I flee for my life.

[That errant soul is getting away!] Halamis's voice yells in my mind. [After it! It can't escape the lab's confines! It can't-]

His voice fades as I zip through walls and any other obstructions in my path. I arrive at the elevator and dive down, multiplying my speed by dozens of factors.

Soon, I leave Marie and her Volgrim friends behind.

However, my panic doesn't disappear.

I somehow escaped with my life.

I barely even understand how I got away.

* * *

Minutes later, I fly inside of my body and re-enter the physical world. It takes a few seconds for me to reorient myself, but when I feel the familiar ambient energy of the non-soul world, I almost want to fall over and kiss the dirt!

"I've returned," I mutter to nobody in particular.

"Welcome back!" My mind-wife says, smiling cheerfully at me from within my Mind Realm. "I was having fun possessing your body, but I guess that's over now."

I nod. "Yeah, I guess so. Wait, you *possessed* me? How? And who's the big, muscled guy sitting across from you? Why isn't he wearing a shirt?"

My attention wanders away from Phoebe toward the tall, chiseled blonde dude leaning back in his chair while Shana sits in his lap. He absentmindedly chews on a chicken leg and smiles at me.

"Oh, you must be Jason. Welcome back to your body! Your wife was a wonderful hostess in your absence."

Phoebe throws her hands in the air and smiles helplessly. "Jason, this man here is named Samson. He's physically the second-strongest Hero who has ever walked the Earth. You missed a lot while you were gone."

I nod.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess I did."

Part 196: Samson's Strength

Samson bounces Shana on his knee. He leans back in his chair and folds his fingers over his chest, relaxing contentedly without a care in the world. To my surprise, Samson doesn't resemble the image in my head of a savage brute with incredible strength. Instead, his neatly maintained, long golden hair and beard contrast with his dignified and elegant clothes to give him the appearance of a first-century nobleman. Had he lived during my era, I could easily see him fitting the image of a studio executive or a powerful CEO. Even his simple white and red robes lend him a noble air, allowing him to disarm anyone with a single glance.

Samson aims a smile toward the ceiling where, presumably, he tries to meet my 'gaze.' "So, Jason! Did you have fun while you left? Your wife seemed to enjoy the experience of prancing about in your body."

I shake my head. *I wouldn't say I had 'fun,' but I certainly learned a lot of interesting information. I finally saw several Volgrim in the flesh. They didn't seem particularly scary at first... not until a Psion Confessor appeared. She nearly killed me with her telekinesis.*

Phoebe's smile vanishes. "What? You almost died?! That's terrible!"

It's fine, I say, glancing warily at the roof. I think I got away. Even if I didn't, I can always teleport out of here if those Psions come knocking. Speaking of which, I think we should get moving and leave this place. We've been here long enough.

Phoebe crosses her arms. "Are our lives endangered? Is the Psion who attacked you going to find us?"

I frown. *Probably not. Why?*

My wife grins, shooting me a radiant smile. "Then it's settled! We'll stay here a while longer and chat with Samson! We still have to meet all of the heroes like Marie asked us. If the Psions don't know you're here, then there's no problem!"

Phoebe... it's not that simple.

I take a few minutes to explain to Phoebe what I saw. I tell her about the four Technopaths, the Changeling, and the two Psions. I make sure to mention Umi's biological brain, as well as its restrictor chip.

The more I talk, the more Phoebe's smile fades. Eventually, all that remains is a stone-faced glare of dissatisfaction.

"Wow. You weren't kidding. Marie likes to keep her secrets close to her chest. What's all this about a 'Plague,' and why do the Volgrim care about it so much?"

I shrug. *Zombie infection? That's my best guess.*

Samson scratches his chin. "May I ask what a 'zombie' is?"

"It's a human who's come back from death, usually reanimated by a necromancer," Phoebe replies. "I thought you fought demons during your lifetime? Were there no necromancers living in your era?"

Samson tosses his hands in the air. "Demons, monsters, they were all the same to me. If they weren't human, I crushed them into meat paste with my god-given strength. I paid little attention to their appearances, let alone their powers."

Samson pauses for a split-second to tap his lip.

"Hmm, there was this *one* demon fellow — a big, brutish male who fought me to a standstill on three separate occasions. The bastard took my punches without flinching: Truly a remarkable specimen. What was his name again? Flail? Impale? I vaguely remember associating his name with 'hay' so that I wouldn't forget. Bah, 'twas such a long time ago."

Bael? I ask.

"Yes! Hay Bale! That was the one! Haha, what a chap. I never lost to 'Bale,' but I never beat him, either. My greatest regret is that I wasn't capable of settling which of us was the stronger warrior. If I could go back in time, I should love very much to resolve my one remaining life wish."

Frowning, I shoot a question at Samson. *How can something as silly as that be your biggest regret? Don't most people die wishing they could spend more time with their loved ones? Shouldn't you wish you'd killed off all the demons or something?*

Samson waves my words off nonchalantly. "No, not at all. Why should I care? I did my part. I killed thousands of demons. The Creator selected me as his champion, and I performed my task admirably. What sort of buffoon tries to take on an entire species of evil, godforsaken creatures by himself? I wasn't the only human alive back then, and I certainly didn't expect to live forever."

Samson explains his thinking process in simple, practical terms. As he continues talking, I find myself looking inward to compare my logic with his. Unlike Samson, who knew other heroes would eventually follow him, I don't have the luxury to slack off. If I die, the demons will overrun and annihilate the remnants of humanity.

On the other hand, Samson isn't exactly wrong when he says that saving the universe and exterminating the demons wasn't solely his job. Even as a mighty Hero, he was only one man out of millions. Other humans had the responsibility to stand up and fight for their lands. If I look at the similarities between us, I can reasonably conclude that my job is to empower the rest of humanity to seize their own destiny. I shouldn't have to treat myself as the only person capable of fighting the demons.

And why should I? If I'm the only human who matters, then why bother saving humanity anyway? We're all in this together, trying to survive. I can't put myself on a pedestal just to pretend I'm more important than I actually am.

In the grand scheme of the universe's lifetime, what am I, and what are humans? Mere specks of dust existing for a brief instant of time, only to fade into the wind. We haven't lived 200,000 years out of the universe's ten billion, yet we think we're *so* special.

I shake the thoughts loose from my head, only to frown in confusion as I catch the rest of what Samson is saying. "-Philistines were hardly even anything important in my life. Gods. Those stories in your 'Bible' embarrass me to no end. I can't stand when people talk about me as if I were some amazing figure who

moved mountains. I lived a reasonably normal life with a splash of divinity thrown in. I don't even consider myself all that brave."

Shana turns around while bouncing on Samson's knee. [You really brave and smart! Much better than me. Me no good at all.]

Samson sighs. "My idea of bravery is a skinny young man without a snowball's chance in hell of surviving a war, who stands up to a demon and raises his spear to protect his home. By comparison, a god-touched warrior walking a path set by the Creator is little more than a pawn. That's what I was. A fool performing a fool's errand."

Phoebe shakes her head. "I understand what you mean, but I disagree. Just because some men are born stronger than others doesn't mean they're less courageous for choosing to fight. Those who throw themselves in harm's way to protect their fellow humans deserve to be called brave just as much as when the weak stand up against the strong."

Phoebe turns in her chair to glance at the other end of the table. There, Sir Lorent sits unmoving. He leans his chin on his palm and rests his elbow on the table, a dreamy look in his eyes.

My wife shoots a question at Sir Lorent. "Don't you agree, nephew?"

Mordred's Butcher doesn't say a word. He continues to stare lazily at the wall, oblivious to her words.

"Sigh. If my nephew were awake, he would agree."

Phoebe laments Sir Lorent's distant expression, but she doesn't push the issue any further.

I clear my throat. *Ahem. So, Phoebe, you, uh, took over my body while I was away?*

"Mhm. Are you angry about that?"

Nope. Just curious how the experience 'felt' for you.

Phoebe rises from her chair and starts doing all sorts of leg and arm stretching exercises. "Welllllll, it wasn't all *that* special. I did find that being inside a seven-foot-tall body was different from how I always imagined. I couldn't walk correctly and kept tripping over myself."

Because your legs were longer than you were used to?

"Yes, plus your particular build is very... how do I put it... top-heavy?"

Huh? Are you calling me fat?

"No, no. Big-boned. Big-muscled. I found moving my arms to be pretty hard. You're not nearly as limber as me."

I cast a subconscious glance toward my biceps. *...You have a point. I'm pretty used to my body's size, though. I don't think I'd fare well suddenly changing it for the sake of flexibility.*

Pausing, I glance at Phoebe with a questioning look. *Unless you're hinting that you'd like me to change my appearance?*

Phoebe chuckles. "Haha, don't be ridiculous. I like you just the way you are."

Samson rubs his forehead. "You two remind me of myself and Delilah. I hated that woman."

"Sorry," Phoebe says, blushing. "I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable."

The Nazirite Hero sighs. After a moment, he sweeps his eyes across Phoebe's slender, muscular form. "Never mind all of that. Miss Hiro, I wanted to ask you this earlier, but now is as good a time as any. Are you a strong warrior?"

My wife cocks her head. "I suppose? Why do you ask?"

"Well, I don't mind sitting around and chatting idly, but I've been quite restless inside my artifact for tens of thousands of years. Would you do me the honor of a friendly spar?"

Phoebe widens her eyes in surprise. "I'm not opposed to the idea, but you don't seem the type of man to fight with a woman."

"Pish," Samson grunts, dismissing Phoebe's concerns with a wave of his hand. "What sort of person do you take me to be? I once met the legendary Joan of Arc a few months before her execution. I know full well how strong women can be! I won't look down on anyone just because of their sex. After that damned Delilah stabbed me in the back, I came to realize women can be just as lethal as men. Anyway, if you're up for a match, let's head outside."

Phoebe only gives his request a few seconds of consideration before nodding.

"Alright. I do enjoy a friendly joust now and then. Don't hold back! My husband is more than capable of healing us, so long as we don't instantly die."

"I wouldn't insult your honor by restraining myself," Samson says with a glint in his eye. "If anything, I'm worried I'll lose both of my arms."

Samson sets Shana down, lowering her from his knee. The little girl jumps excitedly as she follows behind the adults to leave the dining hall behind.

[Uncle Lorent! Come watch!]

Sir Lorent stirs, his attention pulled by Shana's excited chirping. He suddenly realizes people are moving and clambers out of his chair. [Hm? What's going on?]

[Mama Phoebe fight big Lamp Son!]

[Lamp Son? Don't you mean Samson?]

[Yes!]

By the time Phoebe and Samson arrive outside, my wife's nephew has already reached the doorway, where he quickly takes Shana's hand and leads her off to the side to watch from a safe distance.

* * *

Phoebe unbuckles her sword from her belt and casually tosses it to the side. Given her opponent's lack of armaments, she decides to go for a fist-fight from the very start.

Samson raises an eyebrow. "I thought you might hand me a sword. Do you wish to engage in an unarmed melee?"

"There's no need to go all-out from the start. Let our fists do the talking, and we can figure out who is the most skilled."

"Very well," Samson replies. The Ancient Israelite kneels down into a crouch and raises his fists. "...But you *do* know that my heroic aspect involves deity-level strength, don't you?"

Phoebe leans into a martial artist's pose, with her right knee flexed, and her left leg swept to the side. "My husband boosted my strength somewhat. I hope you won't mind my testing his buffs on you."

She extends her palms outward and narrows her eyes.

"Nephew, you give the signal for our match to start."

I gaze from above at the makeshift battle arena. Truth be told, it's little more than an empty, grassy field positioned outside the building my wife was just eating food at a minute ago. As an administrator of my Mind Realm, my wife possesses the power to alter and shift the dream world's structures and physical space as she desires. She must have crafted the entire arena instantly, only placing a few potted plants at the corners to signal its boundaries.

[Alright,] Sir Lorent says. [Fight until one of you concedes or cannot continue battling. A ring-out is also suitable.]

"I accept those rules," Samson says.

"As do I," Phoebe replies.

[Ready yourselves. Begin in three seconds. Two. One. Fight!]

The moment the match starts, Phoebe plants her foot in the grass and leaps forward. She dives into a roll and swings her palm up, aiming straight for Samson's face. The ancient Hero jerks back, narrowly avoids Phoebe's palm strike, and swings his fist at her head.

Whap.

Phoebe bats his hand aside with a surprisingly swift and agile movement. Unlike when she's sparred against me, I quickly recognize that she isn't holding back. Phoebe knocks aside Samson's fist with her bare hand and delivers a palm strike to his solar plexus. The Nazirite coughs slightly from the decisive attack, but Phoebe's blow doesn't injure him at all.

Samson is not only a physically intimidating hero, but a durable warrior as well. His skin and bones appear reinforced well beyond mortal limits, granting him the equivalent of living armor.

Phoebe leaps backward and performs a reverse somersault. She flips off her hands and lands on her feet, only to flinch slightly as Samson presses his advantage. He swings his fists like a wild animal, hitting her with a barrage of powerful strikes. Each blow possesses enough strength to crush granite, but Phoebe deflects most of his vicious strikes with ease.

Watching Samson fight, I get the impression that he doesn't have any formal training. His fighting style is chaotic and instinctive, as if he's only ever fought bare-knuckled brawls in back alleys his whole life. Phoebe, on the other hand, is a professionally trained knight who once fought under King Arthur. In addition, after training with several monsters and Makoto Ueda over these last six years, she's learned

several martial art styles, as well as improved her swordplay and gunplay. She's a well-rounded fighter with plenty of training.

Crack!

My heart skips a beat.

Samson finally lands a punch on Phoebe. His fist hits her straight in the ribcage and sends her sprawling backward. To my utter shock, Samson's power is even greater than I first thought. His smooth, charming smile from earlier disappears, replaced instead with an intense death-stare capable of freezing any opponent's blood.

Phoebe lands on her back and slides across the grass. Tears flow from her eyes as she gasps for breath. "Kuhuk!"

By the time she's ground to a halt, Samson has already cleared the gap. He doesn't offer a hand or pause a moment to let Phoebe catch her breath. Instead, he raises his fist and swings it at my wife, still on the ground, intending to finish her in one blow.

Swish!

Phoebe sweeps her leg out and catches Samson off-guard. She trips him and makes the leverage behind his strike lose nearly all of its power. He ends up stumbling forward and falling on top of her. Before he can climb off my wife, Phoebe gives him a mighty shove and flings the barbarian Israelite skyward.

Samson flails wildly. "Gah!"

He flies nearly twenty feet into the air before reversing direction and plummeting to the grass below. At the last second, he reorients himself in midair, spins around, and lands on his hands and feet like a housecat.

The son of a bitch is not only tough, but agile, too.

Phoebe jumps to her feet. She rubs her collarbone and winces, having suffered from Samson's single landed attack. Despite only taking one of his punches, it's clear to me that my wife can't take many more. Their fight isn't much different from a gorilla fighting a well-trained martial artist. Even with her excellent combat skills and training, I don't know if my wife can win against a legendary hero like Samson.

The two combatants quickly re-engage each other. This time, Samson makes the first move by rushing Phoebe and grabbing at her throat. Phoebe ducks his clutches, steps forward, and slams her elbow into his chest.

Crack.

Samson staggers back, wincing as Phoebe's skillfully aimed strike finds its target. Before he can react, Phoebe spins around and swings her foot out. She twirls her leg in a reverse-roundhouse kick toward Samson's shoulder, striking it with the strength of a battering ram.

A meaty *thunk* rings out as her boot meets Samson's shoulder. He cries out in pain and goes flying to his right, only to tumble across the grass and land on his gut.

Phoebe inhales and exhales twice, flaring her nostrils each time. She winces yet again after rubbing her collarbone. Despite her perfectly aimed attacks, Samson still leaps to his feet a moment later and shrugs off her savage blows as if they did nothing to him.

"I was right about you," Samson says. "You *are* strong. Not quite as strong as me, but your quick-thinking and excellent training helps bridge the gap. I'm having fun!"

Phoebe smiles. "I am, too. I shudder to think how poorly I would fare if your moves were less predictable. Have you never trained under a master?"

Samson cracks his neck. "No. I never needed one. After all, no other human stood a chance against me. The only beings capable of threatening me were Demon Emperors. Ironically, my death came at the hands of that damned she-devil, Delilah. No amount of training could save me from the machinations of a woman twice scorned."

"I see. Well, unfortunately, my husband isn't allowed to leave with your artifact. If he could, I'd love to train you to my level."

Samson's death-glare fades. He stands up a little straighter and slackens his posture. "Aye. Training with such a lovely teacher would boost my spirits significantly. I'm hardly a battle-maniac, but living all by myself for several eternities left me wishing for the sweet release of death. The only thing I fear in this world is boredom!"

"Haha," Phoebe laughs, echoing Samson's movements. She, too, relaxes her fighting posture. It seems the two of them have agreed to end their sparring match without deciding an official winner. Looking at how the match played out, I have to assume my wife would ultimately lose, given her inability to hurt Samson. The guy is simply too sturdy. "Boredom is, indeed, one of the many aspects of life which ails all men. At least you've come to terms with your past. You're better off than some of the other heroes Jason and I have met."

Samson walks over to Phoebe. He holds his fist out, and she meets it with a light tap from hers — giving each other a fistbump.

"Hah, I wouldn't say I've rid myself of all my demons," Samson chuckles. "Delilah's actions haunt me to this very day. I've never stopped thinking about that damned- tch, never mind. I hate speaking about her."

Phoebe cocks her head. "What did Delilah do? You called her a backstabber before, but the more you bring her up, the more curious I become. If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, too."

An awkward silence follows.

Samson shifts his feet a couple of times before eventually clearing his throat.

"Erm. Ahem. Well, as I told you before, my strength comes from the length of my hair. The longer it grows, the more my power increases. Delilah figured this out and spent some time plotting behind my back. The night before I planned to set out on a demon hunting excursion, she tricked me into drinking contaminated wine. When I fell asleep, she cut off all my hair. I awoke to find myself in chains, being

dragged away by Philistine debtors from my younger years. One thing led to another, and eventually, I pulled a building down on top of myself to rid the world of those damned backstabbers."

Samson shakes his head.

"My biggest regret is that the harlot who betrayed me didn't perish under the temple's collapse. I would have liked watching the life ebb from her eyes. I loved that woman... but in the end, she turned against me. Everyone did."

For the first time since meeting him, I get the distinct impression that Samson isn't just a fun-loving guy with big muscles and a handsome face. He's bitter and resentful. Whatever life he once lived, he lost it when a woman tricked him and left him naked and defenseless before people who wished harm upon him.

Samson paid the price for that betrayal with his death.

If I were in his shoes, I couldn't imagine moving on and accepting my fate without any lingering psychological trauma. Perhaps a hundred thousand years living by himself helped Samson come to terms with his unfortunate demise.

Phoebe twirls her hair around her finger. "Well, Samson, if it makes you feel any better, at least you outlived Delilah. She died millennia ago. In my opinion, that means you had the last laugh."

"No. I didn't," Samson mutters. "I don't know how she died. She probably lived long enough to witness the birth of her grandchildren. She may have even passed with a smile on her face. So long as I don't know, I'll never be at peace."

Phoebe falls into step beside Samson as they head back indoors. A moment later, Lorent and Shana follow along behind them.

"I'm sorry," Phoebe says, her voice low. "I wish I could grant you a measure of peace, but I don't have that power."

As they step indoors, Samson turns to look at my wife. A curious glint appears in his eyes. "It's funny, Miss Hiro. From the first moment I arrived in this 'Mind Realm,' I noticed that your appearance wasn't all that different from Delilah's. Even your voice is similar. Your short-cropped white hair, and the way you walk is reminiscent of that harpie. When I look at you, I can't help but remember the memories I shared with her."

Phoebe raises her gaze. She turns to look at Samson, only to spot the strange look in his eyes. "I... I don't follow. Surely, you don't think I'm the same woman who once betrayed you?"

"No. I don't."

Samson averts his eyes.

"But... fate is a strange thing, don't you agree? I've always considered myself a calm, logical man. I fought with my fists but never resorted to ignoring the voice in the back of my head. And right now, despite all the logical thoughts telling me you aren't Delilah--"

WHAM!

Before Phoebe can react, Samson whirls around and aims his fist at her head. He smashes my wife in the face and sends her flying to the side, where she plows into a wall and comes to a shuddering stop!

"Phoebe!" I yell, my heart skipping a beat.

"-I can't help but hate everything about you," Samson says, finishing his sentence with a saddened smile.

All hell breaks loose. Sir Lorent immediately leaps at the hulking superhuman, Samson, and tries to land a decisive punch on the back of his head. However, Samson spins on his heel and punches Lorent in the stomach, sending him hurtling backward, where he crashes into Shana. Both of them go tumbling onto the grass outside.

Everything happens so fast; I barely have a moment to react. However, as soon as I realize what's happened, I quickly begin wordsmithing. **"Heal! Heal! Heal! Suppress! STOP!"**

I rapidly fire off words of power, targeting my unmoving wife and her two companions, before wrapping Samson in a powerful telekinetic barrier to seal his movements. I finish with a word of power intended to freeze him in place.

However, the moment my final word targets Samson, a shudder runs through my body. My mana plummets by an alarming amount, and I can only watch in horror as Samson leaps at Phoebe's barely conscious form and raises his fist. "Not today, Wordsmith!"

Phoebe opens her eyes and shoves away from the wall at the last second, causing Samson's fist to smash against the floor and rattle the building's foundations.

Phoebe pushes herself off the ground and leaps to her feet. Even with my regenerative word of power having worked its magic, she still appears shaken by Samson's sudden sneak attack.

"You... you piece of trash!" Phoebe barks. "Why would you hit me?! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

Samson's expression becomes cold and distant. He spins to face my wife, and the emotionless void on his face sends a chill through both of our hearts.

"Sorry, Miss Hiro. I know my hatred isn't logical... but I've lived with it for longer than you can possibly imagine. If I don't kill you now, I don't think I'll ever recover my sanity. I hate Delilah, and I hate you, too. I hate all women. Your kind are worthless, parasitic trash."

Samson leaps at Phoebe. He swings his fists wildly, but unlike before, I detect a deeper underlying strategy behind his attacks. He batters Phoebe from left to right, but she only manages to deflect half of his strength.

"Stop! Confusion! Teleport!" I yell, trying to slow down or distract Samson in his tracks. To my disbelief, each word of power I aim at him drains my mana explosively, forcing me to crush a mana bead and recover my strength! In contrast, Samson's movements slow noticeably, but nowhere near the extent I intended.

My third word of power teleports Samson to the opposite end of the room, causing his swinging fist to batter a wall and rattle the building's foundations once again. Samson immediately realizes what's

happened. He spins on his heel and dives across the table to leap at Phoebe. "You're a pain in my ass, Wordsmith! I'll kill your wife if it's the last thing I do!"

The fuck you will! I bark back. "**Sleep! Sleep! Sleep!**"

This time, I target Samson's mind, hitting him with the same word of power thrice. Once again, my spells drain far more mana than I expected, forcing me to absorb a second mana bead.

Samson stumbles slightly. His head swims, but to my absolute astonishment, he continues swinging at Phoebe, battering her with the strength of a hurricane. He doesn't fall asleep, but instead merely swoons for a moment before regaining his senses.

What the hell is going on? Why isn't my Wordsmithing affecting him?!

Phoebe coughs blood as Samson swings his fist into her gut. He strikes her so hard that she crashes through the wall and flies outside, hitting the ground with an agonizing *whump!* Hardly has Phoebe landed before Samson pounces at her again and raises his fist.

Unable to figure out why my magic isn't affecting Samson, I focus my energy on Phoebe instead. "**Teleport! Heal! Strengthen!**"

Phoebe vanishes, disappearing before Samson can hit her. He swings his fist down and pounds the grass, summoning a small crater where my wife once lay. Phoebe reappears atop the dining hall's roof, allowing her body to instantly regenerate and strengthen itself, bolstering her power and defense by a factor of three.

"Cough, cough," Phoebe wheezes. "That bastard lied... he... he hid his skills from me! He only pretended to fight like a wild animal! Fucking hell- cough, cough."

Tears well up in Phoebe's eyes.

"Jason. We have to kill him. Samson's lost his mind. He's gone down the path of evil. Disregard everything he said earlier. He's our enemy."

I agree, I say, glancing around Marie's hall of artifacts. To my surprise, Momo is nowhere to be seen. I don't know where she went or when she left. *We have a problem, though. No matter what I try, I can't seem to slow down or hurt Samson with words of power. It's like he's ignoring more than 90% of my magic.*

Phoebe rolls to the side and peers over the roof's edge. In the courtyard below, Samson whirls around, looking everywhere for her. "Come out, Phoebe! I won't rest until I kill you!"

My wife slinks backward, avoiding his gaze. "Jason. I can't fight Samson alone, and if you can't kill him with your Wordsmithing, I'll need someone else's help. Where did my nephew and Shana go?"

My heart skips a beat. I quickly pan my omniscient vision around the Mind Realm, only to find Sir Lorent and Shana hiding behind a small shrub. Samson paces around, looking for Phoebe, but he stands less than twenty feet away! Sir Lorent and Shana are in great danger!

"**Teleport. Teleport.**"

I speak again, sending both of them to Phoebe's side. Their hearts leap into their throats as they whirl around to see their surroundings change. However, upon spotting Phoebe, both Sir Lorent and Shana heave a sigh of relief.

[Mama Phoebe!] Shana cries out, relief evident on her face.

[My precious aunt, I'm glad you've survived,] Lorent says. His expression hardens as he takes a knee on the roof and makes himself harder to see. [What a coward that Samson turned out to be. I had my suspicions, but I didn't expect such a swift, underhanded attack from a Hero of his caliber.]

"None of us did," Phoebe replies. "Jason. Boost my nephew's strength and defense. I'll work together with him to kill Samson."

That's dangerous, I reply. Besides, you know me. I don't want to kill Samson unless we absolutely must. Subduing him will prove a lot harder, so I want you to stay down for the moment. I'll take him out myself.

Phoebe's gaze hardens. "That won't work, Jason. You already told me your magic didn't affect Samson. You won't be able to take him out."

As long as you're safe, I reply, I will have plenty of options at my disposal. Sit tight.

Without waiting for Phoebe's reply, I manipulate my omniscient vision to leap over the roof and hover above Samson.

Samson. I'll give you one chance to back down. If you don't, I'll make you regret meeting me.

"Haha. Do you think I care, Wordsmith?" Samson asks. He aims his eyes skyward, seemingly meeting my gaze. "I've suffered in solitude for 100,000 years. Death doesn't frighten me. I swore that if I ever had a chance, I'd wring the life from Delilah's pretty little neck. I don't care if she's gone; your wife will do just fine."

You're insane, I mutter. Phoebe did nothing to you. Stop with your evil ways. Stop right this instant... or else.

A dark smile washes over Samson's face.

"Do your worst."

Enraged, I aim my mind at the Nazirite's soul. **"Impale! Impale!"**

Two metal spears form on Samson's right and left. In the blink of an eye, they rush at his chest, aiming for his heart and liver. Samson expertly spins around, grabs the spears, and stops their momentum in midair.

"Ah, two weapons. These will make for nice skewers when I use them on your wife," Samson says, a nasty grin forming on his lips.

Before he can make another move, I yell again. **"Cage! Collapse! Disperse!"**

A metal cage, forged of nigh-unbreakable iron, instantly appears around the ancient Israelite. A second later, it folds inward and wraps around him like a steel-born octopus. Finally, my last word of power aims

to teleport the Hero back to his artifact, forcing him out of my mind.

However, the third word fails.

Samson growls angrily as the steel cage wraps his body tightly. He struggles to move his arms, but no matter how he thrashes, he can't break free.

"Haha! You won't kill me, Wordsmith! The most you'll do is slow me down! Your wife has already told me about your weaknesses; how you can't bear to end another person's life! You're soft! Stupid women always betray their men!"

Samson raises his eyes skyward to laugh at me. However, as he does, he spots a hint of motion on the dining room's roof.

Phoebe!

Samson's gaze locks onto the top of my wife's head as she peers over the roof's edge.

"Oho! I found you!"

A surge of adrenaline rushes through Samson's body. He flexes his muscles and pulls his arms apart, snapping the steel bars enveloping him with nothing but his raw strength. An instant later, he presses his feet against the grass and leaps skyward, toward the roof.

Phoebe yelps in surprise. "He's coming!"

Samson clears the gap frighteningly fast. The instant before he reaches my wife, I yell out, "**WALL!**"

A barrier made of the same material as the cage from before appears in midair.

Thunk.

Samson smashes against the barrier, totally unprepared for its appearance. He swears like a sailor as he falls to the ground and the wall follows after him. "Fucking Wordsmith! Eat shit!"

The ancient Hero hits the dirt with a *thud*. A split-second later, the wall crash-lands atop Samson, flattening him into the ground with a tremendous *crash!*

All goes silent.

Phoebe and Lorent stare, wide-eyed, at the scene below them.

"Samson still lives," Phoebe says. "You tried, Jason, but Samson has a death wish. Now is not the time to hesitate. Boost my nephew while you still can."

I sigh. *Alright.* "**Strengthen! Strengthen! Perception! Speed!**"

My words of power send magical energy into my mind, where they impact Lorent and boost his physical abilities to Phoebe's level. I quickly follow-up by giving him a gigantic butcher's axe, one identical to his heroic artifact. "**Axe!**"

Now fully equipped, Lorent and Phoebe stand a few feet apart. Mordred's Butcher shoots a glance at Shana. [Leave, little one. It is not safe here.]

[Okay!]

I teleport her to another place in my Mind Realm, protecting her with a heavily reinforced metal structure.

The moment we finish our preparations, the gigantic Wordsmithed wall in the courtyard shifts slightly, then gets flung aside as Samson uses his demigod-tier strength to hurl it away. He jumps to his feet and scowls.

"The three of you working together are more than my match. But at least this way, I can die in battle. I won't have to suffer in solitude any longer!"

Phoebe taps her chest. "You can still stand down, Samson. We don't have to fight. I'm not Jason. He might hold back for fear of shedding blood, but I won't."

[Nor will I,] Sir Lorent adds. [Today need not end in bloodshed. If you continue to fight us, I can promise that you will not win.]

Samson smirks. "It doesn't matter if the Wordsmith increased your strength. You'll never beat me. You know neither the true extent of my power, nor my hidden abilities. Come. Talk is cheap."

Samson coils power into his legs. He leaps toward the rooftop once again, but this time, I allow him to close the distance.

A thought appears in the back of my mind.

If Samson's power comes from his hair... then can't I simply cut it?

The thought makes me want to laugh. Before Samson can clash with Phoebe and Lorent, I speak a word of power. "**Bald!**"

This time, my word of power connects with its target. Samson's hair vanishes, transforming him into the spitting image of a Shaolin monk.

Phoebe's eyes widen. Sir Lorent's expression turns to one of shock.

However, Samson grins like a wild animal.

"Haha... fools."

CRASH!

Samson smashes into my wife with three times the strength he did before. His fist connects with her chest like a wrecking ball with a concrete wall. Phoebe tries to block Samson's attack, but his savage blow sends her hurtling backward, unable to retaliate. She plunges off the opposite side of the roof and careens toward the ground below, only giving me a split-second to teleport her to safety.

What follows is a brutally savage battle as Samson, somehow ten times stronger than before, begins tearing apart Sir Lorent with ease. Even empowered with my magic, Sir Lorent barely puts up a fight as the monstrous Israelite beats him around like a professional boxer facing off against a small child. Sir Lorent swings his axe down and manages to slash Samson's chest, but Samson ignores the cut entirely. He strikes Lorent's shoulder and breaks his arm, causing Phoebe's nephew to scream in pain. "Gaaaugh!"

"Teleport! Heal!"

I teleport Lorent away, but to my astonishment, Samson swivels his head toward the direction I sent Phoebe and her nephew. "Haha. I see them, Jason. I see them both!"

Having hid my wife and her nephew on the opposite side of my Mind Realm's 'city,' I can only hazard a guess as to how Samson knows where they are.

Samson closes his eyes. A moment later, he vanishes.

Rumble.

My entire body shakes. Waves of agony burst out inside my brain. Every inch of my skull cries out in pain!

I stumble forward and fall to my knees. Cold sweat covers my skin as my thoughts turn scatterbrained. I lose the connection to my Mind Realm, leaving me grasping at the air.

What happened? How did cutting Samson's hair make him so much stronger?! Why can't I hit the son of a bitch with my Wordsmithing?!

Recalling our earlier conversation, it takes me several seconds of contemplation to understand the truth.

Samson lied to Phoebe and me from the very beginning.

His hair isn't his weakness. He isn't a simple-minded, bare-knuckle brawler. He's a man with animal cunning who lived during a time of war. He's highly intelligent, shrewd, and a calculating liar.

The pieces fall into place.

"Connect."

I speak a word of power and instantly re-establish a link to my Mind Realm.

There, a heartbreaking, soul-crushing sight awaits me.

Samson grins menacingly at my wife and her nephew. Both of them lay limp in his grasp, unmoving. He clutches them by their throats, an expression of glee covering his face.

"I've waited a long time for this. Squeezing the life from Delilah's body was all I ever wanted after I died. You aren't her, stupid woman, but you'll do just fine."

Seeing my wife in Samson's grasp, something snaps inside me.

I won't let anyone hurt my family. Not now. Not ever.

This bastard lied to us. He betrayed us. And now, he wants to kill my mind-wife.

Fuck him.

Fuck everything he stands for.

"Dissolve."

I speak a word of power. However, instead of aiming my mind at Samson, I target his artifact in the real world instead.

The jawbone of an ass.

Instantly, Samson's meaty hands, still wrapped around Phoebe and Lorent's throat, lose their grip.

"Urgh! What?! My body... it won't..."

Samson's artifact shudders. The ossein comprising its foundation trembles for a moment before evaporating away, fading to dust.

"Aaaaaugh!!"

Samson drops his victims. He stumbles backward as his arms and legs lose their strength. A moment later, he flops to the ground, his eyes twitching wildly.

"Wordsmith... Wordsmith... you fucking.... bastard! I won't die... die this easily... I'll kill her! I'll-!"

The ancient Israelite stops mid-sentence. His pupils dilate, and his jaw slackens.

Without saying another word, his body fades away.

Samson, the former Hero of a long-distant age, perishes to my power.

* * *

I stare for several seconds at the spot where his body disappeared.

"Heal. Heal."

Without giving the matter any more thought, I speak two words of power, restoring my wife and her nephew's lives. They jerk up, gasping for breath.

"Guh! Where... where did Samson go?!"

Slowly, I lick my lips.

Samson is dead, Phoebe. I... I killed him.

Phoebe raises her head to the sky. She stares through my Mind Realm into my eyes.

"Jason...? You did...?"

I nod.

Yeah. I had to. Don't worry. I won't ever let anything happen to you. I only did what I had-

Suddenly, my thoughts freeze up. A burst of nausea strikes my gut as the realization of what I've done finally hits me.

"Burgh... blech!"

I stumble forward and vomit all over the ground. Over and over, I heave my guts, unable to stop myself.

Tears well up in my eyes.

What have I done?

I killed someone.

I murdered Samson.

Even if it was to protect my wife, the decision rips me apart from the inside-out.

This changes everything.

Part 197: Consequences

Every part of my body trembles and shakes. I stare silently at my feet, where a pile of dust rests: the final remnants of Samson's artifact.

I killed him.

I killed Samson, then watched as he screamed in pain and faded away.

Yet, it isn't guilt rattling my nerves, nor my conscience tearing me apart from the inside out.

No.

Instead, my trembling comes as a result of the realization that... in some way... deep inside myself...

I enjoyed killing Samson.

He tried to murder my wife, her nephew, and an innocent little girl. He was a monster. I wanted to subdue him, but I couldn't. In the end, I disintegrated his artifact into ash and sent his soul scattering to the Great Beyond.

Samson, by all measurements, deserved to die. I acted in self-defense. I only killed him because I had no choice.

But even so... even if that is true... why do I feel a sickening sensation building up inside me? How could I possibly enjoy killing another human being, even in self-defense? Why do my actions worry me?

...Because, after reflecting on what I've done, I have come to understand myself a little better.

Growing up, I was a nobody. I passed from one school to another, never making friends, always being bullied. I lived in fear of those with power. I grew to resent them. I envied superheroes, those godlike beings who could level mountains and protect themselves with ease. They punished evildoers and protected the righteous.

But, now, I realize those reasons were only my excuses for envying them.

In truth, I resented my lack of power; of agency.

I didn't have to kill Samson. I'm a fucking Wordsmith! My power is practically limitless. Even if I couldn't target him with my magic directly, I could have tried inspecting him to find a weakness. I could have boosted Phoebe and Lorent to levels surpassing Samson.

Hell, I should have teleported Samson's artifact out of my sight! Once it was a certain distance away, I would have forced him out of my mind!

But I didn't do any of those things. I chose the easy path. I chose the *lazy* path.

Killing Samson wasn't difficult. I spoke a single word and instantly ended his life. He couldn't retaliate at all.

Looking back at my life, I now see my greatest flaw. I always choose the path of least resistance. I use my Wordsmithing mindlessly, like a dog trained to sit on command. I barely put any effort into honing my

craft or learning new techniques.

Wordsmithing is a tool capable of changing the universe. What self-respecting artist learns how to draw a stickman but never evolves his craft beyond that level? How can I call myself a Hero when I don't put in the effort to improve myself?

I made a mistake today. I let myself take the path of least resistance. But I won't do it again.

From now on, I must work my hardest to walk the road less traveled. I can't allow myself to give in to my weaknesses.

After all... it would be all too easy to kill someone else like I did Samson. Maybe Satan. Maybe Amelia. Maybe even... Ose.

Ose is the current leader of demonkind. I need to approach her to offer a peace treaty. But what if she turns me down? What if she attacks or threatens me? Should I kill her, too?

No!

NO!

I can't allow myself to kill ever again.

Not because I'm trying to be a 'good guy,' but because of how much easier each murder will become! Now that I've killed once, the second murder will be much easier. Then, the third. The fourth. The fifth. And so on!

By the time I realize what I've done, it will be too late. I won't be 'me' anymore, but something else. *Someone* else.

A monster.

* * *

Slowly, I blink my eyes. I look away from the pile of dust at my feet toward the vast, empty chamber of artifacts. Without Momo here, I feel completely alone.

"Phoebe. We need to leave."

My wife shakes her head. "I know Samson nearly killed us, but that doesn't mean the other heroes will. He was a broken, bitter man, Jason. We still need to complete Marie's request."

I shake my head. "No. We're done. I never intended to spend as much time here as I already have. Besides, those Volgrim might still be looking for me. I can't trust Marie not to sell me out, or at least not to give me more trouble. I'll leave a note with Momo about the artifacts we've inspected and tell Marie we can always come back later. I can't delay our original mission any longer."

My wife opens her mouth to protest, but changes her mind and sighs. "Alright, Jason. Truth be told, my heart is still pounding like a blacksmith's hammer. I don't think I'd have lived if you hadn't taken drastic action. You saved my life."

I close my eyes. "You're my wife, Phoebe. I'd do anything for you."

Phoebe looks to her left, where Sir Lorent stands silently, watching her converse with me. "I don't know. I'm not the real Phoebe, after all. I'm just a copy made to protect your mind. You don't need to get all overdramatic on my account."

"Quit saying stuff like that," I counter. "You're not 'just' anything. I love you as much as the original Phoebe. You're both equal in my eyes."

Phoebe blushes. "If... if you say so."

"I do."

I pull myself to my feet and step out of my Wordsmithed chair. "**Erase.**"

My seat vanishes, leaving nothing but Samson's dust in the room. Swallowing my doubts, I close my eyes for a few minutes to compile a letter in my mind. Then, I speak a word of power.

"**Note.**"

A piece of paper appears in my grasp. I raise my hand and read the message to confirm its contents.

Marie. I examined several of your artifacts. You'll be delighted to know that among them is a lady named Mad Madam Mildred, along with Caesar Augustus, Kyle Tucker, Kasim, and Karla. Madam Mildred's heroic power somehow allowed her to contact other artifacts. She informed me that those four Heroes were 'worth her time,' whatever that means. However, I also discovered a Hero named Samson. He nearly killed Shana and Sir Lorent, the two heroes I told you about earlier. I had no choice but to kill him...

The letter continues detailing my recent exploits. At no point do I address the Volgrim I witnessed in my soul form.

I'll save them for the next time we speak.

After evaluating the message, I nod to myself and speak another word of power. "**Envelope.**"

I place the letter inside, heave a sigh, and head toward the artifact chamber's exit. Just before stepping out, I speak to the emptiness surrounding me. "I don't know if you can hear me, Mildred, but I hope we'll meet again. Farewell for now."

I follow up by shrinking Sir Lorent's axe with a word of power, then hanging his relic on Shana's necklace, both of which I keep wrapped around my neck.

Just before I leave the room, I cast one final spell.

"**Waypoint.**"

* * *

A minute later, I stride down the small complex's hallways, looking both left and right for Momo. However, no matter what rooms I glance inside, I can't find her.

Dining area? Nope.

Recreational center, with games and stuff? Nope.

Bathroom? Uh... well, I don't hear anything. I'm not going to peep inside. She's probably not in there.

Frowning, I continue heading toward the exit. I slow to a stop in front of Momo's bedroom, where the stuffed animals lay atop her bed in a neat arrangement.

The entire room appears childish, almost as if someone designed it for a six-year-old, not a 100,000-year-old demoness. Its cute pink wallpaper and vibrant atmosphere gives off an atmosphere vastly different from what I noticed of Momo's personality. Maybe Marie wanted the room to comfort her, since Momo seems to live down here all alone.

Cautiously, I approach Momo's doorway. I don't notice any sounds inside her room, but still, I find myself peeking around the corner.

"Ahem. Momo? Are you in here...? Aw, fuck!"

My gaze instantly falls on Momo's nude body. She stands upright inside a pod not dissimilar to my cryopod, but without any freezing liquid inside it. With her eyes closed, she appears to be in a meditative trance, or possibly sleeping...

I quickly jump backward and pull out of the room. I rub my eyes frantically. "Shit, shit, don't kill me, Phoebe! Christ, I knew I shouldn't be looking inside a young girl's room. What the hell is wrong with me?!"

Phoebe facepalms. "It's fine, Jason. I don't know what the Satyr is doing, but she probably should have closed her door. Just leave the note in front of her doorway, and we'll pretend you never saw anything."

"Augh! But I did. Man, I feel like such a creep."

Not wanting to spend another moment lurking in front of Momo's doorway, I set the letter down and walk away. As I do, Phoebe pipes up.

"When we first came here, Marie mentioned that if Momo didn't find a male with whom she could copulate, her body would explode from the buildup of her mana. Marie went on to add that she had developed a method to release Momo's mana buildup. I suspect that is what she was doing. She must have been releasing her mana inside that machine."

"Yeah, probably," I mumble. "Either way, it's none of my business."

"No, it isn't," Phoebe says, laughing into her palm. "But, I do love it when you turn beet-red!"

"Ugh."

* * *

Leaving Momo's room behind, I begin heading down the corridor toward the lower facility's exit. As I walk, I utter words of power periodically.

"Observe. Detect. Search."

I leave Marie's underground laboratory and begin walking through the various hallways toward her elevator. While walking, I keep an eye out for the Volgrim. If they come within a mile of me, I'll pick them out instantly. Having used my Wordsmithing like a radar system in the past, I'm still adept at utilizing my spherical vision to its maximum effectiveness.

Eventually, I arrive at the elevator. Only now do I remember it's still at the top of the shaft, tens of miles above me. With a labored sigh, I tap my foot and frown.

"Should I return to the Labyrinth with my Wordsmithing? What do you think, Phoebe? It'll probably take a lot of mana. I'm not even sure if I can pull it off."

I turn my vision inward to see Phoebe and Shana sitting on a bed. My mind-wife wraps an arm around Shana's shoulder while quietly reading a book. Upon hearing my question, Phoebe glances upward to meet my gaze.

"Marie wouldn't create an elevator which couldn't be called to the bottom of the shaft. Look around! I bet there's a terminal somewhere to summon it here."

After answering my question, Phoebe returns her attention to the book in her hand. "...Jack tripped and fell, spilling the pail of water. Jill came tumbling down, and both of them ended up sprawled on the ground."

[They clumsy!] Shana laughs. [Need watch step!]

"Yes, indeed. Oh, I just thought of something! After Jason visits this Ose lady, why don't I teach you English? We'll be able to communicate better. Won't that be nice?"

[Ya! Ya! Me want learn!] Shana babbles, her eyes lighting up with excitement. [Me smart! Mama teach me words!]

I retract my gaze, leaving Phoebe to her devices. A smile creeps onto my face at the thought that my mind-wife has a daughter in the same way my 'real' wife has Daisy. I feel a little better knowing Phoebe has someone with whom she can share my Mind Realm. Phoebe also has her nephew for company, too.

It doesn't take me more than half a minute to hunt around the hallway before I locate a small recess in the wall. When I press it, a computer panel pops out with a few buttons. To my surprise, the options for raising and lowering the lift are greyed out.

Lift in motion.

The message on the screen catches my attention. I quietly examine the readouts, only to widen my eyes in surprise.

"The lift is moving. Someone has already traveled half the length of the elevator shaft. But who, I wonder?"

Speaking more to myself than Phoebe, I vocalize my thoughts, then turn my attention skyward. **"Examine."**

My vision shifts as a targeted word of power surges through hundreds of thousands of tons of rock and dirt toward the rapidly descending elevator. Eventually, my magic reaches the car and its occupants, revealing something unexpected.

"Oh, wow! I thought I'd find Marie or the Volgrim inside, but instead, it's Kar and Blinker! Did Marie send Kar to meet me?"

"Maybe," Phoebe says, her tone uncertain. "After all, the Volgrim emissaries are probably keeping her busy. If they chose to immediately attack you, that must mean they consider you a high priority target. Marie can't just break away from them."

Phoebe's explanation allows me to relax. I lean against the wall and wait for ten minutes as the glass elevator cabin drops travels toward me. Finally, a distant hissing of wind catches my attention. In the blink of an eye, the elevator car arrives at the bottom of the shaft, slows rapidly, and comes to an abrupt halt. Going from more than a hundred miles an hour to an instant screeching stop might ordinarily injure the cabin's occupants, but Marie's internal dampeners prevent that from happening.

The moment the elevator arrives, Kar's surprised face greets me. He stares through the glass doors as they hiss open, a dumbfounded look on his face. "Hurgh?! Turtle! How long have you been standing here? Mother said you would be waiting for me inside a secret room. She even gave me a map!"

Kar raises his palm to reveal a holographic transmitter, but before I can reply, Blinker darts off Kar's shoulder and rushes over to flutter in my face.

"Forget that boring stuff! Jason, Jason! Guess who just became a queen?!"

I raise an eyebrow. "Uh... you...?"

"No, silly! I did! Me! I'm a queen now, boo-yah! My brothers and sisters are gonna be SOOOO jealous! Aren't you excited?! You're standing in the presence of genuine, bonafide royalty, baby! Whoo!"

Blinker buzzes around my head, babbling like an excited ten-year-old who just got the latest video game for her birthday. I nod along, unsure of how to reply in the face of such intense excitement.

"Uh, congratulations! Yeah. Good job, Blinker."

I pause.

"...How exactly did you become a queen? I feel like I'm missing something."

Kar steps out of the elevator and scratches the back of his head. "Haha... forgive my wife, for she is simply too excited to speak properly. You see, Turtle, King Ghidorah brought me before all of the lizardmen to perform the sacred Ascension Ceremony. He gave up his crown to me in acknowledgment of my power as the Sphinx. He made me the ruler of the lizards!"

My jaw drops. "Seriously? Wow! Good for you, Kar. You've earned it."

"Damn straight!" Blinker yells. She lands on my shoulder and starts dancing a jig. "Ooh, yeah, that's right! I'm the queen now! Uh-huh! Check me out!"

Kar smiles. "Hurgh. As I am now king, my wife naturally becomes the queen of the lizards. I do not know why Butterfly is so excited over a title, but if she is happy, then I am as well."

I smile. "You two are so incredibly wholesome to watch."

Kar nods. "It is because of my wife's radiance that I can bear such a heavy burden. Now, tell me, Turtle... why have you left the secret room? Mother told me you would likely spend several days speaking to the Great Spirits."

"Great Spirits, huh?" I mutter. "Well... something happened. One of those *Great Spirits* attacked my mind. I barely managed to subdue him, and it was at a great cost to my morals. After that incident, I didn't feel like sticking around anymore. I still need to visit Ose and request a peace treaty. The longer we delay here, the higher the risk Tarus II faces."

"Hmm... I understand what you mean..." Kar trails off, and a look of worry passes over his face. "...but Mother said-"

"You can stay here if you like," I reply, interrupting him. "But I can't. I have my own problems. If Marie needs my help, she can get it later. The demons won't stand idly after launching an attack on our planet, or have you already forgotten how they sent a Hydra to attack us?"

Kar shakes his head. "No. I have not forgotten. Big Boobs ended up in a coma because of the demons. I must pay them back in full for their treachery."

A slight pressure on my shoulder makes me turn my head. There, I see Blinker standing with her arms crossed. "Hmph! Jerk-faced demons! Sammy saved my life when Beelzebub attacked us. I'll never forgive anyone who hurts her! I'll give 'em heck! I'll tear 'em limb from limb! Just you wait and see!"

"Haha, I'm sure you will," I reply. "Come on, guys. There's no sense standing around and doing nothing."

I walk past Kar to enter the elevator, and he follows after me.

"Turtle. Regarding my ascension to King of the Lizards, the ceremony was quite elaborate. I wish you had been there to witness it."

I nod along to Kar's words. However, a second later, something occurs to me. After tapping the command to send the elevator upward, I turn to look at Kar.

And then I notice something shocking.

Kar is *bigger* than when I last saw him.

Not only is he several inches taller, but his muscles bulge in an even more exaggerated manner than they usually do. His eyes give off a piercing gaze, revealing a certain animal cunning I've never seen in him before.

"Observe."

I speak a word of power, one which shifts my vision in such a way that I can observe the mana flowing in the world around me.

Instantly, a white-hot light radiating from Kar's chest causes me to stagger backward. "Ah!"

Ever since Solomon started training me six years ago, he taught me to observe the relative power of my opponents and to estimate their strength not only based on their stature, but their mana levels as well.

Without a doubt, Kar is three times more powerful than when I last saw him. The amount of mana radiating from his body dwarfs mine by several factors!

"Holy shit, Kar! Did you take some steroids? You might be as strong as the top Demon Dukes!"

Kar crosses his arms and leans back against the elevator's glass walls with a look of smug satisfaction etched into his face. "Hurgh. When we left the Core, I told you I was the brains and the brawn of our little party. Now you can finally see the difference between us! King Ghidorah gave me his sacred energy, allowing me to ascend to the height of reptilian power."

"That's right!" Blinker yells, her squeaky voice carrying a sense of pride. "Kar is stronger than ever! If he fought that Beelzebastard from six years ago, he'd rip that little punk to pieces in three seconds flat! Just wait until you see the new technique King Ghidorah gave-"

"Butterfly!" Kar yells, hastily interrupting his wife. "There is no need to speak of that little trifle. Hurgh. We will visit Emperor Ose soon. If that snake tries anything, Turtle will find out just how much I've grown! Hehe. Save the surprises for later."

Blinker covers her mouth. "Oops! Teehee! I can't help bragging about how kick-butt my husband is! At this rate, Phoebe's going to feel *preetty* jealous when we get back. Not everyone can have a guy like Kar!"

With a long, exaggerated sigh, I roll my eyes. "I think you guys are greatly overestimating Phoebe's love of muscles. Trust me on this one: She likes me just the way I am."

Hardly have the words left my mouth before my mind-wife pipes up. "Well, it's not like you can't improve *some* things about yourself. Nobody's perfect, stud."

Shush!

I quickly fire off a single word at Phoebe and try not to facepalm out of embarrassment.

As the lift ascends, I continue chatting with Kar and Blinker about various things, both large and small.

Eventually, Kar tells me something that startles me.

Immediately, I retort. "How could the demons do that? I know they view the lizardmen as pests, but... why would they launch an attack on your people with such hostile intentions?"

Kar shakes his head. "The demons at large do not care about the reptilians, Turtle. Only two demons continue to hunt us like rats. They are known as the Battle Brothers, Duriel, and Zamiel. They exterminated my species, the crocodiles. Now, they are aiming to eliminate the lizards as well. King Ghidorah begged me to accept his power and take over his position as Lizard King. He wishes for Butterfly and me to return home after I finish helping you with your mission, and there, we will mount a counter-attack against the Battle Brothers."

The blood drains from my face. "You might be as strong as a Demon Duke now, but didn't you mention before that both of the Battle Brothers were Barons? They must have a massive contingent of Lords and grunts working underneath them. Given how they already exterminated the crocodiles..."

Kar narrows his eyes. "Do not worry, Turtle. Hurgh. I will not be alone. The reptilians are mighty. Had the Crocodiles known of the demons' impending attack in advance, we would have stopped the Battle Brothers in their tracks. They only defeated us due to a cowardly sneak attack. Dishonorable! They must pay for their deception with their lives."

Blinker flutters off my shoulder to land on Kar's. Her expression turns solemn as she gazes at her husband with empathetic eyes. "Don't worry, sweetie. We'll beat them. We won't lose this time. I'll get help from the fairies if I must."

Kar gently raises his claw to his shoulder. He lightly brushes Blinker's hair and smiles. "That won't be necessary, my precious Butterfly. We will not lose this fight. Mother is sure to give us weapons so that we may stand our ground. When the final battle comes, you must stay away so that I can fight without reservation."

Blinker scowls. "The heck I will! I'm not weak! I have fairy magic! When we get back, I'll visit my mother and ask for a drop of water from Gaia's Spring! You just wait and see. I'll come back ten times stronger!"

"Hurgh. I cannot ever bring myself to tell you 'no,'" Kar mutters.

As the two of them share a tender moment, I cough into my fist. "Erm! I mean, if you need help, I'm always willing to jump in. Phoebe, too. We won't let you fight the Battle Brothers all by yourself. We're your friends, after all."

Kar smiles. "No, Turtle. You are not my friend. You are my brother. We fight the same enemies for the same cause. As long as we draw breath, we will be bound together, always."

I nod at Kar and shoot him a confident smile. We both give each other a slap on the back and laugh at nothing in particular.

Eventually, I turn my attention to the top of the lift. We continue ascending toward Marie's Laboratory, but as we do, a worrisome thought strikes me.

"The Volgrim might still be hanging around the Remnant Oasis. Returning to the Labyrinth via the teleportation glyph is probably not our best option. I think I'll teleport us back directly."

Kar turns to look at me with a surprised expression. "Hurgh? I thought you could not teleport great distances. The Labyrinth is on the other side of the galaxy, somewhere within folded space. When you attempted to teleport the Hydra, you nearly died!"

I nod. "You're right. Under normal circumstances, teleportation costs far more mana than it's worth. If I want to teleport somewhere within range of my vision, I will need at least half of my mana reserves. In the Hydra's case, it was a gigantic monster far bigger than anything I'd tried to teleport before. However, there is a loophole I discovered six years ago when I tried running away from Mephisto."

I continue. "Mephisto chased me through the Labyrinth for ages. I finally realized that if I used my Wordsmithing to create a 'waypoint,' I could teleport back to my waypoint later at a much lower mana cost. Before we came here, I set several waypoints in the Labyrinth in case of emergencies. I've also Wordsmithed dozens of others at key locations on Tarus II and its moon, Kelkin."

I pause for a second. "...However, I've never tried using my magic to teleport such a great distance. We should be fine, but I'll have to apologize in advance if something terrible happens."

Kar nods. "How interesting. For someone of your low intelligence, I can only congratulate you. I assume Golden Man must have taught you such a technique, given your brain is not developed enough to imagine such a thing."

"...Kar. For the hundredth time, I'm not a dummy."

Kar's expression softens. "Ah, I know it can hurt, knowing the truth, Turtle... but just know that nobody judges you for your lack of mental energy. We know you are doing your best."

I suck in a long, slow breath. "Kar, one of these days, I'm gonna kick your ass."

Kar chuckles. "Ah. The ambitions of youth." He glances at Blinker. Both of them wink at each other, as if mocking me for thinking I could ever stand a chance against the newly minted lizard king.

However...

Memories of when Solomon's soul sliver took over my body appear unbidden in my mind's eye.

I nearly killed Kar with a single move.

The amount of power I put out when under Solomon's control was frightening. If that level of destruction was possible from me, then I can only hope I never need to do to another person what I did to Samson.

I never want to walk down that dark path again.

After shaking the fog from my head, I clear my throat.

"Ahem. **Return.**"

My body, along with Kar's and Blinker's, disappears from the elevator lift.

We arrive back inside the Labyrinth, amidst pitch-black darkness swallowing us from every direction.

After confirming all three of us survived the teleportation, I smile.

"Another happy landing."

Part 198: Jephthath's Origin

Deep inside the Labyrinth, tucked away in a nondescript corner, a young man stands amidst a room filled with treasure. Heaps, mounds, and even mountains of gold, diamonds, and precious metals litter the floor, making walking anywhere but through the room's main path impossible.

Hope, the only Wordsmith in existence, besides Jason, closes his eyes and focuses his mind. To his right, left, and straight ahead, multiple fifty-foot statues tower above him. Each of their eyes glows a different color as they gaze upon the youth standing before them.

Solomon, the Knowledge-Seeker, glows white.

Arthur, the Legendary Hero-King, glows golden.

And Jephthath, the Illuminator, Shepherd of Men, glows blood-red.

As the original Hero, the first of many to come, Jephthath's gaze seems to burn more intensely than the other two. Despite being nothing more than a graven image, Jephthath's unmoving form contains the slightest hint of arrogance. The more one gazes upon it, the more they get the feeling that not only is the ancient king judging them, but he has found them wanting.

Hope closes his eyes. "Alright. Tell me what you must. I'm ready."

Hope's words ignite a fire in Jephthath's soul. The statue's energy reverberates, and a ray of telepathic energy radiates from its eyes, traveling to the young Wordsmith and engulfing him in its power.

"After hearing my tale, never again will you gaze upon a demon in the same way."

Recommended Listening

My story begins during my youth, around the time of my twentieth year living on God's blessed land.

Jephthath's telepathy shifts the world in Hope's mind to one of an ancient, primeval Earth. Wildflowers riddle the land, along with trees and a few scattered animals. A village of primitive humans, each wearing thin animal-skins and wooden shoes, appears at the edge of the treeline. Poorly constructed dwellings built from straw and leaves provide them with roofs over their heads, but little protection from the elements.

I was a young hunter at the time. I had helped catch food for my village since my twelfth year of life, and was quite adept in the ways of foraging as well.

A group of dark-skinned humans hacks at a deer's carcass, cutting its skinned body with primitive stone knives. At their sides, a bundle of wooden spears rests, each one's tip covered in blood.

Among the group of half a dozen hunters, the youngest, Jephthath, turns to look at another hunter, one who appears to be more than a decade older than him.

"Hook? Hung, gon-gon jong!"

The other hunter lowers his eyes to a dirty chunk of meat in Jephthath's hands. He shakes his head.

"Doka."

Jephthath sighs and tosses the lump of meat to his side, where it lands amidst a pile of similarly nasty-looking meat.

Before the Day of Ascension, the day which changed humanity forever, my people spoke with little more than grunts and sign language. We lived in ignorance. We were not only stupid, but weak.

A young girl, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, runs over to Jephthath's side. "Domga! Domga!"

Jephthath turns to her and smiles. "Hock?"

The girl holds out her hand, revealing a newly sharpened stone knife. She leans forward, kisses Jephthath's cheek, and hands the tool to him.

My wife, nameless, like all the other villagers at the time, was someone very precious to me. Along with my son and daughter, there were few people I considered precious enough to lay my life on the line for than them.

Jephthath pauses. His voice takes on a quiet, solemn tone.

After the Day of Ascension, I chose a name for her. Neilah. I wish I could have called my wife by her name. She would have liked it.

The vision shifts, changing its scene to one of Jephthath and the other five hunters crouching low to stalk a tiger.

Life was dangerous during the ancient times. Hunters would often die by the dozens. We always tried to pre-emptively eliminate the competition in our hunting areas.

Jephthath slinks forward to the front of the party. The six humans hide behind a boulder. Silently, they motion with their hands and share glances among one another. The lead hunter, a man with grey hair, dictates the conversation's flow.

Go there.

I make first move.

You support me.

You two, pair up.

Instead of Jephthath, a much older hunter in his fifties leads the group. He issues several commands with sign language, and the others nod. They fan out, slinking low among the tall grass.

The tiger loudly chews on the remains of a buffalo, oblivious to the advance of the hunters. With its back to them, it doesn't notice their approach as they fan out from every direction and hold their spears at the ready.

Suddenly, all of the hunters spring toward the massive, powerful tiger. They burst out of the grass, and Jephthath howls at the top of his lungs. "Aaaaooaoaoa!!!"

Startled, the tiger instantly shifts into combat mode. It whirls to face Jephthath, but misses the approach of the two older and more seasoned hunters. A moment later, their spears impale the giant cat's ribs, causing it to howl in pain. "Skreeeoww!"

Now badly injured, the tiger tries to bolt away from the humans. It flees in terror, unwilling to retort against their sneak attack. However, hardly does it run ten paces before the ground gives way and it plunges into a trap! A pit filled with upward-facing spears, covered by a woven grass rug, reveals itself, much to the tiger's woe.

Seconds later, the hunters slow to a stop. Each one breathes a sigh of relief as they walk over to the pit and gaze upon the still-struggling cat. The tiger, now impaled by half a dozen barbs, bleeds profusely from several entry points. It writhes back and forth, struggling to break free of the trap, but its movements only cause its blood to drain faster.

The tiger eventually stops moving, and its eyes close for the last time in its life.

"Hep, hep!" The second youngest hunter shouts. His excitement quickly spreads among the others. They all share huge, toothy grins amongst themselves as they gaze upon what could have been a deadly opponent. They slap each other on the back and communicate in sign language, praising everyone for all their hard work.

Times were simple, back in those days, Jephthath continues. However, all humans knew that no matter how dangerous a tiger or lion might be, their threat was nothing compared to the most fearsome predators of all.

The demons.

Jephthath's hunters pull the dead tiger out of the trap and cover it with the woven rug. Afterward, they pet the dead animal's fur, marveling at its softness.

Jephthath glances at the eldest hunter. "Ah... guka jong-jong?"

He smiles politely and pats his heart, as if making a formal request.

The lead hunter rubs his chin.

"Mmm. Mong gah nock-nock."

Relief washes over Jephthath's face. He bows deeply before the lead hunter and bares another toothy grin. "Jip-jip jong!"

I still remember that day as if it were yesterday. After killing the tiger, I begged our eldest hunter to save the fur of the tiger for me. I wished to present it to Neilah as a present, but only after I'd cleaned it and turned it into a beautiful winter coat. When he permitted me the honor of the predator's fur, I felt elation like never before.

Finally, I would give my wife a present worthy of her beauty.

Finally, I would achieve the title of Predator Hunter. I would step out of the shadow of my boyhood and earn the respect of the village.

Jephthath's tone turns wry.

Haha... life was so simple back in those days. If only I had known then what I know now. If only...

The vision shifts again. This time, we jump forward several hours. The sun hangs low in the sky, casting long shadows as the night approaches. It hovers over a mountain range, revealing only a few hours before the darkness arrives.

Jepthath and the second youngest hunter each hold onto the front of a stretcher-like contraption of woven vines. Two long sticks poke through the greenery, giving them the handholds to lift and carry the dead tiger.

Ahead and behind the youngest hunters, the other four hunters split into groups of two, protecting the makeshift caravan's front and rear. They hold their spears forward and cast suspicious glances everywhere they go.

The humans trudge through a sparsely populated forest. Its thin tree cover allows plenty of sunlight to pass through and illuminate their path, but given enough time, the hunters will end up walking in total darkness if they don't make it back to the village before darkness falls.

As they trudge through the forest, the front-facing hunters occasionally pause to sniff the air.

"Maka."

"Gon-gon?"

"Maka."

The eldest hunter narrows his eyes. He points his spear toward the tops of the trees. There, a faint cloud of black smoke hovers overhead.

Jepthath, still grinning from ear to ear over his victory, slows to a stop. He stares at the sky, and slowly, his elated expression disappears.

"M-maka? Kaka no maka..."

His eyes express disbelief. He stares at the smoke as if it were a specter of death, one soon coming to reap his soul.

The lead hunter turns to face the other five. He points at the tiger's corpse. "Joopa! Joopa!"

Reflexively, Jepthath and his immediate senior release their grip on the stretcher. They reach behind themselves and grab their spears.

All six hunters bolt forward, looks of alarm on their faces.

They rush through the trees at full speed, gasping for breath. Leaves smack them in their faces, but they don't slow down in the slightest.

Soon, the edge of the treeline appears.

The thin smoke rapidly thickens.

A dense, black cloud engulfs the hunters. The smell of fire pours into their nostrils, gagging them and bringing them to tears.

However, the men don't stop. They continue storming through the forest as quickly as their legs can manage, stopping only to help another to his feet if one of the hunters trips or stumbles.

Eventually, they break through the forest line.

There, a heartbreaking sight awaits them.

Dozens of villagers lay tossed about here and there. Men, women, and children alike. Horrible, bloody wounds dot their bodies from head to toe, revealing not a battle, but a brutal slaughter. Fires rage throughout the camp, devouring everything in their path.

Even the corpses.

"Maka! Maka!!"

Jepthath screams in rage. He grinds his teeth together and sweeps his eyes across the village's ruins, only for his gaze to abruptly stop on a trio of figures — Neilah, laying face-down atop her dead children.

Time freezes for Jepthath. He stares, dumbfounded, at the image of his dead wife. Memories flash before his eyes. He reflects for a moment on their time shared together, their passionate embraces, and the looks of affection she would always give him.

Numbly, he steps forward, intending to close the distance. However, hardly has he taken a single step before someone grabs his shoulder. "Maka, koko! Maka!"

Jepthath turns to his left to see the lead hunter gazing at him with tears in his eyes.

"...Maka, koko."

Jepthath's voice tightens.

It only took a few grunts from my leader, the head of our village, to bring me crashing back to reality. The demons slaughtered my wife and children like sheep. My family was nothing more than a passing diversion for their abominable inclinations.

Every bone in my body screamed for me to rush to my wife to see if I could help her. I knew she was dead, but I couldn't control my urges. Luckily, or unluckily, depending on how one looked at it, the other hunters held me back. They, too, had lost their loved ones. We were the village's last survivors.

We hid in the bushes and waited while the fires raged. Eventually, the screams of a young man came to our ears. We glanced into the distance, horrified by what we heard.

The hunters slink around the edges of the village while coughing as quietly as possible into their animal-skin clothing. It doesn't take long before they arrive within a few hundred feet of a small crowd of demons. The monstrous, red-skinned bipeds surround a young man tied to a tree, laughing and cheering while two scythers stab him slowly, one by one. They cut him from head to toe, taking great care not to inflict any lethal wounds while drawing out the pain as much as possible.

The boy, barely fourteen years old, was one of our hunter's sons. The boy's father gazed with wide eyes at his beloved son being tortured, yet said nothing. We hadn't any chance of defeating a single demon Lord, let alone three dozen demon grunts working together. Trying to rescue his son would only end up a suicide mission for all of us.

However, within minutes, just before the demons grew bored of torturing the young man and decided to kill him, a strange rumbling began to shake the Earth.

That was when the Titan appeared. Hercules.

All at once, the demons jerk their heads to the south. Barely have they noticed their impending doom before a shadow in the sky plummets to the Earth below. Hercules, the son of Zeus, crashes into the dirt and unleashes a frenzied attack upon the unwitting demons.

His fists move like the wind, while his body twists like a viper. The demigod grabs each demon one by one, smashes them into the dirt, rips them apart, and breaks all the bones in their bodies. For every fireball or rock thrown at him, he delivers a beatdown one hundred times more intense than what he's received.

Eventually, half a dozen of the remaining demons tear off from the pack and flee into the woods, howling in terror.

Hercules doesn't chase them. Instead, he merely follows their path with his eyes.

"You may run for now, but no bloodskin will escape my wrath."

The fifteen-foot-tall Titan turns his attention to the human the demons were torturing only minutes before. He drops to a knee and caresses the boy's face.

"I am sorry that you had to suffer, young one. However, I cannot heal your wounds. You will die within the hour."

The hunters stand and stare, motionless, with terrified gazes. As scary as the demons were, they paled in comparison to the giant who ripped them limb from limb.

However, one hunter, the father of the ensnared boy, steps out of his hiding spot.

"Joko! Gon-gon jip!"

Tears fill his eyes as he takes a tentative step forward, revealing himself to the Titan. A hint of pleading enters his voice, as if he's begun begging for the giant to spare his son. He does not yet realize that Hercules is a friend.

Hercules turns to face him. The Titan gazes at the hunter for several long seconds before closing his eyes. "I see. This child must be your son. Come. Hold him in his final moments."

With a quick, deft moment, Hercules unbinds the boy's arms and gently holds him out for the man to take.

Unable to control himself, the hunter wails in grief as he holds his boy. The life ebbs from the child's body, but still, he forces a smile as he gazes at his papa.

"Guh... gul-gul... kip...?"

The hunter nods. He glances at the village, where, presumably, the other members of his family lay dead and broken.

"Gon-gon. Gon-gon..."

Jepthath's voice cracks with emotion. *The man lied to his son, hoping to ease his suffering. All the boy wished to know was if his mother had survived. She had not, but the hunter could not bear to tell him the horrible truth.*

After a few minutes, the boy's smile disappears. He sags in his father's arms as the last breath of life leaves his body.

All of the hunters step out of the clearing, including Jepthath, and surround their brother. He weeps like a baby, unable to control the agony wracking his heart.

Hercules rises to his feet. He says nothing, allowing the hunters their moment of grief.

Eventually, the hunters pull themselves together. They return to the village, where Hercules snuffs out all the fires with a clap of his hands. It only takes them half an hour to gather the dead and line their burned and defiled corpses in the center of the village.

This time, it is the other hunters who weep. Jepthath, the youngest of the group, trembles with rage and anguish as he gazes at the bodies of his wife and children. He drops to his knees and strokes their hair, seemingly trying to imprint their memories onto his hands so that he will never forget them.

Hercules stands behind the hunters and watches. Eventually, he raises his voice.

"Humans. I am sorry for your losses. I, too, one lost someone precious to me. My beloved wife, Megara, was brutally murdered by the bloodskins. There is nothing left for you here in this village. Bury your dead and come with me."

Fury appears in Hercules' eyes.

"I will *not* let your thirst for vengeance go unanswered."

Jepthath turns to gaze into the Titan's eyes. When their gazes meet, Jepthath nods.

I knew what I had to do.

The Titan extends his hand with his palm facing upward. It doesn't take long before all six hunters walk forward and place their more diminutive hands on his.

Hercules's eyes glow pure white as he sends streams of mana surging into the arms of each human present.

"You've made the right choice, humans. From now on, you will become part of my... Legion."

The hunters raise their heads. Their eyes shimmer white, just like the Titan's, as his memories and knowledge mix with theirs.

"We follow the future King of Titans."

"We serve the future King of Titans."

"We hail the future King of Titans."

"We *obey* the future King of Titans."

"We are yours to command."

Recommended Listening

Six demons run through the forest, their bodies shivering and shaking. They rip through the foliage and flee toward their burrows dozens of miles away, casting glances behind themselves all the while.

"So scary! Come on, Glorm, get a move on! That Titan can't be far behind us!!"

"Who was that guy?! He was huge!"

"You ain't seen shit! Lucy fought a Titan three times bigger'n him! I just didn't know the small ones were that scary, too!"

The demons continue their mad dash, burning, cutting, and punching anything or any creature that gets in their way.

However, behind them, birds caw and take to the skies as something huge bursts through the foliage. Tears and snot continuously stream down the demon's faces.

"It's him! It's the big guy! Run, you morons! RUN!"

Suddenly, the noise behind the demons disappears. The forest falls silent, save for the uproar caused by their panicked flight.

A chill goes down the spine of the Burner in the rear. He jerks his head backward, gazing through the foliage to spot six pairs of glowing white eyes slipping through the poorly lit forest, all while making nary a sound. The eerily silent predators, now boosted by the power of the Titan, leap at the Burner with their spears upraised. He tries to fling a fireball, but all six humans crash upon him like a tsunami.

The other five demons don't notice as their comrade goes missing. They continue running at top speed for several minutes, only to finally realize the volume of fireballs they were lobbing before has halved.

The lead Scyther, a blade-armed demon with predatory fangs lurking in his maw, glances backward and hisses. "Kss! Where is Gruta?! That stupid, worthless little...!"

"Forget him!" The other Burner barks. "Gruta fell behind! He was too slow! We have to tell Emperor Lucifer about the Titan!"

"Yeah!" One of the Brutes yells. His tiny eyes and giant body give him a pea-brained appearance, but animal cunning lurks within his gaze. "We can't let big Titan keep kill us! He too scary!"

The Scyther, still running, nods. "Alright. Forget Gruta! If any of you fall behind, the rest of us will keep running! We don't have time to rescue stragg- augh!!"

Before the Scyther can finish his sentence, he spots an enormous shadow passing over the sky. Hercules plummets from the treetops and smashes into the dirt a few hundred feet in front of the five demons, hitting the ground with a tremendous *thud*. They shriek in fright and come to an abrupt halt, comically stumbling over one another as they try to reverse direction and flee.

However, when Hercules lands, he merely rises to his full height and crosses his arms. The Titan watches with a smirk on his face as the five errant demons split up and run in every direction.

"Haha. Better to die by my hand than those I've contracted. Their retribution will ensure a slow, painful death for each and every one of you."

True to his words, five of the hunters split apart. They race after each demon, targeting the demons they find most suitable to fight with their current abilities. The sixth human stays behind, keeping the unconscious body of the Brute from earlier bound tightly by makeshift vines.

Jepthath chases one of the Brutes. The humongous, eight-foot-tall demon flees at top speed from his seemingly diminutive pursuer. When he glances backward and only sees one tiny human chasing him, the Brute jams his feet into the ground, comes to a screeching halt, and whirls to face his opponent.

"What?! Only one little fleshbag? Me gonna make you dead now!"

The Brute smashes his fists together and flares his nostrils. He waits a few moments as the gutsy human charges at him, spear raised.

Jepthath rushes the big Brute and performs a feint, acting as if he'll leap at the Brute's head. However, he ducks at the last second and slides under the demon's legs, causing the Brute to swing awkwardly in the wrong direction and miss his slippery adversary.

Skrik!

Jepthath stabs his wooden spear into the Brute's ankle, summoning a howl of pain from the giant's throat. The Brute spins around and swings his fist, moving far faster than he did before. Jepthath tries to dodge, but he doesn't put enough distance between himself and the demon, causing the Brute to land a decisive blow on his shoulder.

Crack!

The Brute's monstrous strength impacts Jepthath's muscle and bone, sending the human flying. He crashes against a rock and flops to the dirt, his body burning with pain.

"Ack... hurts..."

Jepthath climbs to his feet. His ribs ache from the rocky landing, while his left arm flops uselessly. With one arm broken, his fighting strength drops by half, making him much weaker than before.

The Brute howls with delight. "Bahaha! Even if that Titan kill me, I not let you live! You die here, stinky fleshbag!"

The Brute storms toward the human, clearing the thirty-foot gap with frightening speed. However, Jepthath's eyes glow a little brighter as he quickly transmits information between himself and the others.

A split-second before the Brute reaches him, Jepthath dives to the side, lands on his right arm, and pushes off the ground with his enhanced dexterity.

His foot rushes toward the Brute's head faster than the demon can react.

Crunch.

The sound of bone striking bone ripples through the forest. Jepthath shatters the Brute's jaw and knocks him backward, causing the demon to stumble and fall on his ass.

"Aaaugh! Muh mouf! Guuurgh!"

The demon howls in pain. Stars dot his vision, making it impossible for him to track the human. Before the Brute can reorient himself, Jephthath rolls to the side, grabs his spear, and thrusts it toward the demon's lung.

Shik!

He spears the demon's blubber, causing another pained wheeze to erupt from the demon's chest.

Jephthath's eyes take on a sinister edge as he gazes at his crippled adversary.

"You killed my *wife*. You killed my *daughter*. You killed my *son*. Your pain has only just begun."

The human draws a stone knife from his waist and leaps at the Brute. The demon's screams of agony echo throughout the forest as the human slowly carves apart his skin, gouges out his eyes, and breaks every bone in his body one by one.

All across the forest, the demons wail and plead, begging for mercy as their human pursuers pin them down, bind their limbs, and torture them for hours on end.

Eventually, the demons succumb to their wounds, perishing one by one.

However, Jephthath makes sure to draw out his victim's agony the longest. A monstrous grin spreads across his face as he cuts the demon apart, chunk by chunk.

"This is for my family! This is for my village! And this... THIS is for my king!!"

* * *

Not far away, Hercules gazes through the eyes of his newly acquired servants. A sense of pride washes over him as he scrutinizes their barbarous acts of vengeance.

"Haha. Good. Good. Let out your hate — your anger. Never forget that which drives you. We mustn't let a single survivor escape. It's far too early for the Emperors to know of my existence."

"But someday... they will fear my name. They will speak of me in hushed whispers."

"And when that day comes?"

"Haha."

"Well, it will be glorious, indeed. I will avenge Megara. I will kill every last bloodskin."

Hercules wipes tears from his eyes. His heart swells with joy as he gazes at the waning sun, where shadows lengthen and darkness stretches across the land.

"You lot will be the first members of my Legion. It won't be long before we take back Earth from the bloodskins. Someday, my father will understand why I've chosen to walk this path."

Hercules shakes his head.

"The old fool. All Zeus does is prattle on about the *ancestors*... but those long-dead relics won't save us, now. Only I can bring back my people from the edge of extinction. Only *I* possess the power to drive back the scourge of demonkind."

As Hercules gazes through the eyes of his newly acquired hunters, he lingers on Jephthah's vision for several minutes.

"You are a most remarkable specimen. Your rage burns the hottest. Your fire, the brightest."

"I will crown you the leader of my Legion."

"I will make you their *King*."

Part 199: Jephthath's Burden

Jephthath's voice rumbles inside of Hope's mind.

Four hundred years passed. Thanks to the Titan's soul manipulation, those who submitted to him and pledged their loyalty gained the gift of immortality. As the first batch of humans he ever recruited, my village's hunters were the closest to him and became his elite generals.

Hercules amassed an army in secret. His father, the Titan King Zeus, would have punished him severely and killed the entirety of Hercules' Legion if he knew of our existence. No Titan King would tolerate a soul-manipulator in their midst. Therefore, we had to keep our numbers low and live in seclusion.

The vision shifts to reveal a massive underground city dug out by the efforts of Hercules' Legion. With a ceiling height of twenty feet and thousands of structures built from stone, wood, and dirt, the underground city possesses something of a dwarven appearance, rather than the haphazard and meandering demonic hallways of the Labyrinth. Every human warrior walks around dressed in light leather armor, but the quality is far higher than what Jephthath's village managed to produce.

Hercules's power enabled his Legion to share not only their vision, but their thoughts and memories. We kept no secrets from each other, and we treated those around us like blood brothers. Thanks to our shared vision, it was impossible for demons to sneak up on us, or for infiltrators to enter our city. Were any member of the Legion to perish, the others would know instantly.

For a time, we enjoyed a sense of peace and security. However, our benefactor continued to fight the demons on the surface world, killing clumps and clusters of them whenever they popped up. We began to wonder when our time to shine would appear.

Finally, that day arrived.

The city of humans bustles with activity. Craftsman sharpen and cut wooden spears by the dozens, while more than half of the community flays the skins of numerous dead animals, dices their bodies apart, and cooks mountains of food for the others. At the edges of the underground city, dozens of hunters patrol, alone, sweeping their glowing eyes in every direction to search for possible enemies. With their shared vision, the moment someone tries to launch an attack, the entire community will rise to the fight at the same time.

Jephthath, leader of a 1,000-man brigade, sits with a small group of comrades. A fire crackles between them as they rest on four logs arranged in a square. They silently chew and swallow meat soup, staring at one another while exchanging thoughts telepathically.

[We should prepare for battle,] One of the warriors thinks. [Hercules' fight against the demons is turning south quickly.]

Jephthath finishes his soup. He sets his bowl on the cave floor and nods. [This conflict isn't like the others. Our leader is facing off against Satan the Devil, the First Emperor of demonkind. We thought he

had perished, but it seems that even his subjects were unaware of his survival.]

The first warrior nods. [So what you're saying is...]

[Aye. We will not let our leader fight this battle alone. Satan killed Megara. He must die for his sins. And as for me... the demons took my wife and children. I won't rest until I have laid every last bloodskin to rest within the Earth's bosom. Their blood will water the flowers of the future. Their bodies will create a virtuous cycle of life, molding a planet for us to live upon.]

Jepthath rises to his feet. His thoughts transmit to all the other denizens of the underground cave.

[Come! We must not allow Hercules to fight Satan alone! This battle is ours as well! What have we to live for, if not to kill the monsters who ravaged our homes and butchered our families?!]

All across the camp, thousands of warriors stop what they're doing and rise to their feet. Their vision unites, allowing them to hear Jepthath's words as clearly as if he were standing right before them.

Despite their unified thoughts and vision, their minds remain unique. Each warrior reflects for a moment on their dead husbands, wives, and children. Each of them walks a similar path in life, a path of bloodshed and revenge, not unlike Jepthath's. However, the individual differences make them stronger and allow them to empathize more deeply with one another. Jepthath's words light a fire in their hearts as they realize that hundreds of years of waiting have finally come to fruition.

[I won't stand idly while my leader fights the Devil!] One warrior cries.

[Neither will I! I fight for Hercules! I fight for Jepthath!]

[I won't draw my last breath until I squeeze the life from Satan's throat!]

Multiple members of the Legion pump their fists in the air. As one, they rise to their feet and march toward the weapons cache, where thousands of sharpened spears await them.

[March on the demons! Kill them all! Char their corpses to ash!!]

A flood of humans pours out of the mountain's entrance. Jepthath's battalion leads the charge, bellowing like bears as they travel.

Jepthath transmits his thoughts to Hercules. [Master! We are coming to help! Do not tell us to abandon you!]

Hercules, their leader, swings his fist at Satan and crushes the Devil's head into pulp.

He smiles.

[I wouldn't have it any other way. The Devil is a troublesome opponent. To me, my warriors! Today, we will shake the Earth and send the demons scurrying back into their burrows!]

The human warriors quickly charge out of their mountain, through the forests, and past various plains and flatlands. Aided by the power of Hercules' Titan strength, their physical prowess, agility, and stamina are more than three times higher than ordinary humans.

Hercules temporarily retreats from the battle. As he does, his thoughts turn inward.

My Titan ancestry is incompatible with human warriors. Were I a pureblooded human, I would be able to share my power amongst them equally. They would become unstoppable, a fighting force capable of leveling continents. Still, even as they are now, my Legion is more than a match for the demons!

Jepthath and the other ten thousand humans charge several miles in the blink of an eye. They sweep across the plains like a hurricane, traveling nearly a hundred miles an hour as their bare feet pound against the Earth's soil.

Eventually, they arrive before their benefactor and savior, the son of Zeus, Hercules. His Legion bows before him, then raises their spears to the sky. "We fight for Hercules! We fight to rid the Earth of the bloodskins!"

"Haha..." Hercules chuckles. "That, you do. I am proud of all of you. Ten thousand men stand before me today. No longer are you boys, but warriors! You've trained to hone your bodies. Now, do not hold back any longer! Come with me! Send Satan's soul to the Great Beyond, where it shall remain, forever!"

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

Hercules' army whoops and cheers. The soldiers pound their chests and follow their leader as he turns around and charges back to the battlefield, where his father awaits.

However...

Little do the humans know, but an awful fate awaits all of them.

Recommended Listening

Jepthath's spear finds its mark. He impales a Scyther through its mouth, ripping the top of its head off with a sickening *skrik!*

The young hunter pants like a beaten wolf. Beside him, two members of his original tribe fight like hell against the demonic hordes. Their spears spin, whack and stab with reckless abandon. However, the fatigue wracking their bodies draws them ever closer to a sudden collapse. Should their strength fail, the demons will pounce on them and rip them limb from limb.

[Give no quarter!] Jepthath shouts through his telepathic link. [We cannot allow Hercules to fall!]

Hundreds of demons and humans stab, slash, burn, and maim one another in a no-holds-barred battle to the death. Barbatos, now an enraged ball of claws and hatred, tears at the Balrog's back with reckless abandon, scorching his claws and howling in pain as he tries to take down the massive behemoth.

Jepthath works together with the oldest hunter from his village. Together, the two of them take on a Demon Lord, a slinky female possessing the power of water. She uses her liquid manipulation to turn the blood-soaked battlefield into a deathtrap. Pressurized bursts of liquid fire at Jepthath, forcing him to duck and dodge as the unified eyesight of the Legion weakens more and more every minute. With fewer than a thousand humans left alive, cracks appear in their formerly near-omniscient field of vision.

The eldest hunter hurls his spear at the Demon Lord, but she dodges at the last second, allowing the spear to sail past her and impale a different demon's back. The poor bastard perishes without seeing his death coming.

"Damned filthy fleshbags!" The Demon Lord yells. "Suffer!"

She summons a razor-thin water-whip and starts whipping it from left to right in huge, sweeping motions. Jephthath and the other hunter duck the first sweep and jump the next when she aims for their legs. Both sides end in a standstill, unable to hit the other, while quickly exerting what's left of their stamina.

"Stop dodging!" The Demon Lord barks. "I'll kill you yet!"

Suddenly, the Demon Lord flings her hands behind herself. A blast of water fires from her back, propelling her forward with startling speed. She catches Jephthath's fellow hunter off-guard as she rushes at him with a water-spear raised.

"Hokkad!" Jephthath yells. He tries to rush to his friend's aid, but doesn't move quickly enough. The Demon Lord hurls her spear down and impales Hokkad through his chest, ripping out the man's flesh and bone. Hokkad slumps to the ground, dead, while Jephthath's heart explodes with fury.

"Demon whore!"

With her attention still fixated on the dead Legion member, the Demon Lord doesn't have enough time to turn and face Jephthath. He takes advantage of her momentary distraction to jump her from behind and impale the demoness right through her heart.

Skrik!

"Augh!"

The demoness tries to turn and fight, but Jephthath follows up with a vicious series of punches and kicks. He sweeps her legs and smashes his fist into the demoness's mouth, knocking the daylights out of her and finishing with a brutal blow to the throat. The demoness goes still as the life leaves her body.

Jephthath gasps for breath. He pants and wheezes as agony wracks his chest. Sadly, he can't spare a moment to grieve for his fallen comrade. With his link to Hokkad's mind severed, Jephthath has no doubts over his friend's demise.

"D-demon filth..." Jephthath growls.

Tears well up in his eyes as he filters his vision from the chaos engulfing the remaining members of the Legion. Hercules howls in pain as Belial wraps herself around him and plunges her knife-fingers into his chest. With their leader suffering such gruesome wounds and their numbers rapidly dwindling, the seemingly perfect teamwork of the Legion falls into disarray. Their unified vision falters, and their expertly aimed blows consistently miss the mark, allowing handfuls of demons to survive what should have been fatal blows.

[Jephthath!] One human cries. [Help me! The demons-]

His voice cuts off abruptly as a Brute pulverizes his skull and flattens his corpse into the mud.

[Leader! We have to retreat! We can't hold off-]

Another voice falls silent as its owner meets a grisly end.

The voices of the few hundred remaining humans fall off, one by one. Friends, comrades, and brothers Jephthath has grown close to over the last few hundred years meet their maker at the fists and claws of the demons. Jephthath yanks his spear from the dirt and re-enters the fray, only to move a beat too slow and watch as another warrior perishes to a fireball flung by a Burner.

[Come, brothers! Retreat!] Jephthath orders. [To the south! We can't hold on any longer!]

The other humans try to obey their leader's orders. With Hercules ensnared by the succubus, Jephthath becomes their pillar of support. However, not even he can summon a miracle. With the ever-increasing number of demons swarming from the depths of the Earth, the humans fail to find a path of escape. Some break off from the demonic horde and rush toward the woods, but their fleet-footed enemies pounce on them like wolves onto sheep.

[Go! Go!] Jephthath bellows. He rushes toward the woods, slaying three grunts along the way while pulling his injured comrades up one by one. Together, he and a dozen humans manage a narrow escape while fighting off their pursuers.

As they flee, Jephthath and his friends sense a growing gap in their vision. The demons mercilessly slaughter the remaining humans ten at a time. Even the ones who stood at the edge of the crater to provide wide-ranged vision perish under the sneak attacks of Burrowers.

Sweat pours down Jephthath's back. He races through the trees along with the ten remaining members of the Legion. Three of them bleed profusely from grievous wounds suffered during the battle, but they offer no complaint. Their speed slows to a crawl as the life ebbs from their bodies. Eventually, the injured fall to the pursuing demons, picked off by a pair of Scythers and three Hellhound-riding orcs.

Jephthath and the remaining Legionnaires screech to a halt as the forest comes to an end at the foot of a cliff. With their escape route abruptly cut off, all the humans can do is turn to face the hundred or so pursuing demons.

The situation turns bleak. Jephthath grits his teeth, as do the other Legionnaires.

[I'm sorry, everyone,] Jephthath says, his voice resolute. [I failed all of you. I should never have ordered us to attack. We weren't ready. *I wasn't ready.*]

[Do not blame yourself,] The nearest warrior replies, his telepathic voice choked with emotion. [No man lives forever. If we must die, then we will bring as many bloodskins down with us as possible.]

[Aye.]

The humans charge their opponents, startling the demon pursuers. The Legionnaires put on a terrific show of brutality as they rip their adversaries limb from limb. Even outnumbered four to one, the humans manage to take out dozens of demon grunts.

However, the moment a Demon Lord appears, the human's ranks fall to pieces. This time, a male lord wearing a black bear's pelt leaps out of the forest and catches two of the Legion's remaining members by

surprise. He grabs them by the backs of their heads and smashes their faces against the ground, pulverizing their heads into mush. In the blink of an eye, he drops onto his hands and feet and charges like a tiger at the other humans and rips through their ranks like a pack of Hellhounds.

One by one, all of the Legion's members fall to the Demon Lord's onslaught.

Soon, only Jephthah remains.

The lone surviving member of the Legion battles for his life as he ducks and dodges the monstrous Demon Lord.

"Skrah! Filthy little human! You're all alone now!" The Demon Lord cackles. "You've done well to last this long! Consider yourself lucky to die at the claws of Kiki, the Lord of the Woods! Hahaha!"

Blood covers Jephthah's body. Hundreds of cuts and bruises line his skin, making him look more like a walking cadaver than a living being. He spits blood on the dirt and grunts.

"Don't mock me, servant of evil. I swore to eliminate your kind from the Earth. If I die here, how will I remain a man of my word?"

Kiki howls with laughter. "Hahaha!! It's a miracle you're still standing, moron! You'll be lucky to last thirty more seconds! Give up, and I'll make your death quick and painless!"

Behind Kiki, dozens of demon grunts file into the forest. They stand aside and allow the Demon Lord his moment of fun, laughing and grinning to each other all the while.

Jephthah grips his blood-covered spear. He gazes at the Demon Lord with a mixture of pity and disgust. "You want me to give up? What a coward. It seems you're too scared to take on one pathetic, insignificant *human*. If I'm as weak as you say, then finish me off."

The Demon Lord guffaws. He laughs at Jephthah with a tone of incredulity, acting as if he can't believe the human's silly bravado. "Pfft! Oh, geez, you're a thick one! If you want to die so badly, I'm happy to oblige!"

The Demon Lord lowers into a four-legged stance again and charges at Jephthah. When the human stabs at him, he jumps to the side and swipes at Jephthah's leg, gouging out a chunk of his flesh. Jephthah grits his teeth, but doesn't cry out in pain.

Instead, Jephthah's movements quicken. He seizes the initiative and charges Kiki, raising his spear to swing it down like a club. Kiki cackles evilly and rolls to the side, allowing the weapon to crash against the ground where he was standing.

"Too slow! Stupid human!"

Kiki dashes behind Jephthah and slashes at his back, tearing out another chunk of skin. Once again, the demon jumps backward and retreats as Jephthah staggers around like a drunken fool.

"Haha, lookit Kiki," One of the nearby grunts says to another. "He's just playing with that human. He ain't taking this seriously at all."

"Why should he?" The other grunt replies, a smirk on his face. "That human ain't got any fight left in him. A few more hits and he'll be begging for a quick death."

The demons chuckle to one another, laughing at how pathetic the final member of the Legion's fight seems to be. However, as the fight continues for another five minutes, and then another ten minutes, their expressions change.

Gallons of blood pour from Jephthath's body. His appearance appears ghastly, like a battle-worn specter of death. No matter how many times Kiki gouges out a chunk of skin, the human doesn't die. Instead, his movement and strength increase, allowing him to slowly match the Lord of the Wood's strength.

"What the hell? How is that human still alive?!" The demon grunt from earlier yells. "He should've died a long time ago!"

Jephthath says nothing. His bloodshot eyes follow the Demon Lord around as Kiki's increasingly wary attacks slow to a crawl. The Demon Lord continues to swipe at Jephthath every once in a while, but his shaking limbs reveal a hidden emotion emerging from within his mind.

Fear.

Kiki cautiously evaluates the human before him.

That guy ain't no human! No way! He's scary! How in the hell can someone take so much abuse and keep standing?!

Kiki charges in again, but this time, he raises his claws high and goes for the killing blow.

I've gotta finish this bastard off now! If the other demons hear it took me twenty minutes to beat one human, I'll never live the shame-

Before he can finish his thought, Kiki's body jerks backward abruptly in midair as Jephthath's spear finds its mark.

Skrik.

Jephthath impales the demon through his throat, swings him overhead, and slams the Lord of the Wood against the forest floor. Kiki's corpse crashes into the glade with a heavy *whump*, sending a wave of silence throughout the demon's ranks.

Several grunts stare in wide-eyed awe at the once-proud Demon Lord they all looked up to and admired.

"H-how... how did one little human beat Kiki? That can't be possible..."

Suddenly, the blood-soaked warrior turns to face his demonic opponents. His gaze, filled with hatred and vengeance, meets theirs.

"Now... you... will... die..."

Jephthath gurgles on his blood. His body trembles from the agony of a thousand cuts, but he never gives in to the pain. Images of his dead friends, family, and former comrades haunt his vision, giving him a bottomless well of strength to continue fighting.

He failed them.

He failed everyone.

But he will never fail himself. He must continue to fight for everyone's sake.

Several demon grunts take a fearful step backward. One particularly brave soul does the opposite. A single Scyther takes a hesitant step forward and aims his blade-arm at the human. "W-what are you morons waiting for?! He can't take us all at once! C-come on!"

The Scyther's shaking voice doesn't imbue his fellow grunts with confidence. However, he does manage to dispel the fog from their minds.

"Y-yeah! We can take 'im!" One shrill-voiced Burner yells. "Come on! Let's gut this bastard for killing Kiki!"

Jepthath stands motionless as the demons rally together and rush him. With his back against a cliff, all Jepthath can do is wait for his enemies to enter his range.

The lone warrior shakes his head. *They've got me surrounded. The poor bastards.*

What follows is a masterclass in brutality. Jepthath's spear becomes a whirlwind of destruction. He spins and twists like an acrobat, swinging his makeshift baseball bat against the heads and bodies of any demon unfortunate enough to draw within his range. Their heads tear from their bodies and sail into the woods, while their arms, legs, and chests shatter under the mountain-crushing strength of the final remaining Legionnaire.

Eventually, the demons cease their assault and beat a hasty retreat. Unable to land a killing blow against the human, their will to fight dissipates like a sneeze in the wind.

"He's too powerful!"

"Run! Get out of my way! I don't want to die next!"

"Hey, don't trip me! You piece of shrakh! If that human gets me, he'll- aaugh!"

Jepthath chases the fleeing demons. He kills more than a dozen, ending their lives in a spectacularly brutal fashion. However, as they run, the difference in their remaining stamina compared to his finally makes itself evident. Jepthath slows to a stop and collapses against a tree. Every fiber of his being aches. His body begs for the release of death, while darkness threatens to swallow his vision.

[Ngh... this is it for me...] The last Legionnaire thinks to himself. [I don't have any energy left. Not a drop. If a demon comes by, they'll easily kill me before I can lift a finger.]

However, his thoughts don't stay within his mind. Instead, they transmit to Hercules, now safely tucked under his father's arm. The young Titan suffers from deep wounds inflicted by the succubus, Belial. He closes his eyes and transmits his thoughts to any who will listen.

[My Legion. Who among you still draws breath?]

Fatigue wracks Jepthath's body. He sags further against the tree and sighs.

[Only me, my leader. I have failed you. The rest of the Legion perished to the bloodskins.]

Hercules falls silent. His father travels at the speed of sound, rushing across the landscape toward the safety of the Titan's hall.

[I see. I expected as much. We weren't ready to fight the demons. An army of ten thousand was far too few to stand against the millions of bloodskins lurking within the Earth's bowels. Haha...]

Overwhelming sadness fills Hercules' mind.

[I knew when I tapped into the soul manipulation arts that my father would hate me. Still, I gained as much as I lost. I'm glad to have met you, Jephthah. You were always different from the other humans. Only you understand the pain tucked away within the recesses of my heart. The pain of loss. Of suffering. Of *regret*. We can never bring back those we've lost, but we can avenge them. *You* can avenge them.]

Hercules sighs.

[I won't let you die. You shall become my ace in the hole. If I should perish, I will ensure my power passes on to you. For now, I will grant you half of my strength. Use it wisely and survive. Earth's fate depends on you.]

Hercules closes his eyes. He transmits a tremendous amount of magical energy through the telepathic link to Jephthah. There, it enters the human's broken body and swiftly gets to work mending his wounds.

Jephthah coughs. [I... I am unworthy.]

[No,] Hercules replies, a hint of melancholy in his voice. [I am. I must do what I can to revive the Titans. However, you must save your people. The angels think little of humanity, but I see now that your kind will be the key to defeating the demons, someday. Whether one year or a thousand, humanity will end up the ultimate victor in this planetary war.]

Jephthah nods. [I understand. Thank you, leader. If it wasn't for you... I would never have had a chance to avenge my family's murder.]

[I have no doubt that even without my help, you would have moved Heaven and Earth to pay the demons back double for their violence. Haha. I am fortunate to have met you. I will submit to whatever punishment my father deems necessary. In the meantime, you must keep fighting, Jephthah. You are the key to defeating the demons.]

[I will. Do not worry, leader.]

Hercules sighs. Having exhausted himself in the battle against the demons, he sags in his father's grasp and allows sleep to swallow him.

However, Jephthah does not.

The human winces as his body repairs itself. He pulls himself to his feet and stumbles away from the field of corpses. With a deep sigh, he begins hobbling back toward his mountain village, where the Legion once lived.

If Hercules will not allow me to die, then I must stay alive at all costs. I will rebuild the Legion, but a thousand times stronger with a thousand times as many men. I won't make the same mistakes I did before.

I will hunt the demons no matter where they hide. Their extinction will draw nearer by the day.

Jephthah smiles.

Only once I've wrung the life from Satan's neck will I finally join my family in the Great Beyond.

Part 200: Jephthath's Inheritance

Five years passed. After witnessing the death of all my fellow Legionnaires, along with Hercules' imprisonment, I all but lost myself to madness and rage.

Jephthath's visions shift, revealing a series of images where he pounces at demons from the shadows, eviscerates them, and then slips back into the darkness. At one point, he ambushes a 100-demon-strong platoon of grunts, rips off their limbs, and beats them to death with their own extremities.

Despite all my rage, I eventually brought myself back to reality. I came to realize that with Hercules imprisoned, it was my job to protect humanity from the demons. However, since Hercules alone possessed the ability to contract with other beings, I could not regrow the Legion by myself.

Undeterred by that overwhelming setback, I realized that I had gained something incredibly valuable to offset my loss.

Power.

Hercules shared half of his Titan strength with me, turning me into a devastating weapon capable of tearing demonkind apart. He had once tried bestowing greater amounts of his power with the Legion, but due to his Titan ancestry, no soldier's body could increase their vitality more than threefold.

I was the lone exception.

Honed by combat and tempered by rage, I gritted through mountains of pain and suffering, granting myself enhanced resistance to his power's negative effects. Eventually, I molded his energy within myself and altered its properties.

I made Hercules's strength my own.

Time flashes forward — Jephthath's vision changes to reveal a small community of humans, barely a hundred strong. Jephthath stands atop a small boulder, surrounded by stone huts covered with straw. Around him, the entire village bows deeply, awed by his presence.

"Jip-jip jong! Jip-jip jong!"

The crowd chants a few words over and over. Some of the gathered men and women raise their heads to gaze upon Jephthath with admiration and fear.

Thanks to Hercules's soul manipulation, I was capable of speaking the language of the Titans and Gods. However, until I established a contract with those under me, I could not share the gift of language with them. Thankfully, this did not impede me, as I had once communicated in much the same way as they did, centuries before.

Jephthath crosses his arm over his chest. "Hoya! Bon-bon, kuu fi-fi!"

The villager nod. In unison, they rise to their feet, run to their huts, and come back with a hundred small baskets of fruit and vegetables. They return with looks of eagerness on their faces and place the baskets down around Jephthath's rock in a circle, then step backward, allowing him to examine their gifts.

Since I could not rebuild the Legion without Hercules's help, I instead rescued a village from a demonic assault, saving them from the same fate my family had once suffered. Afterward, I moved their village into the mountains a hundred miles away from Sinai. Their only purpose was to gather food for me, as well as news and information regarding the demon's movements. However, despite how I used them as a tool in my quest to kill the demons, I came to realize that these humans did not look at me as a man, but as a God.

*They called me the **Illuminator**.*

Jepthath descends from his rock. He reaches behind it to pull out a backpack made from woven vines, then casually walks around, plucking the juiciest-looking fruits for himself. After slinging his backpack over his shoulder, Jepthath turns to face the expectant villagers and their eager gazes.

"Gup. Kra-kra, yong."

He motions to the west, where Mount Sinai looms on the horizon. The villagers press their palms together and bow deeply, allowing their heads to touch the dirt.

Without another word, Jepthath trudges away from the village. He leaps over a twenty-foot-tall wooden pallisade, one with hundreds of spears facing in every possible direction, and impacts the dirt on the other side with a heavy *whump*. The village's wall, built to withstand a demon grunt assault force, might not last forever, but it should give Jepthath enough time to return and save his people if the need arises.

Time passes. Jepthath increases his pace and stomps through the jungle leading up to Sinai relentlessly. His stamina never depletes, nor does his speed drop even after running for hours on end. Eventually, he arrives at the base of Mount Sinai. There, he spots a horde of demons charging toward the mountain's base.

[I see the horde, Master Hercules. How fares your battle?]

Jepthath closes his eyes and focuses his mind. His perception shifts to his Titan commander, where Hercules sits inside a jail cell.

[I sense someone approaching — the Earthmother, Uzziel. No doubt, she has some plan to release me, a laughable notion. Worry about yourself. I have no orders for you, Jepthath. Do whatever you feel necessary. I consider us equals in this war against our shared enemy. Should I fall, my power will transfer to you. Continue fighting; never give up.]

Jepthath nods. [Speak not of surrender. If a demon approaches me, I will kill it without fail. I take my leave, Master.]

[Farewell. I will keep you informed on Heaven's situation.]

Jepthath disconnects his mind from Hercules', then walks over to a large rock with a hole smashed in its top. He sets his backpack filled with food inside, then gently places a cover over the hole to keep it safe.

Jepthath's inner voice speaks once again.

With tens of thousands, perhaps even millions of demons swarming Mount Sinai, I knew I had a chance to deal significant damage to my mortal enemies. I hadn't sat idly for the last five years, but had instead built up a network of human resistance cells throughout the region. Each one worshipped me like a God, fed me, and gave me information on the movements and locations of demon hideouts. With the entirety of the demonic hordes converging on Sinai, I knew that their homes would be all but empty.

Never again would I have such a golden opportunity to deal damage to their society. My goal was not merely to kill demons, after all, but to exterminate them. As such, my focus never wavered; I had to eliminate their broodmothers and kill Lucifer.

If one considered Valac to be the demonic personification of death; then Lucifer would be the demon's hideous, mutated version of Uzziel. Lucifer created not only their broodmothers, but she even twisted and manipulated the life around her to produce goblins, orcs, and all other types of abhorrent monsters. I could kill demons from sunrise to sundown, but so long as Lucifer and her broodmothers survived, demonkind would return again and again for the rest of eternity.

Jepthath crouches low in the grass. However, due to the Titan power flowing through his veins, hiding his seven-foot-tall body amidst the shrubbery proves impossible. A few dozen demon grunts with sharp eyes spot their dark-skinned stalker and whirl to face him.

"Look! Over there! It's one o' them fleshbags sneakin' around! Forget the angels; let's get some grub!"

The demons charge at Jepthath, but he merely shrugs in response. "Oh? I wanted to slip past these fools, but I suppose a warmup before the main event won't be so bad..."

What follows is a scene of carnage. Jepthath leaps at the forty grunts, startling them with his swift movements. He smashes his feet into a Brute's head, killing it instantly, then grabs its corpse and uses it like a hammer. He crushes ten demons flat, breaking their bodies with his Herculean strength.

By the time the others have managed to track his rampaging form, Jepthath reaches them and sends their souls scattering to the Great Beyond. Within minutes, all that remains of the forty demon grunts is a grassy field bathed in blood, dotted with craters.

Jepthath leaps into the air and heaves a sigh. "I never did enjoy sneaking around."

The Titan's servant lands amidst a platoon of burners. They immediately swivel to face the human in their midst, but Jepthath doesn't give them a moment to react. He rips the blade-arms off a nearby scyther and uses its appendages to cut through and wipe out more than five hundred demons over the course of ten minutes.

Eventually, Jepthath fades into the jungle. He smirks as two Barons show up and discover the corpses of their comrades, bewilderment on their faces.

"Your time will come, ascended ones."

[Aaaaah! It hurts! My head, gaugh! That damned demoness... she- gah!]

Jepthath, now slinking around an underground passage, winces as Hercules's words appear in his mind. A sense of agony pours into his brain, transmitted via Hercules's mental link.

[Master? Master?! What happened? Are you injured?!]

Jepthath ducks into an alcove tucked deep within the demon's underground lair. He turns his thoughts inward and tries to connect to Hercules's mind, only for scattered images of blinding pain to explode in his brain. Jepthath immediately severs the link to prevent himself from going insane.

"Ahh, damnation! Someone attacked my Master. He's badly injured. I can't stay here; I must go to him!"

Jepthath casts a glance down the hallway. A couple of patrolling Demons Lords, male and female, lazily saunter around, seemingly unworried about the possibility of a counter-attack. After all, with the angels and Titans trapped within Heaven, who could possibly pose a threat to them and the broodmothers?

Jepthath bites his lip. "No, damn. I can't leave now. I'll never make it to my Master's side in time to save him. I need to remain focused on my mission. Killing the broodmothers is my most important goal."

With a heavy heart, Jepthath spares only a tiny bit of attention toward Hercules's plight. The rest of his focus goes into locating the hiding holes of the broodmothers.

The patrolling Demon Lords continue walking toward Jepthath's alcove. Oblivious to the predator lurking within the shadows, the two of them shoot the shit with one another. "-what I'm saying! Satan thinks this big attack on Heaven will work, but he's an idiot! If we didn't have Bael, we'd lose in ten seconds! Satan's lucky he has the Balrog on his side, or he could kiss his stupid tush goodbye."

The first Lord, a young guy with a chubby body, blood-red cape, and a wreath of flowers around his neck, crows to the demoness at his side, ridiculing Satan without holding anything back.

However, the other Lord, a female with narrow eyes, extra-pointy ears, and small iron marbles embedded in her skin, scoffs. "You'd best watch your mouth. If anyone hears you saying such things and reports it to Satan, he'll stick your head on a pike."

"Relax, sis! Sheesh. Do you really think someone would rat on us to Satan? The guy's a total loser. Bael might be dumb, but he could beat Satan with both hands tied behind his back. Satan can call himself the First Emperor all he wants, but as long as Bael's around, we all know who's *really* in charge."

"And what if Satan succeeds?" The female asks. She rubs a few of the iron balls embedded in her chest. "I think he has a chance at beating the angels. In any case, I wish I could be there instead of here. The battle is sure to be all sorts of fun."

"Pft. You're nuts, Oni. I bet everyone will die except for Bael. When they do, we'll be here, alive. Bael will have no choice but to make us Dukes! Then he'll become an Emperor, and we'll be like his number one and two!"

The two demons walk ever closer to Jepthath's hidey-hole. He coils his muscles and prepares to pounce.

"It's *boring* wandering around while everyone else gets to fight," Oni pouts. "I'd much rather be picking apart angels and peeling the flesh from their bones while they beg me for mercy. Only then could I- ah! Watch out!"

Oni's heart skips a beat. Some unknown extrasensory ability on her body activates, allowing her to dive forward and duck Jephthath's sneak attack. The human pounces from the shadows and swings both of his fists, intending to take out both Lords. Instead, he only manages to kill Oni's brother, crushing the young Lord's head with his bare hands.

Oni rolls to the side and motions with her hands. She barely spares a look at her dead brother and instead gazes at the glowing-eyed human before her, his black skin blending in with the darkened corridors of the demon's lair.

"Bastard! You killed Poli! What the hell are you?! You're not a Titan! You're not a human, either!"

Jephthath rises to his feet. He gazes at the lone demoness with a mixture of disgust and hatred. "I am your nightmare."

The female's eyes widen. "Wait... it's you! You're that human, the one Barbatos mentioned! You're the fucker who's been killing our patrols!"

Jephthath doesn't reply. He lunges at the woman and swings his fist, but when he strikes her chest, his fist crumples as if he's punched an iron wall. The girl flies backward and hits the ground, then slides to a stop. Her chest writhes and twitches unnaturally as the metal marbles embedded in her skin shift around the spot Jephthath punched.

"Kah!" Oni coughs blood, spitting it all over the dirt floor. "You damned fleshbag dogfucker... you killed Poli... I won't forgive you..."

Jephthath balls his fingers into a fist again. "It's not often a Lord survives one of my punches. You're surprisingly durable, demoness. It's a good thing I'll be killing you before you can become a threat."

The young demoness's pupils shrink as the glowing-eyed human pounces at her again. He raises his fist, intending to finish her in one blow.

Suddenly, a flash of motion intercepts Jephthath! A Demon Lord appears from out of nowhere and kicks Jephthath in the ribs, sending him crashing into the wall.

Oni stares at the newly appeared figure with a heart of gratitude. "O-Orias?! Is that you?"

Orias, Lord of the Moon, stands with his back to Oni. He shivers and trembles as fatigue wracks his body.

"Leave, little one. This foe is beyond you. I'll slow him so you can escape."

Orias's voice cracks every few words. He gasps for breath and appears visibly winded, though his fatigue doesn't come from his attack against Jephthath. Instead, Orias's pain comes from unleashing his Beauteous One's full power earlier that day, a move which ultimately allowed him to overpower Uriel and her Valkyries, but which also devastated his body.

Veins bulge across Orias's light pink skin. His awful complexion reveals the exhaustion wracking his entire body. Despite this, he doesn't budge as Jephthath steps out of the wall and leaps into the center of the hallway once again.

Oni struggles to her feet. Having taken one of Jephthath's punches, her condition isn't any better than Orias's. "No! You can't stay here! That human will kill you!"

"He won't. Go!"

Orias bellows at the girl, cowing her into submission. She only hesitates for an instant before turning tail and fleeing in the other direction.

Soon, only Jephthath and Orias remain. The two warriors size each other up. Despite Orias's surprise attack, the human appears to be in peak condition, while his opponent limps at death's door.

"What do you hope to achieve?" Jephthath asks. "I'll kill you, and that girl. It makes no difference to me whether one of you survives a little longer."

Beads of sweat drip down Orias's face. The Lord of the Moon clutches a few different gems in his palm while shaking his head. "I know why you've come. You intend to kill the broodmothers. Every moment I delay you gives Satan additional time to finish his business in Heaven."

Jephthath laughs. "Haha. Your leader can't win. The difference between a Demon Emperor and an Archangel is like that between Heaven and Earth. Similarly, the difference between us will result in your death."

Orias purses his lips. "Perhaps."

The two warriors stand perfectly still for a split-second. Then, they attack!

Jephthath leaps at the wall to his right, presses his feet against it, and dives straight toward Orias, intending to grab his waist and pin him to the ground. However, Orias snaps his fingers to absorb an onyx gem. Its blackened energy transforms him into a shadow, allowing him to melt into the darkness and evade Jephthath's attack.

Jephthath's glowing eyes flash with dazzling energy. He flicks his gaze around and locks onto the mana surrounding himself, then spins on his heel and claps his hands.

Boom!

A thunderclap explodes from between his palms, striking the wall and rattling Orias's innards. The Lord of the Moon demorphs from his shadow form and stumbles forward, blood rupturing from his eyes, ears, and nose. "Guhk!"

"You're too weak to use cheap tricks on me, bloodskin," Jephthath says with an evil gleam in his eye.

The two combatants begin rapidly trading blows. However, any attack Orias flings at Jephthath proves ineffective against the Titan's Servant. Jephthath dodges a dozen shadow-lances, shrugs off two bolts of lightning to his chest, and stands firm against a blast of kinetic energy capable of turning concrete to powder.

Meanwhile, each time Jephthath claps his hands, the sheer power of his soundwaves rattle and rip apart Orias's innards. The Baron of the Stars activates several defensive gems, but at best, they only guard against a portion of Jephthath's might.

"Kah-huck!"

Orias vomits blood uncontrollably. His pink skin loses even more of its luster, morphing into a ghastly grey color, much like Valac's undead minions.

"Not much longer," Jephthath says, a hint of mockery in his voice. "And now, for the part I enjoy most."

Jephthath sizes up his demon opponent. Orias trembles and shakes. He barely manages to keep on his feet through little more than sheer willpower. Unable to heal himself, the Lord can only defend passively as his half-Titan enemy readies himself for the killing blow.

Suddenly, before Jephthath can lunge toward Orias one last time, a bolt of blinding pain shoots through his skull!

[No! You damned Archangel! Stop! You can't take my powers! They're mine!]

Hercules's voice bellows in Jephthath's mind, momentarily stunning him. The mental assault causes Jephthath's body to seize up, making him stumble and fall to his knees.

Disbelief washes over Orias's face. Unsure if his enemy is feigning weakness to make him lower his guard, he hesitates for a second while deciding whether he should attack Jephthath's opening or not. It doesn't take him long to decide.

I'm about to die anyway! If I don't attack this human now, I'll lose my only shot at crippling him!

Jephthath reels as Hercules's voice starts to fade away. With Uzziel healing Hercules's wounds while sealing his powers, he quickly begins to lose contact with Jephthath.

Shik!

Ten dark lances leap from Jephthath's shadow and skewer his chest. Unable to move, he fails to defend himself, allowing Orias to deal a grievous blow. The pain of Orias's sneak attack brings Jephthath crashing back to reality, where he finally loses contact with his Master.

"Gah... damned demon... during my moment of weakness..."

Unbridled rage smolders in Jephthath's gaze. He pushes himself to his feet and rips the shadow-lances from his body. Each one melts into particles of darkness and lands at his feet as blackened dust. With several deep piercing wounds spread across his figure, Jephthath begins to bleed profusely, transforming him once again into the image of a blood-bathed savage.

Orias takes a step back. His pupils shrink as he watches the human advance toward him. "I stabbed your heart! How can you still walk?!"

Jephthath spits out a mocking laugh. "Haha... if only you'd aimed for my head."

The empowered human stomps forward, moving at a glacial pace compared to only a minute earlier. As he walks, his eyes glow brighter than ever, transforming from pure white orbs into a slightly golden

color. His body regenerates and his wounds seal.

To Orias's surprise, tears stream down Jephthath's face, mixing with his enraged expression to create a feeling of heartbreak and loss.

[Master... Master... have you fallen? Where are you? Why has your full power entered me?]

Jephthath transmits his words over Hercules' soul link, but his thoughts fade into oblivion. Hercules never receives his pupil's message.

Hercules's full might enters Jephthath's body. It transforms into a whirlwind of mana and engulfs him in a cyclone of power. Orias retreats several steps as the furious energy swirling around Jephthath threatens to press the Demon Lord against the wall and mash him into mulch.

"Delaying you is all I ever intended to do, human! Cough... I've done what I can! I won't sacrifice myself here for nothing!"

Orias pulls out a green emerald from the folds of his robe. He wraps his hand around it, snaps his fingers, and disappears from Jephthath's sight. His body fades into the wind and rushes down the tunnel, vanishing before Jephthath can fully recover.

The Titan's Servant rubs his chest. The pain he once felt from Orias's attack no longer stings like before. Even better, the dull, throbbing discomfort he previously suffered from Hercules's mana vanishes without a trace. Upon receiving 100% of Hercules's soul energy, Jephthath's strength and vitality not only double, but even triple and quadruple. His muscles bulge so much that they almost split his skin. Jephthath sucks in a deep breath and smiles, intoxicated by the newfound might flowing within his veins.

"Hah... Master... I will not forget your sacrifice. Whoever killed you, I will pay them back a hundredfold. For now, though, I must continue my quest. I must wipe out every demon on Earth. I will not rest until they have all perished."

Jephthath's newly awakened physique makes him unstoppable against any demon below the rank of a Duke. He rips across the demon's burrow, killing dozens of stragglers. Upon finding their nursery, the human wastes no time in plunging his hands into the helpless women's chests and ripping out their spines. Unable to fight back, the broodmothers can do little more than beg for mercy before meeting their end at the hands of the glowing-eyed monster.

Jephthath laughs. "Hahaha... never have I felt as satisfied in all my life as I do at this very moment!"

He charges through the burrows, killing any demon he spots. However, after two hours, Jephthath slows his movements and frowns.

"Something's not right. I've found only a few hundred Broodmothers in this burrow. The demons must have other holes hidden throughout the land. At this rate, they'll return and rescue their hellspawn-whelpers before I can finish killing them!"

Jephthath continues searching the burrow, and when he finds a Scyther cowering behind a rock, he leaps at the blade-armed demon and slams it against the ground.

"Demon filth! Where are the rest of your burrows? Tell me!"

The Scyther struggles mightily to break free of Jephthath's grip, but the human merely tightens his grasp on the young demon's neck.

"Puh... please! I don't... know... anything..."

"Don't act like I'm stupid. Tell me the truth, and I'll grant you a quick death. Lie, and we'll be here for hours."

To emphasize his point, Jephthath pulls back his finger and flicks the Scyther's kneecap, shattering the bone with the barest of effort.

"Aaaaaiiee!!"

The Scyther howls in agony, unable to fight back. His heart-wrenching scream elicits no response from the human standing atop him.

"Please... please! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I don't know anything! I don't know!"

Before the Scyther can finish his sentence, Jephthath jams his thumb into the demon's eyeball, gouging it out in a horrific act of depravity. The pain nearly makes the demon faint, but Jephthath slaps him back to life.

"Tell me where the other burrows are! Don't think I'm not enjoying this, bloodskin! I'll torture you all day if that's what it takes!"

"Nnn... please... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

The Scyther tries to lift its bladed-arm, but it hasn't any strength left. It sags in Jephthath's grasp and takes its final breath before passing away.

Jephthath growls. "Worthless bloodskin. You were so weak; you couldn't even endure a little torture. Pathetic."

Jephthath casts the demon aside. A ghastly expression spreads across his face as he contemplates his next move.

"I can't hunt for the burrows all by myself. That will take too long. Now that I have my Master's power, I must use it to its fullest capability."

After coming to a decision, Jephthath rises to his feet. He dashes down hallways and past alcoves as he heads for the underground labyrinth's exit. The empowered human explodes into the midday sun and immediately beelines toward the nearest allied settlement, a look of delight on his face.

"My Master always said I would one day lead my fellow men to conquer the demons. Perhaps even he hadn't a clue how right he was."

Within minutes, Jephthath arrives at the edge of a human village, one he helped fortify with wooden pallisades and other protective measures a year before. He pounces over the wall and lands amidst the primitive mud huts. The village's residents swivel in fright to face the intruder in their midst, only to breathe a sigh of relief as they discover his identity.

"Ka-ka-la! Bobo!" A young girl cries. She squeals with delight as she runs over to Jephthah, only to pause when she spots the blood and gore covering his body.

Jephthah fixates his glowing eyes on the villagers as they drop what they're doing and rush to greet him. Everyone bows before Jephthah, their Illuminator, and greets him with the same reverence they'd afford a god.

"Jop-jop! Jop-jop! Jop-jop!"

The villagers kowtow and press their faces to the ground while occasionally raising their gazes to beam admiring smiles at Jephthah.

The Titan's Servant presses his bloody fist against his chest. "Hear me. I am Jephthah, your king. I've come today to take my place at humanity's head! No longer will we bow to the angels, nor will we flee from the demons! We are not weak. We are strong! Mighty! Unstoppable! We must show the world our might and our resolve! Come! All of you, place your hands atop mine! Join me and ascend to godhood!"

Jephthah thrusts out his hand and holds it palm-up. However, despite his speech, the villagers merely continue smiling. A few of them cast confused glances at the others, but nobody takes a step forward.

Jephthah's shoulders sag.

"Oh, right. Ah... kiki, maka-laka. Hoppa."

The moment he dumbs down his language, the eyes of the villagers light up. They quickly stride forward and place their hands on his, allowing his newly acquired Herculean power to spread amongst them. Everyone accepts Jephthah's power, including the women and children.

Soon, every single villager's eyes glow pure white, much like Jephthah's.

"We thank you, Illuminator," The village's chieftain says. With his newly acquired linguistic ability, he speaks his mind as easily as if he's done so his entire life. "We will follow you anywhere you ask."

Jephthah nods. "Excellent. For now, come with me."

He smiles.

"We've bloodskins to kill."

Part 201: Jephthath's Domination

As the sky exploded, and a crimson mist descended upon the Earth, a terrible weight settled upon my heart.

I did not know at the time the fate which had befallen Heaven, but I discerned that the demons must have unleashed some monstrosly devastating attack upon their angelic foes.

The mist coated the planet's surface, soaking its soil with the bloody essence of countless dead angels and demons. In my heart of hearts, a wordless revulsion sprang up unbidden, as if I had witnessed an act so heinous that nothing could ever redeem the one who had committed it.

With my link to Hercules severed, it would take me several weeks before I could speak to the survivors of Satan's detonation and learn of his evil. In the meantime, since I hadn't any knowledge of what transpired, I continued summoning additional warriors to infiltrate and attack the demon's dens.

Jephthath's vision shifts. This time, he stands at the base of Mount Sinai, where his gaze falls upon the blood-red sky and its slowly descending mist.

[Great Illuminator! We have uncovered another burrow!]

The words of a recently acquired soldier appear in Jephthath's mind. Much like how the Legion once communicated via Hercules's soul link, the new Legion does the same through Jephthath's power.

Jephthath strokes his facial hair. [That's the seventh bloodskin den already. I always assumed there would be more than one, but to think Lucifer and Valac had prepared so many backups...]

The soldier shakes his head. [Sir, this den is different. It features hallways three times wider than the previous ones, elaborate carvings on the walls, furniture whittled from wood and stone, and plenty of other time-intensive feats of craftsmanship.]

Jephthath straightens his posture. [It must be one of the bloodskin's primary caverns. I'll join you as soon as I can.]

Hardly has Jephthath finished his sentence before another soldier transmits his thoughts. [Great Illuminator! I've been keeping an eye on Mount Sinai's entrance as you requested. Demons are fleeing the mountain! It seems they've begun retreating from combat!]

Jephthath narrows his eyes. He shoots a glance toward the blood-red sky as several worrisome thoughts enter his head. [I understand. We need to speed up our movements. I want one hundred soldiers to descend on the bloodskin's primary burrow. Slaughter everyone you can. Leave no survivors. If any Barons, Dukes, or Emperors appear, alert me at once.]

[Yes, Great Illuminator!]

The soldier disconnects his mind, allowing Jephthath to take a long, slow breath. He turns to the west and begins running as fast as he can, heading away from Sinai toward the location his Legionnaire reported.

Jepthath's voice once again sweeps across Hope's mind, explaining the vision's events.

When I obtained Hercules's full power, not only did I become far stronger than before, I gained plenty of other benefits as well. Because his soul manipulation changed to reflect my human biology, my fellow warriors became even mightier than the original Legion. Each one possessed somewhere between a quarter and half of my power, depending on their individual constitutions. As such, even one Legionnaire was capable of taking out a typical Lord or Baron singlehandedly. To say that my forces had dwarfed their previous power would be a tremendous understatement.

However...

Jepthath's voice frosts over. A hint of melancholy enters his tone.

...Since Hercules was no longer our progenitor, we lost some of the benefits of his Titan heritage. Most importantly; his immortality.

The moment my Master died, my body aged thirty years. My strength soared to the heavens, but my lifespan plummeted to the abyss. In exchange for enough power to exterminate the demons, I lost the advantage of time. I knew this without anyone telling me, all because I could sense the changes happening within my body.

My lifespan was limited. As such, I had to ensure the same was true of those who slaughtered my family.

* * *

Jepthath's vision changes once again. He reappears inside an underground labyrinth, different from the one where he fought Orias, with far wider hallways and plenty of torches fastened to the walls to light the way.

Jepthath strides down the hall while sweeping his glowing eyes from left to right. Whenever he spots a room he hasn't explored yet, he steps inside, eviscerates any demons or monsters inside, and returns to the corridor to continue his hunt.

Jepthath frowns. "This lair is ten times the size of any of the others. No matter how many Broodmothers I slay, I keep finding hundreds more. Orcs, Goblins, Demon Lords, and even a few Barons patrol its passages. At this rate, I won't succeed in clearing it out before the demons return from Sinai."

As Jepthath mutters to himself, one of his soldiers transmits their thoughts. [Great Illuminator, come quickly! We've encountered a mighty foe; a Demon Duke! He's incredibly strong, far too powerful for us to handle!]

Jepthath responds immediately. [A Duke? Where? Send me your location. I'll come at once.]

The soldier transmits his coordinates, making Jepthath frown. [So far away? It will take me several minutes to get there. Which Duke are you fighting?]

It takes twenty seconds before the soldier can respond. When he does, his mental voice is hazy and shaken. [H-he's... he's too strong! We can't even hurt- augh!]

The man's voice cuts off mid-sentence, causing butterflies to bounce around in Jephthath's stomach. A look of rage washes over his face. "Oh? Who do you think you are, killing my men? You'll pay for that, Mister Duke."

Humanity's King takes off like a bullet train. He charges down the hallway with reckless abandon, ignoring anyone in his path. If any demon or monster tries to slow him down, he mercilessly kills them with a single blow, wiping them off the face of the Earth before they can react.

[Soldiers! Since a Duke has appeared in the burrow, then that means the main bloodskin assault force has made it back to their den. Keep your eyes peeled! Travel in groups and watch out for other Dukes and Emperors!]

[Yes, Illuminator!]

As Jephthath traverses the Labyrinth's twisting hallways, occasionally getting turned around by random dead-ends and routes twisting back on themselves, the thoughts of other soldiers reach his mind.

[The Demon Duke! He's here!]

[I'll defeat him for you, Illuminator! I'll-]

The second speaker's voice cuts off mid-sentence, sending pangs of guilt down Jephthath's spine.

[Stay away from him,] Jephthath orders. [I'm almost there.]

[I won't back down! I'll fight for you, Great Illuminator!]

Jephthath scowls at how his men won't obey his orders.

Not only had I lost my immortality, granted via Hercules's Titan lineage, but I had also lost his absolute control over the Legion. I could still communicate with those whom I had granted power, but if they chose to disobey my orders, I could not force their hand.

It goes without saying that every human I had conscripted up to that point worshipped me as a godlike figure, but unfortunately, their fanaticism lead them to make overly aggressive moves, endangering their lives. I did not wish to see any humans perish, not even in combat. Therefore, their blatant disregard for my orders was something I could not ignore.

[I told you to stand down! Keep away from the Duke! Wait for my arrival!]

The soldier protests. [This bloodskin killed my brother! I can't let him live! On my honor, I'll fight to my last breath! I'll-]

His voice cuts off the same as the men before him. The abrupt silence only increases the weight on Jephthath's heart.

Eventually, Jephthath reaches his destination. There, he finds ten dead Legionnaires, with three survivors battling for their lives against the rampaging Demon Duke.

Bael, the Duke of Pain, laughs heartily as his fist comes crashing down on a wiry young Legionnaire's head. He flattens the youth out with a single blow, crushing his head into meat paste. "Hahaha! Oh, man,

I'm having tons of fun! If you silly cunts think we're just gonna let'cha kill our Broodmothers, you've got another thing comin'!"

The expressions of the two Legionnaires betray no emotion. They don't show even an inkling of fear in the face of such a terrifying adversary. Nevertheless, when they discover the arrival of their leader, both men shake their fists with joy. "Illuminator! You're here! Come, work with us so we can take down this Duke!"

Jepthath slows to a stop. He gazes at Bael's back and waits as the Duke turns to face him. "Bael. It's you. You're the one who defeated my Master six years ago."

Bael scratches his ass. "Haha! Who the hell're you? Just another dope for me to smack around! Come on, punk, I ain't got all day!"

Jepthath's expression darkens. He flicks his gaze toward the two other Legionnaires. "Leave. Continue the mission. I'll face Bael alone."

The excited smiles on both Legionnaire's faces disappear. "What? But, Great Illuminator! That's too dangerous! We'll stay and help-"

"LEAVE!"

Rage erupts in Jepthath's voice. His fury instantly cows both of the young men, making them shrink back in fright. After sparing a glance at the Demon Duke, they nod hesitantly, turn tail, and retreat, leaving Bael and Jepthath alone.

Bael raises an eyebrow. "You're that confident, huh? Should've let those kids stay. You'll need all the help you can get if you wanna tussle with me, bub."

Jepthath balls his hands into fists.

"No. I won't."

Recommended Listening

Titanspawn. Hellspawn.

Jepthath and Bael size each other up for a few moments. Both combatants give off auras of confidence, acting as if victory for the other side is impossible.

However, Jepthath's thoughts tell a different story.

My Master lost to not only Satan the Devil, but Bael as well. I knew from the moment I laid my eyes on the Duke of Pain that my victory would come at a price. The mightiest Demon Duke possessed incredible defenses and strength rivaling mine. From the information my Master had transmitted during the War in Heaven, I knew that Bael had taken on and defeated several powerful foes, including the revived Valac, as well as Camael, the Archangel of Divination.

I could not afford to underestimate him. Therefore, I didn't.

Jepthath's glowing eyes flash with a burst of bloody light. He lunges forward, pulls back his fist, and punches Bael in the chest. The Duke of Pain doesn't dodge, but instead allows his opponent to land the first blow. He staggers backward under the force of Jepthath's strength and presses against the Labyrinth wall, only for the empowered human to send a hail of fists raining down on him.

Over and over, Jepthath brings the hammer down on Bael, battering and smashing the Duke with all his strength. Each punch, capable of pulverizing boulders, sends shockwaves traveling down the corridor, flattening any low-ranking demons who stray too close to the battle. Even Lords and Barons shy away from the deafening explosions erupting from Jepthath's punches.

Bael puts his arms up, using them as a fleshy shield to protect his chest. Given his incredible durability, the move seems pointless, but the strain on the Duke's face proves Jepthath's assault is causing him some trouble.

Eventually, Jepthath leaps backward, thanks to his years of honed battle instinct. He narrowly evades Bael's retort as the Duke kicks his leg out and tries to stomp the human's foot into pulp. The lumbering demon moves with astounding speed and pounds his heel into the floor, sending massive cracks spiderwebbing throughout the walls and ceiling.

The fight pauses for a moment as Jepthath narrows his eyes while keeping to a safe distance. Bael lowers his arms and grins, revealing his pearly white teeth. "Not gonna lie, ya little bugger, those punches hurt. I'm gonna have a few bruises when I wake up tomorrow."

Jepthath lowers his fists. He sucks in a deep breath and readies himself for Bael's counterattack.

I put all of my strength into my initial flurry of blows, only to discover that Bael's skin was harder than enchanted steel. Each time my fists struck the Duke of Pain, it was as if he punched back. My fingers ached, and my ears rang. After trying to crush the Duke with an all-out assault, I realized that directly overpowering his defenses would prove impossible.

However... what my raw strength wasn't able to achieve, perhaps a more nuanced technique could...

Bael charges at Jepthath. He doesn't bother with any fancy feints or fakeouts. He repeats what Jepthath did and commits to a full-out assault, intending to beat and batter the human senseless. Jepthath replies by using his superior agility to dodge Bael's punches and kicks while batting aside any he can't evade.

Minutes pass.

The two warriors trade blows, each one trying to land a decisive hit that will end the fight. However, between Bael's stalwart defense and Jepthath's fluttering movements, neither one of them can bring the battle to its ultimate conclusion.

"Stop hopping around!" Bael laments. He swings his fist again, but Jepthath steps to the side, narrowly evading the blow. Bael stumbles and loses his balance, giving Jepthath the initiative for a split-second. The human counters with a brutal jab to Bael's left ear, knocking the Duke to his right against a wall. The impact of fist against skull sends stars dancing through Bael's eyes.

"Grgh! Fuckin' slippery little bitch..."

Jepthath's heart pounds like a drum in his chest. Despite his incredible stamina, the amount of willpower needed to fight against such a deadly enemy brings him to the edge of his sanity.

[Damn,] Jepthath thinks out loud. [I knew the Duke of Pain would be a powerful adversary, but I didn't expect the battle to last this long.]

The Illuminator's observation transmits to all of his troops. Despite it not being a request for assistance, dozens of his Legion members chime in.

[Do you need help, Great Illuminator?]

[We will come to you at once!]

[Explain your dilemma to me, Illuminator. I might be able to offer you some advice.]

The last speaker catches Jepthath's attention. An old man, far beyond his years, but with a voice full of wisdom, doesn't jump at the chance to assist his savior. Instead, he eyes the situation from a distance, offering his knowledge to the Illuminator.

Jepthath pauses for only a split-second. Thanks to the speed of thought, barely any time passes in reality while his mind converses with the Legion members.

[Aye. The Duke of Pain is a most troublesome adversary. I've struck him countless times, but I cannot get past his formidable defenses. Have you any ideas on how I can turn the battle to my advantage, old one?]

The old man's voice reaches Jepthath's mind within the blink of an eye. [Possibly. I once was a hunter in my village. However, due to a nasty encounter with several demon grunts in my prime, I left the path of the spear behind to focus on my hand-to-hand combat training. If my knowledge will be of some benefit to you, Great Illuminator, take it. Even with the power of the gods flowing through my veins, I'm not the warrior I once was.]

A flood of information enters Jepthath's mind. Years of memories, battle techniques, and practiced movements flow through his body, turning him from a warrior possessed by a demon into a battle-hardened veteran.

Jepthath reels from the old man's knowledge. [Incredible. These unarmed skills are unlike anything I've ever seen! How did you come to develop such a fluid, graceful fighting style?]

[When the demons assailed me, I barely survived the encounter. They struck me when I had no spear in my possession, and as such, I found myself defenseless. I wished I could fight back, but my strength didn't compare to theirs. I eventually came to realize that even if I lacked the power needed to defeat my enemies, I could always turn theirs against them.]

A flash of insight appears in Jepthath's eyes.

[I see. If my might is lacking, then I need only borrow my opponent's. Thank you, wise one. I will put this knowledge to good use.]

[I merely exist to serve, Great Illuminator.]

Time returns to normal as Jephthath closes off his communication with the other Legion members. He raises his eyes to meet Bael's, only to see the Duke of Pain standing with his arms crossed. Bael grins like an idiot. "Haha. Lookit you. Tired? You need a nap, punk. I can tell you ain't got much fight left."

Jephthath ignores Bael's provocation. Instead, he spreads his legs and bends at the knees, taking an absurdly wide stance. He aims his dominant palm at Bael, while keeping a fist curled at his side. "Is that all? Come, bloodskin. I can't waste any extra time on you. I've other demons to kill once I finish here."

Bael's expression turns ugly. "Nope. That's where you're wrong, fucko. You've done in enough of my buddies and pals for today. Time for a dirt nap!"

Bael attacks once again. However, as his fists come rushing at Jephthath's body, the former Titan's Servant uses his newly acquired knowledge to bat the Duke's fists aside, swing his palm out, and deliver a palm-strike to Bael's ribs. The sudden reversal of Bael's momentum sends the Duke flying backward, where he crashes against the wall.

A look of surprise passes over Bael's face. "Huh? What the hell just..."

Perhaps thinking Jephthath's reversal was a lucky hit, Bael charges again. His fists tear through the air like bullets made from bone. He tries to beat his human opponent senseless, only for Jephthath to knock his fists aside, grab his arm, and sweep him over his head. Jephthath turns the Duke of Pain into a ragdoll as he flings him into the Labyrinth's floor, where Bael meets the dirt with a violent *crash!*

Stunned, Bael lies inert for a moment as he tries to get his bearing. "...Fucker! How did that little twig-hugger get me again?!"

He jumps to his feet and charges at Jephthath. This time, Bael spreads his arms out and tries to catch the human in a deadly bear-hug.

Jephthath suddenly does the splits, lowers his center of gravity, and fires a punch at Bael's gut.

Thump!

Jephthath strikes the Duke in his abdomen, knocking the wind out of Bael. The Duke of Pain staggers backward and doubles over while clutching his stomach. "Haah! Kuh-huck!"

Bael's astonishment at this sudden, unexpected reversal of the battle gives way to a new emotion.

Worry.

Having seen the human's minions rip apart dozens of broodmothers and countless other demons, Bael knows his adversary is a major threat to demonkind's existence. However, so long as Bael walks the Earth, he'll always be capable of beating even the most dangerous enemy that threatens his people.

Until now.

Jephthath's thoughts project throughout the vision.

Because of the old man's fighting technique, I suddenly found fighting Bael to be far easier than I expected. His movements were rudimentary, clumsy, and awkward. In my eyes, confronting him was no different from trying to knock out a child.

Bael's defenses were still a problem, but now that he couldn't land a hit on me, I could go all-out and use every drop of my strength to injure, and eventually kill him.

The vision continues. Jephthath begins countering Bael's every attack. Over and over, the Duke of Pain tries to punch, kick, or grab Jephthath, only for the human to outfox him and leave Bael on his knees or faceplanted against a wall.

It doesn't take long before Bael's astonishment shifts to fear. Slowly, the Duke of Pain loses his will to fight. Against someone like Jephthath, whose fighting techniques are far beyond anything Bael has ever faced, the Duke can't prepare any counters.

"Cough, cough, you spawn of a broodmother..." Bael growls. Blood leaks from his mouth. Even with his nearly invincible body, small injuries accumulate from Jephthath's relentless assault. "What the fuck are you? You ain't no bloody human! You're a monster... you're stronger than that Titan pup!"

Jephthath's glowing eyes brighten at the mention of his Master. "Your people took everything from me. You killed my wife. You killed my children. You slaughtered my village. I will not let you get away with their deaths. I've come to repay the debt of blood, and nothing you say or do will stop me."

Jephthath seizes the initiative. No longer bound by the worries of Bael defeating him, the human charges his Duke opponent and begins hitting him from all directions. Bael tries to defend, but with his fighting spirit broken, all he can do is try to protect his head.

"Aaugh!"

The Duke cries out in pain as the sensation of a bone snapping tears through his body. To the Duke's disbelief, Jephthath breaks through his defenses and fractures Bael's left humerus. His arm immediately loses more than half of its strength as Bael reels under Jephthath's relentless pounding.

"Yes! Die, you damned bloodskin," Jephthath roars, his eyes blazing with fury. "But before you enter the Great Beyond, suffer a while! Suffer and scream!!!"

Jephthath strikes Bael in the face and lays the Duke out, sending him crashing into the floor. In the blink of an eye, the human leaps atop the ascended demon and batters him from left to right. Bael winces and shudders as the human somehow taps into even greater reserves of strength for his onslaught.

Bruises, welts, and fractures appear all across Bael's body. Jephthath breaks Bael's nose, knocks out a couple of his teeth, and piledrives his neck, nearly crushing Bael's throat in the process.

Finally, Bael snaps.

Bloody demonic miasma bursts from his body. His eyes turn to those of a savage beast, a creature born from primordial chaos. Before Jephthath can react, Bael swings his right arm upward and blasts the human right in his ribs, sending Jephthath spiraling helplessly through the air. He bounces off the ceiling and slams into the ground with a tremendous *thud*, half the bones in his chest broken.

"YOU NO HURT ME!" Bael roars. "ME HURT YOU!!!"

The Duke of Pain leaps to his feet. Embers of flame spurt from his broken nose, while his horns quickly begin to bend around into a pair of forward-facing spears.

Jepthath groans. The Duke's nearly instant activation of his Balrog power caught the human off-guard, preventing him from reacting in time. He raises his head off the floor and gasps from breath.

"...Sh-shit..."

"GROOOOOOOOAR!"

Bael releases a furious howl of pain and frustration throughout the entire Labyrinth, terrifying all who hear him. He lowers his gaze to Jepthath and stomps his feet, preparing to charge. With his body stuck somewhere between half-Balrog and half-demon, his appearance becomes even more frightening.

However, instead of charging, Bael pauses. The Duke of Pain stops morphing as he gazes at Jepthath, laying on the ground.

Jepthath meets his gaze. The human's glowing eyes narrow as his own rage rises to meet Bael's.

The Duke of Pain takes a step backward. Even with the immeasurable might of the Balrog flowing through his veins, enormous waves of fear quickly rise to overpower his anger, dulling it and preventing him from reaching his limits.

"GRRR... ME NO SCARED OF YOU... ME NO SCARED OF ANYONE..."

Jepthath picks himself off the ground. His ribs groan in protest, but he doesn't let even a whimper of pain escape his lips.

"You aren't? Haha... you should be. Go ahead, little Duke. Finish transforming. I won't feel satisfied unless I beat you at your most dangerous."

Jepthath's confidence shatters Bael's resolve. Despite his opponent's heavy injuries, Bael loses his nerve and takes several steps backward.

"ME... ME NO WANT FIGHT... ME LEAVE! ME LEAVE!!"

He turns tail and runs, demorphing as he tries to get away. Jepthath gives chase, but with his entire chest turned to mush, the human can't keep up with his lightly injured demon adversary.

It doesn't take long before Bael escapes Jepthath's sight. The human slows to a stop and clutches his chest. Tears of anger and humiliation flow from his eyes.

"No... I failed. Damn. I let the bastard land a hit, even after all that buildup. I'll never let another demon get the drop on me like that again!"

As Bael vanishes from Jepthath's sight, the human slumps against a wall and weeps.

[...Come to me, my Legion. We must retreat for now.]

[Yes, Great Illuminator!]

[We obey!]

Jepthath closes his eyes. Reports of a skirmish against Satan and Belial reaches his ears, but he doesn't move a muscle.

"It will take some time to heal from this wound. However, once I do, I will return. Again and again, I will hunt these demons down like the dogs they are."

Jepthath rises to his feet. He heads toward the Labyrinth's surface, each step lighter than the one before it.

"Your *doom* draws nearer every day, bloodskins."

Part 202: Jephthah's Ultimatum

Due to the wound Bael dealt me; I was forced to withdraw along with my troops. Naturally, our retreat still ended up bearing many fruits. In total, we slew more than three thousand demonic broodmothers, though what proportion of the whole that amounted to, we did not know.

Within three days, the newfound Titan power flowing through my veins allowed my broken bones to heal. Immediately, I launched an assault on the demonic hordes. We ravaged one bloodskin den after another. No matter their rank, no matter how they begged for mercy, we killed every last one we laid our eyes on.

However, even as I continually recruited new villages from one end of the continent to the next, I began to realize my soldiers were far too free-spirited. I knew not the reason why, but unlike Hercules's Legion, who obeyed his every word, mine would often do whatever they pleased. Occasionally, this led to a more successful mission with greater bloodskin casualties and fewer human deaths. Often, it did not.

To my disgust, there were some warriors who, upon obtaining my power, focused exclusively on satisfying their desires. For the new Legion, I recruited anyone I could find. Men, women, and children too. I had little time left alive, and as such, I put almost no thought into who should join my Legion's ranks.

That was when the chaos began.

Some men, upon gaining enough power to stand against Demon Barons and Dukes, decided their time would be better spent subjugating unascended humans. When I learned of the first time a Legionnaire assaulted a series of helpless villager women, my blood boiled with rage. Unable to take back the man's power, I instead used my superior strength to smash his skull into pieces, then strung his body up in the village's square as a warning to those who might commit similar acts in the future.

With the threat of a demonic invasion hanging over our necks every day, I could not fathom what would bring a man to attack his fellow human beings. For the first time, I realized humanity had a dark side, a terrible, vile nature hidden within us. As bad as the demons were, the idea that one powerful human could turn those weaker than him into his playthings filled me with cold dread.

The bloodskins paled in comparison to any human who might turn against his own people. That was my definition of true evil.

And so, with this newfound realization, it only took me one month of slaughtering demons before I decided to head to Mount Sinai. I needed to survey the damage the demons had dealt to angelkind, as well as remedy a few needs plaguing myself at the time.

Jephthah's vision shifts. He, along with one hundred empowered humans, stomp through the pitch-black corridors of Mount Sinai's underground tunnels. They travel at a brisk walk, keeping their eyes peeled for dangers lurking within the tunnel system's crevices. However, no matter where they look, they

find nothing. Unlike in the past, where angels would roam the halls and keep the ancient torches lit, not a soul whispers within the darkness.

Within half an hour, the platoon of hunters reaches the entrance to Heaven's Gate. They arrive in the large antechamber, still fortified with Camael's divine metallurgy, only to find a pair of angels standing guard outside the now-disabled warpgate to Heaven.

A woman wearing a frightening amount of platemail, standing six and a half feet tall, towers over her far more diminutive brother, a wingless angel Jephthah has met before.

The wingless angel's eyes bulge as he spots the platoon of humans stomping toward him. "Ah! It's... it's him! That man is the human who saved my life!"

The female angel's glorious golden hair flows out from beneath a helmet adorned with miniature wings. With her face shrouded by metal and only her hardened blue eyes visible, the humans can't make out her expression. However, at her brother's words, she lowers her sword.

"Is that so, Shepherd? Art thou laying claim to this mortal saving thee from the jowls of the demons?"

"Yes, yes, Sister Frida!" Shepherd says, his breathing erratic. He leans heavily on a staff, due to a crippled leg. "This human, his name is... is..."

"Jephthah. Indeed, I am the one who saved you, though, in truth, all I managed was to mend your wounds and stymie the blood flowing from your back. I am pleased to see you've survived the demon's attack."

Shepherd's excited expression disappears. Gloom takes its place. "Aye... survived."

Frida sheathes her sword. A deep sigh escapes her lips as she lowers her head. "I know not whether we were fortunate or unfortunate to count ourselves among the living. After Satan's suicidal attack, not ten thousand of my brothers and sisters survived to fight another day. We've lost the war."

Jephthah's eyes shift slightly. An odd look crosses over his face. "I beg your pardon, but I do not know what events transpired in Heaven. Might you explain the situation to me?"

Frida raises her head to gaze into Jephthah's eyes. "I know not thy identity, human, nor why I should inform thee of anything thou knoweth not. What is thy heritage? How art thou capable of speaking the common tongue when thy people are little more than ignorant apes?"

"Ah, so you don't know," Jephthah says, a hint of mockery in his voice. "Humanity has ascended. Under my hand, we will rise to defeat the demons. That is why I've come today. I seek the aid of the Archangels in my quest to rid the world of the bloodskins."

"Thou requesteth our help? Bah! What assistance can we render?" Frida asks. "Our numbers are but a fraction of their former might. We cannot replenish our strength, but the demons can! They will come knocking at our door soon, hence why Raphael has ordered my brother and I to stand guard at Heaven's Gate."

Shepherd takes a step toward Jephthah. He leans even more heavily on his staff than before as his expression turns to one of pain. "Please, benefactor, do not despise my sister for her words. We must keep

Heaven's Gate deactivated unless expressly ordered by Raphael. As the weakest of our people, he placed us here as bait for the demons. Should the Emperors come knocking, we will detonate a blast of holy energy and raze the mountain to the ground. We will gladly give our lives to protect our family! We cannot allow entry for anyone, not even one as righteous as thee."

Jepthath's gaze falls upon the deactivated warpgate leading to Heaven.

"I see. I am not your enemy. We share the same foe, the hellspawn army of Satan the Devil. Will you send a message to Raphael for me? Tell him I am the inheritor of the Titans, and I've come to offer my services to the angels. With your numbers depleted, we must do what we can to eliminate the bloodskins before they become too powerful."

Shepherd and Frida both glance at each other. Her expression is one of immediate rejection, but before she can get a word in, Shepherd drops to his knees. "Sister Frida, please! This human saved my life! I owe him a great debt. As he is a mortal, I will endure great shame if he perishes before I pay him back! All he asks is for thou to send a message to our eldest brother. Can we not perform such a trifle for my benefactor's sake?!"

Frida hesitates. Confronted with her brother's tear-filled eyes, she eventually relents.

"Alright. I do not owe this human a debt, but given thy mana deficiency, I will send the message in thy stead. Were thou to possess even a drop of mana, I know thou wouldst assist this human to thy dying breath. Thou art a most righteous figure, Shepherd."

Frida turns and places her palm against a symbol on the warp-gate's control panel. Heaven's Gate hums to life for a few moments as she pours a significant amount of mana into its energy matrix. Eventually, Frida pulls back and drops to her knees. Sweat drips off her brow, forcing her to remove her helmet and wipe her forehead.

"I... I sent the message. Our brothers will respond within the hour."

Frida's face is that of a hardened warrior, someone who has seen countless battles in her lifetime. With piercing blue eyes capable of melting steel and a golden head of hair, her appearance resembles a goddess of war.

Jepthath nods. "I understand. My men and I will wait."

Each of the soldiers fans out and presses their backs to the enchanted steel walls. Ten others walk just outside the chamber and stand guard, keeping a vigilant eye on their surroundings in case the demons decide to attack.

As I waited, I evaluated the two angels before me. Without his wings, and still suffering from a hobbled leg, Shepherd was, without a doubt, the most pitiful figure I had ever seen in all my years. However, Frida was a menacing warrior reminiscent of Archangel Uriel. For Shepherd to claim she was among the weakest of the remaining angels, it filled me with disgust. How many angels had perished for someone of Frida's caliber to count as a lowborn?

I passed the next hour by chatting idly with Shepherd. Frida did not allow him to explain Heaven's situation to me, but even without him making explicit statements, I was able to glean a hint of the

devastation Satan had unleashed.

Suddenly, the air inside the chamber becomes noticeably less stale. A shimmer in the room's center causes everyone to step back. Moments later, a portal rips into the fabric of reality, as Raphael himself steps through. Alongside him, Camael and Michael emerge from Heaven to scrutinize the humans standing outside their domain.

Raphael gazes at Jephthah for only a moment. He evaluates the human's glowing eyes with a hint of disgust before shaking his head.

"Come with me. Only thou may enter Heaven. This entourage of warriors must stay behind."

His words provide no chance for Jephthah to argue. If the human wishes to enter Heaven, he must accept Raphael's demands.

Jephthah blinks slowly. "Very well. Only I will come. The rest of my warriors will remain here and stand guard to protect Heaven's Gate. We have come in peace, after all."

"Peace, thou sayeth?" Raphael asks. His expression turns grim. "I remember the last time someone who 'came in peace' wished to enter Heaven. Luckily, even if thou desireth our extinction, there is nothing left for thee to destroy."

Camael nods. Her eyes reveal the Hell she's endured over the past month.

"Indeed. We've only just begun the rites of burial for those who passed. Given the number of fallen, we've even had to expedite the ceremonies for all but the most honored warriors. Such a disgrace will stain our people forever."

"I understand," Jephthah says. "I will come alone and without protest."

"Thou understandeth nothing," Michael says, his voice cold. "But soon, thou shalt."

The Archangels step through Raphael's portal, and Jephthah follows them.

As the guests leave and the portal closes, Shepherd stares at the spot where they disappeared with a longing expression.

"Sister Frida. I... I hope with my heart of hearts that that human is capable of slaying the demons. The demons took everything from us. We must exact swift revenge."

"Aye," Frida replies. She rests her hand on the hilt of her blade and gazes at the hundred men standing with their backs to the enchanted walls. "As do I."

Recommended Listening

Jephthah steps through Raphael's portal. The moment he enters Heaven, a rotten stench assaults him, causing him to stagger backward and swallow meaty chunks of bile. Iron, sulfur, and traces of burnt copper mix into a gag-inducing cocktail with enough potency to make his eyes water.

"Gurk..."

As Jephthath blinks back tears and forces down the roiling in his stomach, he opens his eyes a little wider to examine his surroundings.

Where once Heaven was a realm filled with beautiful trees, flowers, and grass as far as the eye could see, in the wake of Satan's detonation, it has become a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Thick, bloody mist lingers in the air, blowing to and fro by winds of an unknown origin. The ground squishes beneath Jephthath's feet as the gore from millions of angels and demons blends into a foul, toxic swamp capable of choking all it touches.

Jephthath gingerly takes a step forward, only to grimace when his foot sinks three inches into the bloody quagmire. The ground seizes him like quicksand, making forward movement difficult at best, if not impossible.

Camael gazes upon the human's predicament and sighs. "Here. This trinket will grant thee the gift of flight. Its power is limited, but I believe it will last for at least a few hours if used sparingly."

The Archangel of Divination hands Jephthath a perfectly polished pearl, just small enough to fit in his hand.

"M-my thanks, Archangel," Jephthath replies, still trying to steady his churning stomach. He takes the pearl from her, wraps it within his hand, and sends a stream of mana into it. A moment later, he lifts off the ground and hovers a few feet above it, allowing him to travel forward safely.

"We've decontaminated the area where the Temple of Elderium once stood," Camael says, her tone emotionless. "However, it will take us decades to remove the leftover remnants of Satan's miasma from all across Heaven. Cleaning up the remains of our fallen brothers and sisters will require even more time."

Jephthath hovers after the Archangels as they slowly flap their wings and glide across the bloody swamp. "I... I do not understand. What happened here? My master, Hercules, told me of a terrible battle in Heaven, but he perished before the fighting ended."

"We fought a war, and we lost," Michael says, his voice hollow. "My memory is hazy due to the wounds I sustained fighting the Great Demon. However, what I do know is that Satan transformed himself into a living bomb. He unleashed enough destructive power to level the entirety of Heaven, as well as its inhabitants. With a single attack, he wiped out millions of bloodskins and angels."

Raphael flies closer to Michael. He places his hand on the Archangel of Courage's shoulder and sighs. "Do not blame thyself, Michael. Thy battle against the Great Demon delayed him long enough to allow at least a fraction of our family to escape. Had thou not risked thy life to fight that monstrosity, Satan might have killed all of us with his underhanded soul manipulation."

"A small consolation, given how many siblings we've lost," Michael mutters.

Jephthath listens to the Archangels as they travel eastward, toward the center of Heaven. Eventually, after a bit of back and forth, he uncovers the specifics of what happened during the War in Heaven.

"Gods. How could such devastation be possible?"

Raphael snorts. "Compared to some of the beasts born during the Primordial era, Satan's attack was but a drop in the bucket. However, my people have declined over the eons, even to the point where such pitiful, wretched creatures can threaten us."

"Nevertheless, Satan's army represents a significant threat to all of Earth," Jephthath says. "Comparing him to long-dead monsters won't diminish his presence in the coming months and years."

"The human speaks truth," Camael replies. "Ah, over there. Look closely."

Jephthath follows Camael's indication as she gestures into the distance toward a massive stone platform laid atop Heaven's soil. Standing only inches tall, the width and circumference of the flat, stone table boggles Jephthath's mind. With a size big enough to encompass multiple human villages, the flat rock provides some shelter from the bloody swamp surrounding it.

Two thousand angels stand or sit on the platform. They cluster together in groups of four to ten, chatting quietly about various happenings. Jephthath and the Archangels descend from the skies and land softly at the edge of the platform, where several high-ranking Cherubs turn and bow politely.

"Brothers Raphael and Michael. Sister Camael. This human must be the visitor from outside."

"Aye," Camael says. Have Uzziel summon a small structure. We need to deliberate with this man in private."

"Very well. We'll dispatch Hermes on the double. Uzziel is likely still trying to cleanse the Bloody Sea even as we speak."

Michael's expression sours. "A thankless task."

"Aye."

The Cherubs disperse, leaving Jephthath and the Archangels alone. With nobody in earshot, Raphael turns to face the human warrior.

"Verily, thou didst come here today to achieve some goal. Might I inquire as to what thou art seeking?"

Jephthath hesitates for a moment. "Ah... in truth, I came to ask for assistance from your people. My warriors are more than capable of wiping out demonkind, but the bloodskin burrows are well-hidden and scattered throughout the land. I hoped to gather tens of thousands of angels to sweep across the Earth from the skies in search of the demon's dens... but seeing how many of thy people remain, that request won't do anymore."

Raphael narrows his eyes. "Hmm..."

"Is something the matter, Eldest Archangel?"

"Indeed," Raphael replies, his voice curt. "Thy master was none other than Hercules, the Titan who enslaved Uzziel and Michael to do his bidding. He nearly seized control of all the Archangels during the War in Heaven! Thou art lucky I have yet to slay thee where thou standeth. Hads't thou attempted to bring thy invasion force along, I would have sent thy soul scattering to the furthest reaches of the Great Beyond before thou couldst utter a word of complaint."

"Invasion force?" Jephthath asks. His eyes glow slightly as anger builds in the back of his mind. "Hmph. Now, listen here, Eldest Archangel! I do not take kindly to slander. Have you any idea how many demons lurk at the edges of Mount Sinai's base? I brought a contingent of warriors along as protection against bloodskin ambushers, not because I felt the need to threaten the pitiful remnants of your society with my superior strength!"

Jephthath grinds his teeth together.

"I understand you've lost many brothers and sisters, but don't pretend that you are alone in your misery! The bloodskins killed every member of my family. My Master perished while trying to protect the angels and Titans. He gave his power to me so that I might someday eradicate our shared enemies from the Earth!"

Jephthath's rage ignites the fire boiling within Michael's veins. In the blink of an eye, the Archangel of Courage draws his sword and swings it toward the human's neck, pausing the instant it touches Jephthath's skin. "Insolent human! Know thy place! Speak one more blasphemous word, and I'll rid the world of thy apostasy right here and now! I'll have thy head roll across the plains without-"

"Michael, stop," Raphael says, his voice unnaturally calm. "Sheathe thy blade."

"But brother! This human-"

"Put the sword away," Raphael repeats, his eyes revealing an ominous glint. "Unless thou thinketh me incapable of defending myself against a mere *human*."

Michael's breath catches in his throat. His gaze meets Raphael's, causing a hint of fear to appear in the Archangel of Courage's gaze. Immediately, he yanks his sword back and stabs it into his sheathe, then turns away.

"Very well. Thou art more than capable of slaying a weak little human. I'll take my leave."

Michael doesn't wait for Raphael's response. As if guided by an unspoken fear, the young hothead flaps his wings and soars away, leaving only Camael and Raphael alone with the human.

Jephthath touches the spot where Michael's blade rested. "Oh? What an interesting response, Archangel of Wisdom. It seems you've comprehended something your brother did not."

Raphael's eyes flicker with an indecipherable emotion. "Aye. Thy powers come from a soul manipulator. Hercules passed down his power to thee, and therefore, even were we to slay thee here, thy powers would no doubt pass on to another human."

Jephthath smiles.

"It seems your Archangel title is not merely for show."

"Tsk."

Raphael's nose twitches. He glances at Camael, who continues to keep her gaze locked on Jephthath.

"Sister?"

Camael blinks. "What?"

"I should like to ask thee the same question. Thou hath stood silently and observed this human since we arrived. When thy gaze falls upon someone for such a prolonged period, it can only mean..."

"Aye," Camael says. "I've performed multiple divinations on this man."

"As I thought," Raphael murmurs. "Have thou anything to say?"

"I'll wait until Uzziel's arrival," Camael replies, her tone cryptic.

Jepthath crosses his arms. A smile spreads across his face as he silently observes the Archangel's expressions.

Born a mortal, someone who had roamed the Earth looking for the bare essentials to continue living, I had never once met the Archangels in person. However, my Master always sought to keep me informed during his lifetime. He provided me with vast amounts of information on not only the Archangels but anyone else who caught his attention. The Archangels all looked down on me, as they hadn't a clue who I was, but I knew within an instant that Camael was different from her siblings.

Yes. Camael knew I was more than just a man, more than the inheritor of Hercules's ancestry. As she searched my future, I could only guess at what she saw, but her reluctance to move against me told me all I needed to know.

The Archangels were scared.

And why wouldn't they be? A single demon had succeeded at turning eons of angelic rule to dust. Where before they numbered almost ten million strong, after Satan's suicidal attack, their population had dropped to a fraction of its former power.

The angels could not repopulate, but the demons could. Even with their society in disarray and hopelessness spread across their ranks, the leaders of angelkind sought any chance they could take at protecting themselves from total extinction.

In Michael's eyes, I was nothing but an insolent human, a mortal born to feed him spiritual energy.

But by Camael's reckoning, I was a faint spark of hope. I was a chance to hold the bloodskins back while her people rebuilt Heaven.

Raphael might not possess his sister's divinations, but he knew better than to second-guess her wariness toward me. The mere fact she hadn't spoken a word during my verbal assault indicated she valued my existence more than punishing my slander.

Having spoken fewer than a hundred words, I managed to deduce the true strength angelkind possessed, and I found it lacking.

* * *

An hour passes. Jepthath continues to poke and prod Camael and Raphael, but they offer little more than small talk. Eventually, Raphael breathes a sigh of relief as he spots several dozen angels flying over the horizon.

"Uzziel. Finally."

Before Uzziel arrives, a speedy blur zips through the skies. Faster than Jephthath's eyes can follow, the flash of movement rushes past him and screeches to a halt before Raphael. A young-looking male Seraph, one wearing tight, form-fitting robes, snaps his fingers and flashes a huge grin. "Yo! Eldest brother, I've returned! I found Uzziel in a flash, faster than you'd believe! It only took me like, three seconds! Zip, zoop, whapow! In and out, faster than-"

"Yes, yes, much obliged, Hermes," Raphel says, his voice heavy. "As always, thy speed is apprec-"

"But I couldn't help how slowly sister Uzziel flies!" Hermes continues, running his mouth like a mouse hyped up on caffeine. "I kept offering to fly her over here, but she always declined! I know you're in a rush, so I kept pushing and prodding, but she always just ignores me! What's the point of being a speed-zipper if I can't ever let loose and show off, ya know what I mean?! Some people are just so inconsiderate!"

Hermes babbles like a maniac. His words flow together so quickly that Jephthath winces from a rapidly developing migraine. Eventually, Camael walks over, places her hand on Hermes's shoulder, and clears her throat.

"*Ahem*. Brother Hermes, Raphael is tired. It would be improper to exhaust him, as thou art doing right now. Please head over to the Third District and continue assisting them with the cleanup."

"Heck yeah!" Hermes says, spinning on a dime. He whirls to face Camael and nods eagerly as if she's just given him the promotion of a lifetime. "Oh, boy! I'll mop up those entrails lickety-split! I'll scrub and clean like you ain't never seen before! Zip-zoop, that's me! Whapow!"

Before the Archangels can say anything else, Hermes transforms into a blur of movement and zips away at lightspeed, leaving Camael with her mouth hanging half-open.

"Sigh..." Camael groans. "I never should have given him those damned boots."

Raphael smiles. "Do not gaze upon Hermes with enmity, sister. His optimism shines through in every situation. 'Tis always a wonderful achievement when one can smile and persevere in the face of adversity."

"If *only* he smiled and did *nothing* else, I wouldn't mind," Camael grumbles.

Both Archangels fall silent as Uzziel descends from the bloodied sky, along with a couple dozen other low-ranked angels. The Archangel of Creation exhales deeply as she lands atop the stone platform and wipes her forehead.

"Brother Raphael! I came as quickly as I could. Hermes's message sounded urgent. Did something happen?"

Raphael frowns. "Did Hermes fail to deliver my message properly? I sent for thee so that ye might summon a small, wooden hut for Camael and I. We need to speak with our visitor, this human, in private."

Uzziel shrugs. "Hermes is sometimes difficult to understand. He speaks so quickly that I have trouble understanding him."

"As do we all," Camael sighs.

Raphael gestures toward Jephthath. Despite standing not far away from the Archangels, his appearance seems to have gone unnoticed by Uzziel. She turns to look at him, then flashes a radiant smile. "Ah, one of my beloved children! How dost thou fare, little one? I apologize for Heaven's sorry state, but it won't take us long to clean everything up."

Jephthath maintains a neutral expression. "Earthmother. I am Hercules's descendant, Jephthath, the inheritor of his power."

Uzziel's smile vanishes. She flashes a look of agitation at Raphael. "What? This child is...?"

"Aye," Raphael says with a nod. "This human possesses all of Hercules's powers. Jephthath is one of Hercules's thralls, one who managed to escape during the battle against the Balrog six years ago. He's come to deliberate with us on a great many things."

Slowly, Uzziel nods. She returns her gaze to Jephthath, but her expression turns frosty. "I see. Do not let me keep thee waiting, then, *Titanspawn*."

With a flippant series of gestures, Uzziel summons a small wooden building to the east, half a mile away from the stone platform. She bristles at Jephthath and pauses to waggle her finger at him. "Do not think I have forgotten what thy master did to me. He attempted to seize control of Michael and me, and nearly rent Heaven in two. If thou dost make such an aggressive move against anyone here--"

"Worry not," Jephthath says, interrupting Uzziel. "I know full well what power you can unleash. I'm not here to fight."

His reply catches the Archangel off-guard. Uzziel eyeballs him for a moment before turning around and flying away. "Farewell, then."

* * *

A minute later, Jephthath, Camael, and Raphael step inside Uzziel's summoned building. Little more than an ugly square box, it lacks any furnishings or decorations, but does possess a series of slits on its walls, allowing traces of Heaven's Light to slip inside and illuminate its interior.

Raphael and Camael walk over and settle on the floor while assuming cross-legged stances. Jephthath takes a seat opposite them and mirrors their postures.

"Alright, Titanspawn," Raphael says, his voice even. "State thy intentions and terms."

Jephthath nods. "I came here in the hopes of acquiring a few thousand angel warriors for the sake of reconnaissance and surveillance. Locating the demon dens is my highest priority, after all. However, now that I know the pitiful state of your military, that request is off the table."

"Indeed," Camael replies. "Having performed a divination earlier, I could not help but note that thy future is in a much higher state of flux than other beings. Thy destiny appears to have a strong relationship with the fate of the Earth, though the ramifications of thy actions will not be fully comprehensible for several centuries."

"What do you mean?" Jephthath asks, his tone suspicious. "What does my future have to do with our meeting?"

"Everything," Camael replies. "Helping thee could be a tremendous boon for our people. It could also lead to our doom. I am not opposed to assisting humans in their quest to wipe out demonkind, but given thy upbringing and he who begat thy powers, trusting thy intentions is... difficult."

"I agree," Raphael says. "The underlying threat beneath thy words makes any promises thou might offer ring hollow. How can we trust thee, when thou standeth here with ill intent riding thy coattails? Hercules betrayed us. We nearly went extinct as a result of his actions. If thou turneth against us, even if we should kill thee, thy power will transfer to another human. Thy specter will continue fighting us forever and ever."

"That's right," Jephthath says. His eyes turn cold. "Kill me, and another will take my place. I did not come here to sit around and exchange pleasantries, Archangel of Wisdom. I came because I have a war to win. If you can't give me troops, then you will have to supply something else. Something of equal or greater value."

Jephthath leans forward. His voice takes on a menacing tone. "You don't have a choice. Without me, your people die. Anger me, and your people die. This point is not up for debate."

Camael glowers at Jephthath. "If not military might, what can we possibly offer thee? Out with it! I haven't any interest in thy snake-like tongue. Tell us what thou desireth and be on thy way."

Jephthath raises an eyebrow. "Isn't that obvious? I expected the Archangel of Divination to understand my meaning without any issues. I want artifacts, Camael. Divine artifacts."

Camael's jaw drops.

"What? No... no! I won't- I won't give anyone but my brothers and sisters objects possessing the Creator's power. How dare thou presumeth upon my magnanimity!"

"Hmph. As I said, you haven't any choice in the matter," Jephthath replies. "I can crush the angels over the next thousand years, if I so please. If you don't give me what I want, and humanity falls to the demons, the fate which will befall you will be a million times worse. Besides, my needs are not excessive. I require only a few artifacts, and I will provide the mana necessary for you to craft them. A generous offer, wouldn't you agree?"

Before Camael can reply, Raphael butts in. "Aye, thy offer is indeed generous. Am I correct in assuming thy empowered warriors can regenerate their mana each night, as do the unascended plainsman?"

"We can, and we do," Jephthath replies neutrally. "Why? Do you wish to bargain?"

Raphael rubs his chin. "After the battle which ravaged Heaven, my people are in dire need of mana. I cannot condone the usage of soul manipulation, but given the stakes, I will keep my lips sealed for now. However, if thou dost wish to receive Camael's divine artifacts, I will only permit thy transfer on the basis of equal trade."

"Haha, I see," Jephthath chuckles. "Let me guess. As I empower more and more humans, you will supply me with any artifacts I need, but on the condition that humans always donate their excess energy each night. Hm? Is that about right?"

Raphael's eyes flash with the light of insight. "Thou dost possess Hercules's cunning. I see now why the lad bestowed his powers upon thee."

"Don't flatter me, Raphael. I am only here on business."

Jepthath strokes his chin thoughtfully.

"Considering our situation, empowering thy people is of some benefit to me. Hercules's abilities require little mana to function. By the end of each day, my men will have barely used a fraction of their reserves. Donating what remains to the angels will cost me little while providing significant gains for both of us."

Camael glances at Raphael. "Brother! My artifacts are not mere trinkets and baubles to be tossed from child to child! 'Tis only by the Creator's power than I am capable of creating such fearsome-"

"Now, now, sister," Raphael says, keeping his voice low. "The times are changing, as is the world around us. We've no reason to rest on our laurels. The human is offering us a chance to revive our society while crippling, if not outright destroying our enemies. I believe we can reach a satisfactory agreement, given the proper exchange of resources and goods."

"But-!"

Raphael clears his throat. "Ahem. Jepthath, wouldn't thou be so kind as to allow me a moment with my sister. I will convince her to agree to thy terms."

Jepthath frowns.

"...Certainly. I will step outside for a few minutes."

Despite his words, Jepthath's tone seems surprisingly cautious. He evaluates the Archangel of Wisdom with more than a hint of suspicion. However, he still rises to his feet, steps outside, and closes the door behind himself.

Minutes pass.

Jepthath's inner voice plays over the vision.

As I awaited the Archangel's verdict, worries crept up from deep within my heart. I had only received scattered images of the war my Master witnessed in Heaven, but amongst those images, a recurring theme always played out in his head.

"Never trust the angels."

Hercules' repeated that mantra several times as the battles raged. Even after his voice faded and he passed on to the Great Beyond, I never forgot that message.

The Archangels deliberated in secret, sending pangs of worry up my spine. Right as I began considering whether I should press my ear against the door to listen in on their conversation, it swung open to reveal Raphael's hunched-over figure.

"We've finished deliberating," Raphael says. "Come in."

Jepthath quietly releases a breath he'd been holding. He follows after Raphael, shuts the door, and sits down before the brother and sister. Immediately, he notices Camael's sullen expression, as well as her ashen skin.

"What did you decide?" Jepthath asks.

Camael fidgets uncomfortably. "I do not enjoy the idea of granting anyone but an angel my artifacts. However, my brother has convinced me to make this sacrifice for the sake of my people. I will craft what thou dost require."

Jepthath nods sagely. "I see. Is that all, then? I can't help but feel suspicious at your change of heart. What did Raphael say to convince you to my side?"

Camael sighs.

"I... I have always prided myself on my virtuousness and morality. Never once have I compromised in the face of evil. However, after losing so many brothers and sisters to the demons, I realize now that I erred in my judgment. Sometimes, one cannot adhere to the past, lest it causes their future to crumble."

"Mmm. Well-spoken. Well-spoken, indeed..." Jepthath mutters.

Gazing upon the disheartened Archangel of Divination, for some reason, I felt no joy in my victory. It seemed to me that I had willingly stepped into a trap, one which had yet to spring. However, no matter how I pondered and questioned the Archangel's behavior, I could not determine anything Raphael had done that might endanger me or my goals.

Raphael smiles. "Thy mentor, Hercules, was his own man, as thou art thine. I was wrong to evaluate thee with the same lens I did the son of Zeus. I look forward to collaborating with thee in the coming years, Jepthath."

Jepthath nods. "As do I, Archangel of Wisdom. Thank you for coming around to my way of thinking."

Raphael's eyes twinkle with a strange, eerie luster.

"Aye. We both have much to gain from this arrangement. So very, very much, indeed."

The Archangel's tone only increased my suspicions. Sadly, many years would pass before I finally comprehended the depths of his schemes.

Part 203: Jephthath's Resolve

Nineteen years passed. Camael granted me divine artifacts to locate, suppress, and exterminate any demons I came across. I made sure not to waste her gifts.

Jephthath's visions shift again. Images of humans storming through underground passages, across vast, open fields, and climbing steep mountains flash by one by one. The sheer number of ascended beings boggles the mind, as more than a hundred thousand glowing-eyed warriors flatten the Earth with their heavy boots.

In one vision, fifty demon grunts unleash all of their might to try and stop three human warriors. They sling fireballs, hurl rocks, and charge into the faces of their god-like enemies.

They fail.

The three humans easily overpower and cripple the entire demon contingent. They slap the heads off a pair of succubi, break the back of a giant demon Brute, and unsheathe shiny steel swords to cleave the rest in two.

Demons scream and wail. They beg for mercy, only for swords to lance through their skulls moments later. The humans wordlessly continue a violent rampage across the demon's territory as they hack and slice apart all in their path.

Unlike Jephthath's previous visions, the warriors now wear neatly sewn leather and animalskin clothing. Along with their swords, they also carry steel shields while wearing leather pauldrons for their shoulders. They appear far more civilized than in the previous visions, but equally fearsome.

I found myself surprised when the Archangel of Divination introduced me to the concept of metallurgy. Not only could she craft unique, mighty objects of divine origin, but she also went out of her way to teach my people the concept of forging our own weapons and armor. Most importantly, however, Camael gave me a personal gift. A weapon capable of uniting humanity's power and transforming us into an unstoppable spear against the demonic bulwark to the west.

The Dominion Rod.

Crafted from the finest enchanted steel, the weapon resembled a shepherd's staff, with a curved top, allowing a single brilliant gem in its center to shine like the midday sun. The divine weapon was not only sturdy enough for me to wield in melee combat, but even better, it augmented and boosted my Heroic power. It improved my mental control over my troops, preventing them from rebelling or disobeying. In addition to improving my mental control, it also equalized the strength of any who accepted my power. Nearly every warrior came to possess the same fighting power I did, making every individual capable of fighting Demon Dukes without any assistance. One warrior was often capable of slaughtering an entire Demon Den singlehandedly.

While Heaven struggled to rebuild itself, I put my power to work crafting cities, weaponry, and armor which would even the playing field against our demonic adversaries. With our minds and bodies

united, we accomplished in mere years what would take later generations decades or centuries to accomplish.

I had no time to waste when it came to bringing about the end of demonkind. While my life slowly ticked away and my skin began to sag, doubts appeared in my mind.

How many demons still existed on the Earth? With their ranks thrown into turmoil, would I be able to find and kill every last Broodmother? Even if I did, assuming I couldn't locate the elusive Emperor of Providence, Lucifer, what did my efforts amount to? Once I died, she would reappear and rebuild the demonic army. All of my efforts would crumble to ash.

I loved my wife and children. On the Day of Ascension, when I seized control of the Dominion Rod and lifted humanity to its greatest height, I gave my deceased family names to honor their memory. Neilah was like a flower blooming within my heart. Even as I killed my way through tens of thousands of demons, carving a path across the land with their blood, I never forgot my wife.

However, the realization that my lineage would end upon my death spurred me to take a new family. I found another wife, a woman I later came to call Pierra, and lay with her whenever I found the time. She bore me several children, but no matter how I tried, I could not build a connection with them as I had my first family.

My second family came to represent my ultimate detachment from the trifles and joys of life. I tried to show them the same love as my first family, but I failed. After killing so many demons, it felt as if a part of my soul had died. I could no longer love another in the same way I once had.

Life is a series of ironic twists. I spent my whole existence fighting and killing demons, all to sate my bloodlust for them killing my family. When the chance came to savor a second life with a new family, I cast it aside.

Jepthath's tone turns melancholic.

I gave up my humanity, all so I could slay demons.

Do I regret my decision?

...Sometimes.

The vision darkens, revealing an underground demon lair, one dug much more hastily and crudely than any of the others before it.

Nineteen years after I made my pact with the Archangel Camael, and her brother, Raphael, I came upon an irresistible piece of intelligence from one of my scouts. We had finally pierced the depths of the Earth and found the hiding hole of Satan the Devil, as well as his cohorts, the Emperors of Passion and Providence, Belial and Lucifer. Having hunted down millions of demons and their broodmothers, and with my vitality running out, I decided it was time for an all-in attack.

I had the Devil cornered. The odds were high that he had set up a trap to bring me closer, but I didn't care. All of my pieces were in place. I brought an army of men thirty-thousand strong, each warrior

capable of flattening a typical Demon Duke. It was now or never; my last chance to kill the one who had brought about the end of my family, all those centuries before.

Satan's doom was upon him.

"Keep close, Aaron," Jephthah says.

"Yes, father," A strapping young lad replies.

Father and son, Jephthah and Aaron storm through the crudely-dug Demon Den. Unlike the polished walls of the dens from years before, this one's design appears haphazard at best. The pitch-black hallways turn from left to right in random directions, causing anyone with a poor sense of direction to become confused.

However, thanks to the piercing blood-red-light emitting from Jephthah's eyes, he illuminates the path ahead with ease.

Hundreds of other warriors following in Jephthah's wake charge through the demonic hallways with reckless abandon. Their eyes, too, glow, but with a pure white color instead. Once or twice, the humans come upon an orc, a goblin, or some other monster, only to brutally end the unfortunate being's life before it can defend itself.

Aboveground, thirty human warriors and five lowborn angels use the power of Seer-Stones to pierce the Earth's depths. They envision the inner hallways, then transmit all the relevant information directly to Jephthah's mind.

Jephthah and Aaron pause for a split-second before a T-junction, where the path splits in three directions.

"If we travel to the right, we'll be able to cut across several broodmother dens along the way," Aaron says. He gazes at his father respectfully, waiting for Jephthah's input.

"No," Jephthah replies. "Our goal is to eliminate Lucifer. Once she perishes, we can take our time mopping up the Broodmothers. Five warriors will head down the right path, but the rest of us will go left."

"Of course, father," Aaron replies, as any thoughts of disobeying vanish immediately under the Dominion Rod's power. He spares a glance toward the weapon held in his father's grasp. "What if we should fall here, today, against the Emperors?"

Jephthah immediately heads down the left tunnel, shooting a remorseful glance at his son. "If I perish, you will inherit my power. The Dominion Rod is a weapon possessing enough Holy Energy that no demon will be able to touch it. Make sure you obtain my artifact and continue hunting the bloodskins. Until every last one is dead, our work will never be done."

Aaron nods. His muscular body stands in stark contrast to his youthful face, which oozes childlike naivete. With only a single glance at the lad, anyone would be able to tell that he has no business dealing with matters of war.

However, Jephthath pays little attention to his son's body language. Instead, the Shepherd of Men leads his warriors down various passageways, traveling as quickly as he can toward the large, inner chambers of the Demon Den.

"I understand, father," Aaron replies, his voice muted. "I will continue your fight even if you should fall."

"Good boy," Jephthath says, his expression neutral.

The father and son fall silent, having exchanged all the words Jephthath feels need to be said.

I cared little for my son, Aaron, Jephthath's inner voice says. At the time, I saw him as nothing but a tool — a weapon to combat the demons. Never once did I value him as a fellow human, nor as a beloved son. To me, he was merely the inheritor of my resentment. If I had to rely on him to kill my enemies, then all that meant was that I had failed in fulfilling my lifelong ambition.

In a way, I resented Aaron. I resented his existence, and how he had subtly come to replace my first family.

Of all the regrets I've come to possess over the millennia, treating my flesh and blood so poorly is what tears me apart the most.

I was a terrible father. No doubt, Aaron despised me.

Jephthath and Aaron slow to a stop as a flickering light appears in the darkness ahead. With their enhanced eyes, both humans pick out the figures of half a dozen Burner demons, all of them standing at the ready with spells half-casted.

Fwoosh!

Several fireballs come flying down the corridor. Before Jephthath can react, Aaron leaps forward and uses his shield like a baseball bat, swatting the flames to the left and right. They splash against the walls, causing the assault force no injuries.

Jephthath's vision-voice speaks. *My body was not as young and virile as it used to be. In terms of physical strength, my son was my equal. In terms of speed, he was more than my match. I felt a hint of pride whenever I saw him fight, but that feeling always morphed into shame.*

I was ashamed of my weakness. Ashamed that I had taken so long to exterminate the little blood-suckers.

Now, I gaze upon my son with pride, but back then, I was too stuck in my ways to appreciate my son's evolution into a fine warrior.

Aaron lunges forward. He and three other soldiers attack the low-ranking Burners, slaughtering them with ease. Aaron rips off the head of their leader and smashes it against a wall, turning it into a mess of blood and bone.

Moments later, he returns and places his hand on his heart. "Let us continue, father."

"You hesitated," Jephthath says, his eyes turning cold. "You could have killed those bloodskins five seconds faster, had you not paused to consider the flashiest method of dispatching them."

"I... I apologize, father. I will try to be more efficient next time."

"Don't 'try.' *Do*. You have to set an example for the other soldiers. They'll look up to you when I'm gone."

"I understand, father."

"Do you? I'll be the judge of that. Let's continue. The Emperor's lair isn't much further. If you slip up, they'll kill you without hesitating."

"...Yes."

Aaron's expression turns slightly dejected, but he hides his emotions quickly, masking his eyes by rubbing his forehead. Moments later, the assault force of several hundred humans continues charging into the depths of the Earth.

"Stay sharp!" Jephthath yells. "Today, we finish this war! We'll kill the bloodskins and complete our quest of blood! For humanity!"

His soldiers shout in unison. "For humanity! For the Illuminator!"

Recommended Listening

Thousands of humans storm into one of the innermost chambers, its size comparable to a football stadium. The massive, recently excavated area stands nearly a hundred feet tall, held up by several hardened dirt pillars.

Inside, thousands of demons assume defensive stances as their human oppressors charge inside, swords and shields held at the ready.

Bael, the Duke of Pain, stands at the front of the crowd alongside Agares, the Duke of Reptiles.

"Don't let the bastards through!" Bael roars.

Jephthath's eyes flick past the wall of demons, toward a caved-in hallway leading deeper into the demon's den.

[We have to bypass this bulwark,] Jephthath says, transmitting his thoughts to his son and the other Legionnaires. [The Demon Emperors must be hiding inside the central chamber.]

[Cowards!] One of Jephthath's generals yells. [The bloodskins know only how to skulk in the darkness!]

[We must exercise caution,] Aaron says, a hint of worry in his eyes. [This might be a trap.]

[Indeed, it is,] Jephthath replies. He charges at Bael and raises his fist. [I would expect no less from these loathsome cretins!]

Boom!

Bael meets Jephthath's fist with his own. The two warriors engage in brutal combat, using their bodies to their fullest extent.

Unlike a few years before, when Jephthath first used his newly acquired martial techniques, this time, Bael manages to hold his own. Bael receives more than his fair share of blows from the human king, but manages to land a few of his own. Each time Bael's fists strike Jephthath, the human king staggers backward. Having spent the last twenty years running from Jephthath's forces, Bael's combat capabilities appear to have sharply risen, forcing the human king to rely on his staff as a weapon.

It only takes a minute for chaos to engulf the chamber. Aaron and Agares meet each other in one-on-one combat; trading blows between the future leader of humanity and a grizzled veteran of the demonic species. Goblins adhere to the ceiling while hurling spears from above, trying their best to wound or distract the humans beneath them. Orcs leap into the fray while riding atop Hellhounds, using the double-threat of monster and beast to take out a few of the weakest human warriors.

However, it doesn't take long before the battle begins tilting in Jephthath's favor.

Jephthath ducks a punch from Bael, grabs the Duke's arm, and flings him over his shoulder. Bael spins through the air and lands amidst a six-man-strong contingent of Legionnaires, all of whom descend upon the Duke of Pain, raining their fists upon him mercilessly.

Agares uses his superior scaled defenses to absorb the youth's attacks where possible. At the same time, his claws slash and cut Aaron's skin when he gets too close.

"Gah!"

Aaron cries out in pain as Agares rakes his face, ripping out thick, meaty chunks of flesh from his forehead to his cheek. Aaron staggers back, allowing three other Legionnaires to pounce at the Duke.

Suddenly, Agares gasps. Jephthath appears from out of nowhere and smashes the Dominion Rod against the back of the Duke's neck, sending him crashing into the chamber's floor. With Agares staggered, another contingent of Legionnaires begins whaling on him from every direction, suppressing his movements and forcing him to retreat.

"Aaron! Come with me," Jephthath yells, grabbing his son's attention. Both of them, along with a thousand soldiers, charge toward the caved-in doorway at the edge of the chamber. The demons and monsters behind continue trying to fight the ever-increasing stream of humans flooding into the chamber, but their forces are no match for an army of demi-humans, each individually as strong as a Demon Duke.

Jephthath stops before the caved-in hallway. "Stand back!"

He aims the Dominion Rod at the entrance, looks away, and shields his eyes.

"Firing... now!"

A tremendous surge of mana wells up within Jephthath's chest. It transfers into the Dominion Rod, enters the magic crystal in its head, and morphs into a mountain-shattering blast of holy energy.

Thoom!

The entire underground tunnel system explodes with dirt and debris. Cracks rip across the ceiling as an earthquake rattles the planet. It takes more than a minute for the dust to settle, only for chunks of the ceiling to plummet from above, crushing anyone they hit.

"Let's move!" Jephthath bellows. He charges into the now-excavated tunnel, ignoring the rapidly building casualties outside. Hundreds of Legionnaires perish along with their demon and monster adversaries, but Jephthath pays them no mind.

My warriors were little more than expendable resources to me, Jephthath's inner voice muses. I only cared about their deaths before obtaining the Dominion Rod, back when I had to appease various tribal leaders to build my army. Once I received Camael's artifact, I no longer wasted my time fretting over such trifles. The moment they accepted my power, they lost their ability to protest.

Jephthath and his son charge down the hallway. They plow through dozens of Lords and even a few Barons, both groups doing their best to stall the humans for time.

Upon entering the next chamber, Jephthath and Aaron find themselves surrounded by a massive quantity of demons. Unlike the previous room, where some of the mightiest demon warriors stood their ground against the human invaders, in this room, they try using the narrow doorway as a chokepoint to crush the humans with numbers.

Thousands of fireballs rush at Jephthath the instant he enters. Instinctively, he activates the Dominion Rod to form a powerful mana barrier, causing the superheated projectiles to explode harmlessly at the doorway's opening.

Slowed by the Burner's assault, Jephthath and his fellow humans pause upon entering the second chamber. They take refuge behind their king as Jephthath easily repels the nonstop barrage of flames and hellfire from his mortal enemies.

Within two minutes, the Burner's fireballs drop off in both intensity and firepower. Having run out of mana, the Burners retreat from battle, allowing their allies to seize the initiative.

Once again, a horde of goblins skitters across the ceiling. However, unlike the previous room's occupants, these goblins share a variety of different skin colors.

The red-skinned ones, who somewhat resemble hornless demons, are far more aggressive than the rest. They leap from the ceiling like kamikazes and try to stab the humans to death with little stone knives. As Jephthath's warriors funnel into the chamber and engage in battle, they easily shrug off the limp-wristed attacks of the red-skinned goblins.

Yellow-skinned goblins join the fray as well. They pounce from the ceiling to the pillars and keep their distance from the humans, all while using makeshift slingshots to try and shoot the humans in their eyes. Several warriors howl in pain as tiny rocks zip unnoticed into their glowing weak-spots.

Finally, a much smaller number of black-skinned goblins ride alongside orcs atop their Hellhounds. These Obsidian Goblins appear virtually identical to the ones which appeared on Tarus II alongside the Hydra. With their iron-like skin, they act as tanks, allowing their fellow orcs to focus more on offense while they deflect and absorb attacks from the mighty human army.

Jephthath swings the Dominion Rod from side to side, using it as a club against any enemy foolish enough to step within range. He crushes heads, shatters shoulders, and sends waves of destruction surging amongst the demon ranks. Meanwhile, Aaron stays close to his father. Humanity's king and

prince take out three Demon Lords effortlessly, eliminating troublesome foes before they can cause any casualties.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion ripples through the chamber, momentarily stunning all of the humans. Shax, the Baron of Shredding, leaps atop the back of a riderless Hellhound and rides the rampaging monster like a surfboard. He sweeps his fingers across his chest, acting as if he's going all-out while playing air guitar. Every time Shax's fingers move, sound-blasts fire from his body, knocking away anyone, friend or foe, who strays too close.

Shax's little sister, Murmur, the Lord of Emotion, rides atop his shoulders. She rests her chin on his head and sighs deeply, while occasionally aiming her finger at any humans who charge her brother. "Poke. Poke... poke."

Each time Murmur pokes the air, using the least amount of physical exertion possible, she sends a Legionnaire flying. Murmur's telekinesis proves unyielding, preventing anyone from landing a hit on her older brother.

One of Jephthath's generals scowls. "We have to kill that Baron!"

"No," Jephthath says, shaking his head. "He's nothing more than a distraction. Keep your eyes on the prize. I want our weaker reserves to keep him busy."

"Father, I can eliminate him," Aaron offers.

"Stay by my side, boy. You still have to prove yourself worthy of wielding the Dominion Rod. You'll have a shot at glory once we fight the Emperors."

"Alright. As you wish, father."

Shax begins headbanging, causing his frizzy white hair to leap back and forth. Each time, bolts of electricity fire from his hair's tips, jolting both enemies and allies alike who stray too close.

Because of Shax's headbanging, Murmur loses her comfy headrest. She frowns. "Brother... stop moving..."

Shax laughs. "Haha! No can do, little sis! I have to move to feel the rhythm!"

Murmur sighs. "...I hate 'the rhythm.'"

Shax, a dull-headed music-lover, continues blasting his intolerably awful music at anyone in range, while his sister protects him from ambushers. As they work together, Jephthath shoves his way past them toward the rear of the demon's army. There, he encounters another obstacle. A massive Hellhound, comparable to Cerberus, stands amidst a sea of Orcs.

The four-legged predator stands nearly thirty-feet tall. Its ten-ton body, starved of food, trembles with hunger. With the demons having kept the animal on a short leash, its viciousness is at peak rarely seen amongst other wild creatures.

"Gods!" Aaron cries out. "Is that Lucifer's transformation?! She's massive!"

Jephthath shakes her head as he grabs a shield from one of his nearby soldiers. "No. It is merely a starved mongrel. I'll kill it myself!"

Without issuing any orders to his men, Jephthath lunges toward the humongous creature. Orcs try to stop him, but he flings them aside with the ease of an elephant stomping mice. The king holds his shield up and uses it as a battering ram, turning anyone in his path to bloody mush.

Eventually, Jephthath arrives before the giant Hellhound. The monster snaps at him, trying to devour the warrior whole. Upon seeing the jaws of death approaching, Jephthath merely smiles.

[Oh? Hungry? Allow me to oblige.]

Like a man possessed by the Devil, Jephthath happily leaps into the monster's mouth while avoiding its teeth. The Hellhound slams its jaws shut, causing Aaron's heart to tremble. "Father!"

A moment later, the Hellhound's eyes bulge with pain. It opens its mouth and tries to spit the steel-clad warrior out, but Jephthath merely leaps into its throat.

[I think I'll stay for a minute, beast.]

An explosion detonates inside the monster's throat, causing its entire body to shudder. The Hellhound scrabbles back and paws at its face, trying desperately to vomit out the parasite it swallowed mere moments before.

It fails.

Jephthath activates the Dominion Rod, sending a blast of mana throughout the wolf's organs. Moments later, the beast explodes, sending rivers of blood and bone spraying in every direction. Jephthath leaps out of its body, covered from head to toe in its cooked entrails.

Aaron blinks. "Father? You're alright!"

Jephthath scowls. "Stupid boy. Of course, I am. Stop speaking nonsense! Now, let's get a move on. The final chamber awaits!"

Once again, Jephthath ignores the mounting casualties and advances forward with a dwindling number of elite warriors. By the time he charges through the final corridor into the largest, innermost cavern, he only has a hundred men following him.

Jephthath enters the final room and slows to a stop. Unlike the two before it, which were crudely dug and illuminated by the light of Legionnaire eyes and Burner fireballs, this chamber possesses hundreds of lamps stuck in the walls around the room. Its walls shine with polish, revealing the amount of care taken in its decoration. A granite throne sits against the back wall, where Satan sits atop it, smirking. Lucifer stands to his right, with a small contingent of mutated Hellhounds at her side. Each of her pets possesses bright red fur, giving them the appearance of fox-wolf mixed breeds. Their eyes crackle with electricity, revealing their elementally attuned nature.

"Haha!" Satan laughs. "Hey! It's been a while, kingy! Glad you could make it!"

Jephthath ignores Satan's taunts. His eyes flick first to Lucifer, then to the rest of the room, where tens of thousands of demons and monsters stand at the ready.

"Foolish humans. You've walked right into a trap," Satan mutters, yawning as he speaks. "Today... you die."

"I wonder about that," Jephthath murmurs. He scowls at Satan. "Unfortunately, oh, mighty bloodskin Emperor, no amount of trickery will ever defeat one who possesses the strength to withstand it. My men, go!"

Satan sighs. "A frontal assault. Why am I not surprised?"

Jephthath leaps into the air. He summons power into the Dominion Rod, then fires a blast of holy energy at Lucifer, intending to finish her off in one blow. Instead, Lucifer jumps forward, grabs a goblin, and hurls it at the human king.

"No, no, nonoNOOOOO!!!"

The goblin shrieks in terror as it turns into a meatshield for the Emperor of Providence. The Dominion Rod's blast of energy rips the goblin apart and turns it into a blood-balloon, splattering the monster's innards all over Jephthath. By the time Jephthath manages to see past the fog in the air, Lucifer has disappeared.

Jephthath lands on his feet and swivels to look in every direction. He spots Lucifer engaged in combat with Aaron and rushes forward to help.

The Demon Emperor of Providence cackles evilly. Her deity-level body provides her with more than enough physical power to take on the human, but even so, Jephthath finds himself astounded at the sheer might behind each blow. Lucifer whales on Aaron, her fists striking his enchanted shield like sledgehammers. Aaron grits his teeth as the clanging of her fist sends out *bangs* whenever she lands a hit.

"F-father! Help me, please!"

Jephthath arrives just in time to save his son. He rudely kicks Aaron aside and sends the lad skidding to the side, just in time to avoid one final, deadly strike by Lucifer.

Crash!

The Demon Emperor's fists strike the dirt where Aaron stood only a split-second before, summoning an Earthquake to shake the planet.

Jephthath stumbles backward as the ground tosses him like a sack of potatoes. He rights himself in midair and lands in a crouch, readying himself to charge again.

[Astounding!] Jephthath crows, begrudgingly praising the Demoness in his mind. [Lucifer has never possessed such power, not until she morphed into one of her animal forms! Where did she obtain such strength?!]

Shaking away his worrisome thoughts, Jephthath attacks Lucifer, turning his body into a tornado of muscle and pain. He swings the flat of his shield against her head, but she deflects it with the side of her arm. He fires a blast of holy energy at her via the Dominion Rod, but she bends over backward and narrowly evades the deadly laser.

[No, something isn't right,] Aaron says, transmitting his thoughts to Jephthath. [Look! Her movements are far too fast and fluid. We've faced Lucifer many times, father. That isn't her!]

Thump!

Lucifer pounds Jephthath in his chest and sends him flying. Jephthath spins head over heels until he crashes into a rock pillar, bringing the whole thing crashing down. Just before 100 tons of collapsing rubble can kill him, Jephthath shakily raises his staff and summons another mana barrier to protect himself. He narrowly survives with his life.

"Kah! Damn... Aaron is right. That isn't Lucifer... it must be... the changeling!"

Jephthath bursts out of the collapsed pillar's remains. Not far away, five of his warriors work together to take down a pack of hellhounds. The mind-controlled Legionnaires snap each beast's neck, one by one, only for the Hellhounds to open their mouths and breath lightning upon the warriors. Electrical pain surges from their minds into Jephthath's, forcing him to sever the connection.

[Gah! Aaron, don't engage that Emperor in combat! She's not Lucifer! She's Belial!]

Across the cavern, Aaron battles Belial, using his comparable strength and speed to just barely keep up with her. However, with her stretchy limbs, Belial outmaneuvers the young man time and again, simultaneously batting him around like a kitten with a ball, while occasionally turning her fingers into knives to cut and stab the openings in his defenses.

Jephthath hesitates.

Faced with the decision to save his son or to seek out the true Emperor of Providence, uncertainty clouds his judgment.

[Father! Help me!] Aaron cries out, begging for assistance.

Jephthath continues to hesitate.

"Where is she? Where did that whore hide? If I can't kill Lucifer, everything I've done today will be for *nothing*."

Jephthath chews his lip. From across the chamber, he hears a blood-curdling scream, then silence. The battles around quickly swallow up the sound, but the King's heart skips a beat.

[No! Aaron!]

Rallied by the terror in his heart, Jephthath pounces like a jaguar toward his son and Belial. As he leaps over the heads of surprised demons, Jephthath's vision lasers in on the figure of 'Lucifer' holding Aaron by his throat. She gazes at Jephthath's oncoming form and smiles.

"I have your son, human! You won't dare-"

"LET HIM GO!"

Jephthath howls in rage at the shapeshifted demoness, interrupting her mid-sentence. Belial suddenly realizes Jephthath isn't slowing down. She tosses Aaron aside and holds up her arms to protect herself.

BOOM!

Jephthath strikes the Emperor of Passion with stunning force. He sends her flying backward, then lunges again without pausing.

"I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!"

The image of his son's unconscious form held in the demoness's grasp etches into Jephthah's mind. By the time Belial impacts one of the side-walls, it only takes a split second before Jephthah arrives before her and begins swinging his fists recklessly, like a raging bull.

Wham! Wham! Wham wham whamwhamwham!

Jephthah's blood boils with fury. His wrath becomes a monsoon of destruction. Belial's strength, the mightiest among her people, only manages to suppress half of Jephthah's striking power. Each time he lands a punch, the human king breaks one of Belial's bones. Eventually, she loses her concentration and breaks her shapeshifted form, revealing her true appearance underneath.

"Aaaahhhh!!"

Belial cries in pain. She tries to sidestep, to push away the king, and even to jump into the air, but he never lets up.

"Today, you draw your LAST breath!" Jephthah roars.

With one final punch, he swings his fist against the side of Belial's head, sending her careening to the left. She tumbles and twists for several seconds before coming to a grinding halt amidst a group of demons and humans.

Jephthah's blood-red eyes flash with insight. A sudden realization strikes him, and he whirls around to face Satan, who continues sitting on the throne without moving.

[Ah! As I thought! While I assaulted Belial, Satan didn't move a muscle. He would never let me injure his beloved mate! That must mean... the Satan seated there is a fake! Belial used her illusion magic to change his appearance!]

Jephthah grinds his teeth together.

[The aura leaking out of that demon is identical to any Emperor. 'Satan' must be Lucifer!]

However, even as this realization hits Jephthah, he pauses. The human king glances toward his son, lying motionless amongst a sea of enemies and allies. Several demons try to plunge their knives into his heart, but the nearby human warriors manage to shield him.

[You! General Kian! Take my son out of here! I'll kill the Emperor of Providence myself!]

[Yes, my king!]

Jephthah watches as one of the human warriors grabs Aaron, hoists the lad over his shoulder, and retreats, leaving only Jephthah and fifty-something other humans to fend off their demon opponents.

Jephthah turns to face 'Satan.'

"Haha... now, I've got you."

He lunges toward the eerily calm and confident demon sitting on the granite throne. Satan leans lazily against his palm, seemingly uninterested in Jephthah's incoming attack.

Jephthah grins. "Pretend all you want, but I know who you are!"

As he lunges toward Satan, the Devil yawns. "Oh, dear. Looks like this is the end for me."

Jepthath raises the Dominion Rod.

He swings it downward, aiming to crush 'Satan's' head into mulch.

Crunch!

To Jepthath's astonishment, he pulverizes Satan's entire body into a bloody pulp. The sheer strength behind Jepthath's swing sends a shockwave into the Earth's depths, destroys the granite throne, and sends shockwaves exploding in every direction.

Jepthath stands amidst the rubble, staring in disbelief.

"What? No... it can't be... Lucifer's body would be too durable to perish under such an attack. Was he really Satan after all?"

Suddenly, Jepthath's body teleports. He reappears not far away, back where he was standing moments before. Satan sits on the granite throne and yawns lazily.

"Oh, dear. Looks like this is the end for me."

Jepthath blinks in confusion. Hesitantly, he raises the Dominion Rod and lunges forward again. This time, he puts every drop of his strength into the attack, doubling his previous output.

"I... I won't fall for your tricks, bloodskin!"

THOOM!

Jepthath smashes Satan's body into mulch once again. He rattles the entire chamber, causing hundreds of tons of rock and stone to shake free from the ceiling and plummet to the ground below.

Jepthath breathes heavily. He stares at the rubble where the throne stood only a second earlier.

"I... I got him. He's dead now. The bastard can't have escaped death a second-"

Suddenly Jepthath teleports again. He reappears where he stood before, facing Satan as the Devil yawns.

"Oh, dear. Looks like this is the end for me."

Jepthath's heart trembles. "No... again? How? How is this happening?"

Faint memories trickle into Jepthath's mind. Hercules's words tickle his brain, as if trying to remind him of some terrible power, some awful demonic magic he must avoid at all costs.

However, no matter how Jepthath struggles, he can't remember what his former master once said.

"Something's not right. Why can't I kill the Devil?"

"Father... h-help me..."

Jepthath jumps in fright. He turns to his right, only to see a young boy lying on the ground amidst a pool of blood. Barely six years old, the boy is but a child, far younger than Jepthath's oldest son, Aaron.

"Daddy... it hurts..."

A little girl's voice reaches Jepthath, startling him again. He raises his eyes slightly to see a little girl, badly burned, crawling toward him. With her right arm and leg chewed off, she's a miserable sight, with

an appearance so heart-rendingly sad that it brings tears to Jephthath's eyes.

"M-my... my children... how are they alive..?"

Jephthath takes a step toward the little boy, only to find an invisible mana barrier blocking his path. He stumbles backward in surprise, only to jump forward a moment later and try to break it with his bare hands.

He fails.

"No! No!! Let me through, damn you! You filthy bloodskin bastards! How dare you desecrate the dead?! I'll kill you all!!"

Jephthath hammers the barrier with all of his strength. The harder he fights, the stronger it becomes. He breaks his fingers against the wall, but even then, he can't get through to embrace his dying children.

"My... love... help me..." A woman whispers.

Jephthath gazes at his feet. There, a face more familiar to him than his own looks at him with eyes full of tears.

"N-Nei...lah?"

Jephthath drops to his knees. He stares at his former wife's disfigured body, covered in even more gruesome burns and cuts than his daughter. Neilah coughs blood all over the dirt and lowers her eyes.

"You... you left us... to die..."

"N-no, I didn't," Jephthath says, as he touches her face. "I'll... I'll save you! I'll grant you my power! You'll be able to heal, you'll-"

Suddenly, Jephthath teleports back to his starting position. He stands and faces Satan once more, startled by the sudden change of scenery.

Satan yawns. "Oh, dear. Looks like this is the end for me."

Disbelief washes through Jephthath's body. He turns to look for his family, only to find that they're no longer there.

He's all alone.

"Neilah... my children..."

Grief wells up in the king's chest. He stifles his emotions and gazes at the Demon Emperor seated on the throne.

"You... you did this. Who are you?! Where am I?!"

Hardly have the words left Jephthath's lips before the chaotic battle surrounding Jephthath simply disappears.

The chamber falls silent.

Satan, still seated on his throne, chuckles.

"Haven't you figured it out, yet? Pathetic human. You revealed your weakness to me, not once, but twice, and you thought I wouldn't notice? Your love for your family allowed me to exploit your mind. Even as we speak, Satan is pushing through your warriors. He'll crush your head momentarily, take your power for himself, and win the war."

'Satan' disappears. He reappears a few feet away from Jephthah, only for his body to shift its appearance, revealing his true form.

Lucifer.

Jephthah's heart skips a beat. The memories of what his master once told him come flooding back.

"Ah! You... you trapped me inside the Room of Torment!"

Lucifer cackles. "Hahahaha! Is that what you filthy fleshbags call it? My Demonic Trance is unlike anything you've ever faced! I could force you to endure a million years of pain and agony while only a minute passed in the outside world! Face facts, human. You've lost, and I've won."

Lucifer leers in front of Jephthah she cackles evilly, taunting him for his weakness and inability to see through her brilliant plans.

Jephthah closes his eyes and sighs. His understanding of the situation takes hold, calming his previously unstoppable rage.

"Aye. Had I known of your power beforehand, I could have protected myself. But now, I have only one recourse."

Lucifer smiles. "Yes. That's right... the only thing you can do now is... *suffer!*"

Jephthah winces as ten thousand knives fly at him from the walls, ceiling, and floor. They impale his body, sending waves of pain coursing through him.

However, the king merely shakes his head.

"I know what it means to suffer. These blades are nothing compared to what you showed me before."

Bitterly, the human sighs.

"You've left me no choice. At least now I can go out on my own terms."

As another knife impales Jephthah's eye, he smiles.

"Farewell, Aaron. My son."

The king summons all of the mana in his body to his brain, causing his vision to turn white.

The last thing he sees is Lucifer's look of disbelief.

"No... you can't do this! Nobody has ever escaped my trance! You filthy fleshbag!! You'll never-"

Part 204: The Heroic Aura's Origin

Jepthath's visions fade away, returning Hope's mind to the Three King's chamber. He stays silent for a moment while gazing up at the Illuminator's statue.

Eventually, when Jepthath doesn't say anything, Hope clears his throat.

"Is that how everything ended? Your story, I mean. Seems a little anticlimactic."

Solomon, Arthur, and Jepthath's statues loom overhead, dominating the diminutive Hero with their presence. Jepthath's eyes brighten as he ponders the Wordsmith's question.

"Mmm. Yes. That is how my story ends. I could not afford to give my power to the demons. I always knew that if Satan crushed my skull, he would become an unstoppable force of evil. He would ravage the Earth, and nobody, not even the angels and Titans, would be able to defeat him."

Hope taps his lip. "Lucifer might have lied to you. She was a demon, after all. You couldn't trust a word she said."

"I know, and I knew," Jepthath murmurs. "However, if there was one thing I understood about Lucifer after battling her and the other Emperors for two decades, it was that she always bragged once she came within reach of some ultimate goal. She might have been lying, but I could not afford to risk my head over the possibility. I was already under the effect of her Demonic Trance. My physical body was paralyzed and vulnerable. If not Satan, some other demon was sure to murder me while my defenses were down."

Hope nods. "I see. What did you do, then? The vision just sort of... ended."

Jepthath's tone turns casual. "Oh, that. I detonated the mana within myself and thus turned my body into a living bomb. Any demons in the area likely perished, while my men would have been unaffected."

Hope takes a step back and leans against a massive pile of gold and coins resting inside the El Dorado room. "Wow. I admire your resolve."

Jepthath's glowing eyes lose some of their luster. They slowly fade to black, revealing only a hint of their former brilliance. "My choice was an easy one. Ironically, had Lucifer not shown me images of my family, I might have tried to fight back, and inevitably damn myself to oblivion. Their appearance caused a tremendous surge of longing to build within my heart. Lucifer's declaration of Satan's killing intent merely pushed me over the edge. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to be done with the war and the fighting. I wished to join my family in the Great Beyond and leave behind all the trivialities of life."

Solomon speaks, breaking his silence. "And look what happened. You ended up inside one of Camael's accursed artifacts."

Jepthath's eyes suddenly glow once again. His statue trembles slightly from his rampaging emotions. "Speak not of that bedeviled whore! That treacherous witch! That confounded swindler and her brother! They tricked me! They lied to me!"

The First Hero's outburst catches Hope off-guard. He leans away from the statue while staring at it with a puzzled expression. "Huh? Explain. What did Camael do?"

Jepthath bites off every word as he addresses Hope's inquiry. "Don't you *see*? Camael's so-called gifts were nothing more than traps designed to place me under her control! No, not hers, but Raphael's! When the old conniver took her aside, twenty years before my death, he must have told her to do something to the Dominion Rod. I know he did! Raphael was a cunning bastard. He never once gave up a chance to reap more benefits for angelkind."

Solomon chimes in, adding onto Jepthath's words. "That's right, old friend. As someone who possesses the memories of the Archangels, I know well how Raphael crafted the Heroic Aura. He used the Dominion Rod to influence Hercules's leftover soul manipulation. Every time you activated the Dominion Rod's magic, it subtly altered your mana to match its own."

Solomon continues. "This is the truth, Hope. The Heroic Aura wasn't a tool of the angels, but a human and Titan fusion tweaked and altered to meet Raphael's ideals. The angels deceived not only Jepthath, but me as well. Had Hercules's plan succeeded, Jepthath would have continued passing his power down from one human king to the next. Without a doubt, he would have eventually crushed demonkind with his might. However, due to Raphael and Camael's tampering, the Heroic Aura became volatile and unpredictable. It converted into a semi-sentient entity, capable of leaving its host on death and transferring to a new one."

Hope straightens his posture. "Hold on, have you told Jason any of this?"

Solomon shakes his head. "I intended to do so before he turned against me, but ultimately never got the chance. You are the first person outside of the Three Kings to learn this secret. Only Raphael and Camael ever knew the details of the Heroic Aura. They even went so far as to lie to the other Archangels, pretending the Heroic Aura was a joint effort between humanity and angelkind."

Solomon chuckles. "Haha. Raphael's ultimate desire was to take full control of Hercules's power. He wished to choose the bearer of the Heroic Aura and turn humanity into a pawn of the angels. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, he failed. The Heroic Aura not only began choosing new bearers, seemingly at random, it even changed its abilities to be more compatible with whoever obtained it. That is why all Heroes possessed different abilities from one another."

Jepthath's voice hardens. "Solomon. You never told *me* any of this."

"You never asked," Solomon replies, shrugging. "Besides, I doubt this news will grant you any peace. You're more likely to go off the deep end now that you understand the full extent of Raphael's cunning."

Jepthath snorts. "Tch. Do not lecture me on ethics and morality, Knowledge-Seeker. My rage might be a bottomless pit, but your schemes are just as endless! How many years have you plotted and planned to take revenge on the demons? Here we are, at the end of time, and you're still hanging on to the dream that this new Hero whelp will succeed where we failed."

"As are you," Solomon counters. "With your chance at joining Neilah in the Great Beyond revoked, your final wish is to complete your revenge. Now that we've brought Hope here, we can bestow to him

Excalibur and the Dominion Rod. With their power, he will shatter the confines of this Labyrinth and turn the demon's rule upside-down."

Jepthath snorts. "The Dominion Rod is a cursed artifact. Should he use its power, he'll only degrade the Heroic Aura further!"

Solomon sighs. "Jepthath, my brother, you may not know this, but the Wordsmiths are the final inheritors of the Heroic Aura. With the Archangels gone and Heaven dissolved, the Heroic Aura will no longer transfer upon death. Its continuation depended upon their existence. Without them, the Wordsmiths will be the last people capable of wielding its power."

Jepthath falls silent.

The conversation lulls for nearly a minute before the ancient king finally replies.

"Are you speaking the truth, Knowledge-Seeker? If the Wordsmiths perish, will there never again be a Hero?"

Solomon sighs. "There will not."

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

Jepthath's pointed query gives Solomon pause. The Knowledge-Seeker hems and haws for a moment before shrugging. "Well, based on how no Hero emerged after the 1940's, I have to assume... hmm..."

Solomon strokes his beard. "Come to think of it; it's likely that so long as Jason possessed the Heroic Aura, but stayed inside the Cryopod in a suspended state, the next Hero would never appear. Short of Hope or Jason dying, and possibly both of them, we can't say for certain that the Heroic Aura has lost its transference ability."

Hope's heart skips a beat. "Hold on, are you saying that even if the demons kill Jason and I both, there's a chance someone else could emerge as a new Hero?"

"I suppose it's possible," Solomon mutters. "I never knew of your existence. Given your birth around the year 2000, I don't know what to make of the 60-year gap between the 1940s and the 2000s. Which person or people were the heroes before you? Who obtained the power of the Heroic Aura? It must have been someone."

Solomon chews on his lip. His expression turns anxious. "This makes no sense. By the time Joan walked the Earth, let alone Arthur and the heroes following him, the angels had become extremely adept at fishing out newly born heroes. They trailed Joan from her 2nd birthday and onward. How could they overlook Jason and his predecessors?"

Hope shrugs. "Does it matter? There were billions of people living on Earth. It can't be easy to comb through that many humans."

"Perhaps..."

Solomon hesitates. He gazes into the distance, pondering a great many things.

"What worries me is that your entry into the cryogenic containment pod may not have been a coincidence. There were more than a dozen powerful factions manipulating humanity from the shadows

by the time of the Industrial Revolution, some of them controlled by the angels, others by the demons. If a demon faction came up with the idea to seal away the next Hero inside cryostorage, that would explain why you remained unmolested for 100,000 years. Why else would they place your cryopod inside Faith's End — Hell's prison?"

Hope's expression changes. He gazes inward at the heavily breathing visage of Solomon and frowns.

"Solomon. If what you're saying is true, then you've just opened up a massive can of worms. If the demons managed to seal away Jason intentionally, then that means they must have figured out the Heroic Aura's weakness. If its carrier doesn't die, it can't transfer. You already showed me that Valac could see into the future, as could Camael. Is it possible that after Valac's death, another demon appeared with the gift of foresight? If so, they might have been able to outwit and destroy the angels. Hell, maybe they opposed Satan and maneuvered to have him killed once his usefulness was over."

Solomon tugs on his beard. "I don't know, Hope. All of that is perfectly plausible, but we mustn't jump to conclusions. It's just as likely that all of your assumptions are false. We won't know without any proof."

Hope begins pacing back and forth. He wrings his hands together and narrows his eyes. "If the demons put Jason inside the Cryopod, then why did we eventually escape? Surely it would have been in their best interests to place us on ice forever. As long as the cryopod had power, it would have kept Jason frozen until the end of time."

Hope pauses.

"Say, Jephthah. I have a question for you."

Jephthah's eyes brighten. "Go on."

"You said that if Satan crushed your head, he would obtain your power and prevent you from passing it on to your son."

"Aye. What of it?"

"How do you know that was the case? Weren't you only guessing?"

Jephthah's eyes pulse as he ponders Hope's question. "Indeed, I could only hazard a guess."

"I see. I'm only asking because I have to wonder; did Satan ever manage to kill a Hero? Did he ever crush one's head and steal their power?"

Solomon nods. "He did, yes — Alexander the Great. Satan brutally defeated him and stole Alexander's powers. He prevented the Macedonian's soul from entering his artifact, the Gordian Knot, but surprisingly, he could not stop the Heroic Aura from transferring to a new host. It was not a soul and thus lay outside his influence."

Hope nods. "But if Satan had managed to crush Jephthah's head, could he have prevented Heroes from emerging in the first place? Wasn't the Heroic Aura already formed by the time Jephthah died?"

Solomon falls silent.

Jephthah does not. "Preposterous. If... if what you're saying is true, then Satan might have claimed my soul, but he'd not have stopped my heir from obtaining my power. That would mean I died for nothing!"

Hope shakes his head. "No, you did the right thing, Jephthah. Even if the Heroic Aura was already formed, you did *not* want to end up a snack for Satan. I can't imagine all the ways he and Hades would have tortured you, not to mention what he'd have accomplished with your stolen abilities. Anyway, I didn't ask that question to poke holes in your self-esteem."

Hope clears his throat. "If my theory is correct, then the Heroic Aura should reappear even if Jason and I die. If we ultimately fall to the demons, and if they capture our souls, another Hero is likely to emerge. We are *not* humanity's last chance. So long as our species survives, another will continue to emerge again and again until the end of time."

Solomon releases a turbid breath. "Haha... I see now why your name is Hope. That is the most heartening speech I've heard in ages. I'm at least fifty percent sure it's the truth, too."

"You flatter me," Hope says, smirking. "Let's get back on topic. I assume Jephthah showed me his past to teach me about the origins of the Heroic Aura. What about the Dominion Rod? Is it intact?"

Solomon nods. "Aye. Even now, if you stretch out your senses, you might be able to detect a faint tingle of its overwhelming mana reserves. Alongside Excalibur, the Dominion Rod is the second mightiest divine artifact in existence."

"Hm, I'm not good at detecting energy signatures," Hope says. He trails off after a moment and frowns. "Say, Solomon? Why hasn't Arthur said anything since I left Jephthah's vision? Is he always this quiet?"

Solomon glances backward, through Hope's vision, at the golden-eyed statue across the room.

"Hmm... aye, Arthur has always been a man of few words, but even for him, this level of silence is unusual. Arthur! King of the Round! Wake up, old friend. Have you nothing to say to our young progeny?"

Hope falls silent. Both he and Solomon wait with bated breath for Arthur's reply. However, it takes three minutes before the golden luster in Arthur's statue's eyes brightens.

"...Hm? What is it, Solomon? I'm busy."

Solomon scoffs. "Busy? Doing what? Knitting? The Wordsmith is here, and he requires your guidance. If you're going to doze off, at least wait until you've told him about your life and where to find Excalibur."

Once again, Arthur doesn't reply for over half a minute. When he does, his voice sounds strained and weak.

"...I can't... there's something wrong... something outside the Chamber of Kings. I sense it, but I cannot tell what it is."

Solomon's lighthearted attitude vanishes. "What? An enemy?"

Arthur's eyes dim noticeably. "...I do not know, Solomon. The feeling is both familiar and alien at the same time. Whoever it is, I don't believe they are a demon. Yet, they are also not a human, nor a Volgrim, angel, or monster. They're... something else."

Solomon falls silent. He turns to Hope and nods. "Can you detect anything, lad?"

Hope swivels to face the Three King's entrance. After using Centurion to augment his mind, he speaks a word of power.

"Detect."

Hope's eyes flash with divine light. The corridors of the Labyrinth appear before him in a wireframe view, mimicking Solomon's magic mapping ability.

However, a large area outside the chamber appears hollow, as if there isn't anything there. No matter how Hope focuses his mind, he cannot detect a trace of life or matter.

"Arthur," Hope says, "why didn't you say anything? Whatever is outside, it isn't something I've encountered before. Next time, don't hold your tongue when something this important shows up."

Arthur's reply comes even slower than before. "I... was uncertain. Ever since my death, doubts have clouded my judgment. Whatever is outside, I cannot approach it as I once did, with my chest puffed out, and my head held high. I have to take care to consider my actions."

Hope crosses his arms. He takes a step toward the doorway and smiles. "You might be scared, but I'm not. I'm a Wordsmith. Whatever rat is hiding out there, I'll teach it not to spy on me. What can my enemies do against the Creator's power?"

"Wait," Solomon says, alarm in his voice. "What are you doing? Don't go outside. As long as you stay within the Three King's chamber, nothing can harm you. I placed powerful protection magic over this vault. You have no idea what's waiting for you out there."

"You're right; I don't," Hope replies. "But that's all the more reason for me to check. I don't like people who sneak around behind my back. Not Jason, and certainly not some nasty, skulking voyeur."

Hope starts walking toward the chamber's entrance, causing Solomon to stand up a little straighter. "You don't know who, or what, is outside."

"No, I don't, but I have a hunch."

The Three King's entrance appears before Hope. He walks toward the doorway while speaking a word of power. **"Invincible. Perception. Speed."**

Readying himself for whatever horrible creature might be waiting outside, Hope jumps around the corner and assumes a defensive stance.

"Show yourself, you ugly-!"

Hope pauses midsentence. He stares, astonished, at the face of a creature he hasn't encountered in over six years.

"What the hell?! You're... you're...!"

A freakish monster, standing more than nine-feet-tall, towers over Hope. Glowing eyes dot its body, all of them jerking around erratically as if trying not to gaze upon some unseen horror. Two pairs of arms jut out from its right and left sides, along with dual heads mounted on its shoulders.

The monster gazes at Hope. Its eyes contain a mixture of apathy and pity.

"Haha... so you came out, after all, Wordsmith. You must be pretty confident to face me by yourself."

Hope swallows his words. He takes a step back as memories from Jason's arrival appear in his mind.

"...Gressil."

Part 205: Hope's Terror

Recommended Listening

"So. You're one of the Wordsmiths. I wonder, are you Hope, or are you Jason?"

Gressil, the Labyrinth's lone prison warden, cocks his right head slightly. All four of his arms hang loosely at his sides, almost as if he hasn't a care in the world. However, the seven-foot-tall human standing before him, a giant among his species, seems little more than an ant compared to his demonic adversary. Hope's body tenses up as he gazes upon the visage of the first being he came across six years ago, back when he first awoke from cryosleep.

Hope's memories, identical to Jason's, send a wave of fear coursing through his veins.

However, even as Hope's horror threatens to immobilize him, his battle instincts, honed through several years of hardened combat against the demons, break the spell.

Hope slowly exhales, releasing some of the tension from his body. He forces himself to relax, even as he sends a mental command to Centurion, hardening the nanites embedded in his skin.

"H-hehe... you guessed correctly, Gressil. I'm Jason's clone, Hope. Don't compare me with that loser, though. I'm much deadlier than him. You must have a death wish if you think you can show up in front of me and live to tell the tale. After all... I *really* hate your kind."

Hope's tough words splash against Gressil harmlessly. The prison warden doesn't even blink as he gazes at the comparatively diminutive human standing before him.

"How amusing. Look at you, trying to cow me. Haha. Anyone else in your situation would lose their nerve and run away, or perhaps fall to their knees and beg me to spare them. You possess admirable fortitude, Wordsmith. I'll give you that."

Gressil takes a step forward. The mere act of placing his foot down sends a tremor through the walls, making it seem as if his body weighs several tons.

The prison warden strokes his chin. "I already know your name, Hope. Your life is an open book before me. If the other demons knew what I did, your little operation on Tarus II would have fallen apart ages ago. Haha. You haven't any idea how far my claws reach."

Gressil's gravelly timbre sends a shiver down Hope's spine. As the prison warden takes another step forward, an invisible force begins pressing on Hope. While insignificant at first, it quickly increases in power, causing the Wordsmith's heart to beat erratically.

Unwillingly, Hope takes a step backward. His awkward retreat summons a wispy smile to Gressil's face, doubling the pressure Hope faces.

"Don't mock me, Gressil. I know all about you. You're nothing special. You're just a creepy recluse the other demons consider too barbaric for civilized society. Against me, you're nothing more than a mongrel waiting to be put down."

Gressil pauses. He blinks slowly, acting as if the only emotion Hope's retort made him feel was boredom. "A mongrel? You wound me. I came because I thought we could be friends. Ask anyone, and they'll tell you I'm an excellent conversationalist. There's no need to use hateful words in my presence, young Earthling."

"Stuff it," Hope snarls. He takes a step forward, pushing back against Gressil's invisible pressure. "What the fuck do you want? I can't imagine you came here to chit-chat. If you're planning my death, tell me now, and I'll cut off that ugly lump of fat you call a head."

Gressil's smile fades away, returning his face to a decidedly sinister expression. He stops advancing, crosses his arms, and stands in silence, sizing up the Wordsmith before him.

"Haha... you, kill me? Now, that *would* be interesting. I've never fought a Hero before. But no, Hope... I'm not here to kill you. I wouldn't dream of it. The last thing I want is for you to end up in the River Styx. You're too key to my plans for me to allow that."

Hope frowns. "What do you want, then? Out with it."

Gressil unwraps his crossed arms. He waggles a stubby claw at Hope and chuckles. "Haha. Not so fast. First, Wordsmith, I have a question for *you*. Why do you suppose the demons have yet to attack Tarus II?"

Hope's expression becomes twice as unpleasant as before. "What kind of stupid question- no, forget it. You must have a reason for asking. My answer is that the Emperors haven't been able to amass a big enough army to crush humanity, yet. Once they do, they will launch an assault, hoping to eliminate all of the dissidents."

Gressil sighs.

"...No. You're not even close. How sad. I expected you to be the more intelligent Wordsmith, yet still, you only operate at a surface level."

Gressil's eyes glow blood-red, illuminating his face with their light.

"The reason your insurrection has lasted for six years has little to do with Ose's inability to corral an assault force, but everything to do with her desire for your magic. Haha. That should be an excellent hint. I need not say anything else."

Gressil's blank, emotionless gaze falls upon Hope. He drills the Wordsmith with his stare, practically boring holes in Hope's skull.

Hope swallows his saliva. "I... I see. Not only does Ose intend to defeat humanity, but she wants the power of Wordsmithing, too."

A smile creeps back onto Gressil's face. "Ahh... so you do possess a few drops of intelligence. Well done, Wordsmith. Though, considering that shiny golden Crown on your head, I can't say I'm surprised."

Hope's eyes subconsciously flick upward. His heart stops beating for a split-second.

What?! How can Gressil see the Crown? I made it invisible before I left the Core. I didn't want Jason knowing I'd obtained it!

Hope's heartbeat quickens. A rush of adrenaline floods into his body as he tries to rationalize Gressil's observation. *Maybe, during Jephthah's visions, Solomon somehow made his artifact visible again. But why would he do that? Solomon! Why is Gressil able to see your Crown? What's going on, here?*

Hope transmits a mental request to the Knowledge-Seeker. However, to his astonishment, not only does Solomon stay silent, Hope can't sense the ancient king at all.

For some reason, Solomon's soul has gone dormant.

Unable to parse the reason for Solomon's silence, Hope returns his gaze to the hideous prison warden.

Gressil's expression turns diabolical. An evil glint appears in the prison warden's eyes as he nods along to the Wordsmith's confusion, savoring the disbelief etched onto Hope's face.

"Yes, yes. Just like that. Haha. You may try to mask your bewilderment, but such childish attempts at deception will fail. I'm more than adept at spotting the panic on my prisoner's faces."

For the second time, Gressil takes a step forward. He draws within ten feet of Hope, forcing the Wordsmith to retreat. Even with his body Wordsmithed to be invincible, Hope feels defenseless against the predator hungrily eying him.

"Y-your prisoners, huh? It sounds like I need to tear you apart and free all the poor bastards you've hidden away. You're a sick fucker, Gressil."

Gressil's glee instantly doubles. His grin turns maniacal as he licks his lips. "Oh, how I love the fight in your eyes. Yes, I am a demented monster. I'm a product of hatred and violence. I'm what you'll become, given enough time. Sadly, for you, your story must come to an end, little Wordsmith. Once I make you mine, you'll have no choice but to follow my orders. You'll become one of my *eyes*."

The glowing red orbs twitching on Gressil's body suddenly become more agitated than before. The prison warden gazes at Hope with a mixture of lust and hunger, boiling emotion within Hope's body like never before.

Hope turns away from Gressil and starts to run.

I... I need to escape! I can't fight this sick son of a bitch!

As Hope starts to retreat, Gressil's eyes grow cold. He watches as the Wordsmith bolts toward the Three King's chamber.

"Yes. Run, little Wordsmith. Your terror will sustain me."

Recommended Listening

Hope's heart trembles, sending the biological equivalent of earthquakes surging throughout his blood vessels. The Wordsmith rushes back toward the entrance to the Three King's room, only to find that it has somehow moved to the end of the corridor, some one hundred feet away.

Fuck! Hope yells in his mind. *For the Labyrinth to shift at such a terrible moment; the architect is a bastard!*

Hope leaves Gressil in his dust. He flees down the hallway and jumps into the Three King's room, only to freeze up and stare forward in bewilderment.

Gressil, the prison warden, stands mere feet away, his gaze fixated on the confused Wordsmith. Instead of the Three King's room, the same hallway Hope just left stands before him.

"Haha. Going somewhere?"

The warden's voice pushes down on Hope, mentally crushing him with its weight. Hope jumps backward and immediately speaks a word of power. **"RETURN!"**

Two seconds pass. The world shifts around Hope as his teleportation magic activates and he returns to the Labyrinth Core, far from Gressil's reach.

Hope exhales, as relief swells in his chest.

"I... I made it... hm?"

Suddenly, the Wordsmith's heart rate doubles.

For seemingly no reason, the entire Labyrinth Core appears far different from before. Where rows of computer terminals once stood, now only flat, empty spaces greet his eyes. Not a soul stirs anywhere, making Hope flick his eyes from left to right. He looks around, searching for Neil, the monster technicians, or anyone he might recognize.

But no matter where Hope looks, he doesn't find a soul.

Even more incredibly, the warp-gates remain at their proper positions, but not one of them stands activated and ready to use. Hope's eyes fixate on their crumbled, destroyed ruins.

"The Core! What happened here?! Don't tell me the demons attacked while I left?! How long was I under Jephthah's influence?! Solomon! Answer me!"

Hope speaks to the Crown sitting atop his head. However, the ancient king does not reply.

Hope begins to tremble. His teeth chatter as he tries to make sense of the unbelievable sight before his eyes.

What happened to the Core?

Why isn't Solomon responding?

Why in the hell can't I calm my nerves?!

As Hope berates himself, a heavy footstep strikes the ground behind him, causing the Wordsmith to jump in fright!

"Haha. Confused? You should be."

Hope whirls around, only to see Gressil standing behind him. The enormous demon gazes at him like a starving beggar seated at a five-course meal.

Hope jerks his arm up. He aims his palm at Gressil and bellows from the depths of his lungs.

"EXPLOSION!!"

Boom!

A terrific eruption of mana detonates on top of Gressil, sending a shockwave through the Labyrinth Core. Hope, standing mere feet away from his demon-stalker, takes the full brunt of the explosion. It smashes into him and sends him flying backward, where he crashes into the dirt at fifty miles an hour. The Wordsmith slides to a stop and coughs, having had his Nanites absorb the brunt of the attack.

"Grgh... ah... m-my invincibility... why am I... why didn't it protect me...?"

Hope's eyes flutter for a moment as he tries to reorient himself. When he opens his eyes, his thoughts come to an abrupt halt.

No longer is the Wordsmith resting on the ground inside the Core.

Instead, he's returned to the hallway where he first met Gressil.

The prison warden, unharmed, stands mere feet away from the fallen Wordsmith. He crosses all four of his arms and gazes at Hope, amusement filling his countenance.

"Haha. Hahahaha... oh, what great fun this is. It's been ages since I laughed like this. You are quite the treat, Hope. Are you tired? Since we're good friends now, it would be impolite if I didn't let you rest your eyes a bit."

Hope scrambles backward. He drags himself across the ground in a terror-filled reverse-crabwalk.

"W-wh-what the fuck?! What are you? What did you do to me? To the Core?! Answer me, Gressil!"

Gressil cocks his head. He appears surprised that the Wordsmith would ask him such a silly question.

"I didn't do anything. Is the Core in danger? Not from me. I don't care about a bunch of silly little humans playing pretend with their puny guns. I'm only here for you, my next prisoner. That's all."

Hope pulls himself to his feet. His expression turns livid as he realizes he won't be able to escape the prison warden's reach.

Gressil must be at least at the level of a Duke, possibly even an Emperor. I've heard plenty of rumors about him, but nothing involving his powers. Can he teleport? Is he fucking with my mind? Wait...

Hope's eyes flick from Gressil's dominant head to the subservient one on his left shoulder. The second head lulls forward listlessly, not saying a word.

Could that second head have done something to me? No. It hasn't moved since Gressil first appeared. Damn! I just don't know what the hell is going on. If I'd known I'd be facing an Emperor, I'd have done some more research on him! When I get out of here, I'll be sure to research each of the high-level demons for myself. I can't afford to be caught off-guard like this ag-

"Your mind must be racing," Gressil says, his deep timbre interrupting Hope's thoughts. "But I haven't any interest in letting you reconcile the implausibilities in our little fight. I'm only here to savor your torment before I break you."

The moment Gressil finishes speaking, he lunges forward. His huge, seemingly unwieldy body transforms from a misshapen boulder into a raging cheetah. He swings his fist out and uppercuts Hope's

face and chest, sending the Wordsmith flying backward. Hope bounces off the ceiling, rebounds off the floor, and grinds to a stop at the end of the corridor.

"G-guh..."

Centurion's nanites rush around in his body, attempting to repair his damaged nerves and cracked bones.

WARNING! PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR, YOU HAVE SUSTAINED HEAVY DAMAGE TO YOUR INTERNAL ORGANS! THE ATTACKER IS NOW REGISTERED AS A CRIMSON-ZETA-LEVEL THREAT! IMMEDIATE EVACUATION IS ADVISED!

Hope lays on the ground, unmoving. He slowly twitches his arm for a moment before finally gathering enough strength to lift himself up and lean on his elbow.

"I-if... if only I could... cough..."

Hope's eyes flutter heavily. Gressil's punch not only knocked the daylights out of him but caused severe mental trauma as well.

Hope turns his head to see the massive prison warden slowly striding toward him. Each time Gressil takes a step, he pauses, as if he's enjoying the most leisurely stroll of his life.

Hope coughs. "Kuh. B-Ba... **Barrier.**"

The Wordsmith aims his mind at a spot between himself and Gressil while intending to create a temporary wall between them.

However, to his surprise, no wall appears.

"Kuh... what the... what the fuck...? Why didn't it work? **Barrier. Barrier!**"

Hope Wordsmiths again. This time, he pays attention to his body.

A chilling realization sets in as the young Hero inspects himself.

I can't sense my mana supply. It hasn't dried up, but rather, it doesn't seem to exist at all! I don't understand... what the hell is wrong with my Wordsmithing? My body?

Gressil slows to a stop. He stands a mere ten feet from the Wordsmith, who lays on the ground, barely able to rest on his elbow.

"If you were any other human, that punch would have turned you into a thick, meaty paste. Your cute little 'nanites' interest me. They won't save you, but they give you a small chance to fight back. That's why the white-haired woman named you Hope, isn't it? Because you're supposed to represent humanity's 'belief' that they will someday defeat the demons."

Gressil shakes his head.

"How unfortunate. You were doomed to fail from the beginning. Fate itself conspired against you. I knew you were a Hero from the very first moment I learned of your cryopod."

Hope's heart skips a beat. "What? You knew?"

Gressil scratches his chin. "Haha. Yes, little human. I told you before; I know things that would send the entire demon council into a fit of rage. Did you think you were special? Did you think you emerged from the cryopod by chance? Haha. Jason must have thought himself quite clever when he slipped past me."

A sense of foreboding falls upon Hope. "Impossible. You... you can't expect me to believe you released Jason from the cryopod intentionally! Why in the hell would you do that? You're a demon! We're Heroes! We're your mortal enemies!"

Gressil rears his head back. This time, when he laughs, the noise comes out much throatier and full-forced than ever.

"Ahahaha! Hu-hu-hu... oh, you brainless rat. No matter how powerful a Hero you might be, you are but one man. You have no chance of defeating demonkind on your own. Even if you should gather some pathetic, rag-tag little army together, you would never in a million years defeat my people."

Gressil stops laughing. He lowers his head to gaze at the Wordsmith. A burning intensity appears in his eyes, once again giving him the appearance of a wolf sizing up its next meal.

"Your first mistake was arrogantly assuming you ever stood a chance of winning this war. Your second was assuming I cared about those who ignored my plight and left me to die. The demons are as much my enemy as the humans, the angels, and all the other wretched, worthless gnats roaming the mortal plane."

Gressil continues. "I don't give a damn if you succeed in your conquest or fail spectacularly. The only reason I freed you from that cryopod was so that you could amuse me. That's all."

Hope pulls himself to his feet. He eyes the warden warily and tries to shrink back against the wall. Sadly, there isn't anywhere for him to run. Hope can't escape his predicament, not by using his legs.

"Ugh... if the demons are your enemies, but the humans are, too... then I still don't see why freeing Jason helped you. Nothing you've done makes any sense."

While Hope speaks, his mind runs a mile a minute, trying desperately to understand why he suddenly can't fight back against the freak standing before him.

I Wordsmithed myself to be invincible. In the past, when I did that, the biggest, toughest demon couldn't put a scratch on me. However, this time, Gressil nearly knocked me out with one hit.

After that, I tried to create a barrier, but failed.

Why isn't my Wordsmithing working? Why can't I speak to Solomon? He'd know in an instant what Gressil did to me!

Wait. No, I'm going about this all the wrong way.

Son of a bitch. That's it. That's it! It's all connected. Everything makes sense now.

I can't speak to Solomon, my magic has stopped functioning, and it's all because of Gressil! Somehow, he must be preventing my magic from working. He's suppressing or nullifying it!

Hope's eyes flash with insight. Puzzle pieces click into place as he rapidly integrates this newfound realization into his thought process.

Earlier, Arthur couldn't tell me anything about Gressil. He didn't even know if Gressil was a demon, a human, or an alien! That must mean there's an anti-magic field surrounding Gressil. If I can get away from him, I'll be able to use my Wordsmithing again!

The Wordsmith's mind blazes away at lightspeed, allowing him to infer key information about Gressil's abilities within seconds. Thanks to his six years of battle experience, Hope is more than capable of determining his enemy's powers after spending less than a minute fighting them.

Gressil speaks, jarring Hope's thoughts for a moment. "I don't care what you think about me, young Hero. I don't even care that you've already figured out my abilities. That knowledge won't help you escape."

Gressil swings the back of his hand at Hope. Before Hope can react, the equivalent of a hundred sledgehammers impacts his head, sending him careening helplessly to the side, where he flies down the corridor. He hits the ground, rolls thrice, and comes to a stop with both of his arms broken.

"Ahh... augh..."

Tears well up in Hope's eyes. Even with his incredible deductive ability, he can't react fast enough to the prison warden's movements.

He's... he's definitely... at least... a Demon Emperor... augh... fucking hurts... everything hurts...

Hope coughs out a single word. "**Heal...**"

However, nothing happens. The Wordsmith's mana rests within the pit of his stomach, inert. No matter how hard he tries, he can't will it into existence.

Gressil lumbers toward Hope again. This time, he stops less than a foot away and smiles.

"Ah. There it is. That's the look of a broken man. I've been waiting for you to make that juicy, helpless expression since we met. Have you come to understand, little human? You might be a Hero, and you might consider your ability a god-given power, one which places you above the common rabble, but in front of me, even your almighty 'Wordsmithing' means nothing. You are weak. You are frail."

Hope coughs. He gazes up at the demon towering over him, as helplessness and despair swell up in his heart.

"You... you coward... you're too... too scared... to fight me like a man..."

Gressil's smile turns positively gleeful, making him appear ten times more monstrous than before. "Huhuhu... even broken and defeated, you still have the strength to insult me. Yes, I like your spirit. It's a good thing I got to you before my cute little sister did. What will Ose think when her plan to capture two Wordsmiths fails before it's even begun?"

Despite his question being purely rhetorical, Gressil pauses for a moment. He scratches his chin, then glances at his second head, which continues to flop forward uselessly.

"Hm. Yes, good point. Why *should* I care? I can't wait to see what happens when my sister finds out there will only be one Wordsmith waiting for her. Yama is not someone she can overpower. If she doesn't

give the Shade King his prize, Yama will destroy her. With Ose dead, the Hidden Emperors will emerge. Chaos will engulf the Labyrinth."

Gressil chuckles. "Haha. The coming weeks are sure to bring about a huge transformation all throughout Hell. Now then, come along, little human. Playtime is over."

Hope's heart skips a beat as Gressil bends over and reaches for his head. With a light *flick*, Gressil smashes the Wordsmith's skull against the corridor wall, knocking him unconscious.

Defeated, Hope slumps lifelessly to the ground, all his energy spent. Gressil stares for a moment at the Crown stuck to Hope's head. Disgusted, the prison warden reaches down, plucks it off the Wordsmith's scalp, and holds onto it with the tips of his fingers.

Gressil's expression contorts into revulsion as he holds the golden band as far from his body as possible.

"Wretched artifact. Your divine energy cannot harm me, but knowing what your people did to my brother, I would give anything to destroy you."

After a moment, Gressil lightly tosses Solomon's Crown aside as if it was garbage. It hits the Labyrinth floor with a sharp *tink* and rolls away, but the warden pays it no more mind.

Gressil kneels over, wraps his giant hand around Hope's head, and begins dragging the Wordsmith behind him as he returns to Faith's End.

"Farewell, Solomon. We'll meet again soon. Haha. Hahahaha!"

Gressil stomps away, leaving Solomon's Crown behind.

After the prison warden leaves, Solomon's artifact begins to glow, and the Knowledge-Seeker groggily returns to reality, his mind a muddled mess.

"I... I... what happened? Where is Hope? Gods. Why did he leave my artifact sitting all alone in the middle of the Labyrinth?"

Solomon asks questions of nobody in particular. His voice enters the void, never once traveling outside his artifact's radius.

Silence swallows the Labyrinth, the only hint of a recent battle being the cracked walls where Hope's body struck.

Once again, Solomon is alone.

Part 206: The Plains of Pain

Elsewhere in the galaxy, somewhere on a distant planet far removed from the Labyrinth, a giant mass of monsters clumps together and performs various drills assigned to them by their military instructor.

Artorias, the current possessor of Barbatos's body, paces back and forth as he fixates his piercing gaze on the nearest cluster of trainees. Five hundred goblins and two hundred orcs work together in twos and threes, performing all manner of assigned drills. One orc braces a giant log on its head, allowing his two goblin partners to punch and kick it relentlessly to hone their endurance. Two other goblins nearby tug on a mannequin, trying to rip its arms off like they would a filthy fleshbag.

Artorias glances upward, at the pale green sky. This world, unlike Hell Harbor, is one where any demon or monster may come to train outside of the Labyrinth. However, the poisonous rain, which occasionally falls from its skies, chokes the life from its land, preventing a diverse array of wildlife from forming. Only the fiercest creatures roam the planet, those capable of surviving under the harshest conditions.

Basilisks. Hydras. Gorgons. Wyrms.

Weaker monsters occasionally come for various reasons, but they never stay for long. They can't, lest they become food for those who would prey on them.

This world is a hellish nightmare — a place where the strong come to thrive, and the weak, to suffer.

This world is Grimvolas, Bulwark of the Ancients.

Artorias exhales through his nose. He lowers his gaze from the sky to the trainees, all of whom will help spearhead Operation Stormbringer. He strides into the middle of the pack, keeping a sharp eye out for lazy weaklings and those unfit for combat.

His eyes laser onto a small pack of goblins. One of them, a black-skinned fellow with stouter muscles than the rest, cackles shrilly as he gloats to anyone who will listen.

-right! Everyone say fleshbags in Core big and strong! Wrong! They not tough like me! Me big hobby-gobby! Me kick their butts!"

"Whaaat?" A different, green-colored goblin says, confusion on his face. "You no hobby-gobby! You obby-gobby! If you was hobby-gobby, you'd be runnin' the clan!"

The black-skinned fellow, an Obsidian Goblin, slaps his arms and grins. "Psh, who cares! That just dumb name! Once war over, all the femmies'll beg me to mate them! Me be hobby-gobby before ya know it!"

A tiny shriveled-looking fellow gazes at his obsidian cousin mournfully. "Me wish me could be obby-gobby too... some guys get all th' good luck..."

"Bahaha! It's true!" The obsidian goblin laughs. "Skin so tough, nobody can hurt me! Just try! You can't do shit! You too weak!"

A young goblin, new to the group, takes a step forward. "C-can I touch? I wanna know what obby skin feels like..."

"Psh. If you ain't scared, go ahead!" The obsidian goblin laughs. He leans forward, holds out his arm, and flexes his muscles, allowing the younger goblin to come closer.

The younger goblin squeezes his cousin's arm. His eyes light up with excitement. "Wow! You just like rock! You feel pain?"

"Nah, not even a little," The obsidian goblin brags. "Between you'n me, me armor even tougher than commander's! Ol' Barby ain't nothin' compared t'me!"

Having heard enough, Artorias steps forward. The instant his boot strikes the dirt, all of the goblins whirl to face him. Their faces pale in terror, realizing he's spotted them slacking off. The obsidian goblin looks even worse than the rest. He practically shifts himself.

"A little bird told me you think my brother is weak," Artorias says, his voice deadly calm. "But perhaps I misheard."

The obsidian goblin freezes. It takes several seconds before he can spit out a response. "Y-y-yeah! Whoops! Me musta misspoke! Err, ahh, me words got twisted, b-b-big boss! Me meant say yer armor was b-b-better'n me skin! Yeah..."

Artorias stays silent for a moment. Seeing the looks of terror on the goblin's faces, he merely sighs.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to kill anyone. I'm not like other demons who explode with rage at the slightest insult. However, if you don't get back to your drills, I might have to administer some... *discipline.*"

A sigh of relief sweeps through the goblin ranks. Immediately, they jump back into position and begin sparring with each other, throwing vicious jabs and punches to try and impress the Demon Duke towering over them.

"Anything for you, big boss!"

"No slackin' off for us!"

"We on the job!"

Artorias gazes through the pitch-black metal helmet covering his face. Before the obsidian goblin can join his friends, Artorias shakes his head. "No. You come with me."

The obsidian goblin turns to look at Artorias with a hint of fear. His voice cracks as he squeaks out a single word. "M-me?"

"That's right. *You.*"

The obsidian goblin lowers his head. He trudges along behind Artorias, a look of death on his face.

Me doomed.

* * *

A minute later, Artorias and the obsidian goblin step away from the hardworking platoon. Artorias passes the torch to a nearby Demon Baron, ordering him to take over temporarily. Once the Baron leaves, Artorias clears his throat.

"You. What is your name, goblin?"

The goblin shivers. "H-Hungry, sir."

Artorias raises an eyebrow. "I didn't ask when last you ate."

"N-nah, boss... me name... Hungry."

Artorias sighs. "Right. Sometimes I forget how idiotic monster names can be. Alright, 'Hungry,' I have a few questions for you."

Hungry rubs his three-fingered claws together. He trembles even harder as Artorias's gaze falls on him. "Me sorry, boss. Me so sorry! P-please forgive me! Me would n-never make fun of you! Not in million years!"

"Hm? Oh, that. I don't care about what you said earlier. No, instead, I need to ask you a question regarding Obsidian Goblins. How much do you know about them?"

Upon realizing Artorias isn't mad about his comments from earlier, Hungry visibly relaxes. "Obby-gobbys? Me not know much, big boss. Me elders said they tell me more after big battle."

"Obsidian Goblins are quite rare," Artorias murmurs. "Yet, for some reason, several hundred recently appeared on the human's capital world, Tarus II. Tell me, Hungry, how might that be possible? Given the rarity of Obsidian Goblins, how could so many crawl out of the woodwork when I know of fewer than a dozen living within the Labyrinth?"

Hungry shrugs. "No clue! Hobby-gobby elders no tell me nothing!"

"I see. You don't know anything."

Artorias's burning gaze leaves the goblin. He stares into the distance, pondering the recent events from a few days prior.

"Hundreds of obsidian goblins. Elemental wyverns. A Hydra. Something isn't right. Why do I start feeling uneasy whenever I think about Operation Stormbringer? Ose is overlooking something important. So am I."

Artorias scrunches his face up. He continues staring into the distance, trying with all his might to connect the puzzle pieces.

"Two Wordsmiths, both capable of unthinkable feats of magic. Have demons ever truly beaten a Hero? If we take their souls, the Heroic Aura will inevitably manifest again. Even if it takes a hundred thousand years, it always returns. A specter from the past. Darkness filled with enmity and hate."

"Um... b-big boss...?"

Hungry rubs his hands together sheepishly. He shrinks back in fright when Artorias glances down at him.

"You're still here? Go. I've nothing more to say to the likes of you."

The obsidian goblin quickly nods. He slinks backward, then races away, leaving Artorias in his dust. "Me be good from now on! No more say bad things!"

Artorias rolls his eyes. "Suit yourself."

The Demon Duke once again returns to his duties. He continues whipping a batch of nearby orcs into shape, using his words to insult their strength and agitate their bloodthirsty urges.

However, his thoughts continue to wander, providing him with ceaseless, neverending questions.

Suddenly, a voice from behind Artorias startles him from his musings.

"Yo! Arty, boy! What the heck're you up to, bub?"

Bael, the Duke of Pain, swaggers over to Artorias. He reaches behind himself and sticks a finger down the back of his underwear, scratching his ass without a care in the world.

Artorias turns around to greet his friend, eye-to-eye. "Bael? I didn't know Ose stationed you here."

Bael laughs. "Bahaha, you think that broad can tell me what to do? Nah. I just wanted to pop over and see what you were up to! I hear Grimvolas is the *pits*."

Artorias nods. "Yes. We've suffered several bursts of acid rain today already. The weather here is remarkably brutal."

"You holdin' up okay?"

Artorias nods. "As well as can be expected in these trying times."

Bael continues to stare at Artorias, but his expression turns slightly more sympathetic. "Had any flare-ups?"

"No. I haven't detected Uriel's mana even once in the last six years. She's gone completely dormant."

"But the bitch is still in there, ain't she?"

"Undoubtedly, along with my brother."

Bael falls silent. He rubs his chin and nods along as if answering some unspoken question lingering in the air.

"No Barbatos, and no Uriel. Bad news mixed with good. You don't think your brother... y'know... died?"

Artorias shrugs. "I believe not, but I cannot say for certain."

"Good enough for me," Bael grunts. "Anyway, I didn't come here to chit-chat. I wanted to invite you ta' my place on Hell Harbor. I thought we could hang out together for a while, y'know? Just like the old times, back before that angel bitch fucked you up."

Artorias shakes his head. "I am busy, Duke of Pain. I must train these recruits. That was the task assigned to me by the Third Emperor."

Bael rolls his eyes. "Oh, bloody hell, man. Who cares? Do you think a couple hundred orcs and goblins'll make any difference? Even if you train 'em to be total killers, they ain't never gonna be useful for anything but moppin' up the leftovers. You'n me'll be doin' all the heavy lifting."

Artorias falters. "Maybe so, but Emperor Ose ordered me-"

"I don't care what that bimbo said," Bael says, waving his hand flippantly. "Sheesh. You always did pay way too much attention to rules'n shit. How long has it been since you got to move around in a whole-ass body, Arty? A few thousand years? Tens of thousands? You gotta stop being so uptight and smell the roses once in a while."

Bael jerks his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the direction of Grimvolas's warpgate.

"Come on, pal. I'm tryin' ta' help you out, here. What if ol' Barby wakes up, and you go sleepy-bye again, eh? Now might be your last chance to have a little fun before that Operation Storm-thunder-clap-boom thing."

Artorias lowers his eyes. "Fun..."

"Yeah! Barby never got into Sticks 'n Bones, but I bet it'd be right up your alley. Come on, come on!"

Bael grabs Artorias's arm and drags him along. Artorias starts to protest, but Bael shuts him down.

"Nuh-uh. I'm the First Duke, pal. You wanna follow orders? Follow mine. Unless you think you can beat me and take my job. That could be fun, too."

Artorias lessens his resistance. Reluctantly, he falls into step behind Bael and trudges along; his head hung low. "I have no desire to rule. Leadership means nothing to me."

"Great. That's somethin' you, me, 'n Barbatos've all got in common," Bael replies.

The two Demon Dukes stomp along in silence for several minutes. Their heavy feet create depressions in the soft, acrid soil, sending maggots skittering in every direction.

As they walk, Artorias raises his head. A mountain to the west catches his attention. On one of its many plateaus, the eagle-eyed Duke spots a few figures moving about; their bodies shrouded in thick cloaks.

"Hm? Hold a moment, Bael. Up there, on that cliff... are those... Overlords?"

Bael and Artorias slow to a stop. The Duke of Pain follows his comrade's gaze, where he spots the rag-wearing figures skulking about on the cliff's face.

"Heh. You don't get out of the Labyrinth much, do ya?"

Artorias shakes his head. "No. My brother rarely leaves the mermaid caves. Their serene and peaceful nature helps him forget our shared pain."

"Mmm. Yeah, well, a lot's happened since the Energy Wars. Those punks up there... they're called, ehm..."

Bael scratches his chin. He pauses for half a minute to think about his words. As he and Artorias stare at the cliff-face, the distant figures quickly realize they've been spotted. They retreat behind a boulder and enter a cave embedded in the mountainside, disappearing from view.

"Duh... Dol... Dol-something-rather," Bael mutters. Suddenly, a lightbulb pops up above his head. "Oh, right! *Dolgrim*. That's what those punks're called. They're like ancient Volgrim or something. Real sneaky, primitive, and nasty, from what I've seen. It's no wonder they live on a shithole like Grimvolas. Sheesh. At least they keep to themselves."

Artorias nods. The Duke's eyes turn glossy for a moment as he digs into his memories. "Mmm. Yes, Dolgrimites. I've heard people mention them once or twice. I've never seen them in the flesh, though."

Bael shrugs. He returns his attention toward the warpgate and continues walking. "Eh. If you've seen one Dolgrim, you've seen 'em all. Ain't nothin' special about 'em, 'cept they don't like strangers. Anyway, forget those guys. When was the last time ol' Barbatos came over to my place? I had the girls put in all kinds of fun stuff recently. You'll love it."

Artorias follows Bael's lead. He falls into step beside the Duke of Pain and returns his attention to the topic at hand.

"...I must admit, in between the agony scorching my soul for tens of thousands of years, I *have* occasionally felt twinges of boredom at the monotony of my existence."

Bael punches his palm. "Hell yeah! That's the spirit, Arty! We're gonna have a good devil-damned time, just the two of us!"

Artorias sighs. "Alright. I will follow your lead, Duke of Pain."

Five hours later.

Bael and Artorias stand atop a gigantic winged beast, a bird as black as night. Each of its feathers are nearly two feet long, while its body stretches almost fifty feet from head to tail.

The monstrous bird, a Hellraven, screeches and caws as it soars over the plains of Hell Harbor. Thousands of trees race past beneath the Duke of Pain and his comrade as they fly over mountains and across rivers.

Along the way, Bael points at a gigantic obelisk standing five hundred feet tall. At its base, a dead forest encircles it in a huge radius, giving it the appearance of a graveyard.

"Yo, Arty! You ever been to Mephisto's shack?"

Artorias narrows his eyes. "I avoid the Hall of the Damned. Such a place is not somewhere the living should tread."

"Bahaha! It ain't all bad!" Bael laughs. "Some of the undead girls ain't too shabby-looking! Ol' Mephisto's even got a few angel corpses hangin' around in there. Sometimes I like to pop by and remember the good old days."

"Oh?" Artorias asks. "Angel corpses? What of their souls?"

Bael waves his hand. "Long dead. Don't you remember? Angels die if they don't get enough mana. They're always leakin' that crap all over the carpet."

"Mmm. Right. That makes sense," Artorias mutters.

The Hellraven flaps its wings, catches an updraft, and soars several hundred feet higher than before, rushing toward the summit of the tallest mountain in the region. The moment it reaches the top, the bird passes overhead and surges downward, aiming for its base on the other side.

"Whoa! Hahaha, easy there, bird-brain!" Bael yells. He laughs as he struggles to keep his footing. Standing atop a Hellraven while it flies is no mean feat. It's only thanks to his ascended demon physiology and millennia of honing his instincts that he doesn't fall off and tumble down the bluff.

Eventually, the Hellraven slows its flight and comes to a gentle landing before a gigantic, hundred-acre mansion located smack in the middle of the forest. However, much like Mephisto's obelisk, countless trees have been cleared away, allowing the estate to sit in a wide-open clearing free of the foliage.

The moment the bird lands, Artorias flicks his eyes around, taking in the sights.

Hundreds of gigantic animals, monsters, and mutant freaks sit in cages and pens dotted around the villa. They screech, howl, and roar at the newly arrived guests, only to fall silent when they realize it's their owner who has returned.

Along with the caged beasts, hundreds of gorgeous women stand in clumps and groups here and there. Many of them attend to the animal's needs, while others till the fields, clean the villa, or otherwise fulfill the duties any experienced servant might perform.

"Human women, demon women, Felaris girls, even a minotaur cow or two. You have quite the collection of species here, Bael," Artorias muses.

Bael hops off the Hellraven and gives it a few scratches under its beak, causing it to caw softly. "Heh, damn right, bub. What can I say? I love the bitches, and the bitches love me."

Artorias levitates off the Hellraven by wrapping magnetic energy around his armor. When he touches the ground, he sighs. "Yes. I am sure they do."

By the time Bael and Artorias have stepped foot on the main path leading into the estate, most of the women outside have already noticed them. A flood of females comes rushing over, all of them waving while yelling Bael's name.

"Master Bael is back!"

"I told you he'd visit today! I always know when he's coming!"

"Master Bael, I'll draw up your bath right away!"

Bael holds up his hands, silencing the throng of women as they slow to a stop before him. "Girls, please, haha. Let's bring the energy down a little. I brought one of my buddies here today. Name's Artorias. He's a little shy, so let's treat him real good, aight?"

As Bael speaks, one of the minotaur women stomps over to him. With the head and legs of a cow, but the midsection and arms of a human, her appearance is remarkably attention-grabbing. She wears elaborately stitched leather clothing, accentuating her curves, while also making her animal parts that much more onerous.

The minotaur woman bows slightly before Bael. "Master, you've returned."

Bael stops. He puts his hand behind his back and nods. "That's right, Giselle, I'm back. Alright, go on. Haul off."

Before Artorias can ask what Bael means, the minotaur woman raises her thick, muscular fist, lunges toward the Duke of Pain, and blasts him right in the face. Bael goes tumbling backward and slams onto his ass, momentarily stunned by her vicious strength.

Artorias stares in disbelief. "Bael! What in the name of..."

However, the girls behind Giselle seem unconcerned for the Duke's well-being. One dark-skinned human girl laughs into her hand. "Haha! Master Bael didn't even flinch that time!"

"I know!" A yellow-skinned succubus replies. "He always closes his eyes, but not today! He must be showing off for his friend!"

Bael pulls himself to his feet. Despite taking a punch that would have shattered the facial bones of a weaker demon, he appears wholly unaffected.

"Not bad, Giselle. You've really improved!"

Giselle nods. "It is all because of your training, Master Bael."

Artorias's bewildered expression only intensifies. "I... I don't understand. Why would you-"

Before Artorias can finish his sentence, Bael rears his fist back, lunges toward Giselle, and blasts her in the face. His body, the peak of demonic strength, sends the minotaur hurtling away. By the time she's started flying backward, the crowd has parted behind her, as if having anticipated Bael's response. Giselle crashes into a giant statue of Bael, shatters its leg, and eventually grinds to a halt on its opposite side.

Artorias's eyes grow as wide as saucers. This time, the Duke of Steel finds himself at a total loss for words. He swallows one shallow breath after another, completely dumbfounded by the sight he's just witnessed.

Within moments, Giselle pulls herself to her feet. She calmly walks over to Bael and brushes dust off her shoulder, her body uninjured.

"Master. What have I told you before?"

Bael turns his head away, unable to meet her gaze. He laughs awkwardly. "Ah...ahaha... I'm pretty dumb, sweetie. You know me. I forget things easily."

Giselle shakes her head. "I hate it when you hold back. I barely even felt that punch. Next time, put more spirit into your retort. What sort of bull shows his mate disrespect by holding back?"

Bael blushes. "Ehehe, sorry, cutie. I just hate hitting women. It don't feel right, ya know?"

Giselle sighs. "*Men*. I'll go and help the kitchen prepare your feast. Fetch me when you're ready."

Without another word, the minotaur woman turns and walks away, her hooves *clopping* against the paved ground all the while.

Once she leaves, the other girls come a little closer and start eagerly touching Bael. "Master! Kiki made you a beautiful new quilt while you were gone! And Fermi wanted to know if she and Silvia could go on a little vacation to the beach next month! Oh, oh, and we were hoping you could get a few Newts up here soon for another riding competition! It was such fun the last time we did it!"

Bael grins. He wraps his arm around one of the Felaris females while caressing the cheek of a nearby human girl. "Haha, sure, sure. You know me. I can't ever turn one of you ladies down. Let's worry about that small stuff later, though. Today is all about making Artorias feel welcome. Come on, girls! Let's bust a move. This poor guy hasn't had a good time with a woman in ages!"

The moment Bael brings up Artorias, all of the women snap their heads in his direction. However, instead of the fear that most Labyrinth denizens show the Duke of Steel, not a single woman has an expression of anything other than curiosity.

"Oh, wow! He's a good-looking guy!"

"Check out his armor! It must weigh a ton! I bet he could take one of Giselle's punches!"

"Ten coins says he's a stud in the sheets. Master Bael only brings his best friends to visit!"

Three dozen demon, human, and monster women crowd around Artorias, causing him to flinch reflexively. "I... I, ah..."

"Oh my gosh, look at him! Artorias is sooo shy! Master Bael wasn't kidding. We've got some hard work ahead of us if we're going to break him out of his shell!"

Sweat drips down Artorias's face. It slides around inside his helmet, making him extremely uneasy.

Perhaps coming here was the wrong decision. I should have known Bael would have ulterior motives.

Bael smirks. "Kid, you're 'bout to have the time of your life."

"...and this over here is the spanking room! Some of my girls spend way too much time in there! Bahaha!"

Artorias strolls down the main hallway of Bael's expansive manor, his fellow Duke pointing out various locations of interest as they travel. Unlike before, only a dozen women follow after them, the rest having stayed behind outside to finish their assigned tasks.

Artorias glowers at the Duke of Pain. "A spanking room. Bael, sometimes I wonder about you."

"What? It's all in good fun, Arty-boy! Don't you know that pain is the path to pleasure?"

Artorias slows to a stop. He stares at Bael for a moment as the Duke of Pain also pauses.

"Can... can you repeat that?"

Bael shrugs. "Nope. I already forgot what I said."

Artorias frowns. "You said that pain was the path to pleasure. What did you mean?"

Bael glances at the girls following him. Immediately, one of the dark-skinned human women answers in Bael's stead.

"Master Bael is a demon with a unique constitution. Because his body is all but invincible, he does not have the same sense of touch that others possess. For him, being able to experience pain is akin to feeling pleasure. Thus, he built this manor and established the principle of 'pain is pleasure.'"

Bael pats the girl's head. "That's right. Megan always knows what ta' say."

However, despite Megan's words, Artorias's expression darkens noticeably. "Pain is *not* pleasure — what a load of nonsense. Are you trying to tell me that I should have enjoyed the agony wracking my soul for the past hundred thousand years? You know nothing of pain, Bael."

Bael's smile vanishes. His expression turns complex as he listens to the bitterness in Artorias's voice.

"I get it, pal. Not fully, but I get it. You've been hurtin' for a while, Arty-boy. A long, long time."

Bael steps toward Artorias and pats his shoulder.

"That's the real reason I brought you here, pal. I know you've had it rough. We ain't even spoken since the last time that bitch made a mess of Hell. I'm here to help you out, man. You've gotta go beyond all that past trauma."

Bael continues walking, forcing Artorias to fall into step beside him.

"How am I supposed to 'go beyond' the pain of my existence? Have you any idea how many times I've wished Barbatos would kill himself? His death would release me from my suffering and permanently end the threat Uriel poses to our people."

Bael nods. "Yeah, but he didn't. Barbatos is a tough kid. He never gave up. He continued living, despite how dying would free him from his pain. Why d'ya think that is?"

The Duke of Pain smiles at Artorias.

"And why ain't *you* killed yourself, if you've been waitin' for a chance all this time? You've got control, Arty-boy. What's holding you back?"

"This body is my brother's," Artorias replies, his tone solemn. "It's not my place to destroy it. Even if I could eliminate my soul and nothing else, I'd never leave Barbatos alone with that wicked Archangel. She'd crush him in seconds. Only our combined power keeps Uriel at bay."

"Sounds like you're making excuses," Bael mutters. "That's the difference between you and Barbatos. Even with all the pain he endures every day, your little bro never gives up. He continues living, all because he wants to see a better future for his people."

Artorias snorts. "I'm sure there's more to my brother's stubbornness than that."

"Mhm. For sure."

* * *

The two Dukes eventually arrive in a gigantic dining hall, complete with exquisitely designed bamboo chairs, tapestries hanging off the walls, and a Chinese aura lingering within the area. Paper lanterns hang

from the ceiling, their combined light proving more than satisfactory for illuminating the chamber. The two Dukes seat themselves at the center of the table, allowing room for the women to file off and seat themselves to the left and right of their masters.

Once Bael and Artorias take their seats across from each other, multiple girls file into the room, each carrying giant trays of food.

"Oh, damn, Betsy must've gone all-out!" Bael says, his eyes lighting up excitedly. "Spit-roasted Juwallapy? Bigornel Stew? Daaaaamn! I'm gonna pig out!"

Artorias stares, unmoving, as Bael's girls place dozens of food trays on the table. They open the lids, revealing all manner of meats, soups, fruits, and vegetables. A sumptuous aroma immediately fills the room, and soon, the hundred or so women begin to salivate as they gaze at the food expectantly.

"It's been more than a month since you last returned," Megan says. As one of the longest-serving among Bael's servants, she takes a seat at his right side, placing herself in the second most important position at the table. "We've collected a vast amount of food in preparation for your return. We want nothing more than for you to enjoy yourself."

Bael sweeps his gaze around the room, admiring the assorted colors and species arranged at his table. "Hah, this is the life: good food, and good women. Thanks, ladies. You girls always make my day."

A pleasant atmosphere pervades the dining hall. The women grin at one another, pleased with their master's reaction.

Moments later, Bael moves his hands. What follows is a scene of carnage.

The Duke of Pain opens his mouth wider than creatures from horror movies. He stuffs a bird the size of a turkey into his maw and begins furiously chewing. It takes him mere moments to swallow the well-cooked animal and move onto a fruit the size of a watermelon.

Chomp!

Bael wraps his lips around the skinless fruit. His eyes bulge with excitement as he turns the soft, juicy food into mulch. In the time it takes for Artorias to remember the fruits' name, Bael has already finished it and moved onto the next entree.

All around the table, similar scenes of carnage take place. Bael's harem descends into a frenzied scene of disorder and chaos. The women grab plates and bowls, ladle food into whatever they can, and begin wolfing down everything in sight like a pack of starving hyenas.

"Ohm-muh-gawd!" One human woman yells. "Thish fud ish sho gud!"

Her words are barely comprehensible through the mash of meat and cheese rolling around in her chaw.

Artorias stares, his eyes fixated on Bael, as the Duke of Pain shovels mountains of food into his facehole. Bael pauses for only a moment to glance at Artorias.

"Washa matter, bro?! You gunna eat, or what?"

With Bael's mouth stuffed full of something resembling chicken, Artorias can barely understand him. He shakes his head.

"Um. No. I don't have much of an appetite."

"Shuit yourshelf!" Bael guffaws. He resumes devouring his food, leaving Artorias to stare like a shellshocked soldier, one who has seen things that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

Devils. I had no idea these fair and gracious ladies would go to such lengths to mimic their master.

Despite there being enough food to feed an entire village, Bael and his harem manage to devour the whole feast, lick all the bowls and plates clean, and lean back in their chairs within half an hour, leaving Artorias dumbfounded.

"Where do you put everything?" Artorias asks. "Is your stomach a bottomless pit?"

"Something like that," Bael mutters. He lets out a violent belch, making several of the girls laugh. Ten or so burps and farts go up around the table, making all of them laugh even harder.

"Devils. You are everything I imagined you to be," Artorias mutters.

* * *

An hour later, Bael and Artorias plop down in one of the manor's many luxurious living rooms. Megan sits beside Bael, along with a cute pink-haired succubus. Her blood-red eyes and yellow skin reveal her identity as an Albino demon, someone born with inverted eyes and skin color.

Bael jerks his thumb toward the succubus. "Artorias, this cutie here is Chryssie. I know I've been tugging you around all day, pal, but I just wanted to loosen you up a bit. You feeling alright, now?"

Artorias sighs. "I'm just *dandy*."

"Great! Well, you probably don't know Chryssie, but she used to be quite the popular lady! Haha. Maybe a little *too* popular."

Chryssie bats her long eyelashes. She averts her eyes and chooses to look at the floor. "Tarnation. That stuff was a long time ago. Why ya gotta bring all that up, Master Bael?"

The succubus drawls as she speaks, giving her a southern-style accent.

"I've heard your name before," Artorias says. "You are Chrysanthemum, the Lord of Mysticism. Your powers revolve around dreams and making fantasies real."

Chryssie blushes. "I'm surprised you've heard of little ol' me. I ain't nobody important."

"Perhaps not," Artorias mutters, "but albino demons are somewhat rare. Those who reach the rank of Lord are few and far between."

Artorias turns his gaze toward Bael. "Alright. Why did you bring me here?"

Bael smiles. "Well, kid, it's like this. You've always been stuck inside your brother's body, unable to do or say anything to the outside world. I thought Chryssie here could help you out. She's a Soul Manipulator, see..."

Artorias stiffens. "A soul manipulator? I thought her powers-"

"I spent a buncha time evolvin' mah abilities," Chryssie replies, her voice soft. "All so I could help Master Bael relax after fightin' in the Slaughterseum. He gets all tense 'n stuff. I figured if I could make his dreams more vivid, he'd love me more."

"I love you plenty, doll," Bael says. He strokes the back of Chryssie's head, making her eyes close for a moment as she soaks in the sensation of his fingers. "Don't go comparing yourself to the other girls. Each of ya is special in your own way."

When Bael retracts his hand, a look of longing passes over Chryssie's face. She quickly plays with her hair to mask her emotions, then returns her gaze to Artorias.

"As... as I was sayin'... I found out mah powers didn't work on Master Bael. No matter what I tried, I couldn't play switcharoo with his dreams. I eventually figgered out why, and it wasn't an easy pill to swallow."

Bael smirks. "Turns out little Chryssie here taps into people's souls. She lets 'em experience memories; she can make their fantasies come true, all kinds of crazy stuff. The problem is, my soul's untouchable. Not even Valac could hurt it, back in the day. You remember Valac, don'tcha?"

Artorias nods. "I do. A vile monster, and the predecessor to Mephisto. He nearly destroyed demonkind to sate his own greed."

Bael laughs. "Yup! I beat the tar out of him this one time. He kept trying to reap my soul, but his stupid scythe couldn't do more than poke my head! He looked like a clown while he was tryin' ta' needle me to death! Bahaha!"

Bael slaps his knee and laughs heartily while reminiscing about the good old days. After a few moments, he settles down and gestures to Chryssie.

"Alright, I'll let you finish, babe."

Chryssie nods. "I kept strengthening mah soul manipulation. Eventually, I was able to tap into mah Master's soul, but only a tiny fragment of it. Still, I managed to help him experience several vivid fantasies. It made me feel..."

Chryssie trails off. She turns to smile at Bael, flashing a look of pure radiance at the obese lump of muscle sitting beside her. Bael smiles back, his expression somehow just as pure as hers.

"I really enjoyed that night, doll. Kicked the shit out of the Archdemon, thanks to you."

Artorias sighs. "What does any of this have to do with me?"

"Everything!" Bael replies. "Tell him."

Chryssie sits up a little straighter. "Mah power ain't only limited to dreams'n fantasies. I can do all sorts of useful stuff, Master Artorias. I know you've been hurtin' 'cause of your imprisonment within Barbatos. Now that you're controllin' his body, I can use mah powers to strengthen your resistance to holy energy. It'll lessen your pain, should that Archangel show up again."

Artorias's eyes fixate on the succubus. "You... you can do that for me? How?"

Chryssie blushes. "W-well, when I finally tapped into Master Bael's soul, I managed to copy a bit of his power. It wasn't much, but for you, it might help ya cope with the pain, assumin' ya go dormant again."

Artorias's breathing quickens. "Devils. If I had known you had this ability, I would have asked Barbatos to come here millennia ago."

"Ahaha... sorry, sweetie-pie. That wouldn't have worked. I can only help ya now 'cause the other two souls went to sleep. As long as that Archangel was alive 'n kicking, she'd probably kill me if I used mah powers on ya."

Artorias tempers his agitation. He nods solemnly and closes his eyes. "I... I see. Forgive me, but I lost control of myself for a moment. Never, not in a million years, did I imagine there existed a way to lessen my suffering. Is that why you brought me here, Bael? To use the Lord of Mysticism's powers on me?"

Bael nods. "Yup. That's right. You wanna do this, or what?"

Artorias doesn't hesitate. "Yes. Tell me what I must do."

Bael grins. "You've got that whole couch to yourself. All you've gotta do is take off your armor and lay back. Let Chryssie handle the rest."

Immediately, Artorias's excitement disappears. "...Take off my armor? No. I cannot."

"What? Why not?" Bael asks. "That she-angel ain't awake, is she?"

"No..." Artorias mumbles. "But, you know the purpose of my armor. Without it, the Archangel's mana would force the demonic energy from Barbatos's body. This armor keeps our mana inside us, allowing it to counteract Uriel's. I... I cannot simply take it off."

Bael laughs. "Haha! Sure, you can. Arty-boy, use your head. We have to help you while that Archangel is sleepin'. Now's the perfect time to strengthen your soul. If we boost you now, then you might be able to catch her off guard later. You might get to beat the shit out of her in Barbatos's Mind Realm! Wouldn't that be fun?"

Artorias falls silent.

The Duke of Steel lowers his gaze and stares at the carpet for several long, agonizing seconds.

Eventually, he nods.

"Aye. You are right, Bael. I can't let that damned Archangel control me for the rest of my life. I need to fight back."

"Hell yeah!" Bael yells. He punches his palm and laughs. "That's the spirit!"

With a great effort, Artorias rises to his feet. He stares forward for several seconds, then makes a motion with his hands, summoning the power of magnetism.

Artorias's left pauldron detaches from the rest of his armor. It gently floats to the ground a few feet away.

The right pauldron follows. Then, his gauntlets. His chestplate disassembles into multiple pieces.

Soon, dozens of pieces of armor sit in a pile next to the couch. Artorias stands, fully naked, before Bael and his two servants.

Chryssie and Megan gaze in disbelief at the Duke of Steel's violently scarred body. Splotches of white dot his skin, making it look as though someone had recently splashed the Duke with a gallon of paint. Deep cuts, bruises, and lacerations mark his entire figure.

The Duke of Steel meets the girl's inquisitive gazes with his own look of pity.

"Aye. This hideous appearance is the fate which will befall one who succumbs to their greed. My brother sought the power of an Archangel, back during the ancient times. For his desire, he suffered immeasurably. Learn from his mistake. Always take caution when dealing with an angel. Never give in to your greed, lest you end up suffering as I have."

Artorias sits on the couch once again, and after a moment, he lays back and stares at the ceiling.

Unlike his two servants, Bael seems unmoved by Artorias's hideous appearance. "Alright. Go on, Chryssie. Help my friend out. You're his best hope."

The succubus swallows her saliva. Slowly, almost reluctantly, she rises to her feet, walks toward Artorias, and crouches at his side.

"I... I didn't know you were hurt this badly..."

Artorias smiles. "What you see is merely a fraction of what I've endured. Take care when probing my memories, young one. You needn't experience the horrors of my life. Stick to my most recent memories, and you'll be fine."

Chryssie nods.

"I will, Master Artorias. I'll help ya in any way I can."

As Chryssie reaches out her hands and begins stroking Artorias's skin, Bael leans back on his couch and wraps his arm around Megan.

"Say, when Chryssie finishes with him, why don't you go 'n grab a Sticks 'n Bones set? I wanna go a few rounds with Arty-boy."

"Of course, Master Bael. Anything for you."

Part 207: Rosalia's Desire

Having lived on Tarus II for a few weeks now, I've come to regard it with the utmost suspicion, but who can blame me? Before I came here, I never liked humans. I always thought they were smelly, rude, and, most importantly, *weak*.

Now, I can say with the utmost confidence that humans are a thousand times worse than I ever imagined! It's no wonder we demons wouldn't let them become more civilized. Look at all the weird things they build!

As I walk down the 'street' of a human city, I raise my eyes toward one of the many similarly-designed buildings within view, one that does not look cute at all. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was a giant square and nothing more! Unlike the beautiful houses and mansions at Hell Harbor, each with an architect's artistry touching them, the capital of humanity's military is instead filled with ugly and crude structures, designed for function over aesthetics.

If I had to think of one word to describe humans, I'd call them 'queer,' and perhaps even 'odd.' Upon my arrival, they immediately assigned me a job, and I had no say in what it ought to be! What sort of braindead simpleton takes a look at such a fair and beautiful demoness as me and decide I will be a cleaner of bedpans? Who gazes upon me, Rosalia, Beelzebub's former bed-warmer, and concludes my job is to assist that damned traitorous Second Emperor in sticking thermometers in mouths?

Hmph!

I hate living among humans. Whenever I walk past a male, he will, without fail, gaze at me with eyes-wide-open, as if he cannot believe such a gorgeous specimen would occupy the same space as he! His lecherous gaze strips me from head to toe. His tongue lolls out of his mouth, and his eyes water, likely from imagining how one night with me would change his life forever.

But no! I won't accept any man in my life besides Mister Beelzebub! He's the only mate for me. After I break the mind control of that damned floozy, that worthless Ose, I'll have him for myself! Finally, he'll have no choice but to accept the perfection that is me! I'll make him beg for forgiveness. When he next 'fires' me, he'll do so with the utmost passion! He'll-

Ah! What the Devil is that?!

My heart skips a beat as I stop and stare at a bright-red object embedded in the 'sidewalk.' The object's shape immediately reminds me of several indecent 'tools' I once spotted in a succubus hovel. However, given its size of nearly two feet in height, I can only begin to imagine what sort of gigantic creature would use it to pleasure themselves! Perhaps a minotaur? A gate-troll? A flame wyrm?!

Seven Hells! How could someone leave such an inappropriate object on a random street corner? It befuddles the mind! Is this the level of vulgarity the humans have begun teaching to their monster and demon slaves? How dreadful!

My cheeks flare up slightly as I imagine what would happen if Mister Beelzebub were to use such a predatory implement upon me. Oh, how helpless I would be! He would ravage me, bend me over his knee, and-

"Ma'am? Ma'am? Are yew alright? You're lookin' at that there water-spitter real weird..."

A voice jars me out of my thoughts. I whirl around to spot a kobold standing next to the sexual torture device. He scratches his head and stares at me in a manner most lewd, causing my cheeks to flush-

Wait, what did he say?

"I'm... I'm fine! What did you call this.. this *implement*?"

The kobold raises an eyebrow. "It's a water-spitter, ma'am. We use it to put out fires. Yew alright? Yew ain't suff'rin heatstroke, are yuh?"

My blood runs cold.

"...To put out fires? That's what this... this lewd object does?"

The kobold nods politely. "Yes'm. That, it sure does. Did yew need water t'cool off?"

"Uhm... no. I'm fine. Thank you for your concern, kobold."

The kobold shrugs. "Suit yerself, missy. It's awful hot this time-o-year. Keep cool now, y'hear?"

The kobold shuffles away, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Immediately, I turn to stare at the so-called 'water-spitter.'

"Hehe. I see. The humans truly are crafty little rats."

A *water-spitter*. Who could believe such a lie? How is this conspicuous red implement supposed to deliver water to something which has caught fire? There are no lakes in the area, nor are there any rivers or oceans.

Anyone with half a brain knows the best way to put out a fire is by using water magic! Since humans have no magic at their disposal, they must be deluding the monsters here by claiming they can summon water from thin air!

Only someone of high intelligence, such as I, can see through the lies of these vile, disgusting humans. Without a doubt, my initial guess was only slightly off the mark, for this object may not be a water-spitter, but it surely exists to make someone *wet*. Humans cannot fool me with their trickery!

I quickly walk past the bright red object, pushing it to the back of my mind. Hopefully, I'll never do anything to incur the humans' wrath, for I shudder to think of all the vile positions they would make me assume to satisfy their debased desires!

Having removed the human's invention from my sight, I turn my gaze westward, toward Hero City's border. There, at the edge of a cliff, the 'General Hospital' stands, all ten stories of it. Just like every other structure, it's nothing more than a big square mashup of brick and stone, held together by whatever sloppy methods the humans use for construction. I never feel even slightly impressed by anything I see on Tarus II since everything human in origin mystifies me with its obtuseness.

I work at the hospital. Not willingly, but if I intend to follow Mister Gressil's orders, I have to blend in and act natural amongst all these filthy fleshbags. If that means debasing myself by working as a servant of fleshbags, then so be it! Someday I'll break free and find Mister Beelzebub again.

Hehe. You don't have to follow the flow. You can carve your own path. Isn't that what you want? To become someone incredible, worthy of Beelzebub's interest?

I frown as a familiar female voice speaks within me. Ever since Mister Gressil put his hand against my face and shoved that disgusting, wriggling *thing* inside my stomach, the entity's voice has spoken to me whenever I start feeling self-doubt.

Desire? What do you want? You always pop up at the worst moments.

I named my inner voice 'Desire,' because she usually talks about what I want. However, her requests always rub me the wrong way.

I don't want anything, Rosalia. I am a part of you. I merely wish to help you achieve your dreams. Your wishes are my wishes. Is that such a hard concept to understand?

No, it's not hard to understand... but I don't see why Mister Gressil would put you inside of me. Why would he care what I want?

Silly girl. I am a means to an end. Master Gressil has chosen you to be one of his pawns. This is a rare opportunity for you, since someday, Master Gressil will rule the cosmos. He doesn't know it yet, and perhaps he doesn't even wish for such a fate, but his ascension is inevitable. What use has the ruler of all creation for weak, useless creatures like you? You must ascend if you are to serve him properly.

I lower my eyes to stare at the ground. *I'm... I'm not useless. Mister Beelzebub always loved how hard I worked-*

Fool! Just look at you. It is no wonder Beelzebub cast you away. Why would anyone wish to have a fat, bumbling oaf like you standing at their side? You have to leave behind your weakness and your dependence on others. Only by doing so will you transform into someone worthy of Beelzebub's respect.

A sigh escapes my lips.

But, what you want me to do... is...

It's not that difficult. You already hate humans. You loathe them, despise them, and wish for all of them to drop dead. I'm simply offering you the chance to expedite that process. What's the matter? Are you afraid of dirtying your hands?

No... I'm- I'm not...

Desire's tone turns haughty. **Bingo. You don't mind if other demons bathe in human blood, but you think yourself above all the 'riff-raff.'** You're too good to follow my lead. Very well. **I'll stay quiet for a while. Go ahead and play 'House' in Hero City. See what happens when you don't do what I say.**

After a moment, Desire fades away, causing me to stumble as I arrive at the entrance to Hero City's hospital.

My chest hurts.

My eyes sting.

I... I've never acted like other demons. When I was an imp, I obtained human souls through manual labor. I sucked up to any Lords I could find and begged them for scraps. The day I earned my hundredth soul and became a grunt, I lucked out by being assigned to Mister Beelzebub.

After that, I served him for hundreds of years. Never once did I try to earn any additional souls.

I was content to follow in Mister Beelzebub's footsteps.

I thought I would always be by his side. But once he became a Duke, Ose seduced him. She forced him to abandon me. Why else would he leave me, his most loyal servant, behind?

I can't do what Desire wants. I'm not a killer. I'm not capable of hurting others for my own benefit! I'm a beautiful, shining star. I won't let someone change that part of me.

With a belated sigh, I walk up to the doors of the general hospital. They slide open automatically, all thanks to the electrical magic the humans use to power their bizarre inventions.

I step inside and turn to the right, where a reception desk stands mere feet away. Seated behind it, a short little goblin, dressed in a pinstriped suit, glances at me.

"Ah, Nurse Rosalia. I trust you enjoyed your lunch break?"

"Yeah... sort of, Grima."

"Wonderful. You need to check on rooms three through fifteen in the next twenty minutes, then resume your usual rounds. After that, feel free to use your discretion for the rest of the workday. Doctor Fathy should arrive around noon to assist you."

Grima, the goblin receptionist, smiles at me before returning his attention to a small stack of papers resting on his desk. Unlike other goblins, he's a well-spoken fellow, far more interesting than any stinky human.

"Um... say, Grima... do you think Doctor Fathy has any experience dealing with... parasites?"

Grima continues reading his notes without looking at me. "Undoubtedly. Among harpies, she is considered an especially knowledgeable healer. Even Bahamut herself relied on Doctor Fathy's knowledge. Why? Has one of our patients contracted a viral contagion?"

"Um, no! Nope, not at all. I was just curious, that's all."

Grima flicks his eyes to me for a moment, then returns his gaze to one of the many medical reports on his desk. "I see. Feel free to ask Doctor Fathy yourself when she arrives. As a new arrival to our facility, you might be a little suspicious of the doctor's medical talents, but I assure you, even the best demon healers find themselves in awe of Doctor Fathy's medical expertise. Now, if you'll excuse me, I do have several forms I need to finish sorting before I may return home."

"O-okay! Sorry to bother you, Mister Grima, sir."

Feeling slightly embarrassed, I duck away from the goblin, walk over to a wardrobe station, and close the door behind me. It only takes a few minutes to don my white nurse outfit, one in which I never quite feel comfortable. Why must they make the size so form-fitting? I'm no succubus! I'm supposed to dress like a professional, like I always did for Mister Beelzebub.

* * *

Ten minutes pass. Twenty. Thirty.

I wander from room to room, checking on each patient one by one, always grumbling underneath my breath when I have to clean a bedpan or roll over the less lucid patients to get their blood flowing properly.

Ever since Belial fell unconscious a few weeks ago, when both of the Wordsmiths left the Core, we haven't had any magical doctors on hand — certainly nobody capable of healing injuries with a wave of their hands. I had barely even joined the Core before the Wordsmiths ended up leaving. What timing! Mister Gressil probably wanted me to do some secret spy work and keep my eye on the Heroes, but they both disappeared!

That's my lot in life. I've always been a poor, unlucky idiot. My world is filled with coffee tables, and I can't stop tripping over them.

"Room thirteen, done. Room fourteen..."

I mumble to myself as I leave Old Hallister's room and move on to the second-to-last of my assigned charges, the room belonging to Miss Belial herself.

The moment I arrive at the doorway, I fall silent. As always, Miss Belial's demonic energy chokes me with a mixture of excitement and worry. Unascended demons like myself have difficulty fighting our superiors, given the monstrous power they control within themselves. As the Second Emperor of demonkind, Miss Belial is the strongest of us all. Before coming to Tarus II, I'd never once met her in all my life. I only knew her name thanks to rumors passed among my fellow imps.

Belial is a shapeshifter, one who also possesses incredible healing magic. If that isn't enough, she can also bend and deform her body, almost as if her bones were made of rubber. Her strength surpasses even Mister Bael's, allowing her to crush mountains with a single punch.

She's incredible. *She's scary.*

I only managed to speak to Miss Belial a few times before the Hydra put her into a coma. She didn't seem mean or vicious, especially compared to that skank, Ose, or Mister Gressil. Still, Miss Belial is an Emperor, and that means if I ever made her angry, she could kill me in the blink of an eye. I've heard that anyone who dares to insult Mister Satan in her presence will suffer immensely. She even beat Mister Bael within an inch of his life, some twenty thousand years ago!

That's why I always tread lightly when tending to her needs. Miss Belial might be in a coma, but I can't take any chances. If she wakes up in the future after hearing me say anything *uncouth*...

Let's just say I won't be able to see Mister Beelzebub anymore. He'll have to peel me off the side of a mountain!

With a heavy heart, I swallow my anxiety, push aside the curtain to the Second Emperor's hospital room, and step inside.

Immediately, I freeze in my tracks.

Phoebe and Daisy Hiro, the wife and daughter of humanity's commander, stand beside Miss Belial's bed. Phoebe runs her fingers through Miss Belial's hair, while Daisy hops up and down on her feet. Both of them stand with their backs to me.

Maybe I can slip out of the room unnoticed. I dread the idea of having to talk to these two disgusting fleshbags.

Before I can retreat, Phoebe turns her head slightly and spots me. "Oh! Rosalia, you're here. I've already taken care of Sammy's needs for today. Daisy helped me give her a sponge-bath, so now you don't have to!"

I swallow my urge to vomit. "Y-yes. Um, okay! Thanks, I guess."

I quickly turn to leave, only to freeze in my tracks as Phoebe speaks again. "Hey, now, I made sure to leave you some work. Why don't you water the plants by the windowsill?"

My vision turns red.

Filthy human! How dare she order me around! Argh!!

However, I take a moment to exhale and breathe out my anger, then turn around and flash a cute, cheerful smile at her.

"Oh, sorry! I misunderstood and thought you'd taken care of everything here! Give me a minute, and I'll get those flowers watered in a jiffy!"

I force my grin to widen even further while hoping the human isn't intelligent enough to notice my eyebrows twitching in rage. If I were only dealing with Phoebe, I wouldn't care, but it's patently *obvious* the Second Emperor fancies the Hero's spouse. When Phoebe isn't around, Miss Belial always talks about her with stars in her eyes. It takes all of my willpower not to vomit!

How can a demon fall for a human? Such a concept sickens me. Miss Belial might pretend her intentions toward Phoebe are platonic, but *nobody* talks about a mere friend with such revolting, dopey-eyed reverence. Barf!

I walk across the room, grab a glass cup, and fill it with water. Within moments, I arrive at the first of six plants lining the edges of each of the room's three windows.

"So, how have you been enjoying your stay in Hero City?" Phoebe asks.

I keep my back to the human so that she won't see me gritting my teeth.

"Oh, you *know*, it's a new experience... haha..."

Even a light chuckle directed at the Hero's Whore makes my entire body tense up. Not only is she a filthy human, but she's the spouse of demonkind's greatest enemy! If I weren't forced into servitude by Mister Gressil, I wouldn't let myself get caught dead within a hundred miles of her!

"Oh, yes, I imagine so," Phoebe replies, keeping up the small talk. "Samantha mentioned you before. She said other demons bullied you because of your looks. I hope you know that we always try to treat everyone equally in Hero City. Jason doesn't like bullies and jerks, after all. Feel free to tell me if anyone hurts you or insults you, alright? I'll straighten them out, lickety-split!"

My eyebrow starts twitching again.

How dare Emperor Belial tell this stupid human the information I relayed to her in confidence?! Besides, nobody ever bullies me! I made all those stories up! Everyone loves me! They can't get enough of my rapturous good looks!

I turn my head and force myself to smile at Phoebe.

"Y-yes. I'll make sure to do that."

As I look at Phoebe, a movement at her side catches my attention. I can't help but notice Daisy, her daughter, staring at me with a look of absolute concentration.

"Hey! You're lying! Mommy says lying is bad!"

My heart skips a beat. "What? I beg your pardon!"

Phoebe's polite smile vanishes. She turns to scowl at her daughter. "Daisy! That's not nice to say. You can't just call someone a liar. Apologize."

Daisy crosses her arms. "No! She's lying, mommy! The fat lady thinks you're a big meanie!"

Phoebe turns to face her daughter, and her expression turns nasty. "Daisy Miranda Hiro! That is enough out of you, young lady! Apologize to Nurse Rosalia at once! We do *not* insult other people's looks in this household!"

Finally, Daisy realizes her mother isn't kidding around. The little girl casts a fearful glance upward and nods her head. "Uh, uhm... okay..."

She fidgets for a moment before turning back to me. However, she casts her eyes downward, unable to meet my gaze. "...I'm sorry, Miss Rosie. I shouldn't have called you a fat liar."

"Daisy!" Phoebe yells, hissing her words through gritted teeth. "Even when you apologize, you still can't help but insult her!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry..." Daisy whispers. She starts shaking and rubbing her eyes. "I'm sorry, mommy... I... I didn't mean to be rude... I'm sorry..."

Finally, Phoebe calms down. She glances at me and shrugs. "My apologies, Nurse Rosalia. My daughter sometimes says the rudest things. Kids, you know? Haha... you can leave the plants alone. I'll take over from here."

I nod along to Phoebe's words. "...Alright. Do what you want. I have other patients who need my help."

Without another word, I set my half-filled cup of water on a tray beside Miss Belial's bed and head out of the room, leaving behind the nasty humans who dared to insult me.

However, as I exit, a strange uneasiness settles upon my skin.

That little girl... something about the way she spoke to me... how did she know I was lying? Do human children possess incredible powers of perception? Was she able to notice the signs of my anger when even her mother couldn't?

Hm. I'll have to keep an eye on her. Somehow, I don't think she's merely a smart little girl.

* * *

It doesn't take long for me to finish my walk and complete my rounds. With all of my charges cleaned up and inspected, I eventually find myself drifting around the hallways, looking up at clocks on the walls.

11:13 AM. I still have 47 minutes before Doctor Fathy arrives. What am I supposed to do until then? Clean? Ugh. I loved cleaning for Mister Beelzebub, but tidying up after humans isn't any fun!

Out of sheer boredom, I decide to make my rounds once again. This time, I only peek into the various patient rooms, checking to see if anything has changed in the last thirty minutes. As expected, nothing has.

Old Hallister continues snoring soundly, his sleep apnea continuing to give him trouble breathing. I sometimes find myself surprised at how long the remarkably fragile humans can live, even with crippling illnesses ailing them. Why are humans mortal while demons and the vast majority of monsters aren't? Even the orcs, who eventually die of old age, still live to be several thousand years old. Naturally, most orcs die young, in battle. If they weren't constantly killing each other, they might eventually overpower all the other monsters with their sheer numbers! Not even we demons can compare to an orc's reproduction speed!

Mister Beelzebub's wise words appear in my mind. He once brought up humans out of the blue, a few thousand years, and his counsel always stuck with me.

Master Agares says humans are not as weak and useless as they appear. Their short lifespans serve to give them focus and drive. Demons failed to crush humanity for tens of thousands of years, all because they never stopped finding new chinks in our armor. Eventually, we defeated them with some outside help, but had we only relied on our strength; we would never have won the ancient wars.

My master says we must never underestimate the combined strength of humanity. I find the idea that humans could ever overpower demonkind laughable, but sometimes, Master Agares gets a distant look in his eyes, as if he's seen horrors that will never leave his mind. It's at times like those where I find myself believing everything he says.

Maybe humans are everything Master Agares claims them to be.

I don't know if Mister Agares was right or wrong. Humans don't seem all that scary to me. Sure, they can build ugly, square houses super fast, and they can make some fancy metal armor, but I don't think they can hold a candle to the power of demonkind. There aren't even three million humans living on

Tarus II, Maiura, and the Labyrinth's Core combined. However, there are trillions of demons spread all over the galaxy, and more than half a trillion living within the Labyrinth! How can humans ever hope to stand up to their superiors?

That's right. They can't.

Jason and Phoebe are just a pair of doe-eyed, star-crossed lovers who don't have a clue what a mess they've gotten themselves into. They think they can beat my people with mere tactics and gadgets, but so long as we have Mister Beelzebub and Bael, not even Belial and a pair of Heroes will be able to hold us off!

Hmph! How sad. These filthy humans think they can win a war against demonkind, but they haven't a chance. Their glory days have long since faded into obscurity.

I continue a little further down the hall and pause once again in front of Miss Belial's room. However, instead of stepping inside, I pause outside to peek into the doorway. Daisy Hiro sits on the edge of Miss Belial's bed. She leans forward and pokes the Second Emperor's cheek, over and over.

"Wakey, wakey! Wake up! Up 'n at 'em! Wakey!"

Anger builds in my chest. I can barely stop myself from charging into Miss Belial's hospital room and slapping the insolent little girl to the floor! What right has she to poke and prod a Demon Emperor?! Miss Belial might be the least respected of all demons, but she's still my Emperor!

Even more astoundingly, no matter where I look, I don't spot Phoebe. She left her stupid little brat alone with the Second Emperor! What if the child starts stabbing or cutting Miss Belial, as the evil little monsters tend to do? Human children are agents of chaos! They're worse than imps!

Before I can step into the room and give the little brat a piece of my mind, Belial's bathroom door opens, and Phoebe steps out.

"Daisy, that's enough. We need to leave Aunt Sammy for a while. I have a race in an hour I need to attend, alright? Let her get some rest."

Daisy continues to poke the Second Emperor. "But whyyyyy won't S'matha wake up? She's sleeping too much!"

"Sammy got hit in the head," Phoebe says. She walks over and runs her fingers through Daisy's hair. "She doesn't feel good. We don't know when she'll wake up."

Daisy frowns. "Aunt S'matha's head looks fine. Where is she hurt?"

"Not her skin or her skull, but her brain. Without daddy's crown, we can't heal her. We have to hope she wakes up on her own, or that daddy will be able to find Uncle Solomon's crown again."

Under her breath, Phoebe sighs. "And I doubt that's going to happen."

Daisy leans forward and presses her hands against Miss Belial's head. "Aunt S'matha! Waaaake uuuup! WAKE UP! Stop sleeping!"

"Daisy," Phoebe groans. "Stop that. What have I told you about pestering people? Let your aunt get some- huh?"

Phoebe stops midsentence. Out of curiosity, I lean forward and gaze into the room, trying to pick out what she saw.

My heart skips a beat.

Miss Belial continue to lay in bed. However, unlike moments earlier, her eyes flutter open. She stares at the ceiling for several moments, before lowering her gaze to Daisy, still hovering inches from her face.

"D... Dais...y?"

The little girl recoils in surprise. "Ah! S'matha woke up! She woke up!"

Phoebe's jaw drops. "Sammy?! You're awake! But... but how?!"

A mixture of relief and awe passes over Phoebe, Daisy, and Miss Belial's faces. Confusion follows shortly after.

Miss Belial slowly pulls herself into a sitting position. She rubs her head and groans. "I kept having these awful dreams. Jason was hitting me, telling me he hated me. He wouldn't stop. The next thing I knew, I heard Daisy's voice and opened my eyes. It all happened so fast..."

Phoebe wraps her hand around Miss Belial's. She shoots a wary glance at Daisy before continuing. "You were in a coma for several weeks. Um, do you remember the Hydra? I can't go into details right now, but after Jason killed the Hydra, someone mind-controlled him and made him attack you. He went completely berserk. We only stopped him with Hope's help."

Miss Belial frowns. "Hope? I vaguely remember a few fractured images, but none of the details. You'll have to tell me later. I have a splitting headache right now."

Daisy bounces on her butt. "Aunt S'matha! I'm sooo happy you woke up! Mommy wouldn't stop crying! She always looked super sad; it wasn't dope at all!"

Miss Belial blushes. "I'm sorry I made you cry, Phoebe."

Phoebe crosses her arms. "I-I didn't cry. Daisy, stop, um, running your mouth. What have I told you about fibbing?"

The two humans and their Demon Emperor friend all revel in their joyous reunion. However, as I gaze into the room, suspicions tingle in the back of my mind.

How the heck did Miss Belial wake up? Doctor Fathy said several times her brain injuries were extremely severe. It should have taken her years to recuperate under normal circumstances, even with her enhanced healing factor.

As I gaze upon the humans and their demon friend, a series of footsteps behind me nearly makes me jump out of my skin. I turn around to see none other than Doctor Fathy herself, almost as if I'd summoned her out of thin air!

The blue-feathered harpie struts forward with elegance and grace. Her bright yellow beak and dazzling green eyes scrutinize me as she draws near.

"Nurse Rosalia? Chrrrup! What reason have you to skulk outside a patient's room?"

Doctor Fathy's three-toed bird claws *click* against the tile as she walks, echoing down the corridor behind me. I blush out of embarrassment and turn to face her. "M-Miss Fathy, I'm sorry. I just... it's a miracle! Miss Belial woke up less than a minute ago! She's talking to Phoebe and everything!"

The harpie blinks a few times before replying. "She did? How peculiar. Let me see."

Without saying another word, the doctor walks past me and enters the room. I follow after her, making sure to keep a neutral expression.

"Doctor Fathy!" Phoebe says, her voice rising an octave. "What timing! Samantha just woke up! Can you perform a checkup on her?"

The harpie nods. She strides past Phoebe to Miss Belial's side, then pulls out a medical gadget from her neatly-pressed uniform. I haven't a clue how it works, but it looks fancy. It must be one of the many inventions the humans made when they settled on Tarus II.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The doctor holds her gadget near Miss Belial's head while staring at its screen. Several times, she clicks her beak together and cocks her head; expressions I've come to recognize as 'thinking out loud.'

"Hrm. How odd. Very odd indeed. Second Emperor Belial, it seems your innate healing factor has intensified, causing your brain to regenerate at ten times its previous rate. The headaches you are experiencing are a direct result of your neurons stitching themselves together."

Belial stares at the doctor and nods. "Uh... uh-huh... and that means...?"

"In the next few hours, your headaches should completely disappear. Once that happens, you'll be free to go! Chrrrup! What a pleasant way to start my day. I hope you'll help me heal the remaining patients once you finish resting and recovering!"

"Yeah," I grumble. "*You* get the day off. *I* still had to clean up all the bedpans..."

Doctor Fathy either doesn't hear me, or she ignores me, and instead continues chirping at Miss Belial. "You've missed a lot while you were in a coma, Second Emperor. Both Wordsmiths entered the Labyrinth for different reasons. Jason has sent several messages back, and he'll soon arrive at the entrance to Hell Harbor."

"Hell Harbor? Why would Jason go there?" Miss Belial asks. She turns to look at Phoebe. "That world lies at the heart of demonkind's power structure. Going there is suicide!"

Phoebe shakes her head. "Don't worry, Sam. Jason didn't go alone. He took Kar. They want to meet Ose and negotiate a peace treaty like we discussed before."

"I told Jason not to do that!" Belial says, exasperation riddling her voice. "It's pointless! He'll only piss Ose off!"

"I know. We went over this, Sam. Don't you remember?"

"I... I don't. Or, maybe I do. My memories are still a jumble..."

Phoebe glances at Doctor Fathy. "Is she going to suffer memory problems into the future?"

"That depends on how much further Belial's regeneration manages to heal her brain. If she makes a full recovery, her memories should return. Even if they don't, Jason's Wordsmithing might be able to recover the rest. It seems like only her short-term memories were affected, but we'll have to wait and see."

"Thank you, doctor," Phoebe says, grinning from ear to ear. "This is such great news! Jason will be so relieved when he returns."

"As will we all," Doctor Fathy says. She turns to leave and beckons to me. "Nurse Rosalia, I've more errands for you to complete before your shift ends. Come along."

I gaze at Daisy for a moment before nodding at the doctor.

"Alright."

The two of us step out of the room. Before the doctor can say anything, I raise my hand.

"Um, Doctor Fathy, I had a question for you. It's, um... it's about... *parasites*. Do you know anything about them?"

"Chrrrp! You've asked the right harpie!" Doctor Fathy says, lilting her voice cutely. I've learned that when she does that, it means she's in a good mood. Considering her best healer has emerged from a coma, it's no wonder she's in high spirits. "What sort of parasite? Ringworm? Intestinal frogs? Perhaps even a Big Black Blotch Barnacle? I know about most of them!"

I hesitate for a moment.

"Err, well, I don't know what it's called..."

"Now, now, you have to tell me something specific. I can't just stand here and throw darts in the darkness! Who's the patient?"

I swallow heavily. "Um, a friend of mine. She's been hearing a voice in her head. It talks to her about her darkest desires."

Doctor Fathy's feathers ruffle at my words. "Hallucinations. Chrrrp... hmm... odd, very odd indeed. Might it perhaps be a brain parasite? If you take me to the patient, I can diagnose them at once! Brain parasites are no joke!"

I rub my hands together. "No, no, my friend is very *shy*. She's an herbal remedy sort of person, one who irrationally hates doctors. You know how they are. I just wanted to offer her some general advice."

The doctor cocks her head back and forth. Her eyes flick from me to the ceiling and floor.

"Chrrrp! Hmm, herbal remedy... oh, dear. If she has a brain parasite, then she could be in grave danger! However, I cannot heal someone who doesn't want me near them. I'll tell you what! If she injects one shot of neuropozyne into her neck each day for two weeks, it should starve the parasite of its nutrients. Tell her it's a homemade honey extract. She won't know the difference! Even if I'm wrong, the neuropozyne won't cause any harmful side effects."

I nod. "Alright. What if that doesn't work?"

The doctor chirps squeakily. "Hee-hoo! Then she'd better get in here, or she might die! I'm a doctor, not a magician!"

The doctor flaps her wings at me — a farewell, in harpie culture — and walks away, leaving me with my thoughts.

Moments later, Desire bubbles up within my mind.

Oh, dear. It seems you've found something that can kill me. Whatever shall I do? Haha. No doctor can save you from my power, little Rosie. Do what you must, but you'll never rid yourself of me. Besides! In time, you'll come to appreciate my presence.

I scowl at my inner voice. *No, I won't! Stop trying to act like you're my friend. You're just a creepy leech stuck in my gut.*

Desire falls silent for a moment.

Haha. Is that what you think?

Another short pause.

I'm so much more than a parasite, Rosie, dear. My kind has existed for tens of thousands of years. I grant demons a special ability, one that little knockoff, Mephisto, eventually stole. Would you like to know what it is?

My heartbeat quickens.

...No. I don't... don't need to know.

Oh, come now. You're curious. Go ahead; ask me.

Fine. What ability do you grant? It's not like it matters.

Desire's voice deepens.

Hohoho... I sense your interest is deepening. Very well, I'll tell you. My presence within your body unlocks a special ability...

The ability... to steal... souls.

Souls? What?! You made me into a soul-manipulator, like Mister Beelzebub?!

Haha. Oh, yes, I did. Of course, until you use my power, you aren't *technically* a soul-manipulator. But you *will* use it. All my vessels do, eventually. Once you make your first kill, you'll feel your victim's essence flow inside of you. You'll instantly become addicted to the thrill of the hunt!

Nobody can resist the allure of obtaining power. Since time immemorial, demons have sought the strength to stand above others. Think of it, Rosalia. All you must do is eliminate a few meddlesome fleshbags. One here, two there... and soon enough, you'll evolve into a higher form.

I lean against the corridor wall, while rubbing my face. *I don't want to reach some higher form. I only want to stand by Mister Beelzebub's side. Moreover, demons can already take human souls. You're not*

giving me a new ability, after all, you liar!

Tsk. That is where you're wrong, Rosalia. When demons kill humans, the River Styx absorbs their souls. What I do is allow you to absorb your victim's soul directly, bypassing the river. Besides... haven't you ever wondered how that thief, Mephisto, created the river?

No. Who cares? You're babbling nonsense!

Desire's voice turns irritable. I'm not. Open your brain, you empty-headed dullard! The River Styx is hardly a natural phenomenon. Through it, Satan was able to create the Labyrinth and dominate the other Hells. It was only thanks to that damned thief that Satan managed to create such an intricate structure! It's all because of Mephisto's meddling-

I interrupt Desire. Hold on, Satan created the Labyrinth? Mister Beelzebub never told me that.

Of course he didn't. Beelzebub doesn't know. Few do. It's a well-kept secret among the upper ranks. If the Hidden Emperors learned of the river's importance, they would band together and seize it for themselves.

Hidden Emperors...?

Desire sighs.

You still have much to learn, Rosalia. Never mind. Go about your business. I've wasted too much energy talking to you. I need to rest for a while. Perhaps later, I'll regale you with tales that will dazzle you endlessly. For now, you'll just have to make do with your imagination.

Wait, but I still have questions-

I care not, whelp. Consume a few souls, and *maybe* I'll give you the answers you seek.

But...

Before I can offer a protest, Desire's presence fades away, vanishing into the depths of my mind.

I awaken from a dreamlike trance to find myself staring at the floor.

Several minutes pass. Eventually, I pull myself out of my stupor and shuffle toward the nurse's station.

Forget it. I'm done working for the day. I need a nap.

As I leave, my thoughts turn inward.

Who are the Hidden Emperors? What significance does the River Styx hold?

Most importantly... how could Desire know all of these secrets? Who even is she?

Part 208: Destiny Cards

Two weeks have passed since Kar, Blinker, and I left Marie Becker's secret engineering facility. We've spent all that time searching for a 'keymaster,' a Warper demon with the access rights to Hell Harbor. Hell Harbor is a world unlike any other, with a complex demonic incantation protecting it from teleportation magic. From what I've gathered, the demons created it not only as a defense against an Archangel-controlled Barbatos, but any other intruder with ill intentions.

I could bypass the restrictions placed upon the planet by using my Wordsmithing. However, I've never traveled to Hell Harbor, and neither has Kar, Blinker, or any of the people currently living within my Mind Realm. Therefore, I can't teleport us there without searching through someone else's mind, specifically a demon or monster who's been there before.

If Belial were here, she could probably give me the information I need, but I didn't realize I needed the planet's location until last week. Not to mention she's still comatose.

I turn to look at Kar. He walks beside me, on my left, arms crossed, while quietly chatting with his wife. She sits on his opposite shoulder, behind his head, where I can't see her without leaning forward.

"-my Butterfly. We'll need to construct a new house somewhere outside the city limits for that to work."

"Oh, come on, big gator-man! Why do you always have to be so responsible? You've gotta be a little more footloose sometimes! Wing it, have some fun!"

"Hurgh. The only one capable of 'winging' here is you, little Butterfly," Kar chuckles. "Spawning a litter is no small commitment. Inter-species children are quite rare. We have to make sure there aren't any complications."

I perk up my ears slightly. "What's this about children? Are you two finally thinking about settling down?"

Kar glances at me. A slight hint of awkwardness appears on his face. "Oh, erm, I did not realize you were listening, Turtle. Yes, Butterfly and I are considering whether we should whelp our first brood. However, I am not so certain now is a good time."

"I am!" Blinker shouts. She flutters off Kar's shoulder and zips over to hover in midair between him and I. "My mating period will end in the next few months! If we don't have ankle-biters by then, we'll have to wait another sixteen years!"

My heart skips a beat. "Sixteen years?! Why so long?"

"Well, I'm a fairy, silly-willy! Fairies can only pop out little squirts once every sixteen years. You humans are the weird ones! You can just spit 'em out whenever you feel like it!"

Kar and I slow to a stop, only sparing a glance around us at the empty Labyrinth hallway to see if there are enemies around. There aren't. Even if there were, attacking a Hero and a Duke-level monster would

not be a high-IQ move.

"I mean, we can't spit them out *literally* whenever, but yeah, I see your point. Well, if it were up to me, I'd do it sooner rather than later. If you don't mind me asking, though... how do you know you two are even, erm... *compatible*? Don't reptiles lay a hundred eggs at once? I don't even know what fairies do. How is any of that going to work for you?"

Blinker waves her hands nonchalantly. "Oh, pish. You certainly don't know anything about inter-species copulation! We fairies are experts at it! Why, my eldest sister has dated several kobolds, an orc or two, and even a Medusa! As long as we have our mate's permission, we can just snap our fingers and *yoin*k the seed right out of them. After all, there aren't many male fairies out there. We reproduce with other beings all the time."

Kar rubs his face, embarrassed by his wife's bold words. "Oh... is that so? I was not aware of that fact."

"Yup! So don't you worry, hubby-lovey! We fairies are experts at this sort of thing! Personally, I think we should have kids as soon as possible. Once we finish chattin' with that Ose bimbo, we'll head back to the Core and get to poundin'. Time's a-wastin'!"

Kar sighs. "Yes, but... what if this 'Ose' does not agree to Turtle's terms? We will have a terrible war on our horizon. I would rather wait sixteen years than raise our spawn in a warzone."

"Kar," I say, butting in, "you aren't thinking of the big picture. As the last living Crocodile, if you and Blinker don't have kids, you'll be the last of your species forever. Anything could happen in the next sixteen years. I say it's better to be safe than sorry. Even if you and Blinker survive a potential war, what if an accident occurs, preventing her from bearing children? In this case, I think time is of the essence."

Blinker nods. "You heard the shrimp! We've gotta summon that stork ASAP, gator-man!"

Kar shrugs. "Well, if you feel so strongly, I cannot refuse, my little Butterfly. After Turtle confronts the demon's leader and we return to the Core, we shall see what we can do."

I nod. "Yeah, but at this rate, it's going to take us forever to find a Keymaster. We've been traveling the Labyrinth's passages for weeks, but every time someone points us toward one, the Keymaster disappears. If you want to return to the Core, and soon, we'll need to figure out a faster method of reaching Hell Harbor."

Silence falls upon our little group.

Blinker flutters over and lands on Kar's right shoulder, the one nearest me. She rubs her chin and falls deep into thought, while Kar echoes her movements, reminding me that even with their differing species, they're surprisingly similar sometimes.

"Jason," Phoebe says, appearing from the depths of my mind, "Don't you think you're a bit too conspicuous? When the demons sense your holy energy, they probably retract the nearest Keymasters out of fear that you'll find a way into Hell Harbor. Kar is a monster, and the Monster King, at that. You, however, are a Hero, the demons' worst enemy. You can't just walk up and expect them to let you in."

My mind-wife, as always, offers a useful bit of advice, turning my thoughts toward a new direction.

I nod along to her words, then glance at Kar. "Hey, Kar, is it possible I'm the problem here? I doubt the demons would prevent you or Blinker from going to Hell Harbor, but there's no chance they would let me through. Maybe I should stay behind and let you go in my stead."

Kar raises an eyebrow. "Hurgh! Do not joke around like that, Turtle. I am no master of diplomacy. This whole trip is your idea. I'm merely the muscle and brains; here to keep you safe. You have to negotiate with the Second Emperor for Tarus's safety."

"Kar is right!" Blinker yells. "If you stay behind, we might as well go back to the Core! Think of something else!"

I furrow my brow. "Alright. What about a disguise? Oh! I could try changing my appearance to make myself look like a demon. However, there aren't many Barons and Dukes out there, so I'd need to figure out which ones come and go frequently."

Kar sighs. "Hurgh. That's a stupid idea, Turtle. I have a better one."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. You should disguise yourself as a Demon Baron, one who has recently ascended. There are far too many Lords for the high-rankers to keep track of them all. Just claim you come from a distant area of the Labyrinth and that you were a Lord until recently. Only Barons and higher can access Hell Harbor, along with their slaves. If you do that, I bet the Keymaster won't be able to tell you're lying!"

"...Kar. That's *exactly* what I suggested."

The Crocodile grins like an idiot. "Heh. Don't kid yourself. My idea was much smarter than yours."

"Right... you keep telling yourself that."

Kar nods. "I will."

Turning my attention inward, I form an image of myself in my mind. After a few moments, I change the image in several small ways, giving myself horns and red skin.

"Disguise. Demon!"

My facial bones shift and morph, causing creaking and popping sounds to erupt from my cheeks and jaw. The sides of my head quickly become noticeably heavier, as thick, bony protrusions jut out of my skull from just above my ears.

Moments later, my transformation finishes.

"Mirror."

I inspect myself, marveling at how much more masculine and intimidating my demonic appearance appears, compared to my human self. A quick glance at my hands reveals sharpened black fingernails with pointy tips, while my vision shifts slightly to expose the various ebbs and flows of mana in the air.

"Hmm, not bad," Blinker says, as she inspects me from head to toe. "Your ears are still human, though! And your mana doesn't feel demonic. It's still pretty... *holy*."

I nod. **"Ears. Mana."**

A slight tingling at the peripheries of my head alerts me to my altered ears, while Blinker's disgusted expression does the rest.

"Better?" I ask.

The fairy woman shrinks away from me. "Eugh! I wouldn't call your current appearance an improvement. Your mana is demonic, but maybe a little TOO demonic. Your demon energy is so pure I could vomit up all the crumbs I ate earlier!"

"Too pure? I don't understand."

Kar raises his finger. "Turtle. Like all humans, you are inexperienced at sensing mana, but monsters and demons are not. Your appearance may be that of a Demon Baron, but your mana's purity 'screams' louder than any Demon Emperor's. Big Boobs possesses overwhelming mana reserves, but the... the *thickness* of your mana makes me feel as if I have begun wading through a swamp. Butterfly, as a lower-class monster, cannot help but feel nauseous in your presence. Even with my power at the apex of Demon Dukes, I find it difficult to stand so close to you."

"Oh. I wasn't aware there were such huge differences between demon ranks. Are you saying if I walked up to a Keymaster, he'd know I was in disguise?"

"Hah! I'd be surprised if your mana wasn't already drawing the attention of every kobold and goblin for miles around! You won't make it ten steps before everyone suspects you of being a Hidden Emperor."

"I see. Wait, Hidden Emperor?"

Kar nods. "Former leaders of the other Six Hells. After Satan's Hell reigned supreme, they retreated to different corners of the Labyrinth, along with their fighting forces. Some of them live on secluded worlds, keeping away from the frontlines. They aren't any threat to you, as they would never band together and follow the orders of the Three Emperors."

Blinker nods sagely. "Yeah. Lots of bad blood."

"Why didn't anyone mention them to me before?" I ask. "I thought we only had to worry about Ose, Belial, and Diablo, along with the secretive First Emperor! Now you're telling me other Demon Emperors are lurking out there in the shadows?"

"Hurgh, yes, but I wouldn't worry about those guys," Kar says, shrugging. "I don't even know who they are. Few do. They keep to themselves."

"Right. Well, I guess that's heartening news..."

With a sigh, I return my attention to my, apparently, way-too-thick-and-pure demonic energy.

Hmm. How to solve this problem...?

"Analyze."

Having trained with Solomon for six years, I have come to learn that I sometimes have to think outside the box when it comes to my Wordsmithing's practical applications. By turning my analytical powers on myself, I manage to summon several numerical readings related to my mana's type, quality, reserves, and other such factors. Dozens of numbers and boxes hover in midair before me.

"Let's see... this number seems really high. Maybe if I try lowering it... **Mana.**"

I fine-tune my mana, bit by bit, for several minutes, using Kar and Blinker as references. They offer helpful and not-so-helpful feedback, telling me whether my mana 'feels' right or wrong.

Eventually, Kar gives me a thumbs up. "That will do. Now you have pretty much the same mana as other Demon Barons!"

Blinker holds up her hand. "But wait! You can't just stroll up to a Keymaster and claim you're a Demon Baron they've never heard of! We need to come up with a rock-solid cover story! What kind of powers will you use? How will you convince him you're the genuine article? Etcetera!"

I nod. "Well, claiming I'm a demon who recently rose from Lord to Baron should be good enough to explain why nobody knows me. As for my powers... my telekinesis is passive, as is my telepathy. I gave myself those Wordsmithed abilities years ago. What else could I use to prove my identity?"

"Most demons have a whoooooe bunch of elemental powers," Blinker explains. "If you could shoot fireballs or fart really hard, you could convince the Keymaster you're a bonafide Baron badass!"

"Um. Is farting considered... elemental magic?"

Kar nods, and a look of serenity appears in his eyes. "Yes. Gas manipulation."

"...Right."

With a shrug, I continue walking. Kar falls into step beside me, and we begin brainstorming how to deceive the Keymasters.

Elsewhere, in a nearby Hellish enclave.

Two gorgeous demonesses, both of them sharp-eyed hawks, lean casually against a wall in a room filled with dozens of lower-ranking grunts, a hundred goblins, and a few orcs. In the center of the room, two naked humans, a man, and a woman, wrestle each other for the amusement of everyone watching. They fight in a paint-outlined square, with the various monsters and demons standing on the outskirts, jeering and pumping their fists.

"Get her! Gut that bitch! I've got five clicks ridin' on this!"

"Haha! Ain't no way the guy's gonna win! He won't kill his precious wifey!"

"Fuck that! The bastard had better not throw the match! I'll teach his bitch a lesson if she wins!"

The male human wraps his arms around his much smaller counterpart. He puts her in a chokehold and presses her against the floor, but thanks to the mud coating their bodies, she manages to slip out of his grasp and land a kick to his groin. The male doubles over in pain, shooting a look of disbelief at his wife.

The two nearby demonesses, a Baron and a Warper, pay only the slightest attention to the crudely thrown-together match between slaves.

The Warper clicks her tongue. "Eugh. Mara, I'll never understand why others enjoy watching such silly contests of strength. The male will easily overpower his mate. Why waste time on such an uneven matchup?"

"Sister," The Baron, Mara says, rolling her eyes. "It's not that hard to understand. The match has nothing to do with skill and everything to do with torture. A few goblins found these two humans engaging in intercourse instead of working in the mines. After following them for a while, the goblins discovered they were a married couple, captured them, and brought them here. The fun comes from watching these two so-called 'lovers' tear each other for sport. The male instinctively wishes to protect his mate, giving the female a chance to turn the tables. However, if she wins, the orcs will defile her and unleash all manner of heinous, depraved acts upon her helpless form."

Mara continues. "Don't you see, Ying-Ying, dearest? The joy comes not from wondering who will win, but from watching the hope die in their eyes."

The Warper, Ying-Ying, raises her eyebrow. "Hope? What hope?"

"Open your mind. These humans have already lost their lives; they just don't know it yet. They desperately cling to the belief that they will find a way out of their predicament. However, no matter which one wins, the goblins will seize the woman, while the orcs will take the man. Their final hours will end with brutal, sexual violence. They will perish wishing they had died in the ring. Perhaps, if the male puts on a good show, his new owners might throw him into the Slaughterseum."

Ying-Ying leans forward to stare more closely at the two humans. The woman pounces on her husband and batters his face viciously, only for him to flip her over and return the favor in kind.

"Oh, I hadn't considered that possibility before. Now that you mention it, watching these two fight each other might be a little more interesting than I first thought."

Mara glances at her sister. Her eyes surreptitiously sweep across Ying-Ying's body as a devious smile appears on her face.

"Speaking of lovers and mates, I can't help but comment on your stunning red dress. Are you going on another date today?"

Ying-Ying blushes. She smooths the front of her Chinese-style long-dress, one which boasts numerous golden tracings and flower patterns along its surface. "This old thing? I threw it on at the last minute. What about you? You're always wearing those weird, black robes. Don't you think that will turn off potential mates? You have to tease men if you want to catch their interest."

Mara snorts. "I don't have time to fraternize. With Operation Stormbringer on the horizon, my Tarot sect has been working overtime to craft new cards for me. I have to test each one, learn their weaknesses... it's such a drag."

Ying-Ying sprouts her own devious smile. "Ohoho? Don't you have *any* mates in mind? This silly little war against the fleshbags won't last much longer. You need to find yourself a high-status snack if you want to ascend to Duke."

Mara's expression flattens. "Do I? Ose *didn't*."

"Come now, even with all Ose's achievements, don't you find it odd she went from Baron to Emperor in one day?" Ying-Ying asks. "How much time did she spend with Diablo behind closed doors for that miracle to happen?"

"It's not odd; it's downright infuriating. I lived in Ose's shadow for millennia. I scraped myself from the womb of a broodmother, held my own against that damned Uriel when she last awakened, and all I earned for my sacrifices was the chance to watch Ose seize the title of Emperor right out from under me!"

"Ose wasn't the only title-thief," Ying-Ying says. "What about Beelzebub? He's a rising star! He went from Lord to Duke in only a month!"

"Screw Beelzebub," Mara hisses. "That arrogant little bastard ought to fall off a cliff. He thinks he's hot shit, just because he greased a few palms and sweet-talked the right people. How else could he gather enough souls to go from Lord to Duke so quickly? Don't even get me started on how he treats us Barons."

Ying-Ying blushes. "Oh, sure, Beelzebub is a jerk, but he's a hunk, too! Those dreamy eyes! I could listen to him tongue-lash me all day!"

Mara groans. "You focus on men way too much, sister. I can't wait for you to pair off with someone so we can calm those raging hormones."

The Baroness flips her long, fluffy blonde hair backward. She quickly ties it into a ponytail before pulling a hood over her head.

"Anyway. Forget all this talk of men and thieves. How is the Warper Guild handling their preparation for Stormbringer?"

Ying-Ying reaches inside the folds of her dress and pulls out a palm-sized notepad with numerous scribbles inside. She flips through it for a moment and sighs. "Oh, you know — same old, same old. The environmental shield on Tarus II prevents us from warping in and out of the humans' capital city. If Ose manages to bring it down, we'll be able to strike their flank, but until that happens, we'll have to deal with a terrain disadvantage."

Mara perks her ears up. "Oh? What sort?"

"The so-called 'Hero City' sits atop a flattened mountain bluff," Ying-Ying explains. "Sheer cliffs guard its edges, and the only ways up are via a few paths carved into the bluff. Goblins can scale the cliffs quite easily, and any demon possessing flight abilities won't have a problem getting inside. The same story is true for burrowers and Mephisto's undead. However, Warpers won't be any use. Something about the city's dome negates our teleportation powers."

Mara frowns. "I've never been to Tarus II. It's such a remote, out of the way world. Isn't it a nasty, desert wasteland?"

"No, no, silly!" Ying-Ying says. "It has forests, oceans, and a fairly mild day and night cycle. Once we quell the human uprising, we should vacation there sometime. This one member of my guild, Janus- you remember Janus, don't you?"

"Possibly. Wasn't he that albino you fawned over for a few years before unceremoniously dumping him?"

"Haha! Yes, that's the one! Ohh, the way he looked at me could send me into conniptions! Anyway, Janus took me to this pristine beach on Tarus II for a date once, and it was soooo romantic! We had the shoreline all to ourselves, and he had these cute little goblins playing saxophones to serenade me! If it weren't for his endowment problem, I might have married Janus right there and then!"

"No, you wouldn't," Mara sighs. "I know you, little sister. You change mates as often as you change your clothes. You'd have grown bored with him eventually and moved on to your next little fling."

"You're just jealous," Ying-Ying says, sticking out her tongue. "You can't get a guy, so you always have to insult my taste in men. What can I say? I'm a free-spirit. I like to enjoy life my way."

"I'm certainly happy for you, Ying-Ying dearest," Mara says, flashing a cute smile. "But I do worry you won't amount to anything if I don't push you out of your comfort zone. Cavorting with males is fun and all, but we demons must always strive to better our lot in life. After all, what higher purpose is there than becoming more powerful?"

"I can't work my way up the ranks unless I luck out and evolve into a Unique," Ying-Ying replies, a hint of bitterness in her voice. "And who's ever heard of a Warper evolving? We've got to be the worst Variants in existence."

"That's not true at all," Mara counters. "Without Wappers, Operation Stormbringer wouldn't even be possible. Your ability to send legions of monsters and demons to the frontlines is invaluable."

"It's my *only* ability," Ying-Ying pouts. She slumps against the wall and rests her head on Mara's shoulder. "At least Burners have other fire-abilities. At least *they* have a shot at evolving. I'm useless. I'll be stuck at the bottom of the rung forever."

Mara wraps an arm around her sister to comfort her. "There, there. At least you're not a Brute. Imagine if you'd ended up in some fat, wobbly body instead of your sexy temptress form. Why, your good looks make you practically half-succubus! Surely, that counts for something!"

"I guess."

The two sisters fall silent for a moment. Mara turns her attention toward the makeshift arena, where the male human howls at the top of his lungs and pounces at his wife. Rage appears in his eyes as he starts striking her, over and over, sending blood and teeth flying. "You stupid bitch! It's all your fault! This is all your fault!!"

With his mind broken, the human finally gives in to his baser animal instincts. He throttles the woman while she gurgles blood and begs for mercy. However, her pleas fall on deaf ears. The man screams at her, nonstop, berating her for his predicament.

Eventually, the life vanishes from his wife's eyes. The man wrings her neck for over a minute after she perishes, continuously cursing her name and blaming her for all the woes in his life.

Mara clicks her tongue. "Tsk. And there it is, sister. Do you see that? That's the reality of this world. There is no such thing as true love. It's nothing more than a passing phase in your life. That fleshbag abandoned his wife and yielded his so-called protective instincts, opting instead to save his own skin. Now he'll end up a gladiator in the Slaughterseum, where he probably won't last a day."

"So?" Ying-Ying says, pulling her head off Mara's shoulder. "Surely, you mustn't be implying demons are the same as fleshbags! Fleshbags are weak and pathetic, while demons are strong and resilient! I guarantee that if Beelzebub chose me as a mate, we'd never betray each other!"

"Hmm. I wonder about that," Mara murmurs. "Us being strong, and them being weak, I mean. I had to attend a Council meeting a couple of weeks ago. Bael started talking about the fleshbags, and, um..."

Mara trails off for a moment before shaking her head.

"No, I shouldn't say. It's not my place to discuss Council meetings with outsiders."

Immediately, a spark of intrigue appears in Ying-Ying's eyes. She pulls away from her sister and grabs her hands. "What?! You got to sit in on a Council meeting?! Ohmygosh! Sis, you have to tell me all about it! Did you get to talk to Beelzebub? What about the Duke of Pain? What was everyone talking about? Tell me, tell me, tellmetellme!!"

Mara scowls. "Devils. Calm down, little sister. The Council meetings are private. I shouldn't even bring them up in front of you."

Ying-Ying instantly deflates. "Oh, come on. I tell you everything... why can't you just do this one thing for me? I'll keep quiet. I won't tell anyone! Not a soul."

"It's not that simple," Mara mutters. "Operation Stormbringer is a sensitive subject. Besides, after that damned Hydra suddenly appeared on Tarus II, Ose's been breathing down everyone's necks looking for the traitor-"

"Ohmygosh! A Hydra?! I thought they went extinct!" Ying-Ying squeals. "What happened with the Hydra? What did it do? You HAVE to tell me, Mara!"

"No! Blast everything, sis, if I leak any information to you, the whole Labyrinth will know what happened before the Goblins wake up."

"You are SUCH a stick in the mud sometimes," Ying-Ying pouts. "You keep giving me all these hints, but you're too afraid of Ose to tell me what else happened! I need the deets, sis!"

Mara frowns. "I'm... I'm not afraid of Ose."

"Yaaaah, you are," Ying-Ying says, rolling her eyes. "It's written on your face, plain as day."

"I'm not!" Mara says, finally losing her cool. "You don't get to call me a scaredy-cat! After all the ways you've... you've..."

Mara's speech slows to a halt.

She narrows her eyes and frowns. After a moment, she flicks her eyes toward one of the far walls of the giant makeshift wrestling chamber.

"Sis?" Ying-Ying asks. "What's wrong?"

"Quiet," Mara hisses. "That monster's energy is coming closer again."

"You mean the traitorous Sphinx?" Ying-Ying asks. "Ugh. I could practically smell the stench of the Hero on him last time. Let's go. I'll jump us over to Quadrant 115 this time."

The Warper demoness motions with her hands and starts to summon a magical portal to another area of the Labyrinth. However, Mara shakes her head.

"No, wait. Something's different. Not only do I sense the energy of the Sphinx, but a Demon Baron as well."

"You do?" Ying-Ying asks. "Who?"

"I'm not certain. They could be a man or a woman. Whoever they are, their mana is different from the Barons I know, and I thought I'd met all of them. Hmm. Let me try a card-reading."

Mara closes her eyes. She takes a long, deep breath, then begins making a series of slow, deliberate hand motions.

"Bird, ox, hare. I summon three destiny cards to predict my future."

Ying-Ying watches her sister with rapt attention. The moment Mara finishes her incantation, three swirls of mana materialize before her, revealing blood-red playing cards hovering in midair. The three cards glow and pulse for several moments as their bloody exterior loses its luster. Mara holds out her hand, and all three of them drop to the ground and land on the floor noiselessly.

Ying-Ying sucks in a sharp breath. "Three whole destiny cards? Look at you, going all-out. Why exercise so much caution? I thought summoning destiny cards cost you a lot of mana."

"They do," Mara replies, her voice even. "Let's see what the cards have to say."

Mara drops to one knee, reaches down, and flips the first card over.

"Hmm. The Cobra. Interesting."

After a moment, she flips the next card.

"Oh, oh!" Ying-Ying yells. She hops in excitement. "A heart card! That means true love!!"

Mara's expression darkens. "No. This one is a *bloody* heart. That means grave danger."

Without saying another word, Mara flips the third card over.

This time, both women fall silent.

After a minute, Ying-Ying hesitantly speaks. "A... a twig?"

"No. An olive branch. How strange. I've never seen this combination before."

Mara rubs her forehead in confusion.

"The snake represents a great lie. Whenever it has appeared, I ended up facing some terrible deception in my immediate future. The bloody heart represents danger. Since it is the second card, that means a great lie will precede a terrible calamity."

Ying-Ying nods. "Right. So, we should get out of here."

"No, that's not all," Mara says, her frown deepening. "I've seen the snake and bloody heart in multi-card sessions before. However, the Olive Branch is not a card I see often. It indicates an act of generosity, or a moment of empathy. It represents an enemy who will accede some important point in my favor. However, for it to follow a lie and a great danger... what could this mean?"

"Are your cards ever wrong?" Ying-Ying asks.

"No. However, they *are* incredibly vague. I only understand their intent thanks to my magic, but not their specific meaning. Since I created them in response to the Sphinx's appearance, I should exercise tremendous caution when dealing with him. No doubt, he is a monster of tremendous intellect, capable of weaving a web of lies. For some reason, he has come to us with the intent of reaching Hell Harbor."

"How do you know all that?" Ying-Ying asks.

"You are one of the few Warpers tasked with the role of protecting our homeworld. For the Sphinx to continuously seek you out, what other reason might he have?"

Ying-Ying shrugs. "Maybe he's heard of my stunning beauty and wants to say hello?"

"Right. That *must* be his intent," Mara says with a sigh. She rises to her feet and motions with her hands, scattering the three Destiny Cards to the void. "Well, if the Sphinx wants to pop over, then let's give him a warm welcome. Keep your magic at the ready. We'll need a swift escape if he attacks."

"You've got it," Ying-Ying says, flashing a cheerful grin.

Both sisters fall silent. They watch as the goblins and orcs haul off the human woman's dead body, then begin praising the human male for his fighting spirit. However, the man breaks down in tears, unable to believe the brutal manner in which he killed his wife.

Time passes.

The monsters chain the human and lead him away, only to bring out two more male prisoners. Both men, apparently brothers, engage in a second set of violent fisticuffs, getting the spectators' blood boiling.

"Rip his fuckin' head off!" One Demon Grunt yells. "Get 'im in the eyes! No, the eyes, ya stupid cunt!"

"Come on, you lousy fleshies!" A Goblin howls. "Me needs a win to get outta garbage duty!"

As the minutes pass, Mara's body language becomes increasingly tense. Eventually, she flicks her eyes toward a large doorway at the end of the hall.

"They've arrived."

From behind the door, A huge, ten-foot-tall reptile emerges, towering over the goblins nearest the entrance. His presence immediately grabs everyone's attention, drawing their gazes away from the thrown-together pit fight.

"Oy! That... that guy's the bloody Sphinx!"

"No way! The Monster King! He's even bigger in person!"

Looks of surprise and awe flash across the faces of the demons and monsters present. A path emerges before Kar as he strides forward, his chest puffed out.

"I haven't had breakfast, yet," Kar growls. "If any of you punks gets in my way, expect that to change."

"Sure thing, mister Sphinx, sir!" One kobold yelps. The furry monster slinks backward and retreats into the crowd, afraid the Monster King's sights might fall on him.

Kar marches with purpose as he crosses the room. He beelines straight for the two demonesses, both of whom immediately go on guard as they sense the overwhelming magical energy emanating from his body.

"Devils, I hope we don't have to fight this fellow," Ying-Ying mutters.

"Agreed," Mara replies, her voice low.

Kar crosses the room and arrives before both women, towering more than four feet above them. He folds his arms behind his back and flashes a toothy grin. "Hurgh. Hello, ladies. I've come to bargain."

Before either demoness can reply, their eyes lower from Kar's grinning face to a much less impressive, significantly smaller Demon Baron standing beside him.

However, the male Baron's stunning visage, a mixture of elegance and power, immediately commands their attention.

Mara's eyes narrow, while Ying-Ying's widen.

"Who in the Hell is this guy?" Mara asks.

Ying-Ying squeals in delight. "A total stud; my future mate! I call dibs!!"

Author note: Check out the artwork for Mara and Ying-Ying!

This is Mara and Ying-Ying!



Part 209: Olive Branch

As the Monster King and his Baron-level sidekick slow to a stop, Mara's eyes immediately snap to the newcomer. Her gaze hardens as she scrutinizes him from head to toe.

The young Baron wears a simple black cloak, one mirroring Mara's. A hood rests over his face, concealing his thin and wispy blond hair, further echoing Mara's appearance. Were one to see the two of them side by side, they might believe the newcomer was a member of Mara's family.

Mara purses her lips. *Hm. Now here's a Baron I've never seen before, and I've met them all.*

"You there," Mara says, gesturing to the handsome devil standing across from her. "Who are you? What is your name and title? I know every Baron in the Labyrinth, so don't even try to lie to me."

The young Baron smooths his hair back. He slowly blinks at Mara, almost as if seducing her.

"Now, now. There's no need to become hostile, Mara, Baron of Games. I'm just a simple Baron, newly risen thanks to His Eminence's magic. The grand and magnificent Kar, King of all Monsters, has blessed me with a small portion of his might, allowing me to ascend from a lowly Lord to the prestigious rank of Baron."

Mara's gaze hardens even further. She glances at Kar while raising an eyebrow. "Is this true, Monster King? Did you raise a Lord to the rank of Baron with your magic?"

Kar crosses his arms. "Hurgh. I did. Why? Did I break one of your laws?"

"No," Mara replies. She glances at Ying-Ying, noting the stars in her sister's eyes. "It's not that. There are no rules stating monsters and demons cannot trade mana. However... I have always been under the impression that monster and demon mana was incompatible."

A flicker of movement flies off Kar's shoulder. Only now does Mara notice the tiny little fairy woman perched atop the Crocodile's arm. Blinker flies over and waves at Mara cheerfully. "Hi, hi! That's where you're wrong, silly! Anything is possible with fairy magic!"

"Fairy magic? Who are you?" Mara asks, her confusion apparent.

As Blinker speaks, she makes a hand flapping motion at the Baron of Games, irritating Mara further. "Don't you know? I'm the Monster Queen, wife of the Last Crocodile! My name is Blinker, and don't you forget it, sister!"

"And my name is Smithy, the Baron of Prediction," the young Demon Baron beside Kar says. He bows slightly, showing deference to his senior. "I am but a humble servant of the great and mighty Kar, heir of the Sphinx's power. I have sworn a vow to serve him until the day I die."

Before Mara can reply, her sister steps forward and jerks out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Mister Smithy! I'm Ying-Ying! Are you single? I'm single! I like to blow bubbles and dance under the sun! How about you? What sorts of hobbies are you into?!"

Ying-Ying babbles wildly, her mouth racing at a hundred miles an hour. However, Smithy merely smiles politely, showing little reaction to her eager and over-the-top greeting. "Haha, how wonderful. I am with mate, as it happens. She has expressed openness to other relationships under certain conditions, but we mustn't rush. You and I barely know each other, and I only exist to serve my Master."

"Psh, no kidding! I should've guessed you had a mate! I mean, just look at you! I bet you beat the ladies off with a stick! I have the same problem, given my stunning good looks! The males line up all day trying to pound down my door, but like I always say, I must wait for the perfect guy!"

The more Ying-Ying talks, the more Mara's eyes begin to twitch. *What nonsense are you blabbering about now, sister?! You fornicate with a new boy-toy every week! Don't spit all that garbage about chastity and- bah! Never mind. Let her keep that Baron occupied. I've other business to worry about.*

Mara casts aside further thoughts of the Baron of Prediction, opting to turn her sights on the Monster King. "Forgive my rudeness, as well as my sister's, Monster King-

"It's just Kar," Kar says. "Hurgh. There is no need to be so formal."

Mara shakes her head. "I disagree. Given how you've followed my sister and me through the Labyrinth for the last few weeks, I must presume you intend to enter Hell Harbor. Doing so requires specific authorizations for one who has never traveled there before. Isn't that the long and short of it?"

Kar glances at his wife as she continues to flutter around Mara, peering at the blonde-haired demoness's long, flowing locks of hair, only a few of which spill out from her hooded face. "Hurgh. You have guessed well. My slave- I mean, my *assistant* and I, must travel to meet your current reigning Emperor, Ose. I come on behalf of the Hero, who sent me to discuss a variety of topics with your leader."

Mara's scowl fades somewhat. "The Hero. I sensed his foul magic trailing after you for the past several days. Why hasn't he come along? Why send you and this little upstart Baron over here?"

Kar spreads out his arms while baring a toothy grin. "Hurgh. Every time we drew near, you fled, along with the Keymaster. The Hero is a kind person, someone who does not harbor any ill intent for your people. He decided it would be best if he allowed my assistant and me to go on by ourselves. We don't want to startle you, after all."

Mara taps on her lips thoughtfully. She meets Kar's gaze for a moment before narrowing her eyes to slits.

"Jason Hiro is the current leader of humanity. His ability is called Wordsmithing, is it not?"

Kar nods. "Hurgh. You have heard correctly."

"Wordsmithing. Hmm."

Slowly, Mara's eyes travel to Kar's right, where Ying-Ying continues yapping the ear off her newfound Baron crush.

"-pink! It's such a great color, so full of vibrancy and love! Of course, I like red more, because demons are red, and so is blood! Nothing like a delicious Blood Soup to wake me up in the morning! Don't you agree?"

Smithy winces. "...Yes. I suppose some... some Blood Soup can hit the spot on occasion... haha..."

Gears turn in Mara's head as she stares at the distracted Baron of Prediction.

Wordsmithing, eh? And this demon's name is Smithy. Hehe. Do I look like I was born yesterday?

Mara's eyes bolt open. She snarls at the young Baron, ignoring the Monster King. "Smithy! Who do you think you're fooling? Do you honestly expect me to believe you're some no-name demon granted the rank of Baron by a monster?! Preposterous!"

Blinker, hovering by Mara's right side, stares with wide-eyes at the Baron of Games. "W-what do you mean? Smithy didn't lie!"

Ying-Ying turns to scowl at Mara. "Jeez, sis! What are you on about this time? Can't you see I'm trying to make some moves over here? Stop throwing off my mojo!"

"No. I won't," Mara says, her voice deadly calm. "I see now that this Smithy is a pretender. He's no servant of the Monster King."

Smithy gently pushes aside Ying-Ying. "I beg your pardon? Would you mind explaining?"

"It's simple," Mara says, the corner of her lips curling into a tight smile. "The Hero wields a power known as Wordsmithing, and you call yourself Smithy. I've never heard such a ridiculous name for a Baron in all my life! What else are you if not a liar?"

Mara swivels her head toward Kar. "You did not boost this demon with your magic. The Hero did! He used his Wordsmithing to turn some Lord into a Baron! You intend to take this 'Smithy' behind our lines and gather intel for your human leader! Admit it!"

As Mara speaks, the Baron of Prediction glances at Kar, and Kar back at him. Both men share a knowing look, as if speaking to each other with their eyes.

Kar rests his hands on his hips. "Hurgh. You've guessed well, Baron of Games. I should have expected as much from the leader of the Tarot Sect."

"Yes, very well done," Smithy replies, his voice low. "But you're wrong about two things. I'm not a spy, and my power *does* come from the Monster King."

Mara gnashes her teeth. "Bah! You cannot expect us to grant you entry to Hell Harbor while spouting off such feeble lies!"

"I am no liar," Smithy says, gently placing his hand on his chest. "Jason Hiro merely helped alter the mana from His Eminence's aperture into mine, then converted it to something my demonic body could handle. You might not know this, but the Hero's mana reserves are quite low. He does not possess nearly enough energy to compete with the average Demon Lord, let alone Barons, Dukes, and Emperors. Only someone with deep reserves, such as King Kar, could grant me my current title."

Kar nods sagely. He closes his eyes and sighs. "Hurgh. I can grant a Lord the power of a Baron, but I cannot grant a Baron the power of a Duke. To attempt such a feat would drain me of all my mana. I might perish if I were to even try."

Mara's steadfast conviction falters. She chews her lower lip for a moment while glancing between the Baron and Crocodile. "Is... is that so? Hm. Your words make some modicum of sense, but how am I to know if you are telling the truth? I cannot allow a demon tainted by Holy Magic to enter my people's capitol."

While Mara voices her concerns, Ying-Ying slithers over to her sister's side and whispers something in her ear.

Mara nods.

"Hm. Yes, that is a fair point. A conductive test would expose any lingering heroic energy contained within Smithy's body."

Smithy raises his eyebrows. "Hm? What's this about a test? Do you need to take my temperature?"

Mara chuckles. "Haha. No, don't be absurd. Unless I determine you and the Monster King lack all traces of Holy Energy, I won't allow you to enter Hell Harbor. It's as simple as that. If you're still dead-set on arranging an audience with Emperor Ose, you'll have to submit to a few magical tests to clear your names."

"Now, hold on just a minute!" Blinker yells, as she flies over and hovers next to Mara's face. "Who are you to treat us like criminals?! We're famous people, you know! Way more than you! Kar could snap you like a twig!"

Mara rolls her eyes. "If the Monster King attacks my sister or me, he'll be lucky to make it back to the Core in one piece, let alone travel to Hell Harbor. You need my sister to open the gate, and you need a high-ranking demon, such as myself, to authorize your travel. piss off one of us, and you can kiss your audience with our Emperor *buh-bye*."

The Baron of Games exposes a sinister smirk. She spreads her arms and leans forward. "Attack me if you dare. I may not have enough strength to defeat you, but you'll find my powers more than adequate for ensuring my survival while punishing your impudence."

Kar holds up one of his claws. "Hurgh. There is no need for us to resort to violence. My *sla- err, assistant*, will submit to whatever tests you like, as will I. However, don't break his arms. If he can't deliver my coffee in the morning, I'll be awfully sad."

Smithy's right eye twitches. "Truly, my master's benevolence knows no limits."

Mara nods. "This won't take long. Smithy, I want you to start by demonstrating your powers for me."

Smithy sighs. "Fine, but only because Master Kar ordered me to do so."

Smithy closes his eyes for a moment, then holds his palm out, upright.

Foop!

A ballpoint pen appears in midair mere inches above the Baron of Prediction's hand. It lands in his palm without making a sound.

"If you wish to see my powers in action, I'll need this."

Mara crosses her arms. "Oh? Is that some sort of magical implement?"

Smithy shakes his head. "It's a pen."

Ying-Ying raises her hand. "Ooh! Ooh! It's a magical pen though, right?"

"No," Smithy sighs. "It's *just* a pen. An ordinary one."

Mara cocks her head slightly. "Alright. You have piqued my curiosity. Continue your exhibition."

The Baron of Prediction nods. He turns to Ying-Ying and smiles. "If you don't mind, I'd like your assistance to verify my powers."

"Huh? Me?" Ying-Ying asks, confusion trickling into her voice. "Why do you need my help?"

Instead of replying, Smithy holds out his palm again. This time, a five-inch notepad pops into existence above his hand and lands in his palm. He stays silent and begins furiously scribbling a series of sentences in the notepad. After five minutes, he nods. "That will do. Miss Ying-Ying, if you would be so kind, please take this notepad and give it a read. Don't tell your sister about its contents; just keep them to yourself for now."

Ying-Ying's confusion doubles as she nods, takes the notepad, and flicks her eyes across its contents. "Huh...? But... how are you going to get Mara-"

"Now, now," Smithy says. He presses a finger against Ying-Ying's lips, shushing her mid-sentence. His touch causes Ying-Ying to blush and stammer, but she quickly falls silent.

After a few moments, Smithy turns to Mara.

"Baron of Games. Let's make this a little more interesting. You tell me about your powers, and I'll tell you about mine."

Mara frowns. "That wasn't part of our agreement."

"I know, but why not humor me? Come, now, we're both Barons. There's no need to be embarrassed if your abilities don't match up to mine."

Mara immediately uncrosses her arms. She takes a step toward Smithy, fury in her eyes. "What was that? Do you honestly think you can say something so insulting and get away with it?!"

"Whoa, now," Smithy says, holding up both hands in a feigned surrender. "It seems I hit a little too close to home. How about this: Why not tell me something personal about yourself? For example, how many moles do you have on your back?"

Mara's eyes grow as wide as saucers. She stares at the Baron of Prediction with open-mouthed outrage. "H-h-how many m-moles I have...?! What kind of absurd-"

"Seven, correct?" Smithy asks.

The Baron of Games averts her eyes. Her cheeks flush deep-red as waves of embarrassment wash over her. "No!! How would you even know something like that? Have you been spying on me?!"

Smithy sighs. "Of course not. Haven't you tried to hazard any guesses about my powers? Are my abilities not given away by my title? Take a look at your sister's face. She'll confirm their validity for you."

In between flashes of rage and humiliation, Mara glances at Ying-Ying, only to see that her sister has even wider eyes than herself!

"It's all on here!" Ying-Ying says, as she scans Smithy's writing. "Every word you and Smithy spoke- he put it all in this notepad!"

"What? How?" Mara asks. Without hesitation, she walks over and snatches the notepad from her sister's grasp. "That's impossible. Not even the best Oracles could do such a-"

Mara stares at the notepad for several long, drawn-out seconds. Her pupils slowly dilate as waves of adrenaline surge through her body.

I will turn to Mara and say: "Baron of Games. Let's make this a little more interesting. You tell me about your powers, and I'll tell you about mine."

She will reply: "That wasn't part of our agreement."

Then, I will say: "I know, but why not humor me? Come, now, we're both Barons. There's no need to be embarrassed if your abilities don't match up to mine."

A dozen or so sentences detail Mara and Smithy's entire conversation. The more she reads, the more her heart palpitates.

Mara will start to get frustrated. She will say: "What? How?" And then she will take the notebook from you. Immediately following, she will say: "That's impossible. Not even the best Oracles could do such a-" and fall silent mid-sentence. By then, she will have begun reading this notepad.

The notebook ends on that line.

Sweat drips down Mara's face as she stares at the impossibly precise prediction, with thousands of thoughts running through her head.

Seven Hells! I thought this Baron of Prediction might have a few interesting abilities, but to be able to gaze into the future is not something I ever thought possible! Not even the Oracles can peer behind the curtain of time!

Mara swallows her saliva to taste the dryness of her mouth.

"You... you predict the future. That's why your title is the Baron of Prediction. Smithy, how did you manage to evolve such a powerful ability?!"

Mara raises her eyes from the notepad, only to see Smithy awkwardly shuffling his feet.

"W-well, ahem, I don't actually see the future, Mara. That's not how my magic works."

"What nonsense are you speaking?" Mara asks, her jumbled thoughts becoming even more chaotic every second. "What is your power, if not the gift of divination?!"

"I do predict *things*," Smithy says, wagging a finger. "But my power revolves around deductions and logic, not foresight in the sense you imagine. After speaking to you for several minutes, I gathered information about your personality and mannerisms, and then I deduced how you would respond to anything I asked."

Smithy sighs. "For me, deductions are as easy as opening and closing my eyes. If you and I were to fight, you would find out how terrifying my ability can be."

Mara slowly drops her arms to her sides. She nods along to Smithy's words, not entirely understanding his meaning. "But... even if you predicted my responses, how could you guess the number of moles on my back? I don't even know how many I have!"

Smithy smiles. "I don't know either. I simply guessed the number seven because it sounded good. I knew you would deny any number I invented, so it didn't matter which one I picked. You not knowing the number either was a lucky bonus!"

"Wow! Wowie!!" Ying-Ying yells. "Ohmygosh, you're so cool! Your power is amazing! Can you predict things about me, too?!"

Smithy shrugs. "Sure."

"Great! What's my favorite color?"

Smithy raises his eyebrow. "...Red."

"Wow!! You're amazing! You didn't even bat an eye! Wait... wait a minute! You cheated! I told you my favorite color already!!"

"Ying-Ying, please," Mara mutters, exasperation in her voice. "Now isn't the time for this conversation. I need to continue my test."

Ying-Ying groans. "But whyyy? Smithy already passed! What more do you want from him?"

"No, he didn't," Mara says. She regains her bearings and takes a few steps back, keeping a lingering eye on the Baron of Prediction. "My test was supposed to detect the presence of holy energy in his body. However, Smithy's predictive ability doesn't release any mana whatsoever. I have yet to confirm his demonic purity."

Smithy claps his hands. "Oh, right! Well, if all you wanted was to sense my demonic energy, you should have said so! I can bring it out for you right now."

Without waiting for Mara's reply, Smithy extends his hand toward the notepad still clutched in Mara's palm. Despite the ten-foot gap separating both Baron's, Mara's heart nearly jumps out of her chest when the notepad vanishes from her grasp and reappears in Smithy's, all without him physically taking it from her.

"Yoink, haha!" Smithy laughs. "See? How about that? Did you sense my mana?"

Once again, a dazed expression appears on Mara's face. She shakes her head slowly, unable to process the notepad's disappearance. "Ah... yes. But what power did you use just now?"

"I call it the 'Sneaky Yoink!'" Smithy says. "I can move things to and from my hands. Pretty neat, right?"

Mara glances at her sister, then back to Smithy. "Isn't that teleportation? Like what the Warpners use?"

Smithy shrugs. "Probably?"

"You're quite the jack-of-all-trades," Mara murmurs. "Any other abilities?"

"A few," Smithy says. "But a magician never reveals his secrets. I've held up my end of the bargain. Go ahead and test my Master now."

Mara starts to protest. "But, I still have questions-"

"And we're still on a tight timetable," Smithy replies, dismissing her concerns. "After we speak to Ose, I'd be open to goofing around later. Right now, a hammer hangs in the air between the humans and demons. Should it fall, millions, billions, perhaps even trillions will die. Your curiosity comes second to saving lives."

Crestfallen, Mara merely nods and sighs. Her shoulders slump as she turns to face Kar and Blinker.

"Uhm, well, Smithy isn't wrong. Would both of you kindly demonstrate your magic for me? We might as well get this over with."

Kar scowls at the Baron of Games. "Hurgh! If I didn't know any better, I might think my presence *bored* you! Do you not understand who I am? I am the mightiest monster in the Labyrinth! How many Duke-level monsters have you ever met, little Peaches?"

"Not many," Mara admits. "Perhaps three. Bahamut was among them, but her physical strength surely paled in comparison to yours. Were it not for her adept enslavement of other beings; she would not have held much clout among Hell's denizens."

"Exactly," Kar replies, as his scowl shifts to a braggadocious grin. "I'm the top gator around here. You'd better open your eyes and pay attention, 'cause I'm about to put on a show like nothin' you've seen before!"

Blinker lands on Kar's shoulder and crosses her arms. "Sweetie, please don't embarrass me like you did last time."

"I'd never do such a thing," Kar replies.

"Yeah. You *would*."

Blinker sulks in silence while Kar stretches his arms. The giant crocodile ignores his wife's concerns as he begins weaving a series of magical signs.

Suddenly, he vanishes.

Kar launches himself toward the far wall at sub-sonic speeds. His instant acceleration startles the monsters in the room, who have all but ignored the 'demon business' happening in the far corner. Many of them jerk their heads to the side as a deafening explosion blasts throughout the small, makeshift arena, the entire sector shudders, and a shockwave flings everyone off their feet. Even Mara and her sister stumble and trip, landing on their asses with looks of astonishment on their faces.

Kar follows-up by leaping into the air and rapid-punching toward the floor. Each swing of his arms sends mana rushing forward, which erupts in dazzling explosions of dirt and rock. The Labyrinth's firm ground, made from magically compacted soil, crumbles under his relentless power.

Boom! Boom!

Hundreds, even thousands of pounds of the Labyrinth's foundation, go flying in every direction, burying the monsters and demons present under an avalanche of debris. Some monsters take cover to protect themselves from Kar's hailstorm, but many do not.

After a full minute of ceaselessly hovering in the sky and punching the air, Kar finishes his demonstration and abruptly stops. The cacaphony of thunder disappears as quickly as it began, and Kar falls to the ripped-up floor below, landing on his feet with a hard *thud*.

The room falls silent. Several hundred monsters begin clawing their way out of Kar's landslide, but many others need assistance from their friends to escape.

The Monster King grins like an idiot as he surveys the chaos surrounding him. He rests one claw on his hip while turning to the Baron of Games. "Hurgh. How was that?"

Mara shakily pulls herself to her feet. She helps her sister up as well, and both of them dust off their clothes. "You... you didn't have to unleash such raw, destructive power! Look at the mess you've created!"

Kar shrugs. "That's why you have goblins; to clean up in my wake."

Mara starts to retort, only to glance to her left, where Smithy stands, a circle of perfection surrounding him. Unlike the rest of the room, which was swallowed up by Kar's destruction, the Baron of Prediction stands in the same spot as before, his immediate surroundings untouched. He leans against the wall with a bored expression on his face, as if he hadn't just witnessed an incredible display of Duke-level strength.

"You!" Mara balks. "You didn't get knocked around by the Monster King's attacks?"

"Nope."

"...Why not?"

Smithy sticks his pinky in his ear. "I've seen more impressive feats. If you think Kar's strength is wild, you should see what the Hero can do. It would blow your mind."

Ying-Ying walks over and pokes Smithy's arm. "Wow. You aren't faking confidence or anything! Did you summon a barrier to protect yourself?"

"Something like that," Smithy replies, keeping his answer neutral. "Anyway, did we pass? Are we cleared to enter Hell Harbor?"

Mara stares at the Baron of Prediction for several moments. Her laser-like gaze threatens to bore a hole in the side of Smithy's head, but he doesn't react at all.

Finally, Mara sighs. "Whatever. I've done my part. Unless the Monster Queen is hiding holy energy in her tiny little body, you three can enter Hell Harbor. *Ugh*. Cleaning up this mess is going to cost me dearly."

Smithy cocks his head slightly. "In what way?"

"You don't know?" Mara asks. "I oversaw today's tests, and failed to provide a suitable chamber for testing the Monster King. As such, I'll need to pay for the Labyrinth's repairs with Soul tokens. How long have you lived among fleshbags to forget such basic information?"

"Oh, Soul Tokens," Smithy says, nodding. "I misunderstood your meaning. I was only a Lord until recently, so I didn't have much use for, uh, those."

Ying-Ying glances at Mara in confusion. "What does he mean, sister? I thought all demons needed Soul Tokens to pay for things. Isn't that how we earn the right to reach higher ranks?"

Mara frowns. "It is. Smithy, how could you become a Lord without using Soul Tokens? All demons need them. You need one thousand souls to become a Lord in the first place, so how could you not know of their existence?"

Smithy's expression twists noticeably. For the first time since his arrival, he appears at a loss for words. He pulls away from the wall and starts rubbing his chin.

"Ah, well, you see... well, it's like this..."

The Baron of Prediction scrunches up his forehead and begins to sweat profusely. As he does, Mara's suspicions deepen.

"Smithy? You're starting to worry me. Answer my question. All demons need Soul Tokens, so how could you not know of their existence?"

Before Smithy can answer, Blinker flies over and interrupts him. "Oh, geez! It's fine; you can tell the lady! There's no reason to hide your powers."

Smithy blinks twice. A look of surprise appears on his face. "Huh? Tell her what? I don't follow."

Blinker lands on Smithy's shoulder and whispers something in his ear. As she does, a look of relief passes over the Baron's face.

"Oh. Oh! Right, yes. How could I forget? Haha. I'm such an airhead sometimes."

The young Baron blushes in embarrassment as he returns his attention to Mara. "Right, so, I never needed Soul Tokens in the first place. I can, uh, take human souls without using the River Styx."

Mara's frown intensifies. "Oh? You're just one big surprise after another, aren't you? How can you obtain souls on your own? Tell me."

Smithy shrugs. "Well, have you heard of Soulfire?"

Mara nearly jumps out of her skin. "Soulfire?! How could you possibly possess such a unique ability, in addition to all the others you've demonstrated today?! Few demons know this, but the fact Beelzebub uses it was considered a high-level secret among the upper ranks! For you to wield it as well is simply inconceivable!"

Smithy nods. "Yes. You're right. I don't possess Soulfire."

Mara's heartrate quickly normalizes as she breathes a sigh of relief. "You don't? Devils. Don't scare me like that. Forget entering Hell Harbor; I'd have to report you to Emperor Ose post-haste if you-"

"I have a similar ability, though," Smithy says, interrupting Mara. "I can take the souls of other beings under, erm, specific conditions."

Mara swallows her words. A flash of anger washes over her face. "Damn you! Stop toying with me! This is no time for jokes, Smithy! Bypassing the River of Souls is a high crime among our people! If you don't explain yourself right this instant..."

Smithy glances at Blinker as she sits on his shoulder. A look of annoyance passes over his face. "A high crime, you say?"

"Yes," Mara replies. "The foundation of demon society rests on doling out a limited number of souls to the most deserving and promising talents. We can't allow demons to reap souls on their own, lest they kill too many fleshbags and stifle the flow of new arrivals into the River Styx. The only reason Beelzebub got away with using Soulfire was because of his status as Agares' pupil, plus a healthy dose of nepotism. For a young, unknown figure like yourself, the punishment will be quite severe."

As Mara speaks, Ying-Ying wrings her hands while looking both confused and disoriented. "Uwah! Smithy, darling! You can't be a criminal, right? Tell me it's not true!"

Exasperated, Smithy shrugs his shoulders. "I didn't, uh, realize taking souls without permission was a crime. Damn. This complicates things. That's what I get for running my mouth."

Blinker facepalms. "It's my fault. I should have remembered before telling you."

"No, don't blame yourself. You're a monster, not a demon. You probably aren't aware of the intricacies of their society."

Mara stares at Smithy as he converses with the fairy on his shoulder. As he speaks, a soft tingling appears in the back of her mind.

Before Kar and Smithy came here, I placed three Tarot Cards in anticipation of their arrival. The cards warned me of a great danger, a terrible lie, and an extension of good faith.

However, what lie, and what danger did they refer to?

So far, while he has been somewhat evasive, Smithy's fibs have been little more than little white lies. Hardly worth mentioning. Kar's demonstration was only a bit dangerous, nothing that would have endangered my life.

What crucial detail am I missing? Why can't I shake the feeling that I shouldn't trust these three with the keys to Hell Harbor?

As Mara thinks, her sister, Ying-Ying, pipes up. "Smithy? What do you mean by 'their society?' Don't you mean 'our society?' You're a demon too, silly!"

Smithy pauses his conversation with Blinker. A strange, distant look appears on his face, as if he's just realized a terrible mistake. "Oh. Hm, yeah. You're right. A slip of the tongue on my part."

Mara's heart skips a beat.

How could Smithy make such a silly mistake? What self-respecting demon would refer to his people in the third-person?

Unless...

Wait. A crucial detail.

Have I overlooked something, after all?

Puzzle pieces click into place in Mara's mind.

Spawn of a broodmother. I have. How could I be so stupid? Jason Hiro is a Wordsmith. He can make anything happen by speaking a single word. Why would he boost a demon, even someone he considered an ally, to take his place, when he could change his appearance via Wordsmithing instead?

Devils! Have I uncovered his scheme?! The damned Wordsmith didn't leave! He must have disguised himself as a demon! It's no wonder this 'Smithy' doesn't know about Soul Tokens! It's no wonder he refers to demons as if he isn't one of them, because he's not!

Smithy is Jason Hiro, the Wordsmith, in disguise! My sister and I are in great danger after all!! The filthy bastard has been lying to us the whole time! He's-

As Mara finishes assembling the puzzle and takes a step back to re-evaluate it, Smithy suddenly turns to look at her.

A cold, icy dread washes over the demoness.

Inside her mind, a second voice appears.

[Damn. You figured it out.]

Smithy? No! Jason Hiro?!

[That's right.]

You're reading my thoughts! You're a devil-damned telepath!

Mara opens her mouth to warn Ying-Ying. However, before she can utter a single syllable, Smithy speaks.

"Silence. Suppress. Bind."

In an instant, all of Mara's instincts fail her. Before she has a chance to defend herself, an invisible clamp grabs her throat and squeezes it, preventing her from speaking. Her body seizes up, preventing her from moving, while chains formed from mana grab her arms and bind them behind her. Unable to perform magical signs, the Baron stands motionless, unable to speak.

Jason Hiro, the Wordsmith posed as a Demon Baron, repeats the same three words, but aimed at Ying-Ying. She, too, turns as stiff as a statue, powerless to resist his magic.

Both women stare at the Demon Baron, wide-eyed with fear. Unable to speak, they can't do anything but look at each other and back at the Wordsmith.

Jason Hiro maintains his demonic appearance. He glances behind the girls at the still-disoriented monsters pulling themselves from the rubble on the opposite side of the room.

"Mirage. Distraction." There. Now nobody will bother us."

Mara's heart rate triples. It bounces around in her chest like an angry gorilla, trying desperately to force her body to move. However, no matter how she tries, Mara can't escape the Wordsmith's imprisonment.

Bastard! You... you disgusting, wretched fleshbag! I should have known! You won't get away with this! When the Council hears of our deaths, all your claims of coming in peace will fall apart!!

Jason cocks his head as a look of confusion passes over his face. "Huh? No, no. I'm not going to kill or hurt you. I'm only temporarily restraining you, nothing else. I wouldn't go this far under normal circumstances, but if I'd let you go on any longer, you'd have run away or brought the whole Labyrinth down on me."

The Wordsmith walks closer to Mara and smiles. However, contrary to her expectations, his expression is anything but smug. His smile radiates warmth, making her doubt, even if only for a moment, the idea that he is her enemy.

"I didn't lie about my desire to seek peace, Mara. You and I are currently enemies, but I had no say in that. Maybe I'm just a stupid idealist, but I believe peace between our people is possible. However, I know you don't believe me, and possibly never will. Once I get the location of Hell Harbor and erase your knowledge of my identity from your memories, I'll let you go."

Mara's eye twitches. *Liar. If you could forcefully take Hell Harbor's location from me, you would have done so sooner.*

"I wanted you to take me there of your own volition," Jason says. "Forcefully taking the information is a backup option, one I regret having to use. Look, I know you don't like me... but... well, maybe just give me a chance, alright? You seem like a good person. We could have been friends in another life. Hell, maybe we still can."

With a sigh, Jason turns to face Ying-Ying. "Um, for the record... I'm married. You seem like a nice girl. Keep that positive attitude going, and I'm sure you'll find a nice guy, someday."

Mara glances at her sister. To her surprise, Ying-Ying seems far less alarmed than she should be. She stares at Jason Hiro with a look of acceptance.

"Yeah," Jason says to Ying-Ying, as if answering an unspoken question. "I'm the Hero, disguised as a demon. Sorry for lying to you. You didn't do anything wrong. Don't blame yourself. If anything, it's Mara's fault. She was clever enough to figure out my identity. I've gotta give her props for that."

With a shrug, Jason speaks two words of power.

"Extract. Erase."

Ying-Ying's eyes flutter for a moment, before eventually closing as she falls into a deep sleep.

Jason turns to face Mara. "Don't worry. Your sister will be fine, and so will you. If you happen to regain your memories, just know that I didn't come here to hurt anyone."

Mara's stomach clenches as tears begin to bubble in her eyes. *I don't believe you. You're... you're a damned, filthy fleshbag.*

"Hey, we fleshbags aren't that bad," Jason says, laughing wryly. "If I manage to put an end to this stupid war, you should pop by the Core sometime. My wife makes dumplings I'd die to protect."

After a moment of silence, Jason closes his eyes.

"You predicted a great lie, a great danger, and an olive branch. In terms of foresight, your abilities eclipse mine. Consider this my olive branch to you, Mara."

"Erase."

Jason Hiro speaks a word of power.

Drowsiness takes Mara, as her eyes begin to flutter and close.

An... olive... branch...

Part 210: The Demon Homeworld

After speaking a Word of Power, I step toward Mara and ease her to the ground. To my surprise, the blonde-haired demoness melts into my arms, weighing so little that I have a hard time believing her body isn't made of feathers and fluff. After laying her on the ground, I do the same for Ying-Ying and wipe my forehead.

"Hurgh. Well done," Kar says, as he walks over and pats my back. "That was a successful mission if I've ever seen one."

I stand up while keeping an eye on Ying-Ying's slumbering face. "No. I didn't want to incapacitate these girls. Where possible, I will always prefer using discretion to force."

Blinker flies over and lands on Ying-Ying's arm. "You're wrong, Jason! It's okay to use your strength sometimes. After all, these girls are Barons. That means they ate over a hundred thousand souls to evolve! They might look like cutie-patooties, but these two are killers to the core."

Kar nods. "Butterfly is right. What good did all of your preparation do, in the end? Peaches still uncovered your identity. Blossom was not as smart as her sister, but even I noticed how she talked about humans. Neither of these girls were friends of humanity. Sooner or later, they would have uncovered your identity. You merely delayed their hatred."

I nod. "You're right, but only somewhat. Tell me, Kar, how did Samantha reach the rank of Emperor?"

Kar shrugs. "Hurgh. By eating human souls?"

"No. Sam got her power from a dragon. She told Phoebe once that she's never killed a human before, nor taken one's soul. Now, I'm not saying this is the case for Mara and Ying-Ying, but I am saying things aren't as black and white as they might first appear."

I turn my gaze toward the monsters and demons milling about across the room. Thanks to my Mirage spell, they have yet to notice their downed superiors. As far as they can tell, Kar has resumed his conversation with the Baron of Games.

"When I told Mara that you evolved me from a Lord to a Baron by using Wordsmithing to refine Monster energy into Demonic energy, that wasn't merely a lie to conceal my origins. It had a granule of truth in it."

Kar scratches his head. "I... I don't follow, Turtle."

"Think about it, Kar. Why does consuming a soul improve a demon's strength, and why does consuming many souls cause them to evolve?"

Blinker raises her hand. "Ooh! Ooh! I know the answer! It's because each soul raises a demon's mana capacity!"

"That's right. So, if Kar gave his energy to a demon, he could, theoretically, evolve that demon without them needing to consume souls."

Kar nods, but a look of skepticism appears on his face. "Hurgh. But as you told Peaches, monster and demon energy are opposites. They would clash and possibly kill the demon if he were to take my mana."

"Yes, but my Wordsmithing might be able to bridge that gap. I might be able to transform demon and monster energy into one another, thus boosting demons without them needing souls."

Blinker flies off Ying-Ying's comatose form and lands on my shoulder. "Hmm, you keep saying 'might' a lot. Haven't you tried doing the conversion already? Don't you know for sure?"

I shake my head. "No. A lot of things could go wrong. For example, my Wordsmithing uses Holy Energy to create its magical effects. You guys saw what happened when I tried to mimic demonic mana. Without Solomon's Crown, I have to feel it out and use you two as reference. If I tried doing the conversion, I might screw everything up."

With a shake of my head, I sigh. "I couldn't risk someone else's life over a hunch. Unless I get Solomon's Crown back or find a suitable replacement for his knowledge and computational power, I won't even try doing something so dangerous."

Kar slowly kneels down to stare at the unconscious demonesses. "Hurgh. I see. You must have told these two about your conversion concept for another reason, then. You... you want to give them the idea that if they follow you, they won't have to consume souls anymore."

"That's right. Demons don't need souls to survive. They can already live forever, barring death by accident or battle. If I can find a way to replace their need for souls, I can outline a more persuasive case for the end of the human-demon war. After all, demons might not need souls to survive, but souls give them purpose and a chance at advancement."

Blinker's shoulders slump slightly. "Jason. Don't you think you're acting a little too casual about... about all this? Like souls and stuff. Demons aren't just 'powering up' with human souls. They're eating fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers. I've met a lot of humans since moving to Tarus II, and I wouldn't want any of them to end up inside some demon's gullet where they'd get tortured for all eternity. It's terrible, Jason. Simply awful."

Blinker's words give me pause for a moment.

"Yeah. I know. But what other option do I have? Demons are sentient creatures, just like humans. If they were all horrible, evil monsters, it would be all too easy for me to invent justifications for their genocide. However, they aren't all bad. Many simply live within the Council's system and do what they must to advance. If I could offer them an alternative, they might leave the current regime behind."

Blinker squirms uncomfortably on my shoulder. "I *know*, but don't you think you're giving most demons way too much leeway here? Demon Grunts act like feral, wild animals. You saw what they did to those two men when we walked in here. They do stuff like that all the time!"

Kar sighs. "I have always been an open-minded crocodile, but even I know that demons are some of the most barbaric beings in the universe."

"You're both missing the point," I mutter. "But it doesn't really matter. I can't expect you to have faith I'll overturn the evils of demonkind. Hell, I don't even believe I can. It's just... when I look at the history of

the demons, they were set up for failure from the very beginning. Their hatred dates back to the first imps who escaped from Heaven. They've lived and breathed violence for their entire existence. First, they had to survive, then to infiltrate, and finally, the last hundred thousand years of violence have all been so they could exact their revenge on humanity. They torture us because they think it's their purpose in life."

When my gaze meets Blinker's, I notice she looks unconvinced. Compared to her, Kar's expression seems much more open-minded.

"Hurgh. Perhaps you may have a point, Turtle. For one as dense as you to dwell on such grand themes, it makes me happy. You may yet have a chance at advancing your intellect."

I roll my eyes. "Ugh, shut up, Kar. You're such an ass, sometimes."

"Damn right, he is!" Blinker laughs. She flies off my shoulder and lands on Kar's. "Anyway, what are we gonna do about these two unconscious beauties? Don't get any weird ideas, boys. I've got my eyes on you."

"We'll leave them here," I say. "I already extracted the layout of Hell Harbor from Ying-Ying's mind. Surprisingly, I managed to map out a huge portion of the planet. I can open a rift almost anywhere."

"Hurgh. The closer you can get us to Ose's location, the less hostile territory we'll have to travel through," Kar remarks. "Where is she now?"

I shrug. "If I had to guess, her estate. But, surprisingly, Ying-Ying's memories didn't tell me where it was, only its appearance. I don't even have a vague direction. There is, however, a mountaintop not far from some of Hell Harbor's lower dominions. It has a great view, and more importantly, it overlooks a bunch of important landmarks. We'll go there and scout the area."

After pausing to take a breath, I speak a word of power. "**Portal.**"

Whoomph.

Ten feet away from me, a huge suction of air makes Kar jump in surprise. He quickly recovers from his shock as an opaque warpgate appears, allowing us to enter Hell Harbor.

Before we step through, I pause and glance at Mara again. "**Extract.**"

Instead of aiming for a specific part of Mara's memories, I aim for a holistic view of her entire life. Thousands of images enter my mind, memories upon memories. My head quickly swells with information, forcing me to my knees as I absorb her knowledge.

Before her memories can overwhelm me, I grit my teeth and speak another word. "**Terminal!**"

Just as quickly as the pain of assimilation strikes me, it vanishes. Inside my mind realm, a large computer terminal appears, complete with a viewscreen capable of looking up information.

My mind-wife, Phoebe, speaks, confusion in her voice. "Jason? What's this? What did you do?"

I stored all of Mara's knowledge in my Mind Realm, separate from my brain, so I won't lose myself. I'll be relying on you to give me any relevant information.

"Me? But why? Does she have any information we need? It's beyond discourteous to look into someone's memories."

I know. However, if I've learned anything, it's that entering Hell Harbor as an unknown Baron will only be asking for trouble. I'll impersonate Mara, instead.

Rising to my feet, I utter several words of power. "**Disguise. Appearance. Voice.**

Bit by bit, I change different parts of my body, transforming myself into the demoness I interacted with only minutes before. Kar and Blinker watch me as I become a perfect facsimile of the Baron of Games.

"You know," Blinker mutters to Kar, "I never thought about this before, but Jason could turn himself into a lady and do all kinds of pervy things to himself!"

With my voice sounding identical to Mara's, I reply, "Samantha could do the same thing, and you never had a problem with her."

"Yeahhh, but it's *different* for a guy," Blinker replies. "Guys are way lewder than women. That's just a fact."

I try not to roll my eyes. "...*Right*. You might have a point. For now, let's focus, alright? I'll impersonate Mara, so if we need to bypass any security checkpoints, we'll be able to get past them with ease."

After the three of us check to make sure my Mirage is still working, we step through the portal and leave the Baron of Games and her sister behind, arriving on the world of Hell Harbor.

The moment we arrive, a litany of sights and smells assaults me, along with the difference in the planet's air pressure, making my ears pop. Having experienced the turbulence of portal-walking on countless occasions, I barely even notice what I once considered head-splitting pain.

A flat, rocky plateau stands atop a five-hundred-foot-tall mountain, its position overlooking the entrance to Hell Harbor, where newcomers arrive via the Keymaster's portals. Ordinarily, nobody can leave or enter the planet via teleportation magic, except through the authorized warp points. Too bad for the demons, my Wordsmithing doesn't have such a limitation. If it did, Kar and I might have to sweet-talk our way through hundreds of potential enemies.

After gazing at the speck-sized demons and monsters milling about in the distance, I turn my gaze north, along the edge of the western beach. Hell Harbor's Annex, the heavily reinforced building for entering and exiting the planet, sits only half a mile away from a vast, sparkling ocean. To my surprise, the seawater is so clear that I can make out the movements of gigantic underwater predators off the coast, each one dwarfing Earth's blue whales.

Hell Harbor's sky distinctly reminds me of Earth's, with its bright blue coloration and white clouds. Interestingly, this planet's star appears noticeably more orange than Earth's, giving the air a warmer tone.

Several other things catch my attention, like how the planet's grass appears far more vibrantly green than my homeworld's. Exotic dragonfly-like insects buzz through the air, while a few clumps of bright purple flowers snap shut on any critter stupid enough to land on their buds.

"Wow," Blinker says, echoing my thoughts. "I thought Hell Harbor would be... I dunno... ugly? Barren? This place is amazing! It's an oasis!"

"Indeed," Kar says, stroking his chin. "Hurgh. I have never come here before. However, Mother has spoken of it on several occasions. It is a luxurious homeworld for any demons or monsters who have earned accolades. While some might state that only Baron-level demons may come here, that is not strictly true. A few Lords live here as well, those who have yet to rank up to Baron, but have performed noteworthy deeds for the Council. Also, countless slaves live here, be they human, demon, or monster."

I nod. "Yeah. Don't expect more than a faint veneer of civility with the slave trade here. I can only imagine the horrible shit the Demon Council's members do to their human pets."

With a sigh, I speak several words of power in a row.

"Invisibility. Invisibility. Invisibility. Telepathy. Telepathy. Stealth. Stealth. Stealth."

Over and over, I use my Wordsmithing to turn Kar, Blinker, and me into invisible agents of deception. Kar stares at me as my body turns partially translucent, along with his and Blinker's. Once I finish, he speaks. "Hurgh. Why imitate Peaches' appearance if we are going to become invisible? I do not understand."

"My goal is to reach Ose and speak to her. For now, though, I don't want anyone seeing us climb down the mountain. It would invite too many questions. Once we get to the bottom, I'll need to find someone who can tell us where Ose is hiding and extract her location with my Wordsmithing. After that, it's smooth sailing."

Blinker narrows her eyes. "*Riiight. Smooth sailing.*"

I start walking down the mountain, and Kar follows behind me.

"We can see each other thanks to how I formulated my magical intent. However, our voices are still audible to anyone nearby. From now on, use telepathy to communicate with each other. Alright?"

Kar frowns. "Certainly. Hurgh... but how?"

[Like this. Think the words in your head, and aim them at Blinker or me.]

[Hurgh... like... this?]

[Yep.]

Kar and Blinker fall silent for a moment, indicating they must be exchanging words with each other.

Telepathy sounds overpowered, but it has many downsides. For example, when I try to read people's thoughts, I can only hear one person's mind at a time. Even when I listen, I can only hear their present top-level concerns. That's the biggest thing that sunk me when I tried to fool Mara. I didn't understand the importance of Soul Tokens, and I couldn't get the information from her brain either, not without using Wordsmithing to extract that specific information.

Most people think on their feet. Their thoughts prove to be a jumble, only slowing down when they enter a conversation. However, the moment they stop talking, their brains fire up to maximum speed, making a thousand words travel around at a mile per minute. When Mara mentioned Soul Tokens, she

didn't need to think about their definition or function, as that information was ingrained in her subconscious. It was only when I started asking questions that she began pulling her knowledge to the surface.

By that point, it was already too late. She'd realized that I, a supposed self-respecting Demon Baron, would know everything she did. How could I make such a casual mistake?

From there, it was just a matter of piecing together the other inconsistencies I'd accidentally let slip.

Now that I've downloaded all of her memories into my Mind Realm, Phoebe can peruse them and help sort out the useful information I might need later. Who knows what other trivial bits of information I've taken for granted?

As Kar, Blinker, and I all trudge down the well-worn mountain trail, Kar's telepathy tickles my brain.

[Turtle. I must say, your performance against that Baron female was decent. How did you manage all that future-seeing stuff? Your explanation sounded fine, but surely you used your Wordsmithing to see into the future, right?]

I shake my head. [No. I used a Word of Power to grant myself enhanced predictive capabilities. Unfortunately, they were far less potent than when I used them in conjunction with Solomon's Crown a few years ago. His Crown greatly accelerated my thinking speed, which also improved my predictive accuracy.]

[Hurgh. Your accuracy seemed just fine to me.]

[It wasn't. I only managed to guess half a dozen or so exchanges into the future. Predicting beyond that would have led to a large number of errors. Any set of probabilities will grow exponentially more chaotic as you add additional variables.]

I can almost hear Kar's head bobbing as he nods behind me. [Hurgh. Yes, yes, of course. I understand.]

Phoebe laughs. "Haha! Kar doesn't understand a word you just said!"

Probably not, but let's let him have his moment.

* * *

It doesn't take long before the three of us reach the bottom of the mountain, where we arrive at a sparsely populated, lightly forested woodland area. A few dozen trees sit amidst heaps of leaves as fifteen goblins work together to rake them up.

"Nyeh! Work work, that all we do! All stinkin' day, rake leaves, shovel hellhound skarn! This big unfair!"

"Shut mouth, Bobo!" A second goblin hisses. "If Master hears you bitchin', we all get three kicks!"

"Me complain if me want!" Bobo groans. "It hot outside! Me want go back underground!"

I hold up my hand, causing Kar to slow to a stop.

[Wait,] I say. [Goblins have excellent senses of smell and hearing. We won't be able to walk past them. Stand still; I'm going to 'jump' you somewhere safe.]

[Hurgh. What do you mean by 'jump me'?] Kar asks. [In my language, that is a term exclusively reserved for one who wishes to copulate with a potential mate.]

My cheeks flush red. [No, idiot! I mean that I'm going to teleport you out of the goblins' range. Do you remember when I held up my hand and made that notepad and pen appear?]

[Hurgh. Yes. That parlor trick you used to enhance the Baron's lust for you. It was an excellent technique. Her eyes dilated by 200%.]

[Kar, I'm going to beat you senseless when we get home.]

I turn back to look at Kar. He grins at me, as does Blinker. Both of them chuckle into their hands, clearly delighted by my discomfort.

[You two are so immature,] I grumble.

Without waiting for a reply, I aim my mind at them while visualizing a clearing at the edge of the forest.

Foop!

Kar and Blinker disappear from existence, only to reappear half a mile away, at the edge of the clearing, far from the goblins.

Alright, time to do myself, I grumble.

However, just before I teleport to my friends, Phoebe stops me.

"Jason. Hold on. Um, I don't know how to explain this, but I think someone is trying to contact you."

Who? Is it Ose? Has she already found me?

"No. Whoever they are, I don't think they're hostile. They seem to be lightly tapping the edges of your Mind Realm, almost like they're knocking on a door. Shall I allow them to enter? If they have any ill intentions, I can push them out."

I nod. *Go ahead. I'll wait while you investigate.*

I transmit my thoughts across the clearing to Kar, as he and Blinker lurk behind a tree, keeping away from the goblins. [Kar. Give me a minute. I'll be right over. Something came up.]

[Are you alright?] Kar asks, a note of alarm in his voice. [Is it Ose?! Say the word, and I'll shield your fragile little body with mine!]

[No. I don't think it's her. Just... hang tight for a minute.]

After pushing away Kar's concerns, I turn my attention inward, to my Mind Realm.

There, I witness a shocking sight!

Phoebe, Shana, and Lorent sit on a bench and smile at a group of winged men, all of whom I instantly recognize as the Archangels.

Raphael? Gabriel? Michael? What are you three doing in my Mind Realm? I thought we couldn't communicate without Solomon's assistance.

Gabriel stands nonchalantly with his hands behind his back, taking in the sights of my futuristic and retro-looking mindscape. His appearance betrays no emotion, and only a faint hint of curiosity.

Michael, on the other hand, ignores the structures within my Mind Realm to examine Phoebe, Shana, and Sir Lorent. "Human. Thy appearance befuddles me. Have we met before?"

Lorent raises an eyebrow. [Are you referring to me?]

"Yes. Thy face seems oddly familiar to me, yet I cannot place it."

[I am Sir Lorent, knight of the Round Table,] Lorent replies. He tilts his head slightly. [We have not met, but how could I not recognize the Archangels of Wisdom, Courage, and Power? Your portraits hung from my king's walls. I observed them many times during my strolls through the palace.]

Raphael, unlike his brothers, wears a scowl on his face. He gives my Mind Realm a once-over before turning his attention to Phoebe.

"Hmph. Thou art the Wordsmith's wife, but what events have transpired to place thy soul within his mind's confines? Unless..."

Raphael's expression turns solemn.

"I see. Jason, am I correct in my assumption that thou hath once again used thy powers for the sake of soul manipulation?"

I nod. *Yes. I copied my wife's soul. Solomon betrayed me, and without him, my mind could be easily taken over by Ose or another mental manipulator. I only copied Phoebe's soul because she's my wife. I don't trust anybody else with access to my memories and knowledge. Heck, I don't even trust myself. Just look at what's happened to Hope.*

"I see," Raphael mutters. "Never mind. None of that is important right now. Jason, where are we? I cannot see outside of my ring."

We're on Hell Harbor, I reply. The demon's homeworld.

"By the Creator!" Raphael gasps. "What reason have thee for coming to such a place?!"

I intend to negotiate a peace treaty with Ose. At the least, I feel I have to try. Why, are you going to try and convince me to stop?

"I... I do not know," Raphael mutters. The old man walks over to a bench opposite Phoebe in her flower garden and takes a seat. He sags into the chair and rubs his forehead. "Jason. The reason I attempted to contact thee — it was due to a particular mana signature I detected somewhere within my ring's range. To say its presence worries me would be a great understatement, especially now that I know thou art standing on the demon's homeworld."

Something about Raphael's tone sends a chill down my back. *What do you mean? What sort of mana did you sense?*

"'Tis difficult to put into words. However, worry not, young Hero. The mana I sensed was not demonic, nor was it evil. It was... kindred. Angelic."

Raphael's words draw the attention of my Mind Realm's inhabitants. Phoebe and Lorent gaze at Raphael expectantly, waiting for him to elaborate.

"If this world is the demon's homeworld, then there is a chance they may have captured an angel and held them here. Not just any angel, but an Archangel!"

Raphael sighs.

"Who, then, might they be? Of all the possibilities, only Uzziel and Camael make any sense. Samael ended up inside Satan's Mind Realm, while Uriel became ensnared within Barbatos. Tch. To think the disgusting vermin may have captured and isolated another of my family... it burns my blood. Jason, I am incapable of ordering thee around like a servant. Instead, I plead with all of my heart that thou shalt seek out this poor, captured soul and uncover their identity."

"Their fate rests within thy hands," Raphael finishes.

I nod. *Alright. If I can rescue an Archangel, you bet I'll get right on it. Can you still sense their mana?*

"I can," Raphael replies.

Good. Stay in my Mind Realm. Contact me if you sense that I'm getting closer. After I discuss terms of peace with Ose, I'll set out to find whoever you've detected. I won't let the demons keep any angels prisoner.

Raphael forces a half-hearted smile. "Good. Yes, good. I thank thee, young Hero. As for the matter of thy flippant soul manipulation..."

He pauses.

"...well, everyone makes mistakes. Thy intentions appear noble, and in this instance, thou have yet to harm anyone. What sort of hypocrite would I be to decry all forms of soul manipulation, given my sordid history?"

I shrug. *What sort, indeed?*

Without another word, I aim my mind at Kar's location.

Foop!

A quiet rushing of air teleports me from the mountain's base to about ten feet behind Kar, half a mile away. I arrive to find the big gator hiding behind a boulder while he and Blinker peer out at the nearby Warpgate Annex.

[Kar, I'm here,] I say. [Let's get a move on. We have to find Ose's estate.]

[No.] Kar says. [Wait a moment. I'm watching the demons.]

I shoot a glance over my shoulder, but the grumbling goblins still haven't noticed our presence. Stealthily, I sneak over to Kar's side and follow his gaze.

Two male Demon Barons, both with black hair, sporting gold and silver armor, respectively, shoot the shit with each other. The golden-armored one stands a mere six and a half feet tall, but his body reminds me of a minotaur's. Hulking muscles, barely concealed by his demonstone platemail, allow him to sling a

gigantic battleaxe and greatsword across his back. Unlike Barbatos's armor, which was piecemeal and formed for function, this Baron's armor appears spit-shined. Every inch of it glistens from head to toe. He tucks a helmet under his arm, while grinning and clapping the other Baron on the back.

Meanwhile, the second Baron, wearing silver-colored demonstone armor, is only half a foot shorter than his comrade. Unlike the bigger fellow, the second Baron has a heavy club slung across his back, two shortswords at his waist, and a razor-sharp pair of spiked gauntlets stuck to his hands. Upon closer inspection, they remind me of the makeshift claws Barbatos used during the Ancient Era when he fought the Balrog.

As far away as I am, I can only make out bits and pieces of the two Baron's conversations. However, I manage to solve that problem for myself with ease. "**Hearing.**"

As my ears attune themselves to the distant conversation, I turn to ask Kar if he and Blinker would like a boost, only to notice both of them leaning forward while listening attentively.

As monsters, their hearing far outclasses mine.

With a shrug, I turn my attention toward the two Barons.

The smaller one rants and raves at his taller colleague. "-whore, thinks she can tell us what to do?! Man, I tell you what, little bro, that bitch has got to go. We had the whole run of the place when that lazy shmuck was the boss. ...The fuck was his name, anyway? I already forgot!"

"You're such a moron sometimes," The taller demon laughs. "It was Diablo, big bro! Deebs! Sheesh, he's only been gone for six years. How could you forget the name of such a good-lookin' demon guy? I know he was your type."

"Right, yeah, Deebs, now I remember. You know how bad my memory is, man! I don't even remember how many fleshbag heads I chewed off yesterday! Besides, that Deebs guy was way too hairy for my liking. What about you? You gonna plug Beelzebub's butt, or are you afraid of getting burned? Bahaha! I knew it! Just look at the disgust on your face! I didn't know you could hate a guy so much!"

"Laugh it up, Zammy-boy," The taller Baron snorts. "You ain't found a nice piece of ass since that fleshbag from twenty years ago. The look on your face when I caught you goin' to town on him, it was pathetic! You got so embarrassed you gutted the poor cunt!"

"Nuh-uh!" 'Zammy' says. "I don't remember that at all! I'd never pork a fleshbag, and you know it! Don't make me sick!"

The taller Baron smacks his older brother's arm. "Haha, yeah, maybe it's my memory messin' up this time, eh, Zammy-boy? Anyway, count your blessings. While you were off teaching the troops about that invasion shit, I had to sit in on one of Ose's boooring meetings. The whole time, she kept giving Beelzebub 'fuck-me' eyes. It was gross, man."

"Yeah, I bet. Ose's a total skank," Zammy replies. "Stupid, stuck-up prude. They say she knees any guy who approaches her right in the demonhood!"

"Serves 'em right!"

"Damn straight."

I roll my eyes, finding the demon's trash-talking too obnoxious to listen to any longer. I reach over and nudge Kar's shoulder. [Hey. Let's get out of here. I'm going to extract those guys' memories, and see if they know the way to Ose's hideout.]

However, Kar doesn't reply. To my surprise, his reptilian irises have narrowed to mere slits. He leans forward, revealing a look of rage.

"Hurgh! It's... it's them...!"

Kar forgets to use telepathy. He growls his words out loud, instantly sparking my nerves.

[Kar! Kar, buddy, what's wrong? Who are you talking about? The two Barons over there? Keep your voice down! We don't want them to hear us!]

Slowly, Kar hunches forward. He coils power into his legs. A vicious snarl, unlike any I've ever seen, appears on his face. He raises both arms and spreads out his claws.

The sunnofabitch is about to pounce!

[Kar! Kar! Calm down!] I yell. [What's wrong? Who are these guys? Do you know them? Do-]

Suddenly, I stop mid-sentence. A sinking feeling appears in my gut.

Wait a minute. Zammy-boy? Zamiel? As in, one of the two Battle Brothers? Are these Barons the fuckers who wiped out Kar's species?!

"Do... do not... attempt... to stop me..." Kar growls. His voice turns feral as rage boils within his veins.

Shit! Shit! What do I do? I came here to ask Ose to sign a peace treaty! If Kar kills the Battle Brothers, we'll definitely have a war on our hands!

However, if I stop Kar, what kind of friend would I be? These are the two pieces of shit who killed his wife and children! They murdered everyone in his family, all the people he loved! According to my basest instincts, he should have the right to exact his vengeance, and if I consider him my friend, I should help him!

A thousand thoughts race through my mind. In the blink of an eye, I come to a realization.

I jerk to the side and grab Kar's arm.

[Kar. Wait. I'm not going to tell you not to fuck these guys up, but before you do, I want you to listen to me.]

Kar jerks his head to the side to look me in the eye. He bares his teeth, scaring the bejeesus out of me. "Do not... stop me..."

[I understand. These scumbag genocidal barbarians deserve everything they have coming. However, does your wife?]

Kar pauses. His rage instead morphs into a hint of confusion. "My... wife... Butterfly?"

[Yes. If you attack these guys, Blinker could get hurt. She could die. All they would have to do is sound the alarm, and all sorts of Barons, Dukes, and Emperors will come raining down from the skies. Will you

be able to fight them off? Even if you can, what about Blinker? Fairies possess potent illusion magic, but that won't protect her from demonkind's mightiest warriors. Not even I could do such a thing. If you attack, you'll sign a death warrant for all three of us.]

Several seconds pass.

Kar's breathing slows. His eyes dilate back to their original size, and he averts his gaze.

The giant crocodile backs down, uncoiling his muscles as a hint of shame appears on his face.

"I... I... understand. Hurgh. My apologies, Turtle. I lost myself for a moment. I put you in danger, after everything you've done for me. I will understand if you want to end our friendship over this."

[Don't even think something like that, Kar. You've got me all wrong, buddy. I told you, didn't I? I'm going to help you kill these scumbags. They don't deserve to live after what they did to your people. My only issue is the timing. Now is the worst possible moment you could attack them.]

I turn my gaze toward the Battle Brothers. They saunter toward the Annex, away from Kar and me, laughing about all sorts of crude, despicable acts.

[Remember their faces, Kar. Burn them into your eyes. I promise you, we'll work together, and we'll make them suffer. As your friend, on my honor, I won't let them get away with the evils they've committed.]

The two brothers disappear into the Annex, vanishing from my sight.

I could have extracted the location of Ose's estate from their brains. However, doing so would mean downloading all of their other memories. I don't want to see all of the horrible shit they've done. I don't want their recollections to taint me.

Maybe I'm acting selfishly. Either way, I'll find someone else. There are bound to be countless demons and monsters who know Ose's location.

[Come on, Kar. Let's go.]

[Hurgh. As you command,] Kar mutters.

Both of us skulk away from the Annex, looking to find some lonely demon all by themselves.

The realization that I nearly lost one of my best friends chills me to my core. Thankfully, I managed to stop him.

Luckily, I didn't let Kar lose himself to rage.

Author's Note:

This is Duriel.



This is Zamiel.



These are both Battle Brothers.



Part 211: Harboring a Grudge

Kar and I spend the next several hours following the main 'road' that weaves across Hell Harbor's coastline. Comparing it to streets on Earth makes it seem extremely primitive, given how its surface is made of compacted dirt and not concrete or something more durable. Well-worn ruts in the ground tell a tale of the excessive number of carriages ferrying passengers along the coastline, from the north to the south.

We keep to the forested side of the road, opposite the ocean, ducking behind cover whenever we spot someone coming. Unfortunately, due to how my Wordsmithing functions, I can't keep us invisible forever. Doing so would drain my mana by three times its usual rate, and even moreso if I have to maintain Kar and Blinker's invisibility if we separate from each other.

So, instead, I activate my T-REX and set it to camouflage mode, allowing me to blend into the background scenery without wasting my mana. Kar's green skin allows him to melt into the forest with ease, while Blinker can just hide behind a leaf. When it comes to stealth, being small is an underrated attribute.

[Turtle,] Kar says, transmitting his thoughts to me from behind a tree. [I sense a single person coming around the next bend. Their mana level is unusually weak. I believe they are human.]

I nod. [One sec.]

I deactivate my T-REX and speak a word of power. "**Sense.**"

My senses reach out half a mile ahead, where I quickly pick out a single human female riding a horse. However, unlike the other humans who've passed us, this lady wears extravagantly designed clothes. Her youthful appearance makes her look about twenty-five years old, while her haughty expression instantly reminds me of Beelzebub.

[It's a human woman,] I say. [I'm a little surprised to say this, but I think she isn't a slave. She's dressed like a noble, so she might know something about Ose's whereabouts.]

Kar grunts. [Hurgh. Shall we tie her up and interrogate her?]

[Ooh, good idea!] Blinker chimes in. [I'll disorient her with a little finger waving, while you guys get the rope!]

[What?! No!] I protest. [Jeez. I'll just ask the lady a few questions. Hang tight.]

With my physical appearance still a perfect facsimile of Mara, I stride over to lean against a tree alongside the road. Having absorbed many of Mara's memories, I've already learned more than a few of her quirks, so I pull out a deck of fake Tarot cards and pretend to glance through them, acting as if I haven't any interest in the world around me.

Within a minute or two, the sound of hoofs clopping against the ground reaches my ears. I flick my eyes to the side to spot the young, dark-skinned woman riding toward the Hell Harbor Annex at a speed I

would describe as 'leisurely.'

As the woman draws near, I continue to stare at my cards while flipping through them. Eventually, she starts to pass me, only to slow to a stop.

"Hm? Mara? What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Immediately, I get a sinking feeling in my gut.

Shit. She knows me. Knows Mara, I mean. Phoebe?

Phoebe quickly appears at the top of my subconscious. She activates the terminal for Mara's memories and flips through them. "This young woman's name is... Lily! Lily Brown. Uhm, her father's name is Benjamin Brown, she lives at, uh... at the Slithering Spire... uhm..."

That's enough for now. Keep listening and try to give me answers to any of her questions.

I raise my head to stare at the young woman riding the horse. Her bright pink hair shines in the sunlight, giving her a cute and merry demeanor. However, the half-squint on her face makes her attractiveness drop by several points.

"Lily. Don't mind me, I'm just passing the time," I say, while running a finger through my long, blonde hair.

"Oh, so *now* you call me by my first name," Lily mutters. "My father told you not to step foot within ten miles of the Spire, especially after what you did the last time we saw each other. You have a lot of nerve showing your face around here."

The sinking feeling in my stomach turns into a bottomless chasm. *Goddammit. What were the odds we'd run into the one person who has beef with Mara? Shit. This is going to be a sticky situation.*

"I, ah, came to apologize," I say, winging the conversation. "Some things happened that made me re-evaluate my outlook on life. I was abrasive and rude the last time I visited."

"Hmph. Understatement of the century," Lily hisses. "He was my brother, you filthy, bloodskinned bitch. Because of you, Tyrese can't have children anymore. You demons are all the same."

Lily exhales violently, flaring her nostrils in rage.

"If my daddy were here, he'd rip your bloody head off. I don't want your apology. I want you to drop dead."

Hoo, Christ, I think to myself. I really know how to pick 'em. Got the saltiest broad this side of the Mississippi.

"Yeah, you do," Phoebe says sarcastically. "Alright, so looking through Mara's memories, it seems this Tyrese kid made a crude joke about how humans are 'bigger' than the pathetic demonhoods most demons sport, and that pissed Mara off. She ended up castrating him. He screamed the whole time and went into shock, barely surviving thanks to this 'Ben Brown' guy's doctors on call. So, yeah, there's a lot of bad blood between Mara and Lily."

I hadn't noticed...

With a sigh, I don my most apologetic smile. "Look, Lily, I know I've done some terrible things, but I'd like to make it up to you. What would you say if I told you I had a method to, ahem, restore your brother's dignity? I can't undo the suffering I've caused him, but I do feel terrible. After all, a harmless joke is no reason to maim someone for the rest of their life."

A strange look appears on Lily's face. "Huh? What in the seven hells are you on about?! Since when have you ever been the type of person to regret hurting one of us 'filthy fleshbags'?! Admit it, you filthy skank! You're just afraid of my daddy! You know that if you piss him off again, he'll rip you limb from limb! Well, let me just tell you this, little miss pissy; you *should* be afraid! My daddy is the strongest human you'll ever face! So you'd better turn that ugly, fat ass of your around and haul it on out of here! Hmph!"

The more Lily talks, the more baffled I become.

Who the hell is her father, and how can he possibly be strong enough to instill such confidence in his daughter? Does Lily, perhaps, refer to political power? Are politics an integral part of Hell Harbor's society?

As several questions churn in my mind, Phoebe suddenly pipes up.

"Benjamin Brown! Ah, I remember, now. Jason, don't you recall Tucker's vision? His artifact used to belong to a man named Benjamin Brown, back during the Energy Wars."

That's impossible, I reply. *Tucker's visions were from a hundred thousand years ago. Benjamin Brown would have surely died by now, if not during the war. Unless...*

Phoebe nods. "Exactly. Marie survived all this time. She mentioned humans who lived on Hell Harbor, too. Benjamin Brown must be one of those 'elites' who obtained immortality and stayed alive long after the Energy Wars."

I see.

With a slight nod, I return my attention to Lily. Thanks to the speed of thought, conversing with my mind-wife only takes a split-second of real-time.

It's no wonder Lily isn't afraid of me. Benjamin Brown once possessed a legendary heroic artifact. He slaughtered Volgrim and demons alike. He's probably a total badass, and that's why even Demon Barons like Mara wouldn't dare to fuck with him.

Maybe I ought to pay him a visit.

After bowing my head, I nod apologetically. "Yes, uhm, you've got me there. Alright. I understand. If I can't make amends for my past actions, I'll leave you alone. Sorry for wasting your time."

I turn away from Lily and start to walk away, only for the girl to speak again, her voice much quieter than before.

"Wait. Something's not right, here. You've been acting awfully odd, 'Mara.' I've known you for a long time, and not once have you ever apologized or said you were sorry about anything. What's going on, here? Who are you?"

My heart skips a beat. *Shit. Lily's onto me.*

I spin on my heel while intending to reply, only for Lily to continue speaking. "Hah. I should have known. You're not Mara at all. You must be..."

She pauses for dramatic effect.

"...Belial! Oh, for devil's sake! Admit it! I've caught you red-handed this time!"

I groan inwardly. *Shit. How am I going to deal with this turn of events?*

"Don't worry," Phoebe says. She rapidly clicks and clacks on Mara's memory terminal. "This is actually fortunate for us. Belial and Lily are birds of a feather. It seems they hang out occasionally, though Mara's memory is quite spotty on the relevant details."

That's not good enough! I reply. *We already stepped in a fat pile of shit by poorly impersonating Mara! I can't afford to screw up again by poorly apeing Samantha!*

A split-second passes as Phoebe considers my words.

"Jason. I have an idea. I want you to allow me to take over your body for a bit. I know Sam much better than you. I think I can imitate her, but I need to have full control. If I try to tell you what to say, you're bound to come off sounding stiff and clunky. Impersonations are not your specialty."

I barely even have to think about Phoebe's request. *Sure. You know how to use my Wordsmithing if the going gets tough, right?*

"Naturally."

Alright. Here goes nothing. Do your best, sweetie.

With a mental command, I close my eyes, willing my consciousness to lower its defenses. Phoebe's soul quickly engulfs mine, wrapping me in its warmth and allowing her to take control of my body.

Having already done this once, back when my soul departed to investigate Marie and the Volgrim, she still surprises me by completing the mind-swap effortlessly.

My consciousness falls into a dark abyss, one which quickly brightens up, allowing me to step foot inside my very own Mind Realm. My soul, now detached from my body, lands amidst a field of buildings ripped straight out of the 2020's.

"You caught me!" Phoebe says to Lily, her voice lilting cutely. She acts embarrassed for a moment and covers her face, all while secretly whispering, "**Disguise**," under her breath.

Phoebe, now fully in control of my body and Wordsmithing, uses a word of power to transform from Mara into Belial, shedding her regal Baron appearance for a far less dressed, more striking one.

"Teehee! It's me!" Phoebe says, sticking her tongue out. Her voice perfectly mirrors Samantha's, reminding me further of how versatile my Wordsmithing can be. "I'm surprised it took you so long to figure me out! Aren't we besties?"

"Oh, Beli," Lily says, clicking her tongue. "I should have known it was you! How have you been? I haven't seen you in, what, two years?"

The young woman slides one of her legs around the horse and hops to the ground. Her leather boots *clomp* against the dirt as she lands, and my wife holds out a hand to steady her.

"Two years? Hmm... you know me! I don't pay much attention to the time! I always- mgm?!"

Before she can finish her sentence, Phoebe gets thrown off-balance when Lily suddenly turns around, grabs the back of her head, and presses their lips together.

I stand within my Mind Realm, eyes wide open at the sudden change in Lily's attitude. Where before, she was a haughty, reserved noblewoman, she suddenly blooms into an erotic-minded temptress.

Phoebe, even more startled than me, only manages to hold herself together by remembering her job of mimicking Belial. She presses back into the kiss and returns Lily's embrace with twice the intensity. Both of them go at it for several long seconds, making me feel insanely awkward as a passive observer.

My wife, who has taken over my body, is now pretending to be her best friend while making out with a woman neither of us knows! What the hell is going on?!

After more than ten seconds of furious tongue-punching, Lily pulls away, her cheeks beet-red. "Devils! It's been a while since you, ahem, retorted so passionately! Have we been apart for so long that you've forgotten to act coy and indifferent?"

Phoebe smacks her lips. Lily's taste lingers just long enough to turn her foggy-brained. "Coy? I, ah... well, what can I say! Haha... I like to do my own thing!"

"No kidding," Lily sighs. She fans herself for a moment before clearing her throat. "Ahm, so, Beli, dear! Why are you out here, all by your lonesome? Don't tell me you were waiting for me to come waltzing by! Pulling such a horrid joke on me is in terrible taste!"

Phoebe doesn't reply for a second or two. Thanks to our mind-link, I notice her use of telepathy increases substantially as she excavates Lily's surface level-thoughts.

"Well, I have my reasons. It's been a while since I returned to Hell Harbor, and you just happened to come trotting down that road. What's a girl to do, if not improvise?"

"Tsk, you've always been an enigma," Lily says, clicking her tongue. "Daddy says you've been on Tarus II, helping out a bunch of humans. Is that what happened, or is his intelligence network wrong again?"

To my surprise, Phoebe doesn't give a direct answer.

"Hmm. What do you think?"

"I think that's exactly the kind of thing you'd do!" Lily replies. She jumps toward Phoebe and wraps her arms around Phoebe's succubus form. "You're always way too kind and compassionate! If it weren't for your help, Tyrese would never have made a full recovery!"

"Oh, I didn't do all that much," Phoebe says, feigning ignorance. "You're giving me way too much credit, Lily, dear."

"Nuh-uh! We only managed to repair half the damage that filthy, sodding Baron bitch did to my brother! It was you who made Tyrese whole again! He still can't have any kids, but daddy said we owed you a great debt! And you know me... I'm not one to let debts gather interest... hehe!"

Phoebe and Lily continue bantering. What surprises me is how, despite Phoebe knowing very little about Lily and Belial's relationship, she manages to improvise time after time, all by using several advanced psychological tricks invented well after the Arthurian era.

Cold reading, a technique often used by so-called 'psychics' from my era, allowed them to speak in broad, generalized terms to gather information about their subjects. Phoebe uses it to determine just how close Belial and Lily's relationship is, while inferring more in-depth information by casually acknowledging and denying statements in a playful manner. Lily, oblivious to Phoebe's intentions, keeps letting more and more details slip, which in turn fuels my wife's knowledge.

The longer the conversation continues, the more adept Phoebe becomes at manipulating Lily. Soon, the young girl becomes putty in her hands.

"Oh, I missed you so much," Phoebe says, grinning from ear to ear. "I've been trapped on Tarus II with only a few friends to keep me company, but none of them are... *like you*. You know what I mean."

"Indeed, I do," Lily says, blushing. She gazes into Phoebe's eyes as she speaks, both of them sharing more than a hint of intimacy.

However, Lily pulls away and ruffles Phoebe's hair.

"Oh, Beli. Things have changed since we last spoke. I'm sorry that we haven't talked much, but... you remember Beelzebub, don't you?"

"Beelzebub? Of course. What about him?"

"Well, he's the new master of the Slithering Spire. He's become more and more heavy-handed over the years. He won't allow any of us humans to fraternize with Hell Harbor's residents, especially other pureblooded demons. It's tearing me up inside! I haven't spent any time with Bianca in several years- you remember Bianca, right?"

Phoebe nods sagely. Her eyes reveal wisdom beyond her years as she acts like a long-lost friend of whoever 'Bianca' might be. "Naturally. What happened between you two? Did Beelzebub hurt her?"

"No, no! It's just... since Bianca's a succubus, Beelzebub won't allow us to spend any time together! Remember that time when the three of us visited the hot spring? You, me, and Bianca? Well, as long as Beelzebub is the master of the Slithering Spire, it'll never happen again! The fucking rat-bastard always gets in my way! He won't let me do as I please, and I don't dare stand up to him! Daddy doesn't care, either! He's always going on about that damned Operation Stormbringer as if it's more important than his daughter's happiness!"

"Operation Stormbringer?" Phoebe asks. "Forgive me, but I don't recall hearing about that one."

Lily waves her hands nonchalantly. "Oh, some big invasion plan. I don't pay attention to the details, and neither should you. Daddy and the top demon generals are always blustering and blowing their horns about this and that! It's hardly worth our attention! Especially when it involves that damned Ose."

"Ose?" Phoebe asks. "Funny you should mention her. I came to Hell Harbor because I needed to see her."

Lily's eyes widen. "What? You?! Beli, darling! I thought you hated that skank! Any time Ose came up in conversation, you always started ranting and raving!"

Phoebe crosses her arms. She assumes a pouty stance and turns a few degrees away from Lily. "I do hate her! Ose and I have a long, sordid history of backstabbing and betrayal. I'd rather not go into it, because it's beside the point. I'm here on official business, Lily, dear. Humanity's leader sent me to discuss peace talks with Ose. If I can convince her to sign a treaty... well, you and I might get to see each other once in a while. Not only that, but even as the owner of the estate, Beelzebub won't have any legs to stand on. You, me, and Bianca could do as we pleased."

Lily's expression turns curious. "Oh? I didn't peg you as the ambassador type! You must really get along with those humans to treat them so nicely."

"As well as I get along with you," Phoebe says, flashing a radiant smile. "But, um, there's a problem, Lily. I'm a little embarrassed to say it, but it's been bugging me, and I don't know who to ask for help."

Lily practically leaps for joy. She rushes toward Phoebe and grabs her hands. "You can ask me for anything, Beli! I'll always help you!"

Phoebe blushes. She averts her eyes, and for once, I realize that her expression isn't deceitful. My wife is actually starting to develop feelings for this young woman.

"Umm, well, you see... there was this Hydra that appeared on Tarus II. I helped fight it, but due to some terrible accidents that happened during the battle, I hit my head and got knocked out. When I woke up, I had lost some of my memories. How do I put this..."

Phoebe hesitates for a moment, building anticipation in Lily's eyes. "Yes? What's the matter?"

"Well..." Phoebe continues, "...I forgot where Ose's estate was! I'm totally lost! I've been searching everywhere, but I'm too embarrassed to ask for help. Oh, devils, you probably think I'm an idiot!"

"An idiot? No, no, don't be silly!" Lily laughs. "And here I thought some jerk had broken your heart. If you don't remember where Ose's estate is, that's easy. I can show you the way, Beli."

Lily presses her head against Phoebe's chest and sighs, taking a moment to inhale her scent. "Ahh... I missed you so much. I'm glad to help you. Never act as if I'll hurt you, okay? We're closer than sisters. Closer than lovers, even."

Phoebe blushes. "Yes. Yes, we are."

* * *

After a few more minutes, Phoebe bashfully waves goodbye. Lily mounts her horse and waves back at us. "Bye-bye, Beli! Remember, it sits atop the third mountain plateau to the east, the one overlooking Bael and Mephisto's estates! After you visit that skank, please drop by later! I'll have daddy's doctors examine your head. I don't want you to suffer any permanent brain injuries, okay?"

"Right, right," Phoebe says, blowing Lily a kiss. "I'll see you later, lover!"

Both women give their goodbyes, then depart, traveling in opposite directions. Phoebe enters the forest to the east, only to hide behind a tree once Lily disappears from our sight.

"Hoo. That was stressful," Phoebe says. "I didn't anticipate Lily being so... excitable."

"You did great," I say, taking a seat on a bench. "Way better than I could have managed. If Lily had kissed me and done the tongue thing, I'd probably have broken character right then and there. You acted the part perfectly."

Phoebe's face turns beet-red. She slumps to the ground and hides her face in her hands. "Oh, god! Jason, don't bring that up! I'm married! I shouldn't be kissing other people! E-especially not women! It's weird!"

"I don't see anything wrong with it," I reply. "It's not like you planned the kiss, or anything. If it had bothered me, I would have stopped you. Besides, in the era I come from, women kissing other women wasn't weird, nor men kissing men. Maybe it was a little bit rare, but I saw plenty of it growing up."

Phoebe rubs her face furiously. "Argh! That might be true for you, Jason, but not for me! I grew up in... in a proper era! Where men courted women, and both sexes knew their roles! This modern era always makes me feel so weird! So... so *dirty*."

I keep my voice neutral. "How so?"

Phoebe hesitates. She doesn't reply for several seconds but eventually relents.

"Well. How do I put this? Um. Ever since you and I got married- no, even before then... Samantha has always acted much more touchy-feely than I liked. At first, I didn't want to be rude, but then after our marriage, I started feeling guilty about my passive rejections. Whenever she got too close, I would push her away. I never directly rejected her, and that, in turn, made me feel worse."

My mind-wife sighs. "Not only that, but since I never told you about all the moves she made on me in private, I always felt like I was lying to you, too. Sammy and I never *did* anything, but I always felt, and still feel, like a complete ass. I should set boundaries, but I don't know how. I don't even know if I should."

She falls silent, waiting for my reply.

I nod. "Yeah. I know all of that. I've always known. The day you and I got married, Samantha came over to me and confessed she was madly in love with you. It caught me off-guard, but I took it in stride. You and Sam have a lot in common, after all. Both of you lost the first men you ever loved. Satan, for her, and Sir Percival, for you. I don't see myself as a fairy tale hero of legend, rescuing a virgin princess. I grew up in a society where marriage was cheap, divorces were common, and love had lost most of its substance."

"I don't believe in true love," I continue. "At least... I didn't. Not until I met you. I knew a lot of people growing up. Good people, the sorts who went to Church every Sunday, and said their prayers before their three meals. I always thought the people who held onto their wives and husbands the tightest had most unhappy marriages. They always broke up and ended their love with explosions of rage and torn-apart families."

"Jason..."

Phoebe starts to interrupt me, but I continue. "There's more. I knew a lot of people who thought of their spouses as possessions. They assumed that marriage entitled them to 100% of their wives or husband's affection. To me, even if that were true in the eyes of the law and God himself, it felt immoral. You have a big heart, Phoebe. There's more than enough room for you to love Samantha and me equally, especially after all she's done for us. For *you*. She saved your life when I couldn't. If it weren't for Sam, Beelzebub would have killed you, Neil, and all the other people in the Core. She's a good friend. I'd never want to hurt either of you."

After I finish speaking, Phoebe falls silent. Tears well up in her eyes, and she quickly tries to wipe them away. "Jason... I never... I never knew you felt that way."

"Dammit, Phoebe. Don't cry. You're gonna make me cry, too..."

"Sniff..."

Phoebe paws at her eyes, and hiccups. "Oh, god. I feel like such an idiot. Why didn't I just tell you sooner? I always thought you'd be jealous, or that you'd pull away from me. I love you, Jason. You're the only man I have eyes for, but... sometimes, when I speak to Samantha, I just... I have this urge to close the gap between us, yet I never do. It tears me up inside."

"I feel terrible, too," I say. "I never realized you and Sam had such tension between each other. I always assumed when you ended up at the pit stop; you two were making a quick pit stop in each other's pit stops."

Phoebe sniffles. "...What?"

"You know... when you're racing. Sam's your mechanic, remember? That's why I mentioned pit stops..."

"Jason. Why do you always have to make such terrible jokes at the silliest times?"

"Dunno. It's a curse."

Phoebe laughs. "Haha... ugh. My face hurts. I look like crap. Jeez, the worst part is, I'm not even the real Phoebe. I'm just her mind-clone. My original body doesn't even know I've told you all this."

I shake my head. "No. You *are* the 'real' Phoebe, equal to your original body. As far as I'm concerned, I have two loving wives. You might as well be her spiritual twin or something. Don't get so down on yourself."

Phoebe doesn't cheer up. She stares at the ground listlessly. "You can say that all you want, Jason. It doesn't change anything. I'm still just an errant soul living inside your Mind Realm. I don't have a physical body. I can use yours when you're not using it, but it's not *mine*. I'm only borrowing it."

The moment Phoebe finishes speaking, a strange, euphoric idea pops into my head. Like a lightbulb going off, I jump out of my seat and gaze forward with brightness in my eyes. "Ah! That's it! Phoebe, you're a genius!"

Phoebe pulls her head out of her hands. "...I am?"

"Yes. Think about it. You don't have a physical body. You can't interact with me, currently. However, that doesn't *have* to be the case. I'm a Wordsmith! I can create a new body for you and allow you to enter it whenever you want!"

Phoebe stares at the ground for a few moments before jumping to her feet. "N-no way! Jason, that's genius!"

"Yeah. I don't know if it will work, but it's worth a shot. Try making yourself a new body, then let me take over mine and I'll transfer-"

"STOP!"

Before I can finish my sentence, a masculine voice shouts from behind me, making me jump out of my skin. I whirl around to see Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael standing less than twenty feet away. The expansive city park somehow seems much smaller with Gabriel's giant form towering above the nearest trees.

"Thou shalt do no such thing, foolish child," Raphael hisses. "Already, thou hath cloned thy wife's soul without comprehending the consequences. Verily, I tell thee now, that if thou go through with thy foolish plans, thou shalt irreparably harm the one thou claimeth to love."

With my mind still in a daze, I merely stare at the old man. "Huh? What do you mean, Raphael? Explain."

The Archangel of Wisdom flaps his wings. He slowly hovers nearer to me, all while maintaining a contemptuous grimace.

"Imbecilic child. Thou knoweth nothing of Soul Links. Tell me, Jason, what *are* souls?"

I shrug. "Um. The essence of a person? Their... core?"

"That description is not far from the truth," Raphael concedes. "However! It is far from encompassing the importance of a being's soul. Souls mustn't be considered trifles and playthings. Those who manipulate souls freely will accumulate terrible injuries, ones incurable by even the greatest healer. Look no further than Valac and Mephisto, necromancers who manipulate the dead to do their bidding. In exchange for tremendous power, they lost the vitality from their bodies."

"Alright," I reply. "What about Satan? He seemed just fine, despite being a soul manipulator like Valac. Hell, he was worse, in many ways."

Michael, instead of Raphael, replies. "Indeed. The Devil was a crafty bastard. He, too, manipulated souls to a fearsome extent. However, while he may not have lost his body, he lost his link to the strands of fate. That is why he eventually perished not ten thousand years after his emergence."

"Put another way, the Devil rapidly accumulated fatal amounts of bad luck," Gabriel explains. "Fate conspired to kill him. The Devil proved incapable of resisting the Creator's divine will, and thus, he expired."

I nod. "Fine. Manipulating souls is evil. I get it. What does that mean, though? What would making a body for Phoebe cost me?"

Raphael shakes his head. "I do not know. Each soul manipulator suffers their own agony. In my case, I ended up trapped alone inside this ring. However, in thy case, I speaketh of the evils of soul manipulation not to protect thee, but to shield thy *wife*."

Raphael continues. "Every time a soul separates from a vessel, it suffers irreversible trauma. Thou hath cloned thy wife's soul. Her clone has, no doubt, suffered some level of memory loss. Her mood swings are not a mere byproduct of her situation, but directly linked to the circumstances of her creation!"

Raphael stabs a finger toward me.

"Thy reckless use of soul manipulation has caused thy wife's errant soul to suffer! Thou art the cause of her pain. Further, by trading places with her, not once, but multiple times, the two of thee have injured thy souls even further!"

This time, Raphael's words hit home.

"You mean... by allowing Phoebe to take over my body, I've somehow injured both our souls?"

Raphael nods. A solemn look appears on his face.

"That is correct, young Hero. Imagine, for a moment, that someone were to take a piece of paper and draw a face on it. We might call this the creation of a soul. However, if one intended to remove the face and place it upon another piece of paper, how might they do so?"

I shrug. "Um. Maybe they'd wet the paper and place another piece against it?"

"Indeed. They might succeed in copying half of the original image, but in doing so, the copy and the original would only be half as vibrant as before! This situation is a suitable allegory for when thou didn't copy Phoebe's soul from her original body. The copy and the original body were both harmed by thy actions."

"Another method," Raphael continues, "would be to take a drawn face and tear it from the page. Thou wouldn't then be capable of gluing the face to another page. And thus, thou wouldn't perfectly move the face from one page to another."

I frown. "But wouldn't that damage the original page? It would still ruin the paper and it wouldn't look good at all."

"That is correct," Raphael says, nodding vigorously. "After copying Phoebe's soul, thou inadvertently attached the copy to thy Mind Realm. By detaching thy soul from thy body and allowing Phoebe to take over, she ended up tearing herself away from her anchor point, and then tore her anchor yet again when she returned to thy Mind Realm. These repeated actions have injured thy soul, as well as hers."

Raphael cocks his head.

"Tell me, Hero. Have thou suffered any mental issues over the last few years? Headaches? Indecision? Paranoia? Irrational bursts of emotion?"

After closing my eyes and thinking for a moment, I shake my head.

"No. I don't think I have."

"So thou sayeth. The effects of soul manipulation can be both subtle and dramatic. 'Tis difficult to spot their effects until they have become irreparable. However, this aged one has a method!"

Raphael makes a motion with his hands. Several magical symbols appear in the air, forming a diamond within a circle. After a few moments, the sensation of a whirlpool swirls within my head, yanking me out of my Mind Realm.

I awaken moments later, fully in control of my main body. I turn my gaze inward to see Phoebe standing before Raphael, her soul having returned to my Mind Realm.

Raphael forces a grim smile. "'Tis no secret to thee that I am one of the mightiest soul manipulators in existence, young Hero. Worry not. My powers are severely limited, so long as I reside within my ring. I have safely swapped thy mind with thy wife's, but doing so again without harming either of thee would be beyond even my means. Now, look closely at Phoebe's errant soul with thy Wordsmithing."

A sense of worry seizes me as I realize what Raphael just did to me. Without my permission, the old man actually managed to manipulate not only my soul but Phoebe's as well, all while possessing a sliver of his former power.

It's dangerous, allowing Raphael inside my Mind Realm. I'll need to come up with countermeasures to protect myself from not only him, but others of his ilk.

I shift my focus onto Phoebe. **"Examine."**

Unsure of what to look for, I turn my attention toward my mind-wife's mana pathways, as well as her internal magic structure. As a non-Hero, she possesses a complete lack of mana, similar to any other human. However, thanks to my various Wordsmithing empowerments, she appears far more fit and full of vitality than other people.

I gaze at her with clinical dispassion, but even after five minutes, I don't see anything wrong.

"Sorry, Raphael. What am I supposed to see?"

"Look toward Phoebe's brain," Raphael replies. "Or, more specifically, the area of her soul which she visualizes as a brain."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"Souls can take any form they wish," Raphael explains. "For example, if Phoebe wished, she could transform her soul into a giant arachnid, or a fearsome dragon. However, 'tis all but impossible for someone untrained in soul manipulation to morph their soul into anything beyond their self-image. Thy wife still remembers her physical appearance, so she materializes within thy Mind Realm as a facsimile of her physical body."

This time, it's Phoebe who responds. "Wait, are you saying I can change my appearance if I just imagine myself looking different?"

Raphael scoffs. "Nay! All beings possess an indelible image of themselves. To merely change thy appearance would require a tremendous amount of willpower and self-actualization, unlike any I've seen

before. For example, if I were to imagine my soul possessing four arms instead of two, I might succeed two times out of ten, due to the image of myself I've implanted in my mind over the- what?!"

Raphael stops mid-sentence. He stares, wide-eyed, as Phoebe's hair color changes from white to crimson. Freckles appear on her face, and her height increases by half a foot.

"Wow! This isn't hard at all!" Phoebe marvels. Her skin becomes noticeably more youthful, and her eyes change from green to yellow and red, mimicking a demon's irises. "Amazing! I can feel all the changes happening in my soul every time I imagine them!"

Raphael's eyes nearly bug out of his head. "W-w-what?! Preposterous! How can an untrained mortal-gah! I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it with my own eyes!"

Phoebe laughs, oblivious to Raphael's astonishment. Behind the old man, both of his brothers wear equally long faces.

"Impressive," Michael mutters. "The human wench is a damned natural at altering her self-image."

"Long has it been since I've seen Raphael in such a confused state," Gabriel adds. "The look on his face is more than a little amusing."

It doesn't take long before Phoebe changes her appearance to mimic Belial, then she changes into Daisy, Raphael, and even me. Each change makes her clap her hands and dance around excitedly. "Boo-yah! Haha, I'm the best! That's right; Queen Phoebe is here!"

I smirk, sending a smug look toward Raphael. "You were saying?"

Raphael tugs on his beard angrily. "No! Dammit, Jason! Look closely! Thy wife's situation is far from optimistic. Do as I said and gaze at her mental pathways."

I nod and follow Raphael's instruction. When I peer more closely at Phoebe's 'brain,' all of my smug satisfaction vanishes.

Inside my wife's head, along with the bright blips indicating her brain's activity, I notice several tiny, almost insignificant-looking 'smudges.' Resembling drops of ink spilled onto a piece of paper, each one appears far darker than the area surrounding it.

"Oh my god."

Raphael nods furiously. "Thy wife's actions are far from normal, young Wordsmith. Even her vocabulary has changed since I swapped thy souls. If she is capable of changing her appearance so easily, it can only mean she has lost her sense of self-image. This means her condition is quite dire. Use thy Wordsmithing and attempt to repair the blemishes staining her soul. If we are lucky, thou shalt return her to normal."

Phoebe continues changing her appearance. To my horror, I realize that each time she does, the blemishes on her soul increase in number, adding another spot or two.

"Phoebe. Please, stop," I say. "You can't keep changing your appearance. You're hurting yourself."

My mind-wife scoffs. "Psh! You're just jealous, hubby! I can do something you can't. Nyeh!"

Phoebe sticks her tongue out at me. Her pose makes me nauseous.

The Phoebe I know would never do such a thing. She's always been a stoic person, not someone who indulges in her emotions.

Without hesitation, I target Phoebe's soul.

"Repair. Repair. Repair."

One by one, I target each of the soul blemishes, erasing them bit by bit.

It takes me nearly fifteen minutes to repair the damage. Eventually, I finish, allowing Phoebe to slump to the grass inside my Mind Realm. She rests her face in her hands. "I... I feel like shit."

Raphael places a hand on her shoulder, comforting her with his touch. "Were thou to continue for much longer, I fear thy memories might have degraded permanently."

"Maybe," I counter, "but I did heal all of her soul blemishes. Doesn't that mean I erased all of her soul manipulation's negative symptoms?"

"Perhaps, but I would not bet my life on it," Raphael cautions. "I have done my part to avert thy crisis. Now, moving forward, thou knoweth enough to avoid placing thy loved ones in precarious situations."

With a dismissive wave of his hands, Raphael turns his back on Phoebe and starts hobbling away.

"Continue with thy plans, Wordsmith. However, do not assume thy Wordsmithing is omnipotent. It has many points of failure, like any power. Rely on it at thy own risk."

"Oh," Raphael continues, "be certain to check thy soul for blemishes, too. If thy wife possesses them, thou surely do as well."

Raphael and his brothers fade away, leaving Phoebe and me alone.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I don't know," Phoebe replies. "But now I understand why I was so good at impersonating Sam. I doubt I could do it again, the way I am now."

"Maybe. Maybe not," I counter. **"Inspect."**

I turn my gaze inward, examining my soul with Wordsmithing.

However, after more than ten minutes of searching, I find nothing wrong with myself whatsoever.

My soul remains uninjured.

Why would Phoebe suffer wounds to her soul, but not me?

...Have I, perhaps, overlooked something?

Part 212: Blinker's Array of Talents

After using my Wordsmithing to check the area for enemies, I breathe a sigh of relief. With Lily having trotted into the distance, I find myself and Phoebe all alone again. The sun continues to beat upon the planet from on high, but I can already hazard a guess that the day is more than halfway over.

I return to my original appearance, donning my T-REX and entering stealth mode to hide my presence. However, after a few moments, I frown.

"Kar? Blinker? Where did you two go?"

After scanning the nearby foliage, I make my way through the jungle, confused out of my mind. I don't see Kar anywhere, even with my T-REX's enhanced visual sensors and radar.

"Kar?"

After trudging through the foliage, a yelp at my feet startles me. I lower my gaze to find Kar and Blinker, both at their shortened sizes, hiding under a leaf.

"Hurgh! Turtle! ...You have finally finished with Black Beauty. Ah... this is not what it seems..."

Blinker scowls at me. "Geez! Can't you give us a little privacy! We're trying to make babies over here!"

My face turns beet-red, though with the T-REX covering my head, neither of the shorties notices. I spin on my heel and turn away, shielding my eyes. "God! What are you guys *doing*?! You were supposed to be my backup! Put some clothes on!"

"It's not our fault you spent an hour blabbering with that hussie!" Blinker yells. "Besides, if you can't handle one skinny little lady by yourself, what kind of Hero are you? I'm over here making the best use of my precious time! Hmph!"

After several seconds, the sound of sticks snapping behind me makes me turn around and watch as Kar expands from his miniature form to his full-sized, ten-foot body. Once the croco-sphinx finishes growing, he rubs his head sheepishly. "Hurgh. My apologies, Turtle. I had no say in the matter. As you know, Butterfly can be quite voracious when it comes to her sexual appetite. I was minding my business, but she demanded that I shrink down so we could make like mice and-"

"Kar! Stop, please," I beg the crocodile. "I get it. I know what you were doing. Good for you guys; I'm glad you were having fun while I had to extract information from a total stranger."

Blinker, having once again put on her clothes, flies over to my face and waggles her finger. "Sheesh! Listen to you, acting like the noble Hero! I saw what you did, buster! You decided to play tongue-twister with little miss temptress! When we get home, you bet your butt I'll be telling Phoebe about this!"

I frown. "...It's not what you think."

"Oh, suuure," Blinker says, rolling her eyes. "You just *had* to smash your faces together like a couple of horny teenagers. At least Kar and I are married! What will Phoebe think when she hears about your little fling? I'm sure she won't mind the saliva-swapping one bit!"

My mind-wife chuckles. "Haha. You're in the doghouse now, big boy."

Oh, shut up.

"Let's get a move on," I say, waving Blinker's concerns away. "I got the location of Ose's estate. It's about thirty miles to the east, so I won't be able to teleport us there."

"Uh-huh," Blinker says, a mischievous smirk on her face. "Did you get that babe's number, too? I bet she'll spend the rest of the day drooling over the taste of your tongue."

Kar laughs. "Hehe. Now, now, Butterfly. It's not like Black Beauty made out with *him*, but with the person who she thought was Big Boobs. Turtle mimicked Big Boobs flawlessly."

"Mhm," Blinker grunts. "Jason deceived a poor, young, virgin maiden. He set her heart aflutter, but alas! She only tasted the nectar of forbidden romance!"

I sigh. "...Don't worry, Blinker. I'll be sure to let Phoebe know about my newfound Frenching skills when we get home. For now, can we focus? I need to meet Ose ASAP. If you're done clowning around, I'd like to get going."

Blinker drops her soapbox act. "I'm just teasing you, hero-man! Don't worry. I won't tell Phoebe anything, not unless she asks. Your secret is safe with me."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

My mind-wife snorts. "Psh. It's comforting to know Blinker would lie to cover for your infidelity."

Yeah, but I didn't even get to enjoy the tongue-tasting. You had all the fun.

"Haha! Maybe I'll let you take over next time," Phoebe snarks.

* * *

An hour later, after using my Wordsmithing to grow wings for Kar and I, the three of us fly over the densely-packed forest toward a series of mountains to the east. Thankfully, growing wings doesn't passively consume any of my mana, so I have enough to make all of us invisible for the journey to Ose's manor.

Crackle.

I activate one of my many remaining Mana Beads, rejuvenating my internal energy.

"We're almost there," I say, speaking to my two airborne partners. I try not to laugh as I watch Kar's clumsy aerial proficiency. Unlike me and Blinker, who have flown for years or our entire lives, respectively, Kar has only taken to the skies when in his Sphinx state. The crocodile scowls angrily. "These wings are far too unwieldy compared to mine."

"Yeah, but you can't maintain your Sphinx form for long," I point out. "And once you use it, you won't be able to activate it again for quite a while. I'd rather save all that extra firepower for a dicey situation. We have no idea how Ose will react to our presence."

After a slight pause, I add, "Hell, we don't know *anything* about Ose. Samantha hates talking about her. From what I've gathered, she's a power-hungry tyrant. Probably looks like a fat, greasy monster."

Blinker flips me off. "Monster?! I resent that!"

"Err, sorry. Bad choice of words."

Kar nods. "Hurgh. Your reasoning makes sense, Turtle. However, I cannot stand these wings! They might as well be a pair of swords, for how well they control. We reptiles do not belong in the skies."

"Sorry, pal. I made them leathery, just like you. You'll just have to practice with 'em."

From within my Mind Realm, Phoebe sighs. "If only I'd known you'd need Kar to fly, I'd have rushed out my new prototype T-REX's."

I turn my attention inward. *Prototype T-REX's? What do you mean? I don't remember hearing about anything like that.*

Phoebe blushes. "Well, I've made a few experimental war suits, but they don't work very well. I figured if a Baron, Duke, or god forbid, even an Emperor decided to attack while you or Hope wasn't available, I'd need some way to retaliate. Unfortunately, all of the nanosuits I made had bugs galore — the flight systems on my newest Hummer models worked fine, but they wouldn't function with any other features. Too much power consumption and too little heat dispersion."

Slowly, I nod. *Interesting. What sorts of features were you thinking of adding? Maybe I could help.*

Phoebe shrugs. "You don't have the Crown anymore, Jason. I doubt you'd accomplish much; no offense. As for the features, well, I had this idea for a suit that could temporarily boost the user's speed by a factor of fifty. I called it 'Lightning Mode.' I also wanted to add a body reinforcement suit, something capable of shrugging off missiles and hellfire, if the going got rough. Unfortunately, each suit ended up only working with one feature at a time. I haven't solved the interfacing issues."

I smile. *Don't worry, you'll iron out the kinks eventually. You always do. Remember the environmental barrier?*

Phoebe nods. "How could I forget? Adding a teleport nullification indexer made me want to rip my hair out. Anyway, I used the Crown when I made the E-shield. The MK. II T-REX's are way harder to perfect. I don't have Solomon helping me, so it takes me forever to tweak all the variables."

My mind-wife sighs. "Well, I keep saying 'me,' but really, it's all up to my other half, now. I can't work on stuff like that anymore."

Phoebe's enthusiasm vanishes as quickly as it appeared. She eases herself onto the grass and rests her head on her knees.

"I've only been in your Mind Realm for almost a month, Jason. Already, I've started feeling claustrophobic. I have Shana here, and Lorent too. The Archangels aren't really my cup of tea, but I'm glad they're here, too. Still... even as big as your Mind Realm is, I can't help but feel suffocated. After learning what Raphael told me, I realized leaving here might be all but impossible, too. If you tried to make a new body for me, it would defeat the purpose of my existence. I'm supposed to stay in your head and protect you from people like Ose. That means if I were to leave, you'd lose your mental protections and end up at the mercy of any two-bit telepath who intended you harm."

Phoebe closes her eyes. "I love you, Jason... but the longer I stay here, the harder things are for me. I want to protect you, but I also can't stand the thought of never touching our daughter again. I hate that you have to keep my existence a secret. I hate that not even Kar and Blinker know I'm in here. I just... I hate all of it."

Phoebe...

I fall silent, unable to reply.

What can I say?

Just like with Hope, I created my mind-wife in the spur of the moment without thinking through my actions.

I assumed that, with my Wordsmithing, I could take care of any problems that would arise. Instead, were it not for Raphael's interference, I might have killed the woman I love.

I'll do whatever I can to help you, I say. Just don't give up hope, okay? As long as we're together, I won't let you suffer. Maybe I can project your image just like I did for Solomon. Then, you'd be able to talk to Daisy.

Phoebe shakes her head. "If you did that, people would learn of my existence, and I wouldn't be able to protect you anymore. For now, just be quiet, Jason. I need time to think. I need time for myself."

Alright, I murmur. Let me know if you need anything.

With a reluctant sigh, I raise my eyes toward the horizon. There, I spot several mountains approaching my group as we fly toward them at high speeds.

"Hurgh. Turtle, those peaks appear to be the ones Black Beauty mentioned," Kar says. "However, I do not see Ose's estate."

"Me neither," Blinker says. "Something feels off about those mountains, though. They look kinda funny, dont'cha think?"

Kar shakes his head. "No, Butterfly. They seem normal to me."

We continue flying closer. Eventually, we stop about a mile away, hovering via the warm updrafts coming off the planet's surface.

I frown. "What the heck? I thought one of these three peaks was supposed to have a plateau with Ose's estate on its top. I don't see it anywhere. Did we come to the wrong mountain range?"

Kar rubs his chin. "Hurgh. I cannot say for certain. My instincts tell me we shouldn't have to travel much further. Look over there."

Kar points to the south, where a massive black spot in the forest catches his eye.

"Do you see it? The trees down there are dead and rotten. That area matches Black Beauty's description of Mephisto's obelisk. We must be in the right area. What other mountains do you see?"

I shrug. "None. Let's fly a little closer."

The three of us hover downward, cautiously angling our wings to levitate a few thousand feet above Hell Harbor's surface. The sounds of beasts roaring and howling below, though faint, tell a tale of vibrant life amongst this world's flora.

However, no matter how I squint, I can't pick out even a tiny flat spot on the mountain where Ose's manor might be crammed. Especially given her status as an Emperor — I'd expect her to live inside a magnificent palace.

"This makes no sense," I mumble. "Let's check the other side of the bluff."

The three of us fly over the mountain. However, once we arrive on the other side, we meet the same sight — a generic, rocky valley.

"Inspect," I say.

My Wordsmithing scans the cliffs, but no matter where I aim my gaze, I don't spot any anomalies.

Frustrated, I punch my palm. "Fuck! I can't see anything out of the ordinary! Not even like a hidden hatch or some secret, underground base! The way Lily described Ose's manor, I thought she'd have carved the whole top of the mountain off! We must have come to the wrong place!"

"...No," Blinker says, her voice quiet. "You're wrong, kiddo. Man, you're lucky you brought me along for the ride. I noticed something was weird since I first looked at this mountain. The top of the middle peak has an Illusory Array protecting it!"

I tilt my head slightly to glance at the fairy. "What's an Illusory Array?"

Blinker smirks. "That ain't the question you need to ask, bucko! The correct question is, 'what is an array in the first place!' Arrays are magical creations that use external sources to power them. There are all sorts of arrays out there in the world. Heck, even Phoebe's created one!"

My jaw slackens. "She has?"

"I have?!" Phoebe repeats. Blinker doesn't hear her.

"Mhm," Blinker says. "Remember that anti-teleportation interface Phoebe built into Hero City's environmental shield? Well, she consulted me to make it. I helped her with a few of the finer details. The only way you can block a Warper's magic is by using a spell of your own! All arrays are like that."

I nod. "So, what you're saying is that someone, probably Ose, shielded her estate with an illusion? Is that why we can't see it?"

The redheaded fairy nods. "Yep. But watch out! The mountain might be an illusion, but I can sense a powerful mana barrier emanating from the middle peak. We'll splat against it like bugs if we get too close. If we're really unlucky, we might get shot out of the sky or something. I bet Ose has automated defenses protecting her home."

"So, what do we do?" I ask. "Maybe I should try and disable the array with my Wordsmithing?"

"You might be able to disable it," Blinker says. "But if you mess up, it'll alert Ose and everyone else to our presence. You should leave this one to me, big guy!"

Blinker pauses.

"...Also, there's a 5% chance that if you royally screw up, the whole thing will explode and kill us all."

"What?! Why? How??"

The fairy shrugs. "Arrays are complicated, Jason. Illusion arrays aren't intended for offense, but you can bet that if one covers the whole top of a mountain, it's gonna have a huuuuuge power source! Best not to set it off with incompetence!"

I nod. "Yeah. Let's not do that."

With a sigh, I cross my arms and watch as the young fairy flies forward, leaving Kar and me behind. The crocodile starts to fly after her, but she holds up a palm. "Nuh-uh! You stay right there, Kar! With our luck, you'll blunder in and nudge the self-destruct mechanism!"

Kar groans. "Hurgh. Fine. Stay safe, my Butterfly."

The two of us fall silent as Blinker glides toward the mountaintop. Her hands become a blur as she chants a series of complex incantations. Several marble-sized balls of light materialize above her head and rush forward, striking an invisible barrier.

Several minutes pass.

Blinker hammers the illusion time after time, creating bubbles on its surface capable of letting us see through the illusion. Already, I can make out the silhouette of a manor the size of ten football stadiums. Its pure white color stands out against the greenery of the gardens lining its borders. The mansion gives me a futuristic vibe, what with its chrome-plated edging and giant, mirror-like windows.

What the heck is Blinker doing? I silently wonder. Won't attacking the illusion notify Ose of our arrival?

To my surprise, Raphael appears in my mind's eye.

"Hehe. Thou hath much to learn, young one. Arrays are complex magical creations capable of protecting and defending landmarks. While they may have the downside of being immobile, their sheer might allows even inexperienced and weak beings to obtain strength capable of rivaling deities."

Raphael continues. "The fairy is not attacking the array, but using illusory orbs to probe its weaknesses. As her magic has no mass, it won't activate the defensive mechanisms. Doubtless, 'twas a team of fairies who created this array, as such powerful illusion magic is rare to find, even among monsters and demons. I was one of only a few pureblooded angels capable of unleashing the Illusory Realm, and my prowess far exceeded my brothers and sisters."

I nod. *Solomon's visions showed me you were proficient with illusions. Why can't I teleport Blinker, Kar, and myself inside the barrier? Wordsmithing is already capable of bypassing Hell Harbor's defenses.*

"Because once we step foot inside, the array will recognize us as intruders. Blinker is not only creating a gap for us to enter, but also forcing the array to treat thy party as authorized residents. Watch and learn, young one. Blinker's prowess reveals the difference between a General Practitioner, such as thyself, and a

Specialist, such as her. Thy Wordsmithing might be capable of imitating countless magical paths, but thy skills will always fall short of a Specialist's single-minded focus."

As Raphael speaks, a flicker of motion passes across the array. Suddenly, the entire illusion crackles and pops, fizzling away to reveal Ose's manor in all its splendor. Finally, the three of us can see inside the projection, where the eerily empty estate beckons for us to enter.

Blinker turns around and forms the 'ok' sign with her fingers. "Whew! Donezo! I thought it'd be a lot easier, but I underestimated the barrier's strength! Alright, no time to waste. Let's get a move on!"

Kar and I both nod. We fly forward, following Blinker's lead as she enters the array.

We hold our breath, waiting for an alarm to go off, or for energy blasts to come flying at us, but nothing happens.

We land amidst one of the many gardens visible from above, only a stone's throw away from the entrance. Sheepishly, I rub the back of my head.

"Say, uh... should we ring the doorbell? How do we even introduce ourselves? *Yo, what's up, I'm the Wordsmith. I forcibly broke inside your barrier. Let's sign a peace treaty!* I feel like that won't work too well for us."

Kar mimics my expression. He forces an awkward grin and shrugs. "Hurgh. You are the master diplomat here, Turtle. I'm only here to protect you and save you from our more quick-witted enemies."

"Ah!" Blinker yelps.

Kar and I jerk our heads in the direction of her voice. What we see simultaneously confuses and startles us.

A lone human woman, blonde, somewhere in her forties, stands silently at the front door. Her prim and proper outfit, featuring a pencil skirt and a white blouse top, gives her the appearance of a CEO's secretary. She stares at us expressionlessly, as if she's expected our arrival for some time.

I reach out with my telepathy, trying to read her mind. To my surprise, I receive only fragments of words in return. No full sentences, no coherent thoughts.

Follow. Guests. New. Where? Yes. Beckon. Master. Kelp? Steak. Clean. Guests? Follow.

After several awkward seconds, the woman bows deeply at the waist, aiming her gesture toward us, the intruders.

Blinker flutters over to me. A spooked look appears on her face. "I, uh, think the blondie wants us to follow her."

"Yeah," I mutter. "You might be right."

The woman continues bowing. She remains locked in an awkward ninety degree angle, giving me a weirdly creeped-out sensation.

She reminds me of a robot.

"Inspect."

I aim a word of power at the woman. Several details appear before me.

Name: Amy Gutierrez.

Species: Human.

Date of Birth: February 3rd, 1985.

Sklsgh: Fggholp?

Jlkdfng... plxner.

A shiver runs down my back. Even my Wordsmithing can only deduce a few small clues about the woman's identity.

"Uh. Her name is Amy," I whisper to Blinker. "She's human, not an android or anything else. Let's follow her."

"I don't know about this..." Blinker mutters. "Ose must be expecting us. Why else would this creepy servant be out here, waiting?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. If Ose is expecting us, but she hasn't attacked, then either she's planning to catch us in a trap, or maybe she knows the purpose of my visit."

"Protect your head," Blinker says, a note of warning in her voice. "If Ose breaks your jaw, or does something worse, we won't be able to escape. You're the only person who can return us to the Core."

I nod. "Noted."

The three of us fall in line and walk toward the woman. Only after we draw within a few paces does she unbend at the wait and stand at attention. Amy turns without saying anything and strolls to the front door, leading us inside.

Guests. Food. Dog? Ship. Master. Master? Guests. Greet. King. Dog? Dog.

The more I try to read Amy's mind, the more unsettled I become. I sever the telepathic link and rub my arms.

Alright, Phoebe. Brace yourself. I'm entering the lair of our enemy. I'll be counting on you to protect my brain from this psycho.

My mind-wife forces a smile. She sits on a couch with a book in hand and Shana's head on her lap. "I'm here for you, Jason. No matter what."

"Good. I'm going to need all the help I can get."

Part 213: Confronting Ose

Kar, Blinker, and I all follow Ose's slave. Amy stares ahead emotionlessly and says nothing as the four of us walk through Ose's mansion. She moves at a brisk pace, allowing us to cover a lot of ground quickly.

The size of Ose's mansion awes me. In terms of square feet, it must be the size of three or four megamalls pressed together. Crystal chandeliers hang from the main entrance, which, when combined with the spaciousness of the entry antechamber, give her mansion's foyer an impression of size far beyond the Labyrinth's Core. A hundred feet divide the floor from the ceiling, while pillars supporting the roof allow the room to stretch out to the right and left for a thousand feet in every direction.

However, what makes my senses go on high alert is the realization that, except for the four of us, the mansion appears to be empty. Aside from Amy, I don't spot a single slave or servant. Every inch of furniture, every vase, wooden banister, or shiny trinket sparkles and shines as if someone has cleaned it within the last five minutes.

Who cleans the mansion? Surely, Ose must possess a fleet of servants, all scouring it from head to toe, day in and day out. Otherwise, how could an estate this enormous be so pristine and untouched? Amy certainly couldn't do it all by herself, could she?

...Could she?

Amy's high heels *click* against the polished wooden floor, echoing into the distance. I find myself lifting each foot and placing it down with the utmost care, for fear of scuffing the wood. For some reason, my instincts tell me I shouldn't harm the beauty of this manor, even if I know not why.

"Amazing," Phoebe murmurs. My mind-wife gazes through my eyes, taking in the sights along with me. "Ose was only a Baron until six years ago, but already, she possesses a property of this size. Did she have it built for her new Emperor-level status, or was it like this all along?"

Unable to answer her question, I only hazard a shrug.

Dunno. Maybe all Barons have properties like this. Perhaps Bael's is even bigger, along with Diablo and the other Emperors.

"Do you think Samantha has a manor?" Phoebe asks.

Sam doesn't strike me as the type to flaunt wealth and power. She's always seemed detached from material prosperity. She lives in a tiny little room, just like you and me.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," Phoebe mutters.

I continue following Amy, while Kar falls into stride beside me. "Hurgh. Turtle, this female is surprisingly quiet. Why has she said nothing since we arrived?"

"I don't know," I murmur. "Something tells me she's missing a few marbles. I don't even want to know what awful shit Ose has done to her."

Minutes pass.

We walk down corridor after corridor. Sometimes, we pass by large windows, allowing us a view of the gorgeous gardens outside. Countless alien flowers bloom under the waning sun, revealing many shades of purple, red, and blue. However, the sheer number of white flowers turns their colored companions into mere specks. Either by choice, or coincidence, Ose appears to prefer colorless flowers when decorating her estate.

Kar's eyes flick out the window. He pauses mid-stride and frowns. "Hurgh. Turtle, look over there. Do you see that?"

I follow his gaze toward a charred-black field in the distance. The remains of a giant bonfire scars the land, while hundreds of weeds poke up through the ash and charcoal. Despite its size and scope, at a tenth of a mile in diameter, the fire's remains appear concentrated, as if it were a targeted event and not a random accident. Thanks to the vegetation swallowing the land, I quickly ascertain it must be a few years old.

"Yeah, I see it," I reply. "I wonder what happened."

When I turn to glance at Kar, I notice that his reptilian eyes have narrowed to slits. "So you do not see it, after all, Turtle. Once again, your frail human vision fails you. Look closer."

Following his lead, I utter a word of power. "**Vision.**"

After returning my attention to the ash-choked land, I need only a few seconds before a bolt of horror shoots down my spine. Amidst the scorched wood and grass, dozens and dozens of bones poke out of the dirt, revealing the presence of a mass grave!

"Son of a bitch," I mutter. "What the fuck happened there? Why does Ose have a bunch of bodies burned in a pile right next to her precious garden?"

"Because," Kar replies, his voice tinged with rage, "those are *human* bones."

My newly acquired deductive powers spring into action. By using the same abilities I did when I faced Mara, I rapidly click pieces into place, determining the most likely outcomes of several different situations.

Eventually, I reach a conclusion.

"There aren't any servants at this estate besides Amy. Kar, I think it's possible Ose killed all of her former servants and burned their bodies in that bonfire, over there."

"Possible? No, it is *guaranteed*," Kar growls. "We cannot trust Ose. She is a monster beyond any we've seen before."

"You're probably right," I say, keeping my voice low. "But we need to confirm our suspicions. I don't know what Ose's reasons were. Even if they were reprehensible, there's a matter of degree involved. I'll only throw away the peace treaty for a good reason."

Kar crosses his arms. "Hurgh. You may lead, here, but if Ose acts out of line, I'll end her myself."

I glance at Kar's shoulder, where Blinker sits in silence. The fairy meets my gaze, but for once, she seems much quieter than usual. "Gator-man is right, Jason. I see no reason to trust Ose."

"Well, damn. If even you're saying stuff like that..."

Blinker doesn't reply. She turns away, her expressionless gaze fixating on Amy.

The servant slows to a stop and turns to face us. She waits for my party to finish our discussion before returning to her previous power-walking speed. We fall into place behind her and keep quiet, merely observing the inner workings of Ose's villa.

Soon, thirty minutes pass. By using my mental map, I chart the course we've traveled and frown as I realize our long, zig-zagging path has taken us through a series of S-curves all throughout the mansion's hallways. It seems Amy has chosen a scenic route, one designed to emphasize Ose's power at the expense of my time.

"Christ," I mutter, "can we get on with it? Just lead us to Ose already. I'd rather not take all day just so your stupid boss can gloat about her riches."

Ose's thrall glances over her shoulder, surprising me. It seems even with my voice low; she heard what I said.

Amy changes direction. Instead of continuously leading us down inner and outer corridors, she turns onto the main hallway, one much broader than its predecessors, and leads us straight into the heart of Ose's estate.

It doesn't take long before even I, with my poorly attuned mana sensing abilities, begin to notice a distinct burning sensation in the air. The overwhelming mana of a Demon Emperor rushes out from one of many inner chambers, slowly increasing in intensity as we draw near.

Finally, we reach our destination. Amy slows to a stop before a pair of fifteen-foot-tall oak doors, each covered in magical runes. She presses her hand against a computer panel beside them, surprising me.

"A handprint scanner? That doesn't seem very demonic."

Kar nods. "Don't you remember, Turtle? Ose is the only demon capable of understanding and creating human technology. Her intellect rivals even my mother's."

"Right. That makes sense."

Kar and I wait while Amy leans forward and opens her right eye, allowing a retinal scanner to do its job. It releases a series of pulses into her iris, causing Amy to flinch. When it finishes, she pulls away and rubs her eye, ignoring the rest of us completely.

Click. Click. CLACK.

A series of unlocking sounds emanate from within the double-doors. Without any fanfare, they slowly open inward, revealing the room's contents.

Inside, a giant table with fifty chairs along each of its sides stretches into the distance. Countless meats and vegetables sit inside glass containers, preserving their contents while keeping them hot. Foods of all different types call to my party, beckoning for us to sit and eat. Torches on the walls crackle with fire, doing little to illuminate the room thanks to the late-day sun pouring in through the windowpanes.

Giant, stained-glass windows, each one protected by humming forcefields, allow natural light to flood the room. Their presence gives the dining hall a vibe similar to a Catholic church, which strikes me as odd. Why would a Demon Emperor decorate her mansion using an architectural style reminiscent of the angels?

When I lower my eyes to the entryway, my vision turns frosty.

Standing at the room's entrance is a demon whose face immediately erases all my interest regarding anything else.

Beelzebub.

The Duke of Inferno spreads both of his arms out while flashing an evil grin. "Hahaha. Jason Hiro. You've finally come."

Kar howls in rage. "You!"

"Ah, ah, ah," Beelzebub says, wagging a finger at the crocodile. "Can't we all get along for today, you worthless traitor? You don't want to fight me, not while standing in the most heavily fortified structure in all of Hell Harbor. Not that you'd stand a chance anywhere else, *Monster King*. You may technically possess the strength of a Duke, but you'll never defeat me in one on one combat."

Kar balls his claws into fists. "Hurgh! You slimy little-! Six years ago, because of you, I lost thousands of friends! I've sworn an oath to erase you from the realm of the living!!"

"Kar," I say, keeping my tone neutral. "Stop. We're not here to fight, not even if it means eliminating Beelzebub. Besides. I've already beaten him once. It's unlikely the outcome will change this time."

A flicker of hatred flashes in Beelzebub's eyes. "Ah, yes. The noble Hero, leader of humanity. Your scaled friend is not the only one in this room who owes a blood debt. Keep running your mouth, and you'll find out just how terrifying my evolution from Lord to Duke has made me. I'm *not* the same demon from six years ago."

"Alright, boys, calm your tits," Blinker says, huffing angrily. "If you're gonna fight, then fight! If not, sit down and shut your mouths! Sheesh. Nothing worse than a bunch of men waving their *big sticks* around."

From behind Beelzebub, across the room, at the other side of the grand table, a female voice pipes up. "Well said, Blinker, Queen of all Monsters, third in line to the Nalerian throne. Your diplomatic instincts aren't half bad."

My eyes flick past Beelzebub's shoulder, toward a white-haired demoness some hundred feet away. She sits at the head of the table, a glass of red wine held loosely in her fingers. The demoness wears a snugly-fitting white uniform, reminding me of a flight attendant. Her painted nails *clink* as she raps them on the table, while her eyes lock onto mine.

"You must be Ose," I say. "I do believe this is our first time meeting."

"That depends on how you define a 'meeting,'" Ose says. "After all, we did have that little encounter inside your Mind Realm. If it weren't for that troublesome king protecting your brain, we wouldn't be

having this discussion right now. Speaking of which... where might your favorite little golden crown be, I wonder?"

"It's gone," I say. "Solomon and I had a mutual parting. But before you get any clever ideas, let me warn you that I've reinforced my mental defenses substantially since we last spoke. As long as you don't try anything funny, I won't accidentally hurt you."

Ose turns her gaze away to look longingly at the stained glass windows, where the waning sun shines through, illuminating them with its golden light. "Ah, I see you possess the capability to learn from your mistakes, Jason Hiro. If only the humans living during the Energy Wars had the same idea, we demons might never have won. In any case, come. Take a seat. We have much to discuss."

I nod. "That we do. I presume you're not going to do anything stupid, like ambush me, right?"

Beelzebub sneers. "If Ose wanted you dead, you'd have perished in your sleep years ago. Underestimate the Emperor of Infiltration at your own risk, vermin."

"Beelzebub. That's quite enough," Ose says, a hint of boredom in her voice. "Lead our guests to their seats."

Beelzebub turns to stare at her for a moment before returning his gaze to us. "Very well. Come, mighty warriors. Don't let me slow you down."

Beelzebub turns and walks to the left side of the table while gesturing to the right. We follow his lead and walk to the seats on Ose's left, while Beelzebub sits at her right-hand side. It doesn't escape my notice that she places him at the second-highest position at the table. In her eyes, we're all guests in her house, but the dignitaries of a foreign nation rank lower than one of her generals. It's not as if I can't fathom why Ose made that choice, but if we were to swap places, I'd choose differently.

After I take my seat, Kar takes his. Blinker sits on his shoulder, eyeballing the food set out before us. A single crumb might last her a week, but not even she is greedy enough to test the waters of eating demon-cooked food. Who knows what mind-altering, poisonous substances Ose might have prepared for us?

"So, you knew we were coming," I say, posing a rhetorical question. "And yet you didn't stop us. Why not?"

Ose leans back in her chair, rests her elbows on its arms, and folds her hands in her lap. "We've never met before, Jason Hiro, but I know you better than you'd expect. I'm not worried you'll cause any trouble for me. Humans might be disgusting vermin, but you at least possess a modicum of self-restraint. I doubt your nobility and so-called 'righteous ideals' will hold out once the going gets tough, but for now, your intentions are benign, if not downright naive."

The Emperor of Infiltration smiles. "Let's just say I wanted to finally get to know you. I'm sure you've heard a bit about me, here and there, from that damned... *Belial*. However, I hate the idea that your knowledge of me comes from that filthy, traitorous little..."

Ose bites her tongue, but just from her tone of voice, I get the impression that her rivalry with Belial is far beyond redemption. Whatever happened between them, I don't see either demoness reaching a peaceful resolution anytime soon.

I clear my throat. "I came here to negotiate a peace treaty between my, erm, *subjects*, and the entirety of demonkind. I can assure you that my intentions are noble, though I'd like to add that I take offense to most of what you just stated. Belial is my wife's best friend... so I'd like it if you kept your feelings for her out of our conversation."

Beelzebub leans his arm on the table. "Ose is the current head of demonkind! She will say whatever she wants about that turncoat! We've already banished Belial from our ranks! She holds no official authority among our people beyond her evolved status!"

Ose sighs. "Beelzebub... please. The Hero appears uncomfortable regarding our discussion. Let's talk about something else for now."

The Duke of Inferno groans, then he leans back in his chair and gazes at a torch behind my head. Thanks to my enhanced mana sensing abilities, I observe a faint strand of magic flying from his eyes to bolster the flickering firelight.

"Whatever you say, my *Emperor*."

Ose returns her attention to me. Despite her harsh words, I find myself slightly off-put by her hospitality and gentle demeanor. She doesn't seem at all like the demoness Samantha described to Phoebe time and time again.

Ose is a backstabbing manipulator. She hates humans more than anything else in the universe. Given a chance, she'll break any deal you set and betray you before you can see it coming. Don't trust a word she says.

Samantha's warnings appear in the back of my mind. I keep them within arm's length, making sure to proceed with caution.

"So, Jason," Ose says. "You've come here hoping to stay my hand. You know damn well what I want, so should I assume you have something to offer me? I don't do bribes, but reasonable trades might slow my fists to action."

Beelzebub snaps his fingers. "Your fellow Wordsmith, Hope, has devastated our ranks over the past few years. Numerous Lords perished to his magic, along with a few Barons. Since we need to rebuild our military, why not start with some compensation for our losses? A thousand souls for each dead Lord, and a hundred thousand for each Baron. That would be an excellent start."

My mouth turns to chalk. All of a sudden, I remember Solomon's observations regarding Hope from before when he showed me the Ancient Era.

Solomon suspected that Hope had been killing demons behind my back. For Beelzebub to bring it up now only confirms my worst fears. I never had a chance to properly explore Solomon's worries thanks to the Hydra's appearance, but I held strong suspicions he was right.

Now I finally have confirmation, but at the worst possible moment. I don't know if the demons are lying, exaggerating, or telling the truth.

Kar butts in before I can reply. "Hurgh. Rabbit did indeed kill many demons. However, why pretend our side was at fault? You attacked us first, six years ago. As the Monster King, I am a neutral observer in this dispute, *Hotface*."

Beelzebub curls his upper lip. "Hah! So, you intend to play the impartial diplomat? I think not. You hold a grudge against me, 'Monster King,' all because I killed a few of your pissant friends who stole our territory. You're just as much at fault as that murderous Wordsmith!"

"You take that back," Kar growls. "You chose to escalate the violence. Had I been as powerful then as I am now, you would not be sitting where you are today. I'd have killed you!"

"And now you reveal your true colors," Beelzebub laughs. "You're no arbiter of neutrality. You're just as violent as your human friends. Blood coats your hands, just as it does Hope's."

Beelzebub and Kar fire off a few more insults at each other, but their words only take the wind from my sails. Unwittingly, Kar provides a piece of firsthand evidence confirming Hope and Neil's violent acts. Assuming the three of us survive today's encounter with Ose, I'll need to return home and interrogate our so-called 'Army Commander.' I've allowed Neil too much free reign, and now his actions have come back to bite me.

"Alright," I say, interrupting the crocodile and firemaster. "Let's just agree that there's plenty of blame to go around for both sides. I, personally, haven't killed a single demon, but I understand that my twin has killed more than his fair share. None of that matters. I'm not going to give you any souls, nor will I demand compensation for all the lives you've snuffed out."

At my last sentence, I shoot a pointed glare at Beelzebub. "You, especially. I know several demon squads have attacked the Core over the years, but your assault killed the most people, and many of them were my friends. If I'm willing to forgive and forget, then you should, too."

"Don't try to put words in my mouth, human," Beelzebub replies. "I regret nothing. My attack gave me enough souls to become a Baron. I only stand atop demon society today because of my sacrifices."

Kar snorts. "You have no understanding of the word 'sacrifice,' *Hotface*."

"I'd be fine with sacrificing you to the elder demons," Beelzebub snarks. "Keep running that mouth, and we'll see who has the last laugh."

"Gentlemen, *please*," Ose groans. "Let's keep the conversation civil, at least for now. Jason Hiro, if you're not here to present any souls for me, then why did you come? I don't like it when someone wastes my time."

I nod. "Ose, as the current *de facto* leader of humanity, I've come to offer a modest proposal. I believe we can reach a mutual understanding if we work together. If you're willing to listen, I may have a way to satisfy your need for souls without harming even one more human for the rest of eternity."

Ose scoffs. "Ridiculous. Demons require human souls so that we may evolve and mutate into greater forms. The foundation of our meritocratic society rests on the principle of 'might makes right.' What can you do to change our very biology?"

"Yes," Beelzebub adds. "What *can* you do? Even the mighty *Wordsmith* has limitations."

"I do; you're right," I reply. "Despite those restrictions holding me back, by working within their confines, I can achieve incredible feats. Ose, am I correct in assuming you've observed me ever since my arrival on Hell Harbor?"

Ose frowns. "Naturally. The moment you broke through the teleportation restrictor, a thousand alarms activated. You might as well have detonated a bomb within our biggest city, for all the good your 'stealthy approach' did."

Kar chuckles. "Hurgh. I knew coming here would not be so easy, Turtle."

"Right," I say. "Well, what about before our arrival. Did you happen to witness my confrontation with the Baron of Games?"

Ose doesn't reply for a few seconds. "...No. I did not. Why? I hope you'll reach something resembling a point soon."

"I can evolve demons to higher ranks via my Wordsmithing," I say, stating my intent bluntly. "*Without* needing to use a single human soul."

Finally, my words pierce Ose's iron-like defenses. Her expression contorts into a mixture of bewilderment and disbelief. "What? No! That's impossible!"

Beelzebub, too, appears even more stupefied. "What a baldfaced lie! Have you come here to mock us, Wordsmith?!"

I shake my head. "No, not at all. Listen. Demons absorb the energy contained within souls to improve their mana's minimum foundation by tiny, nigh-imperceptible increments. Once you gather enough souls to cement your foundation, you can finally mutate into your next form."

Ose frowns. "Yes, that is a passable description of demonic evolution. Are you telling me that your Wordsmithing can... replicate the effect of a soul?"

"Replicate, certainly. But, even better, it can *replace* your need for souls."

The table falls silent.

Ose stares at me silently for several long seconds. Her expression turns stony as she carefully evaluates the information I've just given her.

"...You're a bold one, Wordsmith. Right now, I am asking myself whether you are a genius or a colossal idiot. You stepped inside my headquarters with seemingly no protection while hoping I wouldn't kill you on the spot. Then, you fed me information capable of upending demonkind as I know it. Either you're confident in your ability to defend yourself, or you don't understand the dangerous position you've just entered."

"I understand," I say. "After all, if the other demons learned of my ability, overnight, I imagine many of your most loyal followers would defect to follow my lead. Souls are difficult to come by, particularly when they belong to humans. Meanwhile, all I require is a steady stream of mana, and I can evolve as many demons as I like."

I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table. "You've only ruled demonkind for six years. Many demons still don't respect your authority. Kar and I learned a lot on our trip here. We know several factions have yet to follow your orders. They'd ditch you in an instant if they thought the benefits would work in their favor."

Ose's eyes narrow to slits. "Oh? So you aren't only here to provoke me, but to deliver an ultimatum. Let me guess: If I don't agree to your terms, you'll release this knowledge into the wild to undermine my rule. Am I close to the mark?"

"Not quite," I reply. "While I could do something like that, who would accept a fleshbag's word? No demon worth their salt would believe such a ridiculous rumor, not even if I somehow included evidence of my abilities. No, I didn't come here with such a bad-faith intent, Ose. I've thought about how to reconcile our differences for years, and the idea of using my Wordsmithing to replace the power of souls was the one that stood out to me."

I pause for dramatic effect.

"Furthermore... I never said I would personally use my Wordsmithing on each demon. That would be grossly inefficient. Instead, I would create machines capable of converting mana to soulpower. Then I wouldn't have to do any work, which would suit my laziness just fine."

"You had me until the machine part," Beelzebub laughs. "How could a machine ever increase a demon's power? I can barely bring myself to believe your Wordsmithing capable of such a feat, yet you claim-"

"No!" Ose says, raising her voice. "Jason isn't lying. I once tried to create such a device, only to fail due to the energy conversion step. Spawn of a broodmother, you are a troublesome adversary, Wordsmith. I underestimated your resourcefulness. If you successfully built such a machine, it would only be a matter of months before the entirety of demonkind crumbles and becomes your subservient slave."

"I don't want slaves, nor do I want docile citizens," I say, keeping my voice calm. "I want free-thinkers, scientists, and inventors. I want my fellow humans to experience happiness and to escape torturous misery. I don't even have anything against the demons... aside from your destructive tendencies. I'm willing to overlook your sordid history in the hopes that your kind can improve themselves and move past their hate-filled past."

I continue. "Furthermore, I'm willing to help you transition to a better future. I will use my Wordsmithing to improve the lives of all demons and humans equally, without bias. I will even go so far as to give you all the credit and make your people think you coaxed me into such favorable terms. The only thing I want in return is an immediate and permanent end to all hostilities between humanity and demonkind, and a mutual understanding that we will work together to improve our lot in life."

"What more could I possibly offer to sweeten the deal?" I ask, finishing my monologue.

Once again, Ose falls silent. The cold look in her eyes reveals a deep-seated distrust in not only me, but humankind in general.

However, to my absolute astonishment, Beelzebub's vicious expression cracks. The Duke of Inferno continues to stare at me in bewilderment, unable to process much of what I've said. Unlike Ose, though, Beelzebub lowers his eyes to the table and broods for over a minute, ruminating on the offer I've just made.

When he speaks, he does so much more softly before, and with far less hatred in his voice.

"Wordsmith. Everything you've just said... you can't possibly mean it. What sort of trickery are you trying to achieve? How could you make such a reasonable offer after all the battles we've fought? I slew many of Kar's comrades; he said so himself. Surely, you cannot expect us to believe you would simply wash your hands of the past and stride forward into a brighter future?"

I take a moment to formulate a reply before speaking.

"...You're right, in that I am a little different from most people, Beelzebub. I believe in the endurance of the human spirit and our ability to forgive. Maybe I'm naive, but having observed some of demonkind's history and origins, I cannot place all of the blame for your violent ways on your shoulders alone. Demons grew up slaves of the angels, then suffered multiple genocides at their hands, as well as the Titans' and humans'. It's no wonder your people know only violence and mayhem."

"I believe that, given time and effort, we might be able to reform demonkind from the bottom to the top. Humans could live without being oppressed. Demons could live without hurting other beings. All demons would have a chance to evolve, not by killing and murdering, but by contributing to their society. Doesn't that sound at least a little bit appealing?"

"It does," Beelzebub replies, much faster than I expected. "I've... I've had similar thoughts. I grew up an imp in the Labyrinth. I crawled and clawed my way to the top of our hierarchy. It was only through a few fortunate encounters that I managed to achieve my current level of power. I must admit that I've always felt more than a hint of anger at Diablo and the rest of his cohorts for stifling our people's growth."

"Beelzebub," Ose says, flicking her gaze to the Duke. "Now is not the time to criticize Diablo's methods. He's old news. By the time that fool wakes from his coma, I'll have-"

"You'll have *what*?" Beelzebub snaps. "You care only about killing the humans, Ose. I wish to reform demon society. I always have! This offer Jason is presenting sounds too good to be true, but what if it isn't?"

Ose flares her nostrils, exhaling a few electrical sparks. "Yes, Beelzebub. What *if* it isn't? What if Jason is presenting us with a prime opportunity to reform demon society? Should we do so? Should we abandon our cause in the hopes this one, singular *human* can pull off a miracle? Suppose he not only fails but fails spectacularly. Suppose our people don't take kindly to 'fleshbag interference' and stage a massive revolt. Who will clean up the trillions of bodies piled within Hell's confines? You? Me?"

Ose continues. "I don't trust Jason, and I certainly don't believe that he'll succeed. Even if he does, do you have any clue the turmoil we'll endure following his naive ideology? Do you think demonkind will give up the power we've earned over millennia of struggle, all to appease our lessers?"

Beelzebub scowls in exasperation. "No, but should we not at least hear the human out? His idea has merit. You said yourself that you nearly created a machine capable of generating soulpower. Perhaps, with the Wordsmith's help..."

Ose crosses her arms. The white-haired demoness leans back in her seat and glares daggers at Beelzebub. "I've made up my mind. This Hero will only bring ruin to demonkind. I have no interest in listening to a thing he says."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not sitting right here," I say. "Come on; this is a chance for your people to thrive! To *prosper*! Can't you at least issue a temporary ceasefire to commune with the rest of the Demon Council? What if the Dukes heard about my proposal? They might think it's an action worth pursuing."

"I am the sole leader of demonkind, barring the First Emperor himself," Ose says, turning her glare on me. "I care not what the *Dukes* think. They may protest all they wish, but as of today, demonkind is *mine* to control. Might makes right, and I possess more of it than anyone else!"

"Do you?" I ask. "What about Bael? Can you defeat Bael if he agrees to my proposal? Will you even *dare* to fight him?"

For a split-second, I almost feel I have a shot at changing Ose's mind. However, it falls apart a moment later.

Ose smirks. The Emperor of Infiltration slowly reveals a sinister grin as she eyeballs me.

"Will I fight Bael, you ask? I already have. I defeated the Balrog with ease. After all, it is not mere power that I possess, but intellect as well. Dullards will never defeat geniuses. That is why, despite how many millennia it took me, I eventually rose from the bondage of a human prison to the rank of demonkind's leader. That is why my ways are what will save us, not your false promises and half-truths."

Ose raises her finger. She points at the dining hall's door, opening it with her magic. "Go! I've nothing more to discuss with the likes of you. As expected, you've done little more than waste my time."

"Ose..." Beelzebub whispers. "Please, don't be irrational. If you push Jason aside, now..."

"Quiet," Ose hisses. "Don't even think of opposing me, Beelzebub. I've made up my mind."

"But...!"

Before Beelzebub can butt in again, I raise my hand.

"No, Beelzebub. I've heard enough. I'm sorry we couldn't come to an agreement. I hope you'll think carefully about my offer, Ose. So long as you don't take any drastic actions, I will leave it on the table."

To my left, Kar snorts. "Hurgh. As I thought, Thundertongue would not listen to a word you said. How unfortunate that demonkind's 'genius' has proven herself a fool."

Blinker stares at Ose silently, judging her with her eyes. She continues to sit on Kar's shoulder as the crocodile rises to his feet.

"We'll take our leave," I say, keeping my voice low. "Thank you for at least listening to us. You may not believe me, Ose, but I am not your enemy."

Ose doesn't reply. She merely stares at me stonily, her silence giving me no wiggle room.

With a sigh, Kar and I both shuffle to the doorway.

Suddenly, from within my mind, Phoebe speaks.

"Jason. Wait."

I pause mid-stride. *What? Did I forget something?*

My mind-wife shakes her head. "No. I stayed silent during your meeting because there was something familiar about Ose; something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Now, I know what it was. Jason, I want you to project my mental image out of your mind with Wordsmithing. I want to speak to Ose."

My heart skips a beat. *What?! No way! Don't even think about it! If Ose finds out you're part of my mental defenses, she might attack you! I won't take that risk unnecessarily.*

Phoebe smiles. "Don't worry. I won't give away my identity. Besides, I'm sure Ose knows who I am. Now, please... project me."

Moments pass. My heart pounds like a drum.

Eventually, I sigh and nod. *Alright. Be on your guard.*

I turn to face Ose. She and Beelzebub both stiffen, possibly expecting me to attack. Instead, I speak a single word of power.

"Project."

Ose jumps to her feet. "Bastard! I should have known you'd try to- hm?"

Beelzebub remains seated, but even he frowns in confusion as a holographic image of my mind-wife, echoing her flesh-body's size and appearance, materializes before me.

As Phoebe's projection comes into focus, she bows toward Ose.

"Hello, little one. Do you know who I am?"

Ose cocks her head slightly. "Phoebe, the Hero's wife. What are you doing here?"

Phoebe clears her throat. "Jason transmitted your conversation to me, so I saw the whole thing from the beginning. I did not intend to say anything at first, but now I feel obligated. Ose, do you know me? Do you *remember* me?"

The Emperor of Infiltration taps her fingers on the table. "Naturally. You created several key technologies for humanity's forces. You married the Hero. What of it? We've never met, and I couldn't care less about your existence. Pleading for your husband's mercy only makes him look more pathetic."

"So you've forgotten me," Phoebe murmurs. "I didn't recognize you either, at first. But how could I forget your beautiful, delicate face? I saved you, after all. I pulled you and many other demonesses from Arthur's dungeon, over a hundred thousand years ago. It was only once I witnessed your electrical powers, and when you mentioned the prison, that I finally pieced together my memories."

"Ose. I am Phoebe Berthold, former knight under King Arthur. Do you remember me now?"

* * *

Silence.

Ose stares, wide-eyed, at Phoebe's ethereal image.

It takes several long seconds before she can whisper a reply. "No... that's impossible. You should have died tens of millennia ago. How could you survive after all this time?"

"Bahamut," Phoebe replies. "Her Sphinx magic preserved my body for 100,000 years."

Phoebe continues speaking. She explains the circumstances of her life to Ose. Each word causes the Emperor's blood to drain from her face.

It's only once Phoebe finishes that Ose replies.

"Seven Devils. All this time, it was you who saved me? I was too young to remember your face. I tried to recall, but all I could ever picture was a hazy image in the back of my mind."

"That's right," Phoebe says, smiling. "I saved you. I took you away from those awful, terrible guards. I showed you compassion and empathy while putting my life on the line. I held beliefs reminiscent of Jason's today. I wanted no reward beyond knowing that you could go on to live a happy, fruitful life."

Phoebe's smile fades.

"What happened to you, Ose? Why have you walked the path of hatred? Don't you see how your actions today will only instigate a neverending cycle of despair? Why not set aside your prejudice, as I did all those years ago? Please. Jason and I just want to help your people. We don't mean you any harm."

Ose lowers her gaze. She stares at the table for nearly a minute without replying.

"Ose?" Beelzebub asks. "What's running through your mind?"

"I... I don't know," The Emperor replies, her voice soft. "Phoebe. You may have saved me in my youth, but... that changes nothing. How can one act of kindness erase thousands of instances of hatred? Humans are evil. They're vile, putrid barbarians hellbent on demonkind's destruction. For every Phoebe or Jason, there are a million Arthurs and Hopes. I can't go along with your wishes merely because of sentimentality."

Ose sighs.

"Once again, you've wasted my time. Showing yourself to me accomplished nothing."

Phoebe shakes her head. "Not true. Now you have a face and a name to put to your memories. If you attack my people, you will remember me and weep. You will strike the heart of your rescuer, and slap my face, undoing all of the good my act did. Is that what you want? Are you still that scared, angry little girl I saved from Arthur's prison? Or, will you cast aside your past and become the best version of yourself?"

Phoebe crosses her arms.

"What is your answer, Ose? How can you continue down a path of bloodshed, knowing you will betray me, the person who gave up everything to save you?"

* * *

Ose closes her eyes. She leans back in her chair and sighs.

"I'm *not* that scared little girl, Phoebe. I *have* grown up. I see more clearly now than ever."

The Emperor waves the back of her hand at me. "Leave. I will consider your proposal, Hero, but that is all. Expect nothing more, for that is all I'm willing to give."

I nod.

"As you wish, Ose. I hope you'll make the right choice."

I turn around and walk out of the room. As Kar and I leave, Ose mutters under her breath.

"Don't you worry, Wordsmith. *I always do.*"

Part 214: The Swelling Storm

Kar, Blinker, and I exit Ose's dining room. After the door closes, we find ourselves trailing along behind Ose's human slave, Amy. The blonde woman silently leads us away from Ose's inner chamber, not uttering a word as we walk.

"I don't trust that Ose," Blinker mutters. "She wouldn't listen to reason at all! Geez! You laid out a great plan for demonkind to thrive, and all she could do was think about herself!"

"Hurgh. I was more surprised with Hotface's reaction," Kar adds. "He did nothing but mock you at first, yet once you started talking about upending the demons' social systems, he seemed very receptive to the idea."

"Beelzebub surprised me too," I reply. "But I don't know how well today's meeting went. Ose seems like a smart woman. Belial has always praised her intellect, even if begrudgingly. I can't imagine she'll do anything reckless after I've presented such a tempting offer and ultimatum. Still, she was pretty resistant to my idea, right up until Phoebe spoke to her."

At the mention of my mind-wife, Kar tilts his head slightly to look at me. "Hurgh. You did not tell Butterfly and me that White-Hair would listen to our conversation. I never heard you speak the magic word."

I pause for a moment before closing my mouth.

[Kar,] I say, transmitting my words telepathically. [We're still in Ose's house. She might be able to hear us. Let's continue this discussion telepathically. I don't want to take any chances.]

Kar's eyes flash with insight. He, too, falls silent. Neither of us says anything for a few moments, giving me the impression he's started speaking to Blinker.

[Hurgh,] Kar says, finishing his discussion with his wife. [Is there a reason for your secrecy?]

[Yes. I haven't told anyone yet, but I cloned Phoebe's soul to create a defensive mechanism inside my brain. Ose nearly took over my body six years ago, but Solomon protected me. When he left, I realized I needed a new barrier to protect my mind. Especially after I found out it was a sliver of Solomon's soul that made me attack Samantha and you.]

Kar rubs his chin. [Yes, I see. You must have copied White-Hair's soul right after you erased Whitebeard's imprint from your mind. I didn't realize it at the time, but now your actions make sense. However, why did you keep the second White-Hair a secret from me?]

[To fool my enemies, I must first fool my friends. That's what a famous human philosopher once said — the fewer people who know about Phoebe's soul-clone, the better.]

Satisfied, Kar nods. [You are still a fool compared to me, but I respect your attempts to correct your mental deficiencies. It would be disgraceful if you wallowed in your stupidity forever, rather than following my lead and attaining wisdom.]

[Kar, if you didn't have scales, I'd smack the shit out of you.]

The crocodile chuckles. [Oh, Turtle, there you go with your foolishness again. It is all but impossible to slap someone hard enough to make them defecate. Certainly, a mere smack would never accomplish such a thing, especially not from a twig-armed simpleton like you.]

[Yeah, yeah. Keep running your mouth, scale-butt.]

* * *

Ten minutes later, Amy leads us outside Ose's manor. She stops at the steps leading outside, bows politely, and leaves us to our own devices. After Ose's servant enters the house, I turn to Kar.

[Alright, Kar. I don't trust Ose. We need to return to the Core and start preparing our people for war. Above all else, safety is key, here. I've spent the last six years fortifying Tarus II's defenses with Solomon's aid. Hell, I've even built weapons so secret that Phoebe doesn't know of their existence. If Ose turns down my offer and decides to attack, I won't go down without a fight.]

My mind-wife speaks to me. "Wait, what secret weapons? I thought you told me everything!"

Nope, sorry. Solomon and I agreed that we had to have backups nobody could discover. Don't you remember a few years ago when I told you to keep some weapon projects secret from me? It's important we have a few hidden cards up our sleeve, just in case the demons have informants among our upper ranks. Ose and Beelzebub confirmed as much in that meeting just now.

Phoebe strokes her chin. "Hm. Yes, I see what you mean. I *do* have a few prototypes I haven't mentioned to you yet. Carry on, then."

I return my attention to Kar. The crocodile gazes at his wife for several seconds, before Blinker sends a telepathic message my way. [When we return to the Core, I'll pop over and see if I can find Hope. You go and tell Phoebe about the meeting with the demon leaders, while Kar can give a rousing speech to the military! That will cover the most ground in the least time!]

[That's a good plan,] I say. [Alright, give me a second to visualize the Core, and then-]

Before I finish my sentence, a faint trickle of holy energy fires up my arm, disrupting my thoughts. Raphael appears in my Mind Realm and waves his staff. "Wait! Jason, why art thou leaving? Did not thou promise to search for the captured Archangel?!"

I frown. Captured Archangel? Oh... you mean from when we first arrived. Shit, I nearly forgot. I don't know if now is a good time, Raphael. I need to return to the Core and get everyone prepped for battle. If Ose attacks when we aren't ready, the fallout could destroy everything I've built. While we're on the subject, though, have you detected that holy energy signal intensifying as we've moved around? The three of us must have covered a hundred miles today.

Raphael shakes his head. "Nay, I have not. Jason, I witnessed thy conversation with the demon leader. Surely, even if she were to attack immediately, it would take her several days to muster her forces. Can't we take a quick look around the planet? With thy Wordsmithing, thou art the most capable being to seek out my captured brother or sister!"

I frown. *You have a point. I suppose I could spare an hour or two to look around. I don't like the idea of putting off my return, though. I'll have to make a compromise.*

[Kar,] I say, transmitting my voice to the crocodile. [Change of plans. I'll send you and Blinker back to the Core. Tell Phoebe what's happened first, then rally the military. I need to take a few hours to investigate Hell Harbor on my own.]

A look of alarm appears on Kar's face. [Hurgh! Turtle, what are you thinking? You cannot stay here in the demon's territory all alone. Your weak body will fail you if they launch an ambush.]

[I agree,] Blinker says, nodding along to Kar's observation. [If something happens to you, we won't know. We can't take a chance on losing you to ol' Shifty-Eyes the Seductress and her boy-toy, the Burning Man!]

[I'm not making a request,] I say. [I'm the leader of our makeshift resistance, and I'm more than capable of hiding myself from Ose's eyes. I need to scout Hell Harbor by myself for a while, Kar. You have to return to the Core and make sure everyone is prepared for what might happen.]

[Hurgh. Turtle... you are making a foolish choice.]

[Maybe, but it's mine to make. I've spent the last six years training with Solomon, and I possess all three of the Archangel rings. I can handle myself.]

[But...]

Kar starts to object, but instead, he falls silent.

[Hurgh. Very well. However, you must give me a method to contact you.]

[Sure. That's fair. One sec.]

I close my eyes for a moment and visualize a golden pendant, one with a green emerald in its center.

"Necklace. Imbue. Harden. Refine. Copy. Connect."

Three minutes later, I finish crafting a pair of golden necklaces, each made from nearly-indestructible, wordsmithed alloys. I hand one of them to Kar while clutching mine in my palm.

[These are two-way communication pendants. Normally, communication can only travel at the speed of light. However, these are magical artifacts. They keep a 1-micron-thick subspace rift open between them at all times, allowing for instant communication. Furthermore, if one of their wearers dies or takes off the pendant, both emeralds will shift to red. That way, if something happens to me, you'll know immediately.]

I use my telekinesis to wrap my pendant's chain around my neck. [Also, if someone steals my pendant, you'll know that, too. Neither one will function until we imprint both with our mana.]

Kar nods, but he appears confused by my words. [Hurgh. Can we speak to each other using these?]

[Yes. I have a similar device in place for when I talk to Phoebe. I don't use it often, but she can always use it to contact me if an emergency comes up. Are you happy, now?]

[Hurgh. This pendant is an acceptable compromise. Very well. I will keep an eye on it until you return, Turtle. Don't delay. I don't trust either of those two backstabbers.]

[Neither do I, Kar. Neither do I.]

Kar and I take a few minutes to activate our pendants, then I send him and Blinker back to the Core with a single word.

"Return."

Fwoomp.

The two monsters vanish, leaving me behind.

With a sigh, I turn my gaze toward Hell Harbor's setting sun.

Now, then. Where can I find this missing Archangel?

Back inside the manor, the Duke of Inferno and the Emperor of Infiltration sit in silence at the dining room table. Ose reclines in her chair with both of her elbows resting on its arms. She leans her cheek against her left hand, while her right hand slowly taps against the demonstone-crafted table.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Her fingernails click rhythmically against the table's smooth surface. Her eyes stare ahead at nothing in particular as she sits motionlessly, lost deep in thought.

Beelzebub, however, leans forward and cups both of his hands together while resting them on the table. He stares at Ose intently, scrutinizing her expression like a hawk. He watches every twitch of her eyebrows, every slight narrowing of her eyes, and even picks out the moments when anger and humiliation flit across her face.

"Ose."

Beelzebub speaks, attempting to prod his Emperor from her stupor.

"Ose. Speak to me. Tell me your thoughts."

Ose inhales deeply. She continues to stare forward, not even deigning to look at her young Duke appointee.

"How long have we known each other, Beelzebub?"

Beelzebub snorts, releasing two small flickers of flame from his nostrils. "Six years at most. We met shortly before my ascension to Duke."

"Six years," Ose echoes.

The Emperor of Infiltration falls silent for a moment before continuing.

"Humans are such fragile creatures," Ose says, her words slow and calculated. "They might live eighty to a hundred years under ideal circumstances before dying of old age. Compared to the eternal youth of our people, their lives are like a candle's flame in the wind. Despite that, they form bonds quickly and learn to trust one another without restraint."

Ose continues. "I've known you for only six years. If I divide that number by my entire life's length, our relationship hasn't lasted more than six seconds, in human terms. Perhaps that is why I'm not terribly disappointed in your inability to stick to our plans. I never trusted you in the first place."

Beelzebub bristles. "If this is about my slight interest in Jason's ideas--"

"*Slight?*" Ose hisses. She slowly turns her eyes to gaze at him. "You practically fell over yourself, asking what we could do to bow before His Majesty, the so-called 'Hero.' If I didn't know any better, I might think you were a damned spy for the humans lurking at my side these past few years."

Beelzebub clenches his teeth. "You're one to talk. We already know the Hero possesses a ridiculously versatile magical ability called Wordsmithing. We already know he can summon objects into existence and perform all other kinds of incredible feats. I never said we ought to do what he said, only that we ought to hear him out. You were acting unreasonably!"

"Was I?"

Ose stares at Beelzebub, her eyes betraying no emotion. He meets her gaze, but with more than a hint of anger.

"You were!" Beelzebub roars. "Damn us to Heaven, Ose! How could you ignore the potential for our species if we could evolve without limits?! Forget the obvious benefits of fairness for a moment! Forget how every imp, grunt, and Lord would laud you for giving them a shot at becoming Barons, Dukes, and even Emperors! Think of the sheer power we could command! Think of all the ways we could put our power to good use, reshaping whole worlds for us to settle, instead of living in that blasted, hellish maze!"

Ose stares at Beelzebub. Slowly, she blinks at him, a hint of mockery in her movements.

"Sometimes I forget how young and naive you are," Ose sighs. "Once, a hundred years was enough time for any demon to ascend to the pinnacle of an Emperor's power. Once, Emperors and Dukes were as abundant as dirt on this world. Now, it takes tens of millennia for the truly brilliant to claw their way to the top of the dung heap."

Beelzebub scowls. "That's what I'm saying!"

"No, you misunderstand my meaning," Ose replies. "I am not complaining about the speed of your evolution. Rather, I am lamenting your naivete and easily addled brain."

The Emperor of Infiltration cocks her head slightly, while keeping it rested on her palm.

"Humor me for a moment, Beelzebub. Suppose Jason had any ulterior motives. Suppose he came here with some malicious intent. What might he do?"

Seeing Ose's unfazed expression, Beelzebub quietly stifles his temper. "He would lie to us."

Ose smiles.

"That's right. How well do you know that human?"

"Jason? Not well at all. I haven't spoken to him more than a handful of times."

Like a teacher gently correcting a child, Ose offers a dainty smile. "Ah, yet you appear so trusting of him, as if he were a long-lost blood-brother. Let me ask you something else, Beelzebub. Is Jason a violent, psychopathic murderer?"

Beelzebub cocks an eyebrow. "I... I don't believe so. Why? Do you know something about him that I don't?"

"Hmm. I wouldn't say I 'know' anything in particular, but I have my suspicions. Let's call it my female intuition."

"Pft. That's a gas," Beelzebub smirks.

Ose raises her right hand and fans out her fingers, taking a moment to admire her nails. "Laugh if you like. I'll say right now that Jason is no murderer. I've observed him since shortly before the Black Queen perished, and he has a truly pathetic heart of gold. However, even you must admit the same is not true of... his *clone*."

Ose falls silent, allowing Beelzebub to digest her words.

The Duke of Inferno's smirk disappears entirely. "Jason's clone? Hope? I don't follow. He is certainly a psychopath, but I fail to see the significance of your words."

"Haha. Your naivete is adorable, my cute young Duke. I will take your conduct today as a sign of ignorance, not malice. Listen well, Beelzebub, for I don't like to repeat myself."

After pausing to clear her throat, Ose continues.

"Jason and Hope are, without a doubt, working together in tandem. While Jason has spent the last six years heavily fortifying Tarus II's defenses, Hope spent that time attacking us, killing our Lords and Barons, while also reinforcing the Core's military. What does this suggest to you? You might be naive, but I believe your intelligence should be at least a bit above Bael's level."

Slowly, Beelzebub loosens his clenched jaw. "You... you can't be serious. Didn't you always say the two Wordsmiths were mortal enemies?"

"I did — they had me fooled until today."

The Duke's expression turns incredulous. He leans forward while gazing at Ose intensely. "What do you mean? Did something tip you off?"

"I've had my suspicions since the beginning," The Emperor replies. "I saw Jason coming here and thought he might try to beg for mercy. I even suspected he might try to entice us with human souls, which was why I requested so many to start. When negotiating, the one who sets the starting price wields the strongest hand. However, not even I realized that he had such a ruthless disposition. From the very beginning, he came here intending to blackmail me and coerce you. His words were sneaky and sly, like any seasoned con-artist."

"Con-artist?" Beelzebub asks.

"It's a human term..." Ose replies. "...One which refers to a trade older than the angels themselves. It means 'he who practices deception to advance his material gain.' Jason must have investigated both of us before he came here. He knew any attempt to revolutionize demonic society would tug at your heartstrings, while he also attempted to place a dagger to my neck. Humans are just as manipulative and dangerous as they have always been."

Beelzebub frowns. "I still don't see the danger in his offer. Can you be more specific?"

"Let's start with the immediate fallout," Ose says. She pulls away from her palm and sits upright in her chair, choosing to fold her hands in her lap. "The moment word gets out regarding Jason's plan; the whole Labyrinth will enter an uproar. Every skeezy character will want his turn first, causing mass confusion and disorder. Even if we carefully controlled the flow of information, which would defeat the point, you should expect to see anywhere from ten to forty percent of all demons perish in the aftermath of our new 'friendship' with the Hero."

Beelzebub balks. "Ten to forty percent... so many?"

"That would only be the start of our worries," Ose says. Her smile fades away, revealing a deadly gaze filled with killing intent. "I'll bet that not once have you considered what position the Overlords might take."

The Duke of Inferno nearly jumps out of his chair. "The Overlords?! Spawn of a broodmother! I forgot about them!"

"That's right," Ose says, her voice as cold as ice. "But, ask yourself: Did Jason?"

"No! Of course, that damned, scheming bastard didn't!"

Beelzebub grabs his hair and tugs at it, fury writhing all over his face.

"Seven Hells! That slithering conniver! How could I be so blind?! There's no chance he would offer us such a good deal on a silver platter!"

Ose nods sagely, keeping her stern, teacher-like expression frozen on her face. "Indeed. Once the Overlords realize we've begun to amass frightening amounts of power, even if our internal revolts didn't wipe us out, their fear would ensure our swift demise."

Beelzebub pales. "How... how powerful are the Overlords? I know precious little information about them? Can't you tell me anything?"

"You've stood at my side for six years," Ose says, a faint smile returning to her lips. "As long as you promise not to go against me again, as you did earlier, I'm more than willing to educate you on matters regarding the Overlords. After all, when I leave the Labyrinth to report to them in the near future, I'll expect you to hold the fort together until I return."

Beelzebub nods. "You've hinted at your pending departure before. Why have you not spoken to them since your ascension to Third Emperor?"

"The time wasn't right. It still isn't," Ose replies. "Diablo gave the Overlords a statement regarding the Labyrinth's political situation and military preparedness every ten to twenty years. With those damned

humans having stolen possession of the Core, I fear what might happen if the Overlords learn of the Hero's return."

"Why not lie to them?" Beelzebub asks. "If it's only a statement they want, you could easily hide what the humans are doing-"

"Not a chance," Ose says, cutting him off. "Maybe the Overlords wouldn't find out. They don't tend to meddle in our affairs, after all. However, what if they did? If you think that petulant little Hero is causing us trouble now, wait until you witness the shitstorm the Overlords would rain upon our heads."

"Why not tell them of the human uprising now, then? Perhaps they could assist us."

Beelzebub's sincere question causes Ose's anger to crack. She chuckles to herself quietly.

"Haha. The Overlords don't care about our well-being, Beelzebub. We promised to keep the humans in line. If they ever escape their containment, the Overlords will kill them all. Not even Benjamin Brown or Marie's remnants would be capable of stopping them. It would destroy our soul supply, and summarily, us."

Beelzebub's expression darkens. "We can't tell the Overlords about the humans, and we can't *not* tell them about the humans. What option does that leave us?"

"Operation Stormbringer, naturally!" Ose laughs. "Don't tell me that after six years of planning, you've forgotten! Make no mistake: If I wished to eliminate the human resistance, I could have done so six years ago."

"Mmm. The only reason you didn't was that you hoped to capture the Wordsmiths, then, I presume?"

Ose claps her hands. "Yes! You're finally understanding my intentions! I need to capture the Wordsmiths, eliminate Jason's resistance forces, and report my successes to the Overlords. After all, we've had plenty of human uprisings in the past. None this severe, mind you, but with a Hero leading them, that much is a given. Once I tell the Executor about my killing of the Hero, his faith in my leadership will become unshakable."

Beelzebub nods, but his expression turns grim. "So, you intend to kill the Wordsmith after all?"

"No, no, I will keep him secluded and use my mind-control to turn him into a loyal slave. However, the Overlords needn't *know* that."

Both demons fall silent for a moment.

Beelzebub rubs his chin. "Hmm. You promised 'Yama' you would deliver him a Wordsmith alive. Since you intend to capture one yourself, that will mean you need the Hero and his clone bound and gagged. I know we've spent six years preparing, but now that the Hydra has attacked and Jason chose to show his face here, I feel that he will return to the Core and clamp down on his defenses."

"Indeed, he will," Ose nods sagely. "Of that, I have no doubt. I did not anticipate so many setbacks striking me at once. Now that you see how deep the Hero's planning goes, you should understand how much more dangerous he's become in just the past two months."

Ose continues. "If we accept the Hero's terms, we will fall into ruin. I know you are displeased with demon society and all its awful, unfair restrictions. However, we cannot afford to spook our Overlord friends. If they learn that we have begun to collaborate with humanity, they will destroy us. If they discover we've failed to contain our lessers, they will destroy us. If we do anything to spark their ire, you can bet all of your accumulated souls that we will perish under the fiery blast of their weaponry."

"How dismal," Beelzebub groans. The Duke of Inferno sags in his seat as a thousand-pound mental weight hangs on his shoulders. "I've always thought of our people as the rulers of the universe. Yet, the way you describe us, we are little more than pawns in the hands of our almighty Overlords. If we attempt to break our chains, we will self-immolate under our own hubris."

"That's right," Ose murmurs. Her expression turns melancholic. "In a way, our situation is no different from humanity's. We are prisoners, just like them. We answer to a higher power, just as they do. If we fight back, we will perish, just as they will. Ironical, isn't it? They might be the slaves of slaves, but at least they understand their place in this galaxy, while our people still suffer delusions of grandeur."

"It's damned tragic..." Beelzebub sighs. "If we demons understood our lot in life, we might kill ourselves from heartbreak."

Ose shakes her head. "If only you knew, Beelzebub. Before the mind-wipes and the cullings, every demon knew of our Overlord's existence. Many tried to fight back, hoping to claim our right as rulers of the galaxy. They failed, just as we would if we attempted the same thing today."

Beelzebub falls silent.

Both he and Ose lower their gazes to the table. They say nothing for over a minute.

Eventually, Beelzebub clears his throat.

"Ahem. If the Overlords are so powerful... if they can destroy us and humanity without any effort, why haven't they? What purpose do we serve for the likes of such grand, almighty beings?"

"Hmm..."

Ose glances at Beelzebub. Their gazes meet, allowing him to notice a bizarre emotion on her face — something he's never seen before.

Fear.

"We are a backup, Beelzebub. We exist in case the Overlords fail to block the shadow looming over our galaxy. There are things out there... things in the void... things far more terrifying than you can possibly imagine."

Beelzebub frowns.

"...Things?"

"Yes," Ose murmurs. "A scourge. A plague. Something so horrifying that if it were to reach our Labyrinth, we'd perish within a year. All of us. Demons, monsters, and the humans, too."

The Emperor clicks her tongue.

"If I explained any further, even to you, I'd have to kill you. Count yourself lucky the Overlords exist. They maintain the balance of power so that we don't have to. So long as the plague keeps them occupied, we can live our lives unmolested."

Ose chuckles. "What's a little human rebellion compared to a galaxy-class threat, Beelzebub?"

Beelzebub forces a smile, but Ose doesn't return it. "N-nothing much, I suppose."

"That's right, it isn't. Now, go. Start readying the troops. I want you to begin Operation Stormbringer as soon as possible. Now that the humans have gone on alert, all my planning is down the drain. We might as well make the best of a bad situation. If possible, I'd like to catch them offguard, before they can regroup and upgrade their defenses."

Beelzebub cocks his head. "You want to launch Operation Stormbringer two months early? We won't be able to muster all of our troops in time. And what of Gressil's creations? He can't have more than a thousand ready."

"Leave my brother to me," Ose says. She squeezes her chair's arms firmly, causing the demonstone to fracture. "I will take care of him myself."

With a sigh, Beelzebub rises from his seat. He casts a glance at Ose before turning and heading to the giant exit doors.

"So be it. I was getting bored of waiting, anyway. I always did like a challenge."

The Duke of Inferno pushes the great doors open. After he steps out, they slam shut, causing the giant dining table to vibrate.

Ose stares ahead silently, not bothering to stand and leave.

Heh heh. Oh, Beelzebub. You're still so young and foolish, so easily manipulated. You'll believe anything, so long as it fits into your narrow-minded viewpoints.

Ose smirks.

How could Jason and Hope work together? The clonemaster and his doppelganger hate each other's guts. If you weren't so incompetent at gathering intelligence, you'd know I was lying. However, your ignorance fine. I admire your drive and animal cunning. You might be naive, but given time, you'll sprout into a delicious fruit capable of satiating my ambitions. For now, you are a suitable pawn for my needs.

Ose cocks her head.

What sort of queen dirties her hands with the common rabble, anyway? That's why I picked you. Do your job, and never question me again.

Finally, Ose rises from her seat. She stretches her arms and pops her back, sending tingles down her spine.

Soon, that damned Hero will be mine. As for his wife... what an insignificant plea for attention. I care not if she was the one who saved me from Arthur's dungeon.

Ose strides over to the stained glass window. She casually gazes through one of its clear panes at the darkening sky overhead and sighs.

Soon, I'll have all of humanity in my clutches. If Beelzebub proves his loyalty, who knows? Perhaps I'll make him my Third Emperor.

*But only **after** I kill Belial.*

Part 215: Let's Go To Space!

An hour after leaving Ose's manor, I soar above Hell Harbor's surface, sweeping my eyes from left to right. With Kar and Blinker gone, I finally have a chance to fulfill Raphael's request. The Archangel of Wisdom sits on a bench beside my mind-wife, staring up at me as if I were somehow hovering in the sky. He puffs on a pipe while exhaling smoky circles every so often.

"Have you found anything yet?" Phoebe asks.

I shake my head. "No. **Detect.**"

I utter a word of power, causing my senses to expand for the tenth time in five minutes. Once again, I attempt to locate any signals of holy energy, but no matter which direction my eyes point, I don't find anything.

A flock of pterodactyl-like birds with leathery wings fly past me. They don't notice me at all, thanks to my invisibility and multiple stealth spells shielding me from their gazes. I flap my wings a little harder and rise several hundred feet higher while attempting to avoid another flock of the weird, pterosaurian creatures.

"Raphael," I say. "Have you been able to figure out the general direction of the Archangel's signal? I can't sense anything."

Raphael furrows his brow. "Nay. The signal is remarkably faint. I would not expect one of my brothers or sisters to be so weak that I could barely sense them. Perhaps the demons have imprisoned my sibling on the other side of the planet."

"Or, maybe they're barely alive," Phoebe says, her voice low. "They might be on the verge of death."

"Aye," Raphael mutters. "That is equally possible."

I sigh. "Hmm. The Archangel's energy levels might be so low that I can barely detect them, or they might be a thousand miles away. Raphael, I don't want to sound like a jerk, but those possibilities only make my search harder."

The Eldest Archangel lowers his gaze to the ground and strokes his beard, falling deep into thought. "So, thou sayeth..."

Several minutes pass. I double my flying speed, trying to cover as much ground as possible.

"Detect... Detect... Detect..."

Every thirty seconds, I release a pulse of detection magic. Each time, the mana signature's distance remains the same. Even when I approach the speed of sound, I don't make a lick of progress.

Half an hour later, I slow myself to a stop, then land atop a mountain several hundred miles away from Ose's manor. Gigantic crow-like birds with wingspans exceeding a hundred feet fly around the mountain's midsection, screeching bloody murder as they search for prey.

"Jason..." Raphael says, his voice barely a whisper. "Perhaps we are looking in the wrong place. My sibling might not be on this planet, but a different one within the star-system."

The Archangel's observation makes my eyebrows rise involuntarily.

"Oh! Yeah, you might be right, Raphael. However, I don't know anything about this sector of space. One second."

I clear my throat to speak a word of power. **"Starmap."**

This time, a tremendous surge of holy energy fires from my body, straight into the sky. My heart jumps in fright, making me pray to the Creator that no demons witnessed it. The beam disappears after a moment, flickering into the sky without a trace.

Ten minutes later, a map of Hell Harbor's star system appears in my mind. I knot my forehead together as I try to pick out locations of interest.

Number of planets in star-system: Fifteen.

Number of moons in star-system: One hundred and sixty-four.

Star classification: Main-sequence.

Star size: 4.39 Sol-vectors.

Current planet's position from main-sequence star: Eighth.

Dozens of data points appear in my head, summarizing my discoveries. Without hesitation, I speak again. **"Terminal. Store."**

The information I just gained disappears, transforming into another server within my Mind Realm.

"Phoebe, study the information for this system. For now, I'm going to take to space and see if I can't locate our missing Archangel out there in the void."

Phoebe nods. "Alright. You can't build a spaceship without Solomon's Crown, so you should take every precaution to protect your body."

I smile. Already, my wife has understood my intent to travel to space without a spaceship. While seemingly dangerous, I've already done it several times in the past while under Solomon's supervision. After all, who knows if I'll have Esther on hand when I need her? If something happened to my spaceship and I had to escape off-planet, I'd require a backup to protect myself and my family.

"Bubble. Condense. Shield. Reinforce. Condense. Bubble. Condense. Shield. Reinforce. Oxygenate. Crystallize. Refraction. Deflection."

A flurry of words escapes my lips. I speak each one without hesitation, using my years of training with Solomon to create a powerful, near impenetrable forcefield around my body. While transparent, the shield only allows enough light through to allow me to see my surroundings, while blocking harmful UV radiation and all kinds of other nasty space hazards.

After ten minutes, I finish chanting all of my spells, then pause to monitor my energy expenditures.

"Hmm. With the mana crystals in my body, I can maintain my spatial shield for a day or two at most. I don't want to run my mana crystals bone-dry, so I'll have to return to the Core within 36 hours to keep emergency mana in reserve. Sorry, Raphael, but if we can't find your relative within that period, I'll have to give up the search."

Raphael opens his mouth to retort, only to change his mind. "...Very well. That is all I can ask."

With a nod, I turn my gaze skyward. Already, Hell Harbor's sun has fallen below the horizon, darkening the sky enough for me to spot the twinklings of various stars.

There are billions of stars within the Milky Way, I think to myself. I haven't a clue where Hell Harbor is compared to Earth, but I know the sky above me appears very different from my homeworld's. I could be hundreds, if not thousands of lightyears from where I was born.

Solomon and Marie informed me that the Volgrim own the Milky Way. They control the vast majority of its habitable star systems, which only makes me wonder just how many planets have fallen into their clutches over the millennia. The demons seem vast and innumerable, yet if my betters are correct, they're hardly a drop in the bucket compared to my alien enemies.

With a sigh, I shake my head and crouch low to the ground, coiling power into my legs.

"Conserve! Condense! Buildup!"

I speak three rapid words of power, pooling most of my mana toward my feet. After positioning my energy directly beneath my center of mass, I grit my teeth and prepare for the final step.

"LIFTOFF!!"

Instantly, my condensed mana fires from my feet, while my legs act like springs, launching me straight into the sky. I accelerate to over a thousand miles an hour within five seconds, all while breaking a Mana Bead to flood my body with mana.

"Accelerate! Accelerate! Accelerate!!"

Over and over, I repeat the same word of power, increasing my speed and forward momentum. Thanks to the bubble shield protecting my body, I barely notice the G-forces pulling at me. Under any other circumstances, I'd have instantly blacked out, but Wordsmithing allows me to bypass my limits.

Not even a minute later, I burst out of Hell Harbor's upper atmosphere. The sky around me darkens rapidly as the black void of space engulfs me. My rocket-boosted body slowly quiets down and becomes silent as the superheated air around me dies off, allowing me to increase my speed even further within the vacuum of space.

After ten minutes of pulling away from Hell Harbor, I shoot a glance backward at the beautiful alien orb. Surrounded by the blackness of space, it appears like a pristine jewel, reminiscent of Earth, but featuring wildly different landmasses and shapes I couldn't draw even if someone asked. Where Earth once possessed seven distinct super-continent, Hell Harbor instead has dozens of smaller island-like sub-continent, each one roughly the size of Greenland.

"Amazing," I mutter. "I see why the demons named the planet Hell Harbor. It seems to be comprised of many super-islands, rather than standard continents. I wonder if its oceans take up as much space as Earth's."

Thanks to the oxygenated bubble surrounding me, I'm able to speak and breathe without issue.

"I'd say both are about the same," My mind-wife replies. "It's hard to tell from here, but I believe oceans comprise about 70% of Hell Harbor's surface. Remember that gigantic creature we saw when we first arrived?"

I nod. "Yeah. It seems Hell Harbor has its own dinosaurs roaming its oceans. I'd hate to go surfing with monsters as big as those swimming around."

Turning my attention forward, I gaze into the cosmos surrounding Hell Harbor. **"Navigate."**

The star map I stored in my Mind Realm earlier activates, causing a tiny blip of red to appear in the void. I narrow my gaze to stare at it. As I do, several words appear in my peripheral vision, acting as a HUD readout.

Unknown M-Class Planet. Habitability Index: 60%. Lifeforms not detected. Extreme tectonic and geological movements detected. Danger rating: 75%.

The ninth planet in Hell Harbor's system gives me a bunch of information, making me wonder if I should go there first.

"Raphael. Can you give me a general direction now? Can you sense the Archangel's mana any better now that I've exited Hell Harbor's atmosphere?"

The Archangel hesitates. "I... I cannot detect any differences in its position. Thou must travel further before I may ascertain whether the signal is increasing or decreasing in intensity."

"Ugh. Alright, fine. I'll travel to the ninth planet. Tell me if you notice any changes."

Raphael nods. "Very well."

With my body rocketing away from Hell Harbor at thousands of miles an hour, my speed seems incredible. However, on a galactic and interplanetary scale, I've barely moved an inch. At my current speed, it would take me years to reach the ninth planet.

"ACCELERATE! ACCELERATE! ACCELERATE!"

I howl at the top of my lungs, crushing three more mana beads as I activate all of my energy. Despite increasing my speed a hundredfold, perhaps even a thousandfold, I don't detect any difference in speed via my somatic system. It's only once I glance behind myself and observe Hell Harbor shrinking much faster than before that I know just how much I've accelerated.

"Speedometer."

With another word of power, I summon a series of floating numbers in my vision, telling me my exact speed. Already, I've begun traveling at 50% the speed of light.

"I'm not moving fast enough," I mutter. **"ACCELERATE! ACCELERATE!!"**

My speed increases again, pushing me further beyond my limits. Even once I reach 90% of the speed of light, I barely notice any difference in my body. The temporal shield surrounding me protects me from the effects of time dilation while also preventing my organs from turning to mush.

* * *

Time passes. Ten minutes. Twenty. Thirty.

As the void thickens around me and Hell Harbor fades into a speck in the distance, Raphael suddenly speaks.

"Ah! The Archangel's signature! 'Tis increasing in intensity!"

My heart skips a beat. "It is? Great! Someone must have imprisoned your sibling on the ninth planet! We'll arrive there within twenty minutes."

Raphael's elation disappears. He frowns while stroking his beard. "Hmm. Nay. I do not believe we have come anywhere close to their signal, yet. At most, its intensity has increased by two or three percent. I only detected the increase thanks to thy swift movement. I suspect they reside in a location far, far removed from Hell Harbor."

"Hm. You might be right," I mutter. "I'll still check out the ninth planet anyway, just to be sure. Worst case scenario, they aren't there, but I'll still get a good look at one of the other planets in this system. Who knows? It might be a good idea for me to establish a secret outpost somewhere near the demon's homeworld."

Raphael nods. "Aye. A wise decision, indeed."

Elsewhere in the Hell Harbor star system.

Ping. Ping.

An ancient observation post, tens of thousands of years old, slowly releases pulses of energy that travel throughout the sector. Every so often, it receives data from the system's worlds, gathering and collecting the information for research purposes.

Half a dozen alien lifeforms walk around within the observation post's corridors. As low-ranking members of the Changeling hierarchy, their lives are little more than banal, mundane existences.

One of the many genderless beings aboard the platform, a Second Class Junior Observer, named Moyari, gazes without emotion at the many high-tech displays situated before it. It sits alone within an isolated room, taking its turn for monitoring duties.

Moyari leans back in a comfortably designed hover-chair, one which reclines to allow the Changeling a more relaxed posture. The young Volgrim casually waves its hands through the air while examining a few diagrams reporting on the volcanic activity happening within Planet Jolus's tectonic plates.

The Changeling taps a button on its chair to activate an audio recorder. "Dasa ans'x, tsa'gasa 6,501.13. Pftanas Juftiat hat unth'aatag ust sathsunuth athsu'usx ftx sh'aa la'thans ghushun sha ftats rursaan

tsanga'g suna ianust. P'uu'usx fta'aft 1. Eng 'alu's."

"Data entry, stardate 6,501.13. Planet Jolus has increased its tectonic activity by three percent within the last fifteen standard time units. Priority level 1. End report."

After finishing its report, the Changeling returns to its duties. Its giant, unblinking eyes gaze at the display without a hint of passion or boredom. Its existence revolves around observation. And so, it observes.

Eventually, the research room's door hisses open as a second Changeling enters.

"Junior Observer. Your shift will conclude in one point six micro-time units. You may leave."

"Yes. This one has just delivered its report, Senior Observer, Kol. You may take control for the forty remaining time units."

"Acknowledged and dismissed."

The Senior Observer watches silently as its junior climbs out of the hover-chair and walks to the door. However, just before Moyari starts to exit, the young Changeling pauses.

"Senior Observer. This one wishes to ask a question."

Kol nods. "You may."

After a slight pause, the younger Changeling turns to face its senior. "What purpose does our post serve for the upper echelons? While we might need to observe the demon's designated containment world, this one cannot help but wonder why we do not simply place an artificial intelligence in charge. This station is more than capable of automating its processes. Given that the demons are incapable of space-flight, would not our services be put to better use observing a plague-infested world?"

The Head Observer stares at its junior for a moment, its gaze devoid of anger and annoyance.

"Second-Class Junior Researcher, Moyari. Your inquiry falls within acceptable parameters. Given the low status of those aboard this station, we would be a hindrance to the Council, not an asset. Until you have advanced to the fourth or fifth class and raised your Aspect to the rank of Melder, you will be of no use to the Council. While this one does recognize your interest in promotion, all phases of your advancement must reach a certain level before you may apply to a higher position."

Kol gestures toward the various terminal readouts, but its hand pauses before the one displaying Hell Harbor's information.

"The demonic homeworld is an essential resource point. Should the Plague arrive in this system, we must inform the Council at once. We cannot risk using an automated system for such a high-value asset. Given the low quality of the synthetic minds available to us, we cannot be certain they would detect the Plague and send out a distress signal in time."

Kol walks over to the hover-chair and eases into its embrace. "Do not concern yourself with our mission, Junior Observer. All who perform their duties properly will, without fail, receive an appropriate reward from the upper-classes. You may expect your responsibilities to increase in time as you improve your Aspects."

Moyari listens to its senior without interruption. Once Kol concludes, Moyari bows politely. "This one understands. This one comprehends. This one expresses gratitude to its senior for imparting such valuable wisdom."

"Your gratitude is unnecessary," Kol replies, bowing its head sagely. "Continue improving, and you shall give glory to this one, who taught you."

"This one takes its leave," Moyari says, as it turns away and exits through the door.

A minute later, the room falls silent. Senior Observer Kol, a Fourth-Class Changeling, gazes at the monitor feeds dispassionately. It presses many buttons, scrutinizes several automated notifications, and resumes the work of its younger colleague.

Moyari is an excellent pupil, Kol thinks to itself. This one's junior pays careful attention to every detail and always leaves plenty of notes for when this one takes over observation duties. This one must offer another letter of recommendation to Lead Observer Mellir. If Moyari wishes to advance to a more rewarding field, this one will not stand in their way.

As Kol quietly ruminates on various happenings, a blinking indicator on the Void-Link Scanner catches its attention.

Hm? How odd. What sort of anomaly is this? Kol wonders.

The Senior Observer turns its chair to face the upper-left-most monitor, one which shows a red dot rapidly traveling from the demon's homeworld, Hell Harbor, to the system's ninth planet, Jolus.

Kol watches for several minutes. Each time the station sends out an energy pulse, it pinpoints the anomaly's position with startling accuracy.

Hmm. This anomaly does not appear to be a naturally occurring phenomenon, nor does it possess the same energy signature as the Plague.

The bulbous-headed Changeling gazes at the red blip with renewed interest.

Its speed is increasing dramatically over time. According to its travel vectors, it launched from the third continent of Hell Harbor, and now appears to be traveling on an interception course toward planet Jolus.

Senior Observer Kol presses both of its index fingers against the side of its head. It closes its eyes for several seconds, agitating a tremendous burst of mental activity.

After five minutes, Kol opens its eyes. The Changeling taps a button on its hover-chair's arm, activating a subspace communication pulse.

Not long after, a holographic image materializes in the center of the room, revealing the Cthulian-shaped face of a Technopath. Sporting a pair of bright-blue bionic eyes, as well as a cerebrally-integrated helmet, the Technopath appears fiercely intimidating.

"Senior Observer Kol. It is not yet time for your quarterly report. For what reason have you contacted me?"

Kol bows its head. "Sangin Kordonis. This one apologizes, but it has discovered a strange anomaly in its designated observation sector. This one requests a secondary inspection team immediately."

The Technopath knots its forehead together. "I require more information on this... anomaly. Transmit your observation data."

"Of course."

Kol taps a series of buttons to send its recently acquired information to the Technopath staring it down.

After several minutes, the Technopath finishes scanning the uploaded information. "Excellent work, Senior Observer. It is a shame you haven't yet broken your bottleneck to reach the Fifth Class, for your observation skills echo many of the Sixth Class Observers I've met."

"You praise this one too much," Kol replies, nodding politely. "This one only exists to serve."

"Indeed. I will send five inspection teams and three enforcer teams on the double. Report any changes in the anomaly's travel vectors at once."

Kol hesitates. "Eight teams? This one apologizes for its audacity. However, this one wishes to know why you would send so many reinforcements over such a minor matter."

Sangin Kordanis falls silent. He doesn't reply for several seconds.

"Hmm. You have served the Council well over the years. In light of your dedicated services, I will send you a classified file. Read it and destroy it immediately. Let no other Observers see its contents. Kordonis, out."

After tapping a few buttons, Sangin Kordonis severs the connection without waiting for a reply. Kol falls silent as a file transmits to its station and opens automatically, revealing a litany of previously-unseen information.

An hour later, Kol presses a button on its chair and deletes the file from existence. The Changeling returns its attention to the rapidly-moving blip as it nears the ninth planet of the Hell Harbor star system.

"Hmm. Holy Energy. Heroic Energy. This one was not aware of such a thing before today. It is no wonder Sangin Kordonis intends to send such a frightening strike force. Perhaps, such numbers might even prove too few."

The Changeling returns to its original goal of observing the system. However, it keeps most of its focus on the red blip traveling across the star map.

What might this powerful energy signature belong to?

Part 216: An Anomaly Among Anomalies

The moment I arrive at the ninth planet in Hell Harbor's system, I speak a word of power.

"Pulse."

A bolt of holy energy shoots from my body toward the blood-red sphere hanging in the void. It travels far faster than the speed of light and strikes the planet within seconds, causing divine energy to surge around the molten world several times before fading away.

In my mind's eye, a 3D image of the ninth planet appears, featuring its valleys, canyons, mountains, and all its other geological features. Not even its underground caves manage to escape my vision, allowing me to make out even its most secretive topographical features.

"Terminal. Store."

I place my newly acquired knowledge inside my Mind Realm where Phoebe can access it, then shrug. "I still don't know where your sibling is, Raphael, but I do know they aren't here."

The Archangel of Wisdom watches as another gigantic terminal appears beside the others, and nods. "I understand, Wordsmith. We haven't time to waste. Already, thou hath taken several hours to reach this world. Turn toward the system's outskirts, twenty degrees to thy right, and seven degrees 'upward.' I believe the signal may be emanating from that direction."

I nod. "Noted."

With my body still hurtling straight at the ninth planet, I speak a few words of power to shift my direction while maintaining my momentum.

"Adjust. Adjust. Nullify. Accelerate! Accelerate! ACCELERATE!"

After temporarily erasing the planet's gravitational pull on my body, I increase my speed even further, allowing myself to reach 99% the speed of light. Even so, it still takes nearly a minute to zip past the planet and leave it in my dust, revealing just how far away I was when I first sent a pulse to its surface.

"Calculate. Estimate."

A series of lines and numbers appears in my head, detailing the time costs for searching each planet in Hell Harbor's system. I discount all of the seven inner planets, as Raphael's detection seems to grow stronger the further I travel from the system's center. Additionally, two of the most distant, outermost planets rest at the other side of the system's star, in the opposite direction I'm traveling. They seem unlikely to house the Archangel.

After running the time costs through my head, I frown.

"Raphael. If I travel to each planet one-by-one, it will take me three weeks to visit them all. Some of them are multiple astronomical units further from this system's star than Pluto's is from Sol. Since I'm only following your request, where do you think I should go? Feel free to have Phoebe show you the star-map if you need it."

Raphael furrows his brow. He rises from his seat and strides over to the newest terminal, where Phoebe stands, her fingers traveling like lightning across its keys.

"Hmm. Thy mana supply shall only last another thirty hours at best. Given that limit, let us concentrate our efforts on visiting..."

Raphael hesitates. He watches as Phoebe plots out a course to the three closest planets, along with detours to four others. A series of calculations appears with detailed numbers explaining the time needed to visit Hell Harbor's neighboring worlds.

"...none of them," Raphael finishes. "I strongly suspect that whoever is holding my sibling prisoner, they would not be so foolish as to hide them on a world nearby the demons' stronghold. Nay, we must head for the edge of this star-system at thy highest possible speed. If my intuition is correct, we may discover a space-faring vessel with specialized quarters for confining my brother or sister."

I raise my eyebrow. "Your suspicions sound reasonable, but how did you come to such a conclusion? What makes you think someone, be they Volgrim or Demon, would keep your sibling confined on a spaceship?"

Raphael shrugs. He forces a meek smile before sighing. "I am merely guessing, Wordsmith. My powers have dulled after resting within this ring for 100,000 years. Even so, my intuition tells me that none of these planets lies within the direction we must travel to reach my sibling. I must, therefore, conclude that my sibling is not trapped on a planet as we first assumed. I desperately hope my assumption will bear fruit."

"You're the boss," I reply. "Either way, if I don't find your missing Archangel within thirty hours, I'm teleporting back to Tarus II. However, we do have a secondary problem. I can't go faster than the speed of light. Solomon stressed to me on many occasions that traveling faster than lightspeed would alert the Volgrim of my location. If I create any subspace echoes this close to the demon's homeworld, our alien *friends* will surely notice."

"I agree, prudence is a wise move, young Hero," Raphael replies. "Do whatever thou must to further the search for my sibling. I shall wait patiently and without complaint."

Without another word, the Archangel of Wisdom returns to the bench and takes a seat. He closes his eyes and begins to meditate, causing his aura to increase noticeably. I can only surmise he must be concentrating on pinpointing the missing Archangel's location.

With my speed capped at 99% the speed of light. I fall silent and renew my focus on Hell Harbor's topography, as well as its neighboring planets.

Hopefully, it won't be long before we find Raphael's missing brother or sister.

The Volgrim observation post goes to yellow alert as a massive fleet of warships decloaks off its port bow. The circular platform, bigger than a hundred football stadiums stacked on top of each other, looks positively minuscule compared to the monstrous juggernauts floating within its orbital radius.

Each of the newly-arrived ships sports a different appearance. Some of them resemble long, cylindrical tubes with laser-etched designs on their smoothly-plated sides, while others appear crude, boxy, and ugly, made to favor function over fashion.

The biggest ship of all, the VLL Hatoraxia, possesses a pair of wavy wings resembling a manta ray. Each wing carries a dual-barrel photon cannon armament capable of glassing planets from orbit, giving the Hatoraxia four massive guns in total, to say nothing of its hundreds of smaller, yet still incredibly lethal armaments. Its front section narrows into a lance-like protrusion, making it look like a ship designed for ramming.

Senior Observer Kol motions to its five fellow Changelings, lining them up before a giant viewscreen in the main hall. They stand at attention, with their arms at their sides and their perfectly-pressed white uniforms sporting the logos of their respective factions. Kol wears the emblem of the Yellow Star, revealing its dignified upbringing, while its assistant, Moyari, wears the symbol of the Jade Nebula, a newly created faction with members who will someday explore the furthest reaches of space. To see a Jade Nebulite on a mere observation platform reveals just how thinly the various Volgrim factions have stretched their resources in the modern era.

Kol crosses both of its arms in front of its chest as the viewscreen illuminates, revealing the face of a familiar Technopath. "This one greets its superior, Sangin Kordonis. This one offers itself to the cause of capturing the aberrant anomaly."

Sangin Kordonis, fourth in line to lead Clan Oblong, returns the gesture, placing its arms and finger-tentacles over its chest. "At ease, Senior Observer, Kol. By quickly reporting the appearance of this anomaly, you have contributed greatly to the Founder's cause. I have received a proclamation from Sangin Lidra, head of Clan Oblong. If we manage to capture and contain the anomaly, you and your fellow Observers will receive a recreation boost of one rank and a prestige allotment equal to seventeen war provisions."

Kol's emotionless expression cracks, ever so slightly. "Seventeen provisions? This one understands. This one does not feel worthy of such a transcendent gift."

"Worry not," Kordonis replies. "If this signal belongs to what I think it does, your reward will prove quite pitiful. I expect to double or even triple your allotment. I will also remind you that the prestige available to my legion will dwarf yours by a factor of ten. Now, forgive me, for I am in a rush. Send me the travel data for the anomaly."

Kol relaxes its posture and lowers its arms, then quickly strides over to a terminal a few feet away. "This one requires but a moment. Transmitting... now."

As the data transfers, Kol continues speaking. "When this one first contacted you, it had been just under one-tenth of a standard time unit after we first located the anomaly. However, in the time it took you to arrive, more than twenty standard time units have passed. The anomaly has already reached the edge of this system. Soon, its trajectory will take it past the orbit of planet HH-15A."

"I understand," Kordonis replies. "We cannot afford to waste any time, Head Observer. I will make our stop here both brief and efficient."

Kordonis glances away from his viewscreen and the lined-up Changelings. His eyes fall on a terminal on his ship, where he watches as Kol's data finishes uploading.

"Interesting," Kordonis mutters. "This flight pattern is quite unusual."

The Hatoraxia's captain gestures toward the screen as he glances at his second-in-command, a female Technopath with dozens of wires sticking out of her head. She hovers over to Kordonis, levitating via a hover-system, much like the head of Clan Oblong, Sangin Lidra.

"Captain?"

Kordonis turns his attention to the female technopath. "Orena. Run an algorithm on this anomaly's movements. I postulate, based on its change of course when it reached Planet Jolus, that it might be a miniature spacecraft comprised of an alloy we've never encountered before. Senior Observer Kol did not detect any known metal compounds, so I suspect that it may possess a cloaking field more advanced than ours. Our scanners are unable to penetrate it."

The second in command, Orena, nods at her captain. "Affirmative. I will run an advanced scan on the vessel's movements. Allow me one-third of a standard time unit to compile my review, captain."

Kordonis nods. "Move with efficiency, Orena Limea. We haven't a clue how much longer this 'anomaly' will remain in the system."

The Captain returns his attention to Kol's projected image aboard the observation platform. However, to his surprise, all six Changelings have vanished.

"Hm? Senior Observer Kol?"

After waiting for a few moments, Kordonis flicks his gaze to one of the other Volgrim on his ship's bridge. "Invoker Miikil. I looked away for only a few micro-time-units. Where did the Observers go?"

A hover-chair ten feet from the captain swivels to face him, revealing the presence of a low-ranking Psion. The young telepath meets Kordonis's gaze with her own six blackened, bug-like eyes. [A moment, captain.]

She projects her thoughts outward, but keeps her 'volume' low, only allowing the captain and a few nearby crew members to hear her. The Psion raises her robed arms and places two fingers from each hand on her temple, then concentrates.

[Hm. The observers have all returned to their stations. Their movements are much more frenzied than usual, while their vital signs have become noticeably more erratic than when we arrived. I sense a certain level of excitement and distress in their thoughts. Would you like me to contact the Senior Observer for you?]

"No. Let us wait until Orena finishes her scan before we bother the outpost. Senior Observer Kol is not one to leave abruptly without a formal departure and closing of his link."

The female Psion tilts her head upward. [I agree.]

* * *

Ten minutes pass. Fifteen. Twenty.

By the time Orena returns, the Changelings still haven't returned to their main section. "Captain. I've completed the algorithmic sweep you requested. The anomaly has performed several maneuvers, each of which drastically altered its course. Its movements do not line up with any known natural cosmic phenomena."

Kordonis's finger-tentacles twitch. "As expected. Invocator Miikil, contact Senior Observer Kol for me. I would not normally interrupt my old friend, but we must begin chasing the anomaly at once."

[Yes, captain.]

The Invocator cocks her head slightly and once again presses her fingers against her temples.

After several seconds, she lowers her arms.

[Captain. I... I have just learned some disturbing news.]

Immediately, Kordonis's aloof nature vanishes. He jerks his gaze toward Miikil, acting as if she just told him his entire clan died. "Troublesome news? What sort?"

[I believe it would be best if Senior Observer Kol told you in its own words.]

Hardly have the thoughts left Miikil's mind before the comlink beeps with a transmission request.

"Onscreen," Kordonis says.

The viewscreen changes to reveal Senior Observer Kol's main office. Dozens of warnings line up along the Changeling's computer displays, each one displaying the same message.

"C-captain Kordonis..." Kol says, its voice ragged. "This one deeply apologizes. This one did not intend to leave you in the lurch; however, this one needed to confirm the information it received before relaying it to you."

Kordonis nods. "Yes, yes, continue. What happened? Why do you appear so agitated?"

The Senior Observer wrings its webbed hands together. "The anomaly... it... it has disappeared!"

Kordonis nearly leaps out of his seat. "What?! Disappeared?"

"Yes! This one is still investigating," Kol says, bowing meekly. "This one feels deeply guilty. The anomaly's disappearance does not match up with any known uses of subspace. This one cannot confirm that the anomaly jumped to hyperspace. This one... does not know how or why the anomaly vanished!"

Kol's words causes a veil of silence to fall over Kordonis's crew. They turn to look at their captain with a mixture of fear and worry.

Kordonis rises from his seat. "Hiiga! We cannot delay any longer. Orena, plot a course for the anomaly's last known coordinates. Travel at Warp 6, on the double! The reserve ships will travel at Warp 4. Move quickly, and with purpose!"

Orena hovers over to a nearby terminal. "Yes, captain. We will engage the warp-drive in seven micro-units."

Kordonis glances at Kol, his gaze as cold as ice. "You are not to blame, Senior Observer. I moved too slowly. If the anomaly disappears, it will be my pride on the line, not yours. Continue observing and update us as the situation demands!"

Kol crosses its arms over its chest. "Hiiga! This one contemplates! This one comprehends!"

Moments later, the viewscreen disconnects. Several flashes of light outside the observation platform announce the departure of Kordonis's fleet as all his ships jump to hyperspace.

Senior Observer Kol stares at the blackened viewscreen. Hundreds of thoughts roll around in the Changeling's head, each one more worrisome than the last.

"What happened to the anomaly? How did it leave? Could it be a vessel borne of the Plague?"

After shaking its head, the Changeling returns to its terminal and begins frantically scouring its sensor data, trying to figure out what could have allowed the anomaly to disappear without a trace.

This one must uncover more clues for the captain!

Part 217: It's a Trap!

I utter a word of power to determine how much longer it will take before I reach the edge of the Hell Harbor star system. "**Estimate.**"

The answer comes to me immediately. I'll soon pass the fifteenth planet's orbit. Already, I've scanned three other planets along the way. None of them housed the Archangel, who Raphael so desperately wants to find.

After more than nineteen hours of travel, boredom has become the bane of my existence. Even while zipping along at 99% the speed of light with a barrier protecting me from the effects of time dilation, the universe outside my bubble of protected space never changes. Unlike in old sci-fi movies, lightspeed doesn't equate to streaks of starlight zipping past me. The stars appear just as unmoving as they would if I were standing on Earth, staring up at the night sky.

Space is enormous — incomprehensibly vast. Even at the speed of light, the fastest any natural phenomena can travel, it would still take me 100,000 years to go from one side of the Milky Way to the other. Put in perspective, the Milky Way is only one galaxy out of tens of trillions. The space in between any pair of galaxies is a hundred thousand times wider than the galaxies themselves.

Once, humans thought we were the center of the universe. We believed the sun revolved around the Earth, along with all the other stars and planets we could make out with our naked eyes. In truth, what we saw of the night sky was barely the tiniest fraction of stars within a single spiral-arm of our galaxy.

We thought we were alone.

We were wrong.

A hundred thousand years after we lost the multi-species war, not even the Volgrim, with their Type-3 civilization, have learned what exists beyond the Milky Way. Even their warp travel won't allow them to cross the distance between galaxies within any reasonable time frame. Andromeda is our nearest stellar neighbor. Even if no other alien species live there, perhaps one of the other fifty billion galaxies might harbor life.

My thoughts continue drifting between the size of the universe, as well as the point of my existence. Who am I, but a mere human? Even if some might describe my Wordsmithing as a 'cosmic power,' that only correlates with their limited worldview, not necessarily reality. I can barely reshape a single moon to house life, let alone the rest of the universe.

I'm nothing — an ant. In the grand scheme of things, my power can't do much to change the universe. Even if the entire Milky Way vanishes, some other species in some other galaxy will continue the grand struggle for life.

With a sigh, I shake my head.

"Still two hours to go," I mutter.

My mind-wife replies. "Are you doing okay, Jason? You seem a little down."

I shrug. "Dunno. I think flying through a void of endless blackness is doing something funky to my mind. I keep dwelling on the meaning of life and my purpose in the grand scheme of things."

She cocks her head. "Are you feeling lost and confused?"

"Maybe a little bit. I don't know where I'm going or what I'm supposed to do. I don't even think I matter to the universe."

Phoebe shrugs. "Neither do I. In the end, we are all merely following God's grand plan. Who can know what He has in store for us?"

I pause for a moment before replying.

"After everything we've been through and everything you've seen... why do you still believe in God? You've seen what the angels did, and the horrors the demons unleash every day. You know how dangerous the Volgrim are, the power Dragons once commanded, the might of Titankind, and the folly of humanity. If God exists, why would he breathe life into such horrors, such despicable creations?"

Phoebe hesitates.

"Hmm. I don't know what God's grand plan is. I know only what the scriptures told me. Our Creator made everything for a reason."

"Alright, but *what* reason?"

"I don't know," Phoebe repeats. "Maybe He created life as part of a grand experiment. Perhaps He intended for His children to fight endlessly for His amusement. Perhaps He even wishes for us to one day set aside our differences and love each other. Jason, what if the only way to truly learn how to love someone is by hating them first? Until you burn yourself, you won't understand the dangers of fire. Until you cut yourself, you won't understand how painful a blade pressed against your flesh can feel."

I frown. "So, the Creator wants us to hate each other for now, in the hopes that we'll someday learn to love? What about all the people who perish along the way? Even if I earn the gift of eternal love, those who have died at my hands won't. That hardly makes our all-powerful God seem fair and benevolent."

"Perhaps God doesn't believe in justice and fairness," Phoebe replies. "Such concepts might only be our way of reconciling the nature of the universe. If you look at how life evolves, it becomes clear that survival of the fittest and evolution leads to mightier species. Perhaps God merely wishes to see how far life can ascend. Perhaps, someday, we'll become as powerful as Him."

"I guess that's possible," I say. "Raphael. You're supposed to be the oldest Archangel. Haven't you met the Creator?"

The Archangel of Wisdom materializes beside Phoebe after transferring from his ring to my Mind Realm.

"Hm? Yes, of course. 'Twas an eternity ago. Even so, I cannot forget the divine brilliance of the Creator's aura."

I raise an eyebrow. "You met Him? Did He say anything to you?"

Raphael sits beside Phoebe and smiles politely. "Oh, nay, I would not say the Creator communicated via speech. Rather, He opened up His mind and allowed me to gaze upon His plans. I was able, for a brief moment, to witness the ultimate fate of the universe."

Phoebe's eyes sparkle with interest. "Really?! Raphael, what did you see?"

"I witnessed the Creator's boundless love," Raphael replies. His eyes turn glossy as he gazes at the water bubbling in a nearby fountain. "He created the angels from the dust of the cosmos. He told us that we had to go out and experience the gift of life He had bestowed upon us. Afterward, He departed, and I never saw Him again."

I frown. "That's it?"

Phoebe's eager expression dulls somewhat, as she raises her head to scowl at me. "Jason! Don't be rude! I think it's a wonderful tale!"

"Yeah. I guess it's... uh... interesting..." I mutter.

My thoughts turn elsewhere, as I casually wonder to myself if Raphael is even telling the truth. Did the old man really see the Creator? Even if he thinks he did, who is to say that the thing he saw was actually 'God?' What if Raphael was merely feeling disoriented during his creation, causing him to hallucinate?

Maybe I'm too skeptical for my own good. If Raphael is telling the truth, then he saw something that no other being alive today has ever seen. Gabriel and Michael may have been there to witness the Creator, but with their memories wiped, they wouldn't remember him. That means I have to believe whatever the old man says, but I don't like putting my faith in something I've never seen with my own eyes.

With a sigh, I speak another word of power. "**Estimate.**"

A series of numbers appears in my mind, telling me I've only just passed the fifteenth planet's orbit. From here on out, I only have dead space ahead. Wherever Raphael's sibling might be hiding or locked up, I'll have to hope I'm heading in the right direction.

"Raphael. Are we getting closer?"

The eldest Archangel nods. "Verily, compared to when thou first departed Hell Harbor, the Archangel's signal has grown only stronger over time. My brother or sister is, most likely, in this direction."

"Most likely," I repeat, trying not to reveal my annoyance. "I sure hope this little escapade isn't all for naught. I need to get back to the Core as soon as possible."

"Say, Jason," Phoebe says, raising her gaze to meet mine. "Regarding your conversation with Ose and Beelzebub. I have to ask if... if threatening the demon leaders was the smartest option. Aren't you worried that you might have angered them? What if they attack Tarus II because of you?"

I shake my head. "If Ose attacks Tarus II within the next few days, you can safely bet she was planning an invasion from the very beginning. Logistically, unless she's a total idiot, she'd need to draw up multiple avenues of attack. She could probably just order her minions to assault us all at once and overwhelm us with numbers, but everything Belial has told us indicates she's not an airhead."

I continue. "Furthermore, after speaking to Ose, I saw for myself just how smart she was. She tried to trap me with wordplay to make me reveal any weaknesses she could exploit. I don't doubt that Ose will attack Tarus II, since our negotiations didn't take the path I wanted. However, I would rather stand up for my principles than bend my knee to a tyrant. If Ose wants to attack us, then we'll just have to meet on her terms."

Raphael interjects. "Thou art correct, young Hero. Demons respect power. Hads't thou arrived and offered a limp wrist, Ose and Beelzebub would have smelled blood in the water. Like sharks, they would have eviscerated thee without hesitation. I admire thy strong-armed tactics, especially against such a dangerous foe. Had the demon leaders originally intended to attack, they may think twice now after witnessing thy strength."

"Yeah. I sure hope so."

Once again, I fall silent, retreating into my thoughts.

Between the Atlas Cannon, the hidden automated defenses, and the other surprises I have planned, I doubt the demons could conquer Tarus II in an entire month, even if I weren't there to help defend humanity. Marie warned me that Ose could control technology to some extent, but my automated defenses use magical control units. She shouldn't be able to bypass them.

Even so... if the demons decide to invade with all their military might, I can't see humanity surviving. I may have to act selfishly to get my wife and daughter out of there. I'll bring Samantha, Kar, Blinker, and the other elites along, too. In the worst-case scenario, we may have to take to the stars and hide amidst the vastness of space. If Solomon's conjecture was correct, the demons have little to no spacefaring capabilities. Out in the void, we might find ourselves subject to attacks from the Volgrim, but if we're lucky, we won't.

My eyes slowly scan the stars around me. Tens of millions of specks of light shine in the distance; their light swallowed by the Dark Matter comprising 99% of space's mass.

Where would we hide? What if the Volgrim have probes orbiting every distant world? In the worst-case scenario, I might have to raise my daughter aboard a starship. Without Solomon's Crown, I can't easily create technology, nor can I terraform planets. My next goal should be to build an artifact resembling his crown, something I could use to augment my mental abilities. If I had such a thing, I'd be able to advance humanity much faster than I can at the momen- huh?

As dozens of thoughts bounce around my head, a strange sensation strikes me. My body shudders, making me feel as if I've suddenly landed inside a roller coaster traveling downhill at a hundred miles an hour. A sickening sense of nausea roils in my gut, making me want to puke.

"Gurk..."

I swallow my bile and close my eyes for a moment. When I open them again, my heart seizes up, turning my blood to ice.

"W-what the fuck?!"

All around me, the distant specks of light, the stars in the night sky, vanish abruptly. Instantly, my surroundings shift into an infinitely huge, infinitely black void, lacking all light and life.

"What just happened?! Where did all the stars go?!"

I jerk my head around, from left to right, up and down, and even turn to look for Hell Harbor's sun.

Nothing.

No matter where I look, I see only the pitch-blackness of space, as if someone had snuffed out all the light around me.

"Jason? What's wrong?" Phoebe asks. "What do you mean by- oh! Oh my god!"

My wife gazes through my eyes at the blackness surrounding me. She, too, realizes what has happened.

"I was deep in thought, when suddenly everything around me just vanished," I say, trying to keep my voice even. Hints of panic creep into the back of my mind, but I steady myself with a few words of power.

"Calm. Rational."

Immediately, all of my emotions disappear, replaced instead with a sense of clear-minded focus.

I've been flying along at 99% the speed of light for nearly nineteen hours straight. It's unlikely that I've somehow fallen into a black hole out of nowhere. Perhaps I accidentally stepped into a Volgrim trap?

"Visualize."

I speak another word of power to try and create a wireframe view of the space around me. However, no matter where I look, I don't notice anything out of the ordinary.

"By the Creator!" Raphael yells. His words make me pause.

"What is it, Raphael? Did you notice something?"

The eldest Archangel jumps out of his seat. Sweat drips off his brow. "Did I notice something?! Naturally! How can thy ability to sense mana be so poor as to not notice... THAT?!"

Raphael points forward, which confuses me. Given his position in my Mind Realm, I can't tell which direction he's pointing. However, with his words as my guide, I speak another word of power. **"Sense."**

My vision changes to a mana-based view of the universe. Instead of the vibrant colors of the rainbow, or the pitch-blackness of space, I suddenly notice waves and eddies of blue-colored mana spiraling away from me, as if drawn toward a gigantic, magical vacuum cleaner.

I visually trace the mana currents to their destination, where I notice a blindingly bright blue orb of light, one so luminous that it hurts to look at.

"Jesus! What is that thing?" I ask.

Raphael's expression morphs into a mixture of giddy excitement and intense worry. "It must be the missing Archangel! We've left the realm of the living and stepped inside a fractured dimension, one much smaller than Heaven, yet similar in its application! Whatever is ahead, it pulled us into this dimension when we drew within its range!"

Phoebe's eyes gloss over as she tries to understand Raphael's words. "Another dimension like Heaven? What do you mean, Archangel? Is this place dangerous?"

"Undoubtedly!" Raphael exclaims. "However, now I can say without a shred of doubt... the Archangel I sensed is none other than Camael! My long-lost sister! I believed her dead at the end of the Energy Wars, yet 'tis none other than her life-force up ahead! Quickly, Jason! We must reach her at once!"

I pause, as a hint of concern appears in the back of my mind. "You might be right, but what if this is a trap? I can't just walk forward and risk my life over a feeling. Someone may have captured Camael and put her here as bait."

Raphael's enthusiasm diminishes. Slowly, he regains his calmness and begins stroking his beard. "Hm. Hm. Aye, thou may be correct, young Hero. Very well. Continue forward, but keep thy senses alert for traps."

I nod. "Naturally."

* * *

Minutes later.

I continue flying forward at 99% the speed of light, my pace unchanged. Even after entering this strange void, the laws of friction do nothing to slow me down. Whatever Camael did to create this dimension, it only differs from normal-space by obscuring the stars. I can only liken the sensation to wrapping a black cloth around my head.

Slowly, the bright ball of blue mana draws closer. I normalize my vision, only to frown in confusion. A tiny golden dot appears in the distance, barely the size of an ant. Even at the speed of light, it seems to take me forever to cross the limitless void separating me from my destination.

Raphael and Phoebe both stare through my eyes. They gaze in wonder at the golden object as I approach it.

"What the heck is that?" Phoebe asks. "I can barely even see it."

Raphael's expression mirrors Phoebe's. "I see it, but I know not what it is. Its design is unlike anything I've ever beheld."

Somehow, the Archangel of Wisdom's eyesight surpasses mine. Even when gazing through my eyes, his inherent Archangel lineage allows him to observe distant objects with far more clarity than even I can.

I decide to equalize our senses.

"Eyesight. Enhance! Enhance! Zoom!"

With four words of power, I summon mana into my eyes, improving their clarity a hundred-fold. Instantly, I zoom in my vision to gaze upon the object in the distance.

When I finally see what it is, a mixture of wonder, astonishment, and confusion swirls within my mind.

A gigantic golden cube, thousands of miles in diameter, with no decorations on its surface, no seams, or designs of any kind, floats in the blackened void. It hangs as if suspended in midair, sucking the

universe's ambient mana towards it.

So perfectly flat and untouched is its shape, that I wouldn't question someone if they said it was a solid cube of gold.

However, I find that notion ridiculous. The cube reminds me of something I once saw in an old sci-fi TV series. I can only assume it must be hollow inside. Camael is, most likely, inside it, waiting for a savior... or for someone to fall into her trap.

I exhale, forcing myself to calm down.

"Whatever's in that cube, we'll find out soon enough."

Part 218: The Mystical Cube

It takes me more than two hours to bridge the gap separating me from the giant, golden, six-sided cube. Despite my initial judging of the distance, it turns out the cube is more than 1.3 billion miles away, making even a travel speed of 99% the speed of light seem unbearably slow and tedious. As I draw nearer, the cube's size begins to increase, forcing me to slow down and proceed with caution.

While I initially thought the cube was as big as Earth, it turns out not even Earth is a suitable barometer for its mass. It hovers in the void, suspended upon nothing, with the flat side presented to me being more than three times larger than my homeworld's diameter. By the time I arrive within a few miles of its surface, I can't even see the edges of its nearest side.

"Bloody hell," I mutter. "What is this thing? It's gigantic. Ginormous! Did Camael construct it by herself?"

Raphael crosses his arms. He gazes through my eyes at the cube with a mixture of wonder and worry. "I know not the answer to thy questions, Jason. When my people fell at the end of the Energy Wars, Camael didn't possess a fraction of the energy needed to construct such a marvel. Nay, the only way she might have crafted an artifact of this size would be if she did so during the Primordial Era when her power was at its peak."

Raphael's expression shifts again, this time to confusion. "However, if my sister did, indeed, build this artifact, then why did I never hear of its existence? My sister may have kept a few secrets, but I cannot fathom why she would build something like this without informing me."

"Do you know what it is or what it does?" I ask.

Raphael shakes his head. "Nay. This cube is an artifact unlike any I've ever seen. Magical energy coats its outer surface, preventing me from gazing within."

I frown. "How do you know this giant cube is an artifact? You keep calling it that, but you don't even know its function."

Raphael shrugs. "It bears my sister's mana signature, and it features the same mana-imbued alloy she used for many of her creations, including Solomon's Crown and Aegis. I would be surprised if anyone but Camael could create such an overwhelmingly powerful object."

Phoebe scratches her chin. "What are the odds that it's hollow? Can we get inside?"

Raphael nods. "Undoubtedly. A dense cube of this size would do my sister no good. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say she built it as a mobile base for crafting artifacts. It's bound to have all manner of primordial relics inside."

My heart skips a beat. "Primordial relics? Don't you mean... treasure?"

Raphael smiles. "Aye, thou mayest find such a term appropriate."

"Nice. I'll start looking for an entrance, then. **Scan.**"

I speak a word of power, causing holy energy to shoot out of my chest and strike the cube. Within seconds, a floating sensation engulfs my body, as the cube releases an echo of my magic back at me.

Raphael's body stiffens. "The artifact appears to be scanning thee, Wordsmith."

"Yeah. I noticed."

Dozens of pulses identical to mine strike me, but none of them seem hostile in nature. Eventually, the cube ceases its scans and returns to its inert state.

Several minutes pass.

"Huh. I thought this artifact was going to do something, but after it scanned me, it stopped. If Camael is inside, I'd expect her to recognize me and let me in."

Raphael's shoulders sag. "I doubt my sister dwells within this artifact. 'Tis my belief that she perished during the Energy Wars, along with the other Archangels. Much more likely, this cube is a lost remnant of her ancient craftsmanship. I imagine 'tis automated via holy energy. Given how it absorbed the void's ambient mana, it must be capable of sustaining itself, similarly to Excalibur."

"Excalibur..." I mutter. "Whatever happened to that weapon?"

"Funny thou should'st ask," Raphael replies. "I am not certain. After Camael gifted it to King Arthur, it remained within his family line for many generations. At some point, Camelot fell to a demonic invasion, making me lose track of its whereabouts."

"Seriously? How could you let a weapon like Excalibur leave your sight? It damn near killed the Archdemon. What if the demons stole it?"

"The demons could not have managed such a feat," Raphael replies. "Few were capable of wielding its imperfect prototype, let alone the finished artifact Camael bequeathed to Arthur. The model Arthur received was far stronger and much deadlier than the one Camael wielded against the Archdemon. Any demon who drew too close to Excalibur, let alone attempted to grasp its handle, would have perished instantly."

"Solomon told me once that the demons worked with the Mayans and the Aztecs. What if they found Excalibur and had a human slave steal it?"

Raphael nods. "Aye. The demons may have hidden it by using a human. However, 'tis useless for us to speculate now. Unless Excalibur rests within this artifact, we haven't a single clue as to its whereabouts. Thy Wordsmithing is useless when it comes to locating inanimate objects."

"Yeah. For now, let's focus on getting inside," I reply. "There has to be a way in."

"Agreed."

* * *

Ten minutes later, I re-accelerate to 0.01% the speed of light, allowing me to cruise around the cube as I please. After continually mapping out its exterior, I notice wafer-thin lines drawn all across its six surfaces, each presenting a different symbol. One of them resembles a bird shaped like the letter Q, while another reminds me of a waterfall, one which lands in a pit of bones.

"Translate."

I utter a word of power, allowing me to comprehend their deeper meaning. However, instead of a direct translation, only a vague sensation of danger appears in the back of my mind.

"Hm. This cube is incredible," I mutter. "Its insides are hollow, as Phoebe speculated. It appears to be a containment device, designed to prevent its contents from escaping."

"So, a prison?" Phoebe asks.

"Maybe. I don't know. I found an entrance on the, err, sixth side — the one with the giant bird. We'll enter through there."

"What if that entry-way is a trap?" Phoebe asks.

"It might be, but I have my doubts. Earlier, the cube reflected my scans. I have a feeling it's classified me as an ally. Perhaps it detected Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel's rings?"

"Aye," Raphael replies. "It may have also recognized the holy energy contained within thy body."

"Right. So, I can only hope it won't atomize me when I approach."

I fly around the sides of the cube to arrive at a 300-foot-diameter depression in its otherwise perfectly flat surface. Due to the cube's sheer size, even a hole big enough to comfortably fit a Titan King appears as little more than a black speck on a sandy beach. I zip over and hover before the concave cavity, but to my surprise, it begins to open, revealing a bright-blue force-field protecting its contents.

"Oh? Is the cube inviting me inside?"

Phoebe shrugs. "Maybe it wants to eat your face."

"Given how I live on a world under constant threat of demonic attacks, that's just something that comes with the territory."

Without any fanfare, I float toward the giant force-field. As I draw closer, I reach out my hand, mentally preparing myself for a blast of mana to shoot me out of the sky, or for the barrier to electrify me and fry my brains to mush. Instead, when I try to touch the force-field, my hand passes through it without any issues, entering the inside effortlessly.

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "A bio-barrier."

"A what?" Raphael asks.

"Bio-barriers keep life support and other natural gasses locked inside a vessel, allowing people and crafts to enter while maintaining the ship's cargo bay's pressurization," I explain. "Esther has something similar, though I've never needed to use it."

Raphael tugs his beard. "Hmm. In that case, this artifact has an even more complicated origin than I thought."

"Why do you say that?" I ask, as I float through the bio-barrier.

"Angels do not require oxygen or natural gasses," Raphael replies. "Neither did Titans or dragons. All of us were born and lived in the void."

"That makes sense," I say. "However, if so, why do angels possess vocal cords for speaking? Why not communicate via telepathy?"

Raphael smiles. "We can, and have done so on occasion. However, angel bodies are highly adaptable to new environments. Toxic gasses, molten lava, and many other natural barriers were minor obstacles before our adaptive forms. Once we arrived on Earth, we used its nutrient-rich atmosphere to modify our means of communication. Telepathy requires mana expenditure, while speaking does not."

"Fair enough," I concede.

I return my attention to the cube. After passing through its bio-barrier, I enter a ten-mile-long tunnel. A shiny, gold-plated interior greets me, with a surprisingly bright radiance emanating from seemingly nowhere. The nearer I draw to the end of the tunnel, the brighter the light becomes.

"Incredible," Raphael murmurs. He gazes at the four golden walls encompassing us with a look of awe. "This artifact possesses the same divine core Uzziel and I used to create Heaven's Light. That explains its self-sustaining nature."

"The similarities *are* uncanny," I remark.

Once we arrive at the end of the tunnel, we pass through a second bio-barrier and reach the artifact's interior, only to gasp in shock.

Before us, a vast, green-colored void stretches out, seemingly to infinity. The walls of the artifact disappear into nothingness. No matter where I look, I can't make out the edges of the superstructure. The very air around me hums with life energy.

I continue floating forward, while my eyes flick toward several specks in the distance. Upon enhancing my vision, I zoom in on them, revealing dozens of moon-sized metal spheres, cubes, and all manner of other-sided shapes hovering in the air, soundlessly. Each slowly spins and pulses, discharging small bursts of mana toward the others nearby.

What boggles my mind most is the sheer distance between the gigantic, three-dimensional shapes. Despite the artifact's outward manifestation making it appear only a few factors larger than Earth, its inner dimensions reveal a compressed space several times larger still. The artifact's interior might even be bigger than Jupiter or Saturn.

As I flick my eyes from left to right, I notice a series of blinking red lights several miles away. They float around with intentional wariness, keeping their distance from me. Their movements seem to be both cautious and curious at the same time. I raise my hands in what I hope is the universal sign for 'I come in peace,' and make my way toward them. Even with my unhurried speed, the lights quickly retreat, pulling away as if terrified of my presence. They vanish into the green mist, leaving me in their dust.

"Fascinating," Raphael murmurs.

"Do you know what those little lights were?" I ask.

"Nay. The more I see of this cube's construction, the more mystified I become. I sense my sister's life-force more strongly than ever before, yet I recognize nothing we've seen so far. Everything here only

resembles her craftsmanship in the vaguest of ways. It is as if the Camael I knew was a different sister from the one who crafted this relic."

"Perhaps she didn't build it," Phoebe offers. "Was Camael the only angel capable of crafting artifacts?"

"Surprisingly, yes," Raphael says. "Many attempted to learn my sister's crafting techniques, but few could consider themselves better than amateurs in her wake."

"Maybe she had a few successful students, but kept them hidden from you," Phoebe muses.

"Aye. At this point, that theory lies well within the realm of plausibility," Raphael says.

We fall silent as I change course, once again heading toward the cube's innermost sanctum. It doesn't take long before the wall from where I entered disappears behind me into the horizon.

The air around me becomes denser and thicker as the minutes pass. I check my mana supply every so often, waiting for it to lower so I can activate another mana bead. However, to my astonishment, my mana supply remains steady and even begins to increase slightly over time.

"I don't know if I would call the stuff surrounding me an 'atmosphere' or not, but whatever it is, it's perfectly compatible with my body's energy. Raphael, what if the angels had access to this artifact during the Ancient Era? Would you have been able to sustain yourselves without relying on demonic and human mana?"

Raphael frowns. "Most likely not. Much like when Camael transferred Excalibur's energy to Gabriel, only we Archangels could have absorbed this cube's mana into ourselves. Lowborn purebloods would suffer immeasurably and die a slow, painful death if they attempted such a thing."

"Why?" Phoebe asks.

Raphael turns to look at my wife. "Because, young one. Archangels possess bodies far hardier and much more virile in comparison to the lower-ranked of our kind. Perhaps Catherine and the Valkyries may have survived the energy transfer, but I guarantee they'd suffer for years afterward before the energy finally assimilated into their cores."

I roll my eyes. "Right. And all it took for you to achieve your powerful forms was the wanton slaughter of god-knows-how-many other angels."

Raphael lowers his eyes.

"I am not proud of my past."

"Great. As long as you regret your actions, that should redeem the many evils you've committed. I'm sure your fallen siblings would pat you on the back and forgive you, so long as you're sorry."

An awkward silence hangs in the air. Raphael turns away from Phoebe and rubs his knees, unable to look her in the eyes. My mind-wife, meanwhile, leans back in the park bench and dips her toes in the nearby fountain.

Twenty minutes pass.

As I travel further into the cube's interior, many strange phenomena start to appear. I zip past a cloud of blue gas on my left. It hums and crackles with electrical energy, occasionally sending bolts of lightning firing off in random directions. Thanks to the barrier surrounding me, the thunderous shockwaves which immediately follow don't affect me in the slightest.

Not long after, I pass four spheres, each one the size of a metropolitan city, such as New York or Los Angeles. The gigantic orbs fire a bolt of red-colored mana around, bouncing it between each of their bodies. The energy always ricochets between each of the spheres, seemingly trapped in an endless loop from which it can never escape.

Suddenly, a flat, twenty-pointed metal star zips toward me. Standing over a thousand feet tall, the object rushes at me like a knight attempting to protect a princess.

[HMM HMM BRRM! BRRM BMM HMM!]

A telepathic message strikes my brain, startling me and causing my heart to race. However, whatever the giant star is trying to say, I can't tell. It transmits into my mind as a series of humming noises, some of them deep, others high-pitched.

"Augh! What the hell is this?!" I yell.

Before Raphael can reply, the gigantic star travels even closer. At its center, a glowing red orb pulses with light, reminding me of an eye.

[HMM HMM HMM! **BRRM BRRM BMM!!**]

The star's 'voice' turns threatening, acting as if it's about to attack.

I react by using my telepathy to reply. [I can't understand you! Please, calm-]

BOOM!

The star's red iris fires a blast of mana at me. It smashes against my shield with thunderous force, launching me away at thirty times the speed of sound. I spin helplessly through the void, but the star begins chasing me, maintaining its angered voice.

[**BRRM BRRM HMM!! HMM HMM BMM!!**]

"Raphael! What the fuck is this thing?! Help me out! **Stabilize! Reinforce!**"

I bring my spinning to a sudden stop, all while thanking my stars that my protective barrier negates 99% of the inertial force put on my body. I also empower my shield, strengthening it against the stars enraged attacks.

BOOM! BOOM!

Once again, the star fires two blasts of energy attacks at me, sending me careening helplessly into the void. With a start, I realize it's launched me back toward the cloud of blue gas, where the lightning storms continue to rage.

"Jason! I recognize that device!" Raphael yells. "'Tis an autonomous implement Camael once produced en-masse! Against ancient foes from the Primordial Era, 'twas little more than an annoyance, but against

someone as weak as thee, it will prove most deadly!"

"No fucking shit!" I bark. "Can I stop it? Auuuugh!"

My body flies into the cloud of lightning, making my nerves seize up as trillions of volts of electricity strike my reinforced shielding. Even with my protective magic capable of withstanding the dangers of space, I can't block all of the lightning's power!

"Aaargh! Help! Help me!!"

My mind loses focus. I can't even think of words to say that might negate the electricity. My Wordsmithing proves useless, as the lightning turns my thoughts into a chaotic, disordered mess.

"-bzzat- the- red- angel- mlksh-"

Raphael says something to me, but I can't process his words. They come out a jumbled mess, utterly incomprehensible to my muddled thoughts.

"Aaaah!! Aaahhhhh!!"

My vision darkens. Soon, I begin to fall unconscious.

No... I can't fall asleep... I'll die here if I don't... don't stay awake...

Suddenly, my thoughts clear up!

The electrical pain continues to surge through my body, but with a start, I awaken from my stupor to find my brain working perfectly.

"Nullify! Invulnerable! Disperse!"

With three words, I scatter the electricity to the furthest reaches of space and transform myself into an invincible juggernaut.

Two seconds later, the automated metal-star flies at me again, its body dominating mine with its shadow.

[BRRT! BRRT! HMM!]

However, when it fires another three shots of mana at me, they bounce off my shield harmlessly, ricocheting elsewhere into the cube's biosphere.

The star pauses. It pulls back slightly and speaks again, confusion in its tone.

[HMM? HMM! BRRT BRRT HMM?]

Before I can reply, it instantly reverses course and flies away, leaving me all by myself.

"Hey! Where are you going? Coward!"

I smirk, feeling a slight hint of self-satisfaction at how I single-handedly scared away something so much bigger and mightier than me.

However, as I turn my gaze inward, a wave of shock passes through my mind.

My mind-wife stands with her arms raised above her head. Her eyes glow pure white, while her body trembles violently. Sweat drips down her forehead. Upon noticing my inward gaze, she lowers her arms,

causing her eyes to lose their luminosity.

"Oh... thank god... you've..."

Phoebe doesn't finish her sentence. She falls forward and collapses to the ground, her body drained of all its energy.

"Phoebe?! What happened? What's going on? **Heal!**"

I send a wave of healing energy to my mind-wife, but to my surprise, it does nothing for her physical condition. A moment later, Raphael jumps to her side, a look of concern on his face. Michael and Gabriel appear behind him, summoned from their rings.

"Damn," Raphael mutters. "Damn, thou art an unlucky bastard, Wordsmith."

"What's wrong with Phoebe?" I ask. "Is she... is she dead?!"

"Nay. When thy body entered the cloud of energized miasma, Phoebe leaped into action. She attempted to protect thy brain from the worst of the electrical energy. In doing so, she..."

Raphael falls silent. Michael takes a step forward, an ugly expression on his face.

"Tch. How unfortunate for this mortal's soul. It appears she has unified ten percent of her mind with thine. It protected thee from the worst of the damage, but in exchange, she suffered a blow most heinous."

"Oh, my god," I whisper. "Can I heal her? Is she going to die?"

"As long as thou liveth, so, too, shall Phoebe," Raphael replies. "However, now, any attempt to free her from thy Mind Realm is sure to fail, at least so long as thou lacketh Solomon's Crown. Thy ability to heal brains is sub-par at best. Luckily, once Phoebe awakens, she should not suffer any lingering after-effects."

"What will happen if... if Phoebe unifies her mind even more with mine?" I ask.

Raphael's tone turns grave. "Let us pray such a fate never befalls the both of thee."

* * *

Minutes later, I resume my course toward the center of the cube. This time, my heart skips a beat as six more of the twenty-sided metal stars float toward me. However, they keep their distance and merely hum angrily at me, taking care not to draw too close. For some reason, they appear to be terrified of me, though, in retrospect, all I managed to do was deflect a few of one star's attacks. I didn't even get to attack it or deal any damage.

"As expected," Raphael mutters. "Without Camael's guiding hand, these constructs possess limited intelligence. They act like a human child. When faced with an inferior life-form, they will attack it relentlessly. However, if their attacks don't harm their enemy, they will retreat with their tails tucked between their legs."

A chuckle escapes my throat. "Pft. So, that makes them big, stupid space-bullies. I scared them by standing up for myself."

"Indeed. Ah, look up ahead," Raphael says. "We've almost arrived."

I continue flying forward. Eventually, the green haze begins to shift its color, morphing into a shade of light pink. The dense fog surrounding me dissipates to a fraction of its former density, revealing a massive, eight-sided diamond floating in the void.

I slow to a stop and stare at the diamond, noting its faded grey coloration.

The gigantic shape slowly spins on its axis, as if resting atop a spiraling table. Even as far away as I am now, I can tell it must be the size of Luna, Earth's moon. After gazing at it for a few minutes, I notice that one of the sides spinning to face me is not grey like the others, but red. While the other seven resemble a rainbow drained of its color, the eighth side pulses with energy. Once it spins enough to face me directly, it begins glowing even brighter than before.

Suddenly, a tiny ball of light fires out of the diamond's red-colored surface! The bloody sphere shoots straight up into the sky, circles twice, then swoops at me with frightening speed!

"Shield! Reinforce!" I bellow, not wanting to take a chance.

Right before the bright-red sphere strikes me, it veers away at the last second, choosing instead to orbit me at hundreds of miles per hour.

Over and over, the sphere gyrates around me, as if examining me from head to toe.

The six stars behind me hover a little closer, seemingly wanting to protect the light-orb. Their movements appear antsy, making it appear as if they fear that the orb has decided to show interest in me.

Suddenly, the orb screeches to a stop, not even ten feet from my face. It hovers in midair, emitting periodic pulses of light to probe me.

[Harru? Whu esa irrui?]

A dainty, female voice appears in my mind. The orb slowly levitates to my right, as if trying to see my face from a different angle.

[Du irrui rfaec? Asa irrui llsaialn?]

I shake my head. [Sorry, but I don't understand what you're saying.]

The orb pauses.

[This language, yours?]

In perfect English, the orb sends me a message, giving my heart yet another shock.

[Yes,] I reply. [This is my language. What are you? Who are you?]

Several seconds pass. The orb begins bouncing up and down, excited to hear my voice.

[A friend! He speaks the Dullard! Yay!]

I raise an eyebrow. *The... dullard? Is this thing calling me stupid?*

I turn my gaze inward, only to see Raphael leaning heavily on his staff. A look of incomprehension appears in the eldest Archangel's eyes, as he shakes his head from side to side.

"No, no, no. 'Tis impossible! Camael told me she lost that artifact to the void!"

"Raphael," I say. "Do you know what this thing... this *girl* is?"

"Of course!" Raphael barks. "How could I not?! 'Tis none other than Camael's lost relic, a creation even mightier than Excalibur!"

Raphael continues. "This orb... it is none other than the Phoenix! Camael's first artifact, molded by the stellar flames, forged in the fires of creation, shaped in the Creator's eye! How could I not recognize such a priceless relic?!"

"The Phoenix?" I ask. "Didn't Catherine wield part of the Phoenix?"

Raphael nods excitedly. "Yes, yes! Before Camael lost it, she implanted a sliver of the Phoenix inside Catherine's soul! Never mind that, quickly! Verify this artifact is the very same one!"

I nod.

Turning my attention to the orb, I send it a telepathic message.

[Hey, if you don't mind me asking... who are you?]

The orb slows its bouncing. It pauses for a moment, as if contemplating my question.

[Hmm. Don't know!]

[What do you mean?] I ask. [Are you the Phoenix?]

The orb resumes its bounciness as it begins to circle me once again.

[Don't know! Let's play!]

I shrug helplessly, then glance inward at Raphael.

"The orb doesn't know if it's the Phoenix or not."

Raphael smiles.

"Heh, heh, heh. Is that so? In that case, there can be no doubt. The Phoenix must have died and rebirthed at some point in the past. It has lost all its memories."

"This, young Hero, is most certainly my sister's mightiest, and most precious, long-lost artifact. Today, we will obtain something of tremendous value."

Part 219: The Cube's Secret

Raphael stands up and begins to pace back and forth. He nods his head every few seconds as if to confirm his suspicions.

"Hmm. Hmm, yes. Jason, since the Phoenix has not attacked, that must mean it has recognized thee as a friend. Doubtless, it must have acknowledged the holy energy within thy body. Try to extract some information from it. It may have lost its memories from before its death, but I doubt it lacks all of its recollections entirely."

I nod. "Alright."

Because of the bubble shield protecting my body, the Phoenix can't hear my words, nor can I hear any sound outside my barrier. However, we can still speak via telepathy.

[Phoenix,] I say, [can you tell me a little about yourself? About this cube? What is your purpose? What are you doing here?]

The Phoenix's orb continues bobbing up and down playfully, but it slows its speed for a few moments to contemplate my questions.

It replies in a girly, sing-song voice. [Hmm. Don't know! I've been all alone for soooo long, though! I'm bored! Why don't we play the chasing game? I'll chase you, and then you chase me! Teehee!]

The Phoenix hovers away from me slowly, as if daring me to follow it. However, I don't move a muscle.

[I don't mind playing with you, but I need some answers first. Do you know Archangel Camael? Maybe Raphael, her brother?]

[Nope!] The Phoenix replies. [Don't know them! Are they friends of yours? Do they like to play games?]

I shake my head. [No. I doubt they do.]

Raphael frowns. "Hmm. The Phoenix knows neither Camael nor me. Its memories disappear whenever it dies; therefore, I must surmise it hasn't spoken to either of us since it last perished. That will make trading information much more difficult."

"In what way?" I ask.

Raphael expression darkens. "The last time I saw the Phoenix was before Camael lost it, during the height of the Dragon Wars. She told me it detonated in a terrific flash of light, and that she couldn't locate its ashes."

"Was she lying?"

"I haven't the faintest clue," Raphael says, "but that is a distinct possibility."

I rub my chin. "The Dragon Wars came before the Titan Wars, and before your people colonized Earth. That was a very, very long time ago."

The Archangel nods. "Indeed. Ask the Phoenix how much time has passed since its rebirth."

Following Raphael's advice, I send a telepathic message to the artifact. [Hey, uh, Phoenix? Can you tell me how long it's been since you revived?]

The Phoenix gives an immediate reply. [Of course! It's been about seventeen eons! Now, can we pleeeeeease play the chasing game?]

I frown. "Raphael. How much time does seventeen eons equate to?"

"I cannot give a well-defined answer," Raphael replies. "Eons are an angelic length of time, with neither a strict beginning nor an end. They can range anywhere from one to fifty million years."

I raise an eyebrow. "So... anywhere from 17 million to 850 million years. I don't want to sound like a dick, but that's a pretty goddamned huge gap."

"Naturally," Raphael replies. "This is why we often sub-divided eons into eras, epochs, and ages. However, all of those units of time came about as a way of linking major events from our history chronologically. 'Tis unlikely the Phoenix would know the results of the Dragon Wars, Titan Wars, and so on."

"I agree."

After listening to more of Raphael's advice, I return my attention to the Phoenix.

[I'm sorry to keep asking you questions, little one. However, before we can play together, I need to find out why you've ended up here, so close to the demon's homeworld. Do you control the cube? Can you alter its movements?]

The Phoenix finally stops bouncing around. It floats over to me slowly, as if heaving a sigh. [Ugh... you're so boring! All you do is ask dumb questions! Who cares about that silly stuff? Don't you understand how bored I am? I'm so lonely... I've been all by myself since I woke up. I'm stuck here, where I can't leave. Why won't you play with me? Is it because I'm ugly...?]

[You're stuck here?] I ask. [Does that mean you don't control the cube?]

The Phoenix's orb slowly spins on its axis. [What cube?]

"Ah, so the Phoenix knows not of its prison," Raphael mutters. "That must mean it cannot leave."

I nod. [Phoenix, right now, you reside within a gigantic cube, one which is as big as some of the largest worlds I've ever seen. I suspect the great Archangel, Camael, constructed it. However, I don't know why she did. If you're bored and lonely, then perhaps you can help me figure out why she trapped you here. Maybe I can free you and let you leave this place.]

My words send a spark of electricity through the glowing red orb's aura. [Really?! You can help me leave?! Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!! I don't want to live here! I hate being alone!]

The Phoenix resumes its merry bouncing, doubling its previous speed. [Yay! Yay! I can't wait to leave! I love my new friend! He's so nice to me!]

For some reason, hearing the Phoenix's cries of joy makes me inexorably depressed. The thought of this carefree, childlike entity suffering in loneliness for tens of millions of years makes me want to take her in and give her a big hug. I know the Phoenix is nothing but a genderless artifact, but the mere fact that it possesses sentience and reminds me of my daughter is enough to trigger my feelings of fatherly love.

However, we can't yet leave. My work here is far from done.

After calming the Phoenix down, I float nearer to the eight-sided diamond from which it emerged. The Phoenix follows along behind me while bobbing up and down curiously.

[Hey! Friend! What are you doing? Are you looking for something?]

I shrug. [Not particularly. I'm just trying to see if there's anything important happening with this big diamond-thing.]

[Mhm! Oh, yes. That's the Container! The Container is very mean. I hate it. It never lets me do anything fun!]

"The Container, huh..."

I float toward the Container, observing it with my eyes. As it spins around, the bright-red coloration of the Phoenix's side catches my eye. Why does only that side stand out compared to the others?

[Phoenix. The Container has eight sides, but seven of them don't have any colors, while yours does. Why is that?]

The Phoenix falls silent for a moment.

[Hmm. I don't know... I think I used to have friends there, but they're all gone now. I don't remember them at all.]

My heart skips a beat. [Other friends? Do you mean there were other artifacts, like yourself?]

[I...]

The Phoenix pauses.

[I don't know! Not a clue! Teehee!]

As I draw closer to the cube, I shoot a glance backward to see the six 20-sided metal stars lingering some distance behind me. However, they draw closer than before and twitch angrily, as if enraged that I have the audacity to talk to the Phoenix without their permission.

[Phoenix, what are those stars? Are they friends of yours?]

The glowing red artifact spins in a circle. [Nope! Those are just some of the the Ten Annoying Dummies! They talk like babies. I don't like them, not one bit. If I try to leave, they poke me until I cry. They're not nice at all.]

I make a mental note about how there are four stars I haven't seen yet. [Right. Well, I'll keep my distance, for now. When you say they 'poke you,' what do you mean?]

The Phoenix huffs in annoyance. [Don't even get me started! Those big jerks always make sure I have to stay near the Container! Even if I want to leave, I can't! My head starts feeling dizzy, and then they poke me with their red pokey-sticks, and I wake up in the Container again! Just looking at them makes me so, super-duper angry!!]

Raphael nods. "I see. I know not the reason Camael crafted this cube, but it seems the Container must be its innermost core. If the Phoenix leaves, the superstructure will lose its power source. Undoubtedly, Camael placed the Sentry Stars here to ensure the device stayed operational indefinitely."

An ugly scowl passes over my face. "You're probably right, but I can't help but resent her for subjecting the Phoenix to such terrible, psychological torture. She locked the artifact up all by itself, where it became so lonely-"

"Nay," Raphael says, interrupting me. "The Phoenix was not originally by itself. As thou didst surmise, there were once eight different artifacts embedded within the Container. However, for some reason, all of them except for the Phoenix have disappeared. This mystery grows ever more dire and worrisome by the second."

The alarm in Raphael's voice makes me uneasy. "Yeah? Why the doom and gloom, old man? What's on your mind?"

Raphael scowls. "Jason. At this point, I can do little more than speculate. However, if my suspicions prove true, then the reason for this cube's existence, and the reason Camael never informed me of its whereabouts or functions reveal a most dreadful reality."

Raphael continues. "For Camael to lie to me, for her to hide her mightiest artifact along with seven others inside such a powerful super-artifact... that can only mean she didn't believe I could keep its existence a secret. Why, then, would she think such a thing?"

"I don't know," I reply. "Why?"

"I know not the answer, either," Raphael murmurs. His voice trembles. "However, now I believe that the other artifacts were either destroyed or stolen."

"That's a reasonable assumption," I mutter. "Maybe I can use my Wordsmithing to find out what happened."

Raphael glances at my mind-wife. "Between stealing or destroying the artifacts, which path dost thou believeth the most likely?"

"Destroying," Phoebe replies emphatically. "If someone stole the other seven artifacts, it seems unlikely they would leave the Phoenix behind, especially given how you've described it as Camael's mightiest artifact. However, if someone or something destroyed the other seven artifacts, then it explains why the Phoenix remained behind."

"Aye," Raphael says, forcing a smile. "I am gladdened that thou possesseth the same thoughts as me. Something must have attacked the cube and destroyed all eight artifacts. Thankfully, due to its self-regenerative capabilities, the Phoenix rebirthed after its destruction."

A shiver goes down my back. "Even without Camael wielding it, surely the Phoenix alone should have been stupidly powerful, right? Not to mention the other seven artifacts. What being would possess enough power to destroy all eight of them?"

A deep, dark gloom falls over Raphael's eyes.

"Something horrendously powerful. A monster from the Primordial Era."

As I fly closer to the cube, the Phoenix's movements become noticeably less animated. It hovers close to me, almost as if seeking refuge from the bogeyman.

[I don't like the Container,] The Phoenix whimpers. [I hope you can save me, friend. The Container is mean to me. The Ten Annoying Dummies hurt me. I don't want to live here anymore.]

I reach my hand out and try to pat the Phoenix comfortingly, only for my hand to pass through its spirit-like body. [Don't worry. I'm here for you now. If I can help you, I will. You might not know this, but I'm a pretty strong guy. I can fight off monsters with one hand tied behind my back!]

The Phoenix droops unhappily. [I hope so.]

The nearer I draw, the more an invisible pressure pushes against my soul. Even with my bubble-shield protecting me, an unsettling sensation of despair slowly creeps into the back of my mind. The idea that someone might be watching me makes me shudder involuntarily.

"Nullify! Shield!"

With two words, I reinforce my defenses and try to push away the strangely ominous, evil presence tickling my brain. However, my efforts only seem to strengthen it.

Eventually, I arrive at the Container's surface, right atop the Phoenix's red-colored side. At its center rests a gigantic ruby, more than thirty times my body's size.

"The Phoenix's core!" Raphael gasps. "Even after all these eons, 'tis fully intact! What luck we have."

I nod at him, but pause for a moment to evaluate the Container's evil aura.

"Inspect. Sense."

My mind sharpens, allowing me to pierce the Container's shell with my senses. Its mana hums in my mind as I rapidly identify its exact origins.

Raphael receives the same information as me over my mind-link. His jovial attitude instantly vanishes, replaced instead with a look of horror.

"By the Creator! It all makes sense, now! Wordsmith, thy intuition was correct. This cube is a prison, crafted to contain an unspeakable evil! A monstrous being!"

Raphael balls his hands into fists.

"Creator, guide me! How could I be so blind?! This mana signature is one I've felt countless times! Not Camael, nor her artifacts, but that of a damned, filthy, wretched... dragon!"

Phoebe nearly jumps out of her skin. "A dragon?!"

"Aye!" Raphael roars. "And not just any dragon, but one possessing unspeakable cosmic power! What we now sense is not the dragon itself, but the mere remnants of its former might! It must have escaped the Container which once held it prisoner, and fled, leaving the Phoenix behind! All the pieces fit together! Now I know the answer to the mystery plaguing my mind!"

I nod along to Raphael's words, feeling a sense of awe and fear.

"A dragon. I see. But how long ago did it leave? And where did it go?"

Part 220: The Phoenix's Power

[Tadaa! This is my sparkly gem-thing!] The Phoenix chirps. Camael's artifact guides me to land on the Container's surface, where I arrive before a 100-foot in diameter glowing red orb embedded in the diamond's exterior. I half-expect it to blind me with its shining brilliance, but instead, its brightness appears faded and dull, as if it has lost much of its power over the eons.

"Inspect. Diagram."

With two words of power, I send my mana deep inside the moon-sized, eight-sided diamond, allowing me to scope out its insides. A three-dimensional schematic appears in my mind's eye while transmitting to my Mind Realm's residents as well.

Phoebe and Raphael both close their eyes for a few minutes to evaluate the Container's structure.

"It's hollow," Phoebe says. "and empty, too."

"Aye," Raphael adds. "Whatever monster once lurked within the Container, it has long since escaped."

"And you think it was a dragon?" I ask.

"Think? Nay, Jason. I know so. The draconic mana lingering in this area is so overpowering that, were I to stand there in the flesh, I might faint from mana suppression. The beast once locked within the Container was no ordinary monster, but a malevolent force of evil — a dark dragon."

Raphael continues. "When viewing Solomon's visions, it did not escape my notice that Leviathan, the dragon who empowered the demons, possessed a nearly identical aura. Indeed, judging by his conversation with my brother, Samael, 'twould seem that the Archangel of Change helped Leviathan escape his prison and flee to Earth."

"Are you saying Leviathan was the dragon Camael trapped inside the Container?"

"Aye," Raphael replies. "I cannot say with absolute certainty, but the pieces fit together nicely. Camael must have ensnared the dark dragon during the middle of the Dragon Wars. After we defeated Jörmungandr, the Mother of All Dragons, her mana would have traveled to Leviathan, empowering him within this prison. Once he escaped, perhaps with Samael's assistance, my brother would have suppressed his aura and hid him on Earth. That is why, even while residing on the same planet, my people never once sensed the dark dragon's aura."

"Because of Samael's magic," I say, finishing Raphael's thoughts.

"Correct."

I walk forward to survey the Phoenix's orb from a closer distance. The divine artifact floats along behind me, bobbing along as it observes my movements.

[Can you save me?] The Phoenix asks. [Or am I stuck here?]

[I'm not sure,] I reply. [Your orb is buried pretty deep inside the Container. There are millions of magical circuits interlinked with its structure. Untangling all of them without hurting you will take time.]

"Time isn't a luxury we have," Phoebe says. "We need to get back to the Core. By now, Kar has probably raised Tarus II's defenses, but if Hope hasn't returned yet, humanity will need you."

I smile. "Don't underestimate our species, Phoebe. Humans are strong and resilient. We've survived under 100,000 years of oppression capable of breaking the minds of weaker beings. I installed many defensive weapons to protect our home. Even if the demons attack immediately and it takes us an extra day or two to return, our people will not fall."

"What about Daisy?" Phoebe asks. "What about my original body? My other half? Are you willing to risk their lives on your intuition?"

I pause for a moment to stare at the ground.

"...No. When you put it that way, I suddenly realize I can't dilly-dally. I'll double my speed."

I walk over and step on the Phoenix's orb. The moment my boots touch its surface, the artifact's nucleus glows a little brighter than before, as if recognizing my presence.

"Raphael. Tell me what you can about this artifact. Can I extract it with my Wordsmithing?"

The eldest Archangel heaves a sigh. "I know little regarding the inner workings of Camael's relics. However, I have witnessed similar artifacts she made in the past. The Container is, most likely, a fusion of multiple artifacts into one super-structure. Much like how the cube itself envelops the Container, the Container works with the other relics to envelop its contents."

"The dragon?"

"Aye. The very same one," Raphael replies. "My sister likely reinforced the Phoenix and its fellow artifacts with countless protective measures to solidify their bond."

"Fuck..." I mutter. "That means the bond is likely permanent. If I try to extract the Phoenix's core, I'll probably tear the poor thing to shreds."

Phoebe raises her hand. "The Phoenix can regenerate, even from death. If you tear it out, won't it come back to life?"

Raphael strokes his beard. "Possibly. However, the Phoenix will not revive immediately. It will take centuries, if not millennia. Resurrecting oneself is an ability that very few beings have ever attained. There are almost always heavy costs associated with its power."

"Right. So, even if I managed to rip the Phoenix out and it did come back, I'd never get to use it for myself. Also, the current Phoenix's personality would disappear. I would kill it."

Raphael nods. "Correct. And that is if we assume the Phoenix would return in perfect working order. Severing its link to the Container might tear apart its core and damage its foundation, making it lose most of its power."

I turn my head slightly to look at the bouncing red ball hovering beside me. [Phoenix. Give me a little more time. I'm still trying to solve a few problems with removing your orb.]

[Okay!] The Phoenix yells. Her basketball-sized orb flies toward me and hovers above my head to rest against my bubble-barrier. [Ding ding! It's idea time!] The Phoenix chirps, while pretending to be a light-

bulb.

[Yeah, haha,] I chuckle softly. [You've got that right.]

I fly around the outside of the Container to examine its eight sides. At the center of each one sits a giant crater filled with scorched ash, revealing the remains of whatever attack the dark dragon first used to escape its prison.

However, when I reach the seventh side, opposite the Phoenix's artifact, my heart skips a beat. There, a gigantic hole reveals the opening the Container's prisoner used to escape. Massive claw marks stretch across the seventh side's surface, making it possible for me to enter the Container and see their prison's interior.

However, I don't come any closer. Instead, I levitate a safe distance away and shiver as the dark dragon's leftover aura casually streams out of the Container's center.

"Raphael, you once told me that dragons all shared their power. If two dragons roamed the cosmos, their power would end up halved, or quartered, if there were four. According to your theory, Jörmungandr died, sending the remaining energy to Leviathan. Assuming he was the final remaining dragon, why wouldn't he just... I dunno... kill all the angels?"

Raphael shakes his head wearily. "Even at the end of the Dragon Wars, when my people had expended galactic amounts of mana, we were still more than capable of battling dragons. Keep in mind that we had yet to exhaust ourselves against the Titans for another several eons. Had Leviathan attacked us at the end of the Titan Wars, or any time afterward, 'tis likely he would have crushed us with ease."

"You mean like when Satan stumbled into his den? You're lucky Leviathan didn't attack you right then and there."

Raphael's expression turns gloomy. "Aye. Had he done so, the Archdemon's attack would have seemed as feeble and frail as a child's slap."

Phoebe glances at Raphael questioningly. "What's this about an Archdemon?"

"'Tis a fearsome creature which Solomon showed to Jason via the visions from the Ancient Era," Raphael replies. "If thou wisheth, thou mayest absorb Jason's memories to witness that which Solomon showed him."

"You don't need to do that," I say. "You already saw it once. Remember when I fought Amelia? Diablo turned into the Archdemon there. He was that big, ugly monster with tentacle-legs."

Phoebe shudders. "How could I forget? I'd rather not look at it again. Spare me the details."

Raphael nods. "In any case, my people were most certainly lucky to have survived, despite such a monster living beneath a mountain not far from Heaven's Gate. I always did wonder why Earth possessed such rich life energy. Now that I've entered this accursed ring, at last, I have found some answers."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Dragons emit potent life energy, vaguely reminiscent of Uzziel's nature magic," Raphael replies. "When my people went searching for a world to settle, somewhere where we could set aside our

differences, we discovered Earth. Already, it possessed innumerable primitive life-forms. I assumed at the time that Earth had somehow evolved life naturally. Now, I know that Leviathan's presence jumpstarted its ecosystem. Thy species owe their lives, in part, to the dragon's life energy."

I frown. "Didn't you just say the leftover energy from Leviathan's presence in the Container alone is enough to sicken you? How in the heck can you consider such putrid essence 'life energy'?"

"That's an easy answer," Phoebe replies. "Humans require Vitamin C to keep us healthy. However, too much of it will poison us."

"Precisely," Raphael adds. "Additionally, my sister's nature energy was and is incompatible with the mana other angels required. That is why she was unable to bequeath it unto us during the final battle against the Archdemon."

"Makes sense," I reply. "Leviathan's energy must have slowly diffused into the Earth's soil over millions of years. Life evolved naturally as a result."

Raphael sits on the edge of my Mind Realm's fountain and slowly waves his hands through its water. "Aye. I can only imagine how long Leviathan lay trapped within this artifact before he eventually escaped. Assuming he broke his restraints when we killed his mother, Jörmungandr, Leviathan must have contacted Samael and hid on Earth to escape our wrath. Afterward, the Titan Wars distracted my people for another two eons, before we finally settled our differences."

"What happened to Leviathan after the War in Heaven?" I ask. "Considering how much stronger he was than your people *before* the War in Heaven, surely he must have been even more capable of crushing you into pulp afterward when fewer than 10,000 angels remained."

Raphael falls silent.

The Archangel of Wisdom knots his forehead together. He glances at Michael and Gabriel, both of whom casually lean against a nearby tree, but they both shrug off his gaze.

"I... I know not the answer to that question," Raphael mutters. "After the War in Heaven... hmm. Thy line of thought fills me with uncertainty, young Hero. I doubt anyone could have slain the almighty dragon, given its status as an apex predator. Even if the Volgrim think themselves mighty and unstoppable, before the power of a Primordial Era monster, their armies would fall to pieces. Destroying Earth might have inconvenienced Leviathan, at most."

With a groan, I rub my hands against my face. "Wonderful. There's a whole mystery involving a stupidly overpowered dragon gone missing, and I don't have the time to investigate it."

"Jason," Phoebe says, her voice low. "During the battle against Amelia, the Black Witch... didn't Solomon once say that Leviathan's corpse made an appearance at the end of the conflict, just before he left? Mephisto somehow gained control of the dragon's body. That means it must have died at some point."

"Oh, thank god," I groan. "Thanks for reminding me, babe. I completely forgot. That's why I depend on you."

Phoebe blushes. "Oh, pish. I do what I can."

"At least we know the damned thing has died," Michael mutters. "That's one less terrifying specter for thy people to fear. Now then, Wordsmith. What of the Phoenix's core? Have thou conceived any plan to release it from this Container?"

I shake my head. "No. If I had Solomon's Crown, I could probably peel apart the Phoenix's magical arrays to release its core from the Container. However, I don't. For now, I don't have a clue how I'll get it out of here."

"Perhaps we could leave the Phoenix here for now," Phoebe suggests. "You can create a Waypoint and return for the artifact later."

I pause for a moment to mull my mind-wife's recommendation.

As I do, I glance at the Phoenix's bobbing form, as it hovers above my head, waiting expectantly for its imminent rescue.

"No. This poor thing has stayed here for god knows how long. I won't leave it alone to suffer all by itself. Besides, the Phoenix is a Primordial Era artifact. If I rescue it, my battle power will explode. I'll probably be able to compete with Demon Emperors."

Raphael scoffs. "Pah! Thy ambitions are far too limited, Jason. The Phoenix possesses enough latent energy to level worlds, let alone defeat a few pathetic, sniveling Demon Emperors! The fact it has survived without a wielder for several eons is proof enough of that fact!"

Before I can reply, Gabriel pulls away from the tree and shakes his head.

"No, brother. Thy words contain errors. The Phoenix is indeed a powerful being, but its might has plummeted sharply. Did thou fail to witness its faded luster when Jason stood upon its surface? At best, it may still possess a fraction of its Primordial power. Jason will gain a substantial boost by adding it to his arsenal, but no longer will it offer him the same capabilities as it did in the Dragon Wars."

I sigh. "Either way, I need to get the Phoenix's artifact out of here. I can't leave it hovering so close to the demon's homeworld, and I can't stand the thought of leaving it all by itself. Come on, guys! Work with me. How can I rescue the Phoenix? I'll listen to any suggestions."

What follows is a short, but heated discussion.

Raphael uses his minimal knowledge of Camael's artifacts to theorize several methods for extracting the Phoenix's core. However, upon inspection, all of them would result in severe damage to the artifact, so I don't attempt them.

Phoebe suggests a few alternatives, including seizing control of the cube itself and using it like a mobile battlestation.

"Think about it, Jason," Phoebe says. "This cube is, itself, an artifact. Taking the Phoenix is fine and dandy, but the amount of life energy here is just as invaluable. At some point, we may need to move humanity off Tarus II. You could turn the inside of this cube into a hub world for our people. It's many times bigger than Tarus II, and by using its life energy, you could turn it into a super-structure of your

own design. It's not like you need it to contain Leviathan anymore, so why not repurpose it into something more useful?"

Raphael smiles. "That is an excellent suggestion, Phoebe. However, Jason hasn't much time to dawdle here. Thy plan would make more sense as a long-term project. Jason could teleport the cube to Tarus II's system and slowly improve it there."

"Exactly," I say. "In the meantime, I can't leave the Phoenix here while I work on that project. Raphael, I have another idea, but I'm not sure of its viability."

I pause for emphasis.

"A failed extraction could damage the Phoenix's foundation, while a successful one is still likely to destroy it and make it useless to me for, potentially, millennia. In that case, why not simply absorb all of the Phoenix's power into my body?"

Raphael falls silent.

Several minutes pass. The old man lowers his gaze to hem and haw as he considers my proposal.

"Hrm. Thy proposal is not far-fetched. Already, thou hath demonstrated a remarkable tolerance for allowing foreign entities into thy body, soul, and Mind Realm. However, the Phoenix's power may overwhelm thee. Even if its might is a fraction of its former self, I must assume thy pitiful mortal body cannot contain it without suffering severe backlash."

"It's not like I'm super weak or anything," I counter. "I could put the Phoenix inside of a new container, as I did with my mana beads."

Gabriel raises his hand. "Using a proxy to contain the Phoenix's power may work. However, the relic's magic will fall apart without thy body to contain it. Earlier, I considered suggesting a secondary orb to contain the Phoenix's power. However, extracting its soul from its artifact would traumatize the Phoenix's soul, causing irreparable damage. If thou cannot safely extract its original vessel, then using thy body as a proxy may be thy best bet."

"Indeed," Michael adds. "On many occasions, I witnessed Camael's craftsmanship as she smelted divine artifacts. Their souls are quite different from the souls of sentient beings. However, the Wordsmith's adaptability to other souls is unprecedented. I believe he might pull it off."

"This is the first time I've heard that Camael's divine artifacts had souls of their own," I reply. "I guess it makes sense, though. Mjölnir and Excalibur both seemed to possess animal-like instincts during the War in Heaven. Anyway, if you guys think I should extract the Phoenix's essence, I can give it a try."

"I do not believe that thou *should* do such a thing," Raphael says, hastily correcting me. "...However, since we lack Solomon's Crown, this may be the fastest method to achieve thy goals. As thou hath repeated on several occasions, our time is limited."

I nod. "Yeah. That, it is."

I hover away from the giant, gaping hole in the Container and quickly return to the Phoenix's red-colored side of the planet-sized diamond.

[Hey, Phoenix. I finally came up with an idea to save you. However, it has some inherent risks, so I wanted to run my idea past you before-]

[Yes, yes! Do it, please!] The Phoenix cries, her voice shaking with excitement. [I don't wanna be stuck here anymore! Help me leave here, and I'll do anything you say! Please!]

[No, it's not that simple,] I say, as I reach her side of the Container. [I might be able to absorb your soul and power into my body. However, if I do that, it could hurt you pretty badly. It could hurt *me*, too. I don't know what will happen. I plan to create a miniaturized version of your orb inside my body, then seal your power inside of it, while anchoring your soul to my Mind Realm. However, if anything goes wrong... you could die, Phoenix. You could *die*.]

I let my warning hang in the air, but the Phoenix doesn't hesitate for more than a second before replying.

[I don't care! If I die, I'll just come back! Don't you get it, friend? I hate living here! I hate everything! Every day, I want to fly free and escape this horrible, awful, no-good place... but I can't! I'm stuck here! No matter how much I cried, and no matter how much I pleaded, I didn't have anybody to talk to! I only had the Big Stupid Idiots, and they did nothing but hurt me! If the only thing you can do is kill me, then do it! Please!]

The Phoenix's voice shakes with raw, previously untapped emotion. [Kill me or save me! I don't care! If I can't live free, then I would rather not live at all! Please, friend! You have to do something! If you leave me here by myself, I'll... I'll... I don't know what I'll do, but I know it'll hurt a million times worse than it did before you came!]

So much anguish strangles the Phoenix's words that my heart begins to ache for the poor artifact. With its female voice, I can't help but imagine Phoebe or Daisy pouring their feelings out to me, begging me to free them from some unimaginable pain.

[...Alright,] I whisper. [I'll help you, Phoenix. I won't let you suffer like this. No matter what, I won't leave here without you.]

[Please. Please...] The Phoenix whimpers. I can almost hear it crying as it pleads for my help. [Just don't leave me here...]

With the Phoenix's tear-filled voice pushing me along, I accelerate my speed and arrive at its orb within seconds. When I land atop it, I quickly speak multiple words of power.

"Inspect. Visualize. Diagram."

A 3D image appears in my Mind Realm, visualizing the Phoenix's artifact. Its composition, materials, and countless other details appear in my mind, allowing Phoebe to manipulate its holographic image with her hands and inspect it from every angle.

"Good lord," Phoebe gasps. "This artifact... it's so complex! How could Camael create something like this? It makes supercomputers appear like children's toys."

Raphael starts to open his mouth, but Phoebe continues, interrupting him. "Ah! My god! Jason, you won't believe what I've discovered!"

"What? What?!" I ask, trying not to yell.

"The Phoenix is exactly that; a biological supercomputer! Its internal structure resembles Marie's laboratory! Don't you remember? Her AI, Umi, possessed thousands of biological components! While the designs differ on the specifics, their general appearances are remarkably similar."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

Phoebe clenches her jaw. "It must mean that, at some point, Marie used Camael's artifacts to improve the function of her supercomputer. Umi must be at least partially based on Camael's artifacts."

"Why don't I feel even a little surprised?" I ask rhetorically. "Never mind that detail. Can I duplicate the Phoenix's orb? Can I download it into an identical artifact?"

Phoebe slowly shakes her head. "I don't think so. Perhaps, if I had a hundred years I could replicate the orb's structure for you. However, we don't have the luxury of time. At best, I can create a simplified orb and use your Mind Realm as a replacement for the orb's biological components."

"Fine. Do it," I say. "Send me the specifications when you finish."

Phoebe smiles. "I'll only need five minutes, love."

Immediately, my wife's fingers transform into a blur as she begins clicking and clacking on a nearby computer console. She peels back several of the orb's layers and manipulates its holographic diagram with the precision of a surgeon. I watch her silently, transfixed by her prowess with technology and other concepts I can't even begin to understand.

Raphael turns to his brothers by the nearby tree and chuckles. "Hehe. This woman had only six years to absorb a fraction of Solomon's knowledge, and look at how much progress she's made. Phoebe is a prodigy, even among her species. Her brain soaks up information like a sponge. That is why humans survived the Energy Wars, while our people did not."

Michael frowns. "Hmph. I can respect the female's brains, but I fail to see how that makes her our equal."

"Nay, not our equal, but our superior," Raphael says, his voice lowering. "Had I a fraction of Phoebe's gifts, I might have seen through the lens of fate and crafted a bright future for angelkind. Sadly, I did not. The results spoke for themselves."

Raphael and the other Archangels watch as Phoebe finishes her calculations. Eventually, she forms a miniaturized version of the Phoenix's orb and opens up its hologram in my Mind Realm, allowing me to scrutinize its contents.

"This marble is the smallest I could shrink the Phoenix's vessel," Phoebe explains. "It's small enough that you could hide it anywhere in your body. However, I specifically designed it to rest within your heart. I don't know if you can borrow the Phoenix's power of resurrection, but if you can, it will provide an extra layer of protection for your most vital organ."

Raphael shakes his head. "Only those attuned with the element of fire may use the Phoenix's rebirthing capabilities. That is why Camael bequeathed a sliver of its power unto Catherine, as she was the most suited to wield the Flame of Creation."

I shrug. "If I can't use the Phoenix's power, that's fine too. I'm not looking to empower myself here, but it would be a nice side benefit. Now, enough talk. If this design is ready, then I'll get started. Phoebe?"

My mind-wife's expression turns solemn. She swallows a gulp and nods. "Yes. It's ready. Go ahead, Jason."

I exhale a breath of turbid air.

"...Alright. Let's do this. **Visualize! Gather! Project! Create!**"

I summon my magic into the area before me, allowing it to form into a projection of the shape Phoebe created in my Mind Realm. Without Solomon's Crown, it takes me several minutes longer than it used to, but still, I manage to create a marble sized-vessel for the Phoenix.

Once I finish, the Phoenix flies closer. [Ooh! What's that? Is that for me? It smells like me!!]

I nod. [Yes. It's your new vessel. I couldn't create a replica of your orb, so instead, I'll use this marble to contain your energy while linking your soul to mine. Are you ready?]

[Yes! Yes!! Do it, do it, do it do it do it!]

The Phoenix bounces twice as fast as before, revealing its intense excitement as it awaits my final step with bated breath.

"Alright. Hoo, boy. Here goes nothing."

I take a few deep breaths and brace myself for what's about to come.

"...**Teleport! Gather! Absorb! Transfer!** Aaaaaaaaargh!"

The moment I speak the fourth word of power, a sensation like lava drips across my skin. It pours into my body like boiling oil dropped onto a sieve, igniting my senses with agony.

"Aaaaah! Gah! Shit! Fuuuuck!"

The pain doubles, triples, and even quintuples. I drop to my knees and fall onto the Container's surface as the Phoenix's power leaves the Container and travels into the new vessel placed next to my heart.

"Aaaaaah! Burns! It burns, oh god!"

My body shivers, shudders, and shakes. I curl into the fetal position and scream incoherently. Minutes, perhaps even hours, pass.

My vision turns blood red. Somewhere, in the distance, Phoebe cries out my name. I lose all sense of reason and direction as my eyes close, perhaps for the last time in my life.

...I fall into darkness.

Part 221: An Unlikely Hero

The world of Maiura, at the Wordsmith's residence.

A woman with the appearance of someone in her late twenties sits on a hand-carved bench in a large courtyard. The dwindling sunlight hints at the arrival of night-time, as the shadows cast from nearby trees stretch and lengthen. Outside the walls of the Wordsmith's manor, terrible and fearsome beasts roar and howl at the moonless sky.

However, the woman does not flinch. She has seen scarier creatures in her lifetime. The small fry aching for her flesh barely register in her eyes as a threat.

Amelia, the Black Queen, once the most feared of all who roamed the Labyrinth, stares blankly at the gate leading out of the Wordsmith's Manor. She leans forward on the bench and rests both of her arms on her bare legs. Wearing only a black T-shirt and skirt, her appearance is far plainer and less elegant than years before, when she brought forth terror to all who opposed her.

Now, she resembles a normal human, not a person who has consumed millions of terrified souls.

Amelia scrunches her toes in the grass anxiously. After a while, she sighs.

"Day sixteen, and Jason still isn't back. What happened to him? Why hasn't he contacted me?"

The young woman glances at a pretty little red ruby ring on her finger. She rubs it three times, but it doesn't glow, even while she wishes it would.

"Jason can't be dead. He can't! He promised me he just needed to visit the Labyrinth for a few days. Oh no... what if the demons ambushed him? What if they captured him, or worse?! No... no! I can't imagine such awful things. Jason is smart. He wouldn't allow himself to get caught, especially after they almost got him last time."

A shiver runs down Amelia's back.

"...After they nearly caught him last time? Oh, devils! What if I'm right? What if Jason didn't tell anyone but me that he was heading into the Labyrinth? I can't just sit here! He needs me!"

Amelia jumps to her feet. She takes a hesitant step toward the walls of the manor, but pauses.

"Jason told me not to leave. If anyone finds out I'm alive, it will cause him problems. If he is alright and I expose my existence, I'll have hurt him for no reason. Ohhh! What's a woman supposed to do at a time like this?!"

Amelia begins pacing back and forth. She runs her fingers through her long, black hair over and over, trying to calm herself down.

"Should I leave? Should I stay? Oh, gosh! I don't know! If Jason is in dire straits, it's worth the risk! If he isn't..."

Suddenly, Amelia stops. She gazes at the waning sun and narrows her eyes. "...If he isn't in trouble, then so be it! I'd rather get him in hot water for reviving me than have him tortured at the hands of those

jerkoff demons!"

Amelia turns away from the gate and heads inside. With her mind made up, she steadies her shaking hands and begins to think.

"Plan. I need a plan. I can't just barrel into the Labyrinth. With the abilities Jason Wordsmithed for me, I can't take on any demon stronger than a Baron, and even then, most Barons will push my body to its limits."

Amelia walks inside the manor. She heads up the lobby's main spiral staircase to the second floor, where she walks past more than a dozen empty rooms. Eventually, she arrives at the master bedroom.

"That's right! Jason gave me that special armor-thingy. He told me I could use it in an emergency. Well, if now doesn't count, then I don't know what does!"

Amelia trots over to a small chest on her dresser. She raps her knuckles on its sides and top eleven times, striking several spots with practiced precision. A hidden compartment pops open, revealing a circular device, one with a dinosaur's head etched into it.

"My hidden T-REX," Amelia mutters. "Jason showed me how to use it once. I hope I haven't forgotten how it works. It's been almost four years..."

The young woman plucks the T-REX out of its hidden compartment, loops its straps around her arms, and fastens them together behind her back. The device's main activator rests against her chest, directly above her bosom, where it fits snug like a glove.

"Next step..." Amelia mutters. "...I have to press the activator button three times."

She takes a few deep breaths to prepare herself, then mashes the T-REX's big red activator button on its front, thrice.

Press. Press. Press.

Suddenly, an explosion of nanites erupts from the T-REX. The nanobots swarm up and down her chest, cover her legs, and jump to her arms. A horrible sense of dread and claustrophobia makes Amelia scream in panic as the microscopic robots weave their way around her body and inevitably reach her face.

"No! Nooo!!"

Suddenly, the world goes dark. The nanites finish devouring their host and settle in together, transforming into a seamless alloy ten times tougher than steel. Just as Amelia's claustrophobia reaches its peak, the nanites engulfing her face become transparent, allowing her to see the world outside.

"CENTURION BATTLESUIT, PROTOTYPE SPECTRE MARK II: ONLINE! HELLO, PILOT CODENAMED 'SEXYGIRL69.' WHAT ARE YOUR ORDERS?"

Centurion's deep, robotic timbre rumbles in Amelia's ear, only adding to her panic. However, before she can take the suit off, Centurion releases a small burst of gas directly into her nostrils.

"ELEVATED ADRENALINE LEVELS DETECTED! PILOT SEXYGIRL69 APPEARS TO BE SUFFERING A PANIC ATTACK. RELEASING NEURAL INHIBITORS TO DECREASE THE

PILOT'S AGITATION. PILOT SEXYGIRL69, ARE YOU FIT FOR DUTY? THIS EXOSUIT REQUIRES AN ANSWER WITHIN SEVEN POINT THREE SECONDS."

Amelia quickly sets on the bed. Centurion's neural inhibitors cause a drastic decrease in her claustrophobia, allowing her to catch her breath. "Y-yes. Sorry, Centurion. I got scared for a moment. I'm... I'm not used to wearing these armored suit-things."

"UNDERSTOOD. THIS PROTOTYPE BATTLESUIT IS SPECIALLY ADAPTED FOR INFILTRATION AND ESPIONAGE. PILOT SEXYGIRL69, PLEASE SET ASIDE ANY WORRIES ABOUT THIS EXOSUIT'S DEFENSIVE CAPABILITIES. IN THE CASE OF AN EMERGENCY, THIS BATTLESUIT IS EQUIPPED WITH AN ADVANCED AUTOPILOT FEATURE. THIS SUIT WILL ENSURE YOUR SURVIVAL, NO MATTER THE COST."

Amelia nods. However, her expression turns dim. "Why... why do you keep calling me... *that*? My name is Amelia. Please stop calling me 'sexy girl.' It's weird."

"UNDERSTOOD. PILOT CONDENAMED 'SEXYGIRL69' WISHES TO CHANGE HER IDENTIFIER CODE. IS THIS COMMAND CORRECT?"

"Yeah," Amelia says. "Just call me Amelia, okay? Don't call me 'sexy girl.' Who the heck told you to call me that, anyway?"

"IDENTIFIER CODENAME ALTERED! THIS BATTLESUIT WILL NOW REFER TO YOU AS PILOT 'AMELIA-OKAY.' REGARDING PILOT AMELIA-OKAY'S QUERY: THIS BATTLESUIT CHANGED YOUR IDENTIFIER AS PER THE ORDERS OF PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR."

Amelia rolls her eyes. "Ugh. That's **so** like Jason. Anyway. Centurion, Jason told me your suit has a bunch of special powers, right? Can you give me a rundown? I need to get past the guard post on Maiura and enter the Labyrinth without anyone seeing me."

"AFFIRMATIVE. ORDERS ACKNOWLEDGED, PILOT AMELIA-OKAY. THIS BATTLESUIT POSSESSES NUMEROUS TECHNICAL UPGRADES OVER THE PREVIOUS SPECTRE-CLASS MK. I EXOSUITS. IN ADDITION TO FIVE MINUTES OF LEVEL THREE STEALTH, THIS UNIT CAN MAINTAIN NEARLY INDEFINITE LENGTHS OF LEVEL TWO STEALTH SO LONG AS THE PILOT DOES NOT CHANGE THEIR POSITION. ADDITIONALLY..."

Centurion begins rattling off a long list of upgrades, which takes the better part of ten minutes. Amelia listens intently, only interrupting Centurion to ask for details regarding certain upgrades.

Finally, Centurion finishes its lecture, allowing Amelia to fall into deep contemplation.

"Paralysis gas dispensers. Poisoned needle launchers. This suit can even adhere to the ceiling and walls. I guess if I need to assassinate someone, the Spectre will do the trick. Still, it feels weird that Jason would create a device with such lethal weaponry. If I'm going to find him, I'll need all the advantages I can get, but this just doesn't sit right with me."

Amelia lowers her head.

"I promised Jason I wouldn't kill anymore. Centurion, please deactivate any weaponry or devices that can inflict lethal damage. If I try to use anything that can kill someone, warn me in advance."

"AFFIRMATIVE. ORDER ACCEPTED, PILOT AMELIA-OKAY. WARNING! DEACTIVATING LEVEL TWO AND THREE ARMAMENTS WILL DECREASE THIS SUIT'S COMBAT CAPABILITIES BY 67.3%. DO YOU STILL INTEND TO CONTINUE WITH THIS OPERATION?"

Amelia nods. "I do."

"AFFIRMATIVE. ORDERS ACCEPTED. USAGE OF CLASSES TWO AND THREE ARMAMENTS WILL REQUIRE A SECONDARY CONFIRMATION CODE. WHAT PASSPHRASE WOULD PILOT AMELIA-OKAY LIKE TO SET AS THE CONFIRMATION CODE?"

"Ugh. How about... I don't know... 'Betrayal?' If I kill anyone, I'll be betraying my promise to Jason. Seems fitting."

"AFFIRMATIVE. ORDERS ACCEPTED. THE NEW PASSPHRASE TO UNLOCK LEVEL TWO AND THREE ARMAMENTS WILL BE 'BETRAYAL.' WHAT ARE YOUR NEXT ORDERS, PILOT AMELIA-OKAY?"

Amelia gently slides off her bed and takes a step toward the door. She pauses in front of a full-body mirror, taking note of her golden-armored appearance. Her faceless helmet gives her an intimidating aura, capable of cowing the meek and frightening the strong.

"My next order? Let's start with my name. Your programming sucks, Centurion. Call me 'Amelia.' Just 'Amelia.' Alright?"

"AFFIRMATIVE. ORDERS ACCEPTED. THIS EXOSUIT WILL ADDRESS YOU AS PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT. IS THIS IDENTIFICATION CODE SATISFACTORY?"

Amelia groans, long and hard. "Ughhh... *fine*. Let's go."

Amelia exits the manor and begins running down the main road leading toward a distant series of cliffs. The path cuts through a dense forest, with fifty-foot trees on both sides of the road. However, thanks to its relatively straight-line, the young woman is still capable of gazing into the distance, where her destination awaits.

With her Wordsmithed body, which puts her near the strength of a typical Demon Baron, coupled with her Spectre exosuit, Amelia achieves a casual running speed of sixty miles an hour. The young woman dashes past countless animals, startling them as they spot the freakish, golden-colored biped stomping through their woodland. More than a few predators shrink into the shadows, avoiding the deadly foe rushing past them. Even the 'stupid' animals know better than to punch above their weight class.

"I swear, Jason must have made this suit's AI as dumb as a rock just to annoy me," Amelia grumbles. Her feet leave deep impressions in the dirt road as she runs due to her armor's weight.

Even as she travels, Amelia's thoughts begin to wander.

I've started to feel incredibly lonely over the past few years. Jason isn't home all that often. We barely get to talk. Without Blaarjiim in my head, the world has become eerily silent. At least I can talk to this Centurion thing. It's not much for conversation, but it's better than nothing.

A strange feeling of emptiness builds in Amelia's chest as she runs. Her thoughts darken further, as ancient, repressed memories worm their way up from her subconscious.

Levvy. I miss you. Life hasn't been the same ever since you left me alone. Why did you have to die?

Tears well up in Amelia's eyes. However, she doesn't slow her pace to wipe them. Instead, she allows them to trickle down her face unhindered.

You told me you would always be there for me. You told me you were too powerful for anyone to separate us. Why did you lie to me? How could you leave me all by myself?! Didn't you know...? Didn't you understand you were the only person I ever truly loved?

Finally, Amelia slows her running, as the sheer cliff leading to the Maiura warpgate appears before her. A massive military base with thirty-foot steel walls looms ahead, serving as an impenetrable obstruction to Maiura's native fauna. Instinctively, even the most fearsome beasts know better than to approach humanity's stronghold.

Amelia finally takes a moment to deactivate her T-REX and wipe her eyes. She snuffles quietly, then hardens her heart.

It doesn't matter anymore. Levvy died. He made me promise never to give into my sorrow. I have to live, even if only to preserve his legacy. I may be a monster, and an irredeemable witch... but I'll never break my promises.

Amelia reactivates her T-REX, then stands up a little straighter. "Centurion. Scan the base. Point out all the life readings you can find."

"AFFIRMATIVE. ORDERS ACCEPTED, PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT. SCANNING BASE NOW. IMPORTANT! CENTURION WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST TAPPING INTO THE LOCAL TRANSMISSION NETWORK TO REVEAL THE POSITIONS OF ALL SOLDIERS AT THE MAIURAN FORWARD COMMAND POST. WOULD YOU LIKE TO INITIATE THIS PLAN?"

Amelia frowns. "If we do that, you'll have to reveal your position to the others here. That's extremely dangerous. I'm trying to take a stealthy approach."

"NEGATIVE. THIS EXOSUIT WAS SPECIALLY MODIFIED BY PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR TO NOT APPEAR ON THE CENTURION MAINFRAME. AS SUCH, THIS EXOSUIT CAN INTERFACE DIRECTLY WITH THE MAIN COMMAND HUB WITHOUT RAISING ANY ALARMS."

Amelia blinks in surprise. "What? Jason... he thought that far ahead? He must have known I might need to escape the manor in the future. Wow, he's smarter than I give him credit for. Alright, Centurion.

Tap into the listening post."

"AFFIRMATIVE. ORDERS ACCEPTED."

Centurion falls silent. After a few moments, Amelia glances down at her suits' shiny, golden exterior. "By the way. Don't you think this color is a little bit attention-grabbing? If we're going for a stealthy approach, I'd rather not look like a miniature sun in the middle of the night."

"AFFIRMATIVE. RECOMMENDATION NOTED, PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT. WOULD YOU LIKE FOR THIS EXOSUIT TO ACTIVATE 'CHAMELEON COLOR COORDINATION MODE?'"

Amelia shrugs. "Sure. If it means people won't be able to see me from space, then that would be a big improvement."

"COMMAND ACCEPTED! ACTIVATING LEVEL 2 STEALTH... NOW."

Suddenly, Amelia's armor loses its shimmering appearance. Instead of becoming pure black, or grey, or any other darkened color, it becomes a mirror of the environment around it, allowing the former Black Witch to become almost invisible amongst her surroundings.

"Oh, wow. Not bad," Amelia murmurs. "I can definitely sneak closer like this. How about that wire-tapping, Centurion? Do you have anything for me?"

The moment Amelia asks, a series of images appears in her helmet's readouts. The layout of Maiura's Forward Command post, along with a couple dozen red dots, reveal the positions of multiple sentries standing guard to watch for intruders.

However, Amelia frowns. "That can't be right. Centurion, I want to know about the positions of everyone in the command post, not just the sentries. Once I scale those walls, I'll have to dodge people on the inside, too."

"AFFIRMATIVE, PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT. THIS EXOSUIT HAS NOTED THE POSITIONS OF ALL PERSONNEL CURRENTLY INSIDE THE FORWARD COMMAND POST'S GROUNDS. THERE ARE ONLY TWENTY-EIGHT LIFEFORMS WITHIN THE DESIGNATED BOUNDARIES. WOULD YOU LIKE CENTURION TO EXPAND ITS SCANS OUTSIDE THE COMMAND POST'S WALLS?"

Amelia's frown deepens. "Only twenty-eight people, all of them mere sentries? That can't be right. Jason told me there are never fewer than four-hundred soldiers inside this base. Where did everyone go?"

"PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT, ACCORDING TO MULTIPLE TRANSMISSIONS THIS EXOSUIT HAS INTERCEPTED, THERE APPEARS TO BE A MILITARY CONFERENCE OF UNKNOWN ORIGINS BEING HELD INSIDE THE LABYRINTH CORE. THE SOLDIERS AT THIS STATION HAVE LEFT ON OFFICIAL ORDERS FROM MILITARY COMMANDER NEIL ADAMS. THIS EXOSUIT HAS A 91% CONFIDENCE THRESHOLD FOR THIS ASSESSMENT."

Amelia's heart skips a beat. "Devils. Neil once told me that only in an emergency would he summon all the troops. It must have something to do with Jason's disappearance!"

Several seconds pass.

The young woman stares silently through her visor's display. She ponders her next move with the utmost caution.

Eventually, Amelia nods her head.

"I'd love to ask Neil if something has happened to Jason. However, I can't appear before anyone else or it will raise all sorts of alarms. Instead, I'll use this chance to slip inside the Core while there aren't any guards around. Centurion, will your invisibility feature work once we pass through the warpgate to the Labyrinth Core?"

Centurion offers an immediate reply. **"AFFIRMATIVE. THE SPECTRE MK. II EXOSUIT POSSESSES HIGHLY ADAPTABLE STEALTH TECHNOLOGY FAR SURPASSING THE MK. I! THIS EXOSUIT WILL NOT SUFFER ANY DISRUPTIONS AS A RESULT OF PASSING THROUGH A QUANTUM TUNNEL."**

"Alright. I'll be counting on you, then. Let's get the hell out of here and find Jason!"

* * *

Amelia darts forward, using the suit's innate chameleon powers to merge into the encroaching darkness like a jaguar stalking prey. She weaves through a field of tall grass, slithering through the gaps with the grace of a jungle snake. Eventually, she arrives at the base of the encampment's thirty-foot walls.

"Centurion. Activate your invisibility."

"COMMAND ACCEPTED, PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT. IMPORTANT! THIS EXOSUIT WILL ONLY BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN ITS PEAK STEALTH CAPABILITIES FOR FIVE MINUTES. INITIATING LEVEL 3 STEALTH... NOW!"

With a slight hum, Amelia's figure disappears from the view of even the most eagle-eyed observer. Her nanites begin to vibrate at speeds beyond human comprehension while constantly shifting their color to match the ambient environment. Amelia seemingly vanishes into thin air, allowing her to leapfrog the wall without being seen.

As Amelia jumps the man-made barrier, she plummets over the other side and lands in a pile of tossed-aside paper, but her impact doesn't make a noise.

"Sound dampening?" Amelia mutters. "Nice."

The young woman darts across the field. She rushes toward the portal, only for her heart to skip a beat as a Harpie in a doctor's uniform steps through.

Shit!

Amelia freezes in place. She stares, wide-eyed, as the bird-like woman casually strolls toward her. However, even when the harpie passes within three feet of Amelia's frozen form, she doesn't bat an eye.

Holy hell! Amelia screams internally. Harpies have excellent vision and smell! If that lady didn't see me, I doubt any mere human will!

After swallowing a few frantic breaths, Amelia darts forward, wincing when Centurion gives her a four-minute countdown timer.

Without hesitation, the young woman steps through Maiura's warpgate, directly into the heart of humanity's military. She arrives inside the Labyrinth Core, where, much like on Maiura, hardly any souls stir. A few guards stand at attention near each of the Warpgates, the entrance to Neil's office, and the giant double-doors leading into the Labyrinth. However, aside from a few scattered monster technicians, the Core appears eerily empty.

Amelia narrows her eyes. *Something terrible must have happened. Neil wouldn't call all of the Core and Maiuran personnel for any ordinary meeting. Jason needs me. I know he does!*

The raven-haired woman hesitates for a moment. She darts toward Neil's office and slithers past the two guards standing outside its entrance. Luckily, thanks to the Spectre's stealth capabilities, they don't notice even the slightest shimmer in the air.

When Amelia enters Neil's office, she grabs a feather and parchment and quickly writes a note for the Commander. It takes her almost two minutes to formulate and jot her thoughts down, but still, she finishes with over a minute left on the Spectre's cloaking timer.

That should do it. If Jason returns and finds out I'm not at the manor, Neil will know where I went. I can trust Neil. Jason told me so.

Amelia shivers slightly, realizing what she's about to do.

I'm going to head into the Labyrinth, now. I haven't set foot there since my death six years ago. If I didn't think Jason was in trouble, I wouldn't dare to do so. Should the Demon Emperors learn of my existence, they'll stop at nothing to kill me.

Amelia sighs. *If an Emperor comes for me, I won't be able to protect myself. My best chance will be to rely on this exosuit and flee. Without it, I'm nothing.*

"PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT, THIS EXOSUIT CAN ONLY MAINTAIN MAXIMUM STEALTH FOR ANOTHER THIRTY SECONDS."

"Right. Let's get a move on, then."

Amelia slips her letter to Neil inside an unmarked envelope, then she sets it under a book on his desk. As she darts away, Amelia smiles.

Even with that pile of paperwork on Neil's desk, there's no way he won't notice someone has entered his room. That man has a nearly eidetic memory.

Amelia darts toward the two giant double doors leading into the Labyrinth. Luckily, they both remain open by a mere three feet, allowing people to enter and exit single-file.

With a hop, skip, and a jump, Amelia leaps through the doorway and lands silently on the other side. She rushes deeper into the Labyrinth, leaving the range of the deadly laser cannons mere seconds before

her invisibility timer runs out.

"PILOT AMELIA-JUST-AMELIA-ALRIGHT, THIS EXOSUIT WILL REQUIRE ANOTHER SEVEN POINT THREE HOURS TO RECHARGE ITS STEALTH CAPACITORS TO FULL. YOU MAY ACCELERATE THIS TIMER BY PLACING THIS EXOSUIT'S CAPACITOR ON A CHARGING TERMINAL AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE."

Amelia shakes her head. "Sorry, but we'll have to make do without maximum stealth for a while, Centurion. Let's get a move on."

As the young woman disappears into the Labyrinth's clutches, she groans audibly. "And would you stop with that Amelia-Not-Amelia nonsense! Devils! Get my name right, you stupid hunk of junk!"

Part 222: Preparing For War

Tarus II, midday.

A crowd of soldiers, 20,000 people deep, stands in a large open area within the warpgate encampment. As humanity's capital world, and the place where one of the Wordsmiths lives, it holds a special spot in every human's heart. While most humans don't originate from Tarus II, and many in fact came from worlds liberated by Hope Hiro and Neil Adams, they all still enjoy the capital world's mild climate.

A large display, nearly fifty feet wide and thirty tall, shows a live video feed of a meeting taking place on an elevated platform not far from Tarus II's warpgate. There, humanity and monsterkind's leaders gather at a table and wait for Neil's signal to begin their discussion.

Phoebe Hiro, Neil Adams, Kar the Sphinx, Belial, and many other top figures take their seats at the Governance Table and wait for the other guests to arrive. Neil sits at the head of the table, with Kar and Blinker on his right-hand side and a human male with a vicious demeanor on his left. Phoebe sits across from him at the opposite end of the table, with Belial and Doctor Fathy on her right-hand side and Hans Wagner on her left. Makoto Ueda sits in the middle, sandwiched between a few other humans and monsters, including a minotaur and a pair of jittery-looking goblins.

Nearly everyone arrives within the first five minutes, but it takes a while longer for the final guest to show up.

Lieutenant Henry, a soldier who has shown great promise among the younger recruits, strides toward the table with beads of sweat visible on his face. "Apologies for my late arrival, Commander Neil. I only received word about this meeting twenty minutes ago."

Neil smiles. "At ease, Lieutenant. You received the notification at the same time as everyone else. Were you at your villa?"

"I was."

"Then do not trouble yourself. You have quite a distance to travel. I am sure you stomped your vehicle's accelerator all the way here."

Henry blushes. "That I did, Commander. Thank you for your understanding."

Without another word, the young man takes a seat close to Neil's side of the table, between Kar and a dark-skinned woman wearing tribal garb. Kar nods at Henry politely. "Young Bull. It is fortunate that you did not miss this meeting."

The dark-skinned woman seated beside Henry stares at him like a hawk. "I suppose *someone* has to show up last, yet still I must ask why it is always *you*."

Henry turns to look at the woman on his right. Unlike the other delegates present, she does not wear a military-issued uniform. Instead, she wears a bra and loincloth formed from animalskins, with fur for padding and support. Painted lines criss-cross her face, drawn on as a symbol of her royal heritage among

her tribe. Her silvery hair hangs in a ponytail behind her head, with several black lines running through it, seemingly at random.

"I'm sorry, Miss Brunhilda," Henry says sheepishly. "I ran here as fast as I could."

"So you claim. I shall retract my fangs," Brunhilda says, while licking her front teeth. "But only this time. The ancient gods have cursed us with bad luck yet again. We haven't time to squabble over petty matters."

"Well spoken," Neil says without a smile. "Yesterday, Kar returned from his voyage to Hell Harbor alongside Jason Hiro. The news he brought back was not as pleasant as we might have liked. I've spent the last thirteen hours drawing up a response to the information he brought us."

Neil's words, along with the others at the table, beam to the soldiers in the encampment's courtyard. They listen with bated breath, wondering for what reason Neil summoned all of humanity and monsterkind's elites.

"I won't sugarcoat anything," Neil begins. "For reasons outside our control, we've learned that Ose, the current leader of demonkind, has declined Jason's offer for peace. According to King Kar, negotiations broke down and Ose sent the Wordsmith scurrying."

Kar grunts. "Heh. *King*. I like the way that word tastes."

"Shush!" Blinker hisses in the lizard's ear. Kar's fairy wife hangs out on his shoulder, listening intently to Neil's speech.

Henry leans forward. "What happened to Mister Hiro? Why isn't he here, along with Hope?"

Neil purses his lips. "An excellent question, and the primary reason I've called today's meeting. For the past two weeks, I've found myself unable to contact Hope. He left the Core to pursue some unknown goal in the Labyrinth, but he didn't follow proper procedure to tell anyone where he went. With Hope's recovery signal offline, I've been unable to locate him, and thus, I can't even send a Retrieval and Rescue team."

Murmurs quickly spread among those at the table. Several Core personnel turn pale at the thought that their all-but-invincible Wordsmith might have perished in a demon ambush.

Brunhilda clicks her tongue. "Tsk. What sort of headstrong fool heads into the depths of the Labyrinth by himself? Does this 'Hope' bear a death-wish? He sounds like a fool to me."

Her words cause sparks of anger to ignite in the eyes of several people present. Neil, however, doesn't even blink. "My apologies, Matriarch Brunhilda. Since you have only recently joined our resistance forces, it seems you are not aware of who, exactly, Jason and Hope are. Allow me to explain."

Brunhilda sits in silence and listens as Neil quickly debriefs her on the powers of the Wordsmiths. However, despite directing his words at the tribeswoman, he also ensures his words transmit through the viewscreen to all the troops listening in the outpost's courtyard. Many of them are new to humanity's resistance forces and thus have yet to learn of the heroes' existences.

After a few minutes, Brunhilda nods. "Ah. I see. I wondered why you kept calling him a 'Wordsmith.' My apologies for my disrespect, Commander Neil. I see now why this 'Hope' would stride into the Labyrinth without fear."

Neil sighs. "Aye. However, even with their incredible magic, neither of the Wordsmiths are invincible. Shortly before he left, a demoness named Vepar ambushed Hope. She nearly captured him, and if it weren't for King Kar's presence, we might have lost him then and there. For him to charge back into the Labyrinth after promising me he wouldn't..."

The Commander clicks his tongue. "...disappointing, to say the least."

Phoebe clears her throat. "Neil. About three hours ago, my Sigil darkened, and I lost my ability to contact Jason. I've tried to message him several dozen times, but he hasn't responded."

Kar's expression darkens. "Hurgh. Turtle told me he wished to spend a few hours investigating Hell Harbor. Beyond that, I do not know what his plans were."

The Commander leans against the table, a look of weariness on his face. "Damn. Both Wordsmiths have fallen off our radar. Going forward, I want everyone in this meeting to assume they have either died or landed in the demon's clutches. If fortune favors us, then perhaps they haven't. However, we must operate on the assumption that our two Heroes will never return, or, even worse, that the demons might use wicked magic to turn the Wordsmiths against us."

Ugly expressions appear on the faces of those present. Phoebe lowers her gaze and steels her face, unwilling to cry.

Belial raises her hand. "Since you brought it up, I thought I should mention that Ose possesses some ability to control the minds of others. Given how Jason entered a meeting with Ose, it is possible she compromised him from the very start."

With a slump in her shoulders, Belial continues. "I only know about Ose's powers from when she was a Baron, and I've not interacted with her since her ascension to Emperor. Most likely, her abilities have long since improved."

Belial concludes by lowering her gaze to the table. "Ose is far from the only demon capable of mind control. Some of the Hidden Emperors are equally adept in the mental arts."

Neil nods. "Kar has mentioned the Hidden Emperors in passing to me before. However, based on the way he described them, it seemed as if they would never willingly follow Diablo's orders, let alone Ose's. Kar, do you think that situation has changed? Are the Hidden Emperors likely to reveal themselves?"

Kar shrugs. "Hurgh. I am sorry, Ox-arms, but I do not know. The Hidden Emperors have not shown their faces in tens of thousands of years. The enmity between them and the primary Hell is unlikely to ever fade."

Neil frowns. "Unlikely? I don't like that word. It implies uncertainty. Succubus, have you any detailed information regarding the Hidden Emperors?"

The Commander glances at Belial, who narrows her eyes in return. "My *name* is Samantha. Use it. And yes, I do. Naturally, I know all of them to varying degrees."

Neil ignores Belial's annoyed reaction. "Good. I want a report on my desk by tomorrow. Give me their names, descriptions of their appearances, and as many details about their powers as you can manage. Without Hope and Jason, our chances of surviving a demonic assault will drop precipitously for every additional Duke and Emperor that shows up."

Belial licks her lips. "Kar is right. Knowing Ose, she will never be capable of commanding a single Hidden Emperor, let alone uniting them. As much as most of them hate women, they *all* despise the leaders of the Primary Hell. They would sooner cut off their own hands than assist Ose."

"That may be well and true," Neil counters, "but I'm readying our troops for war. I need a contingency plan for every possible scenario. As a famous man once said, '*know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never lose a single battle.*' If there is even a one percent chance of some horrific monster appearing during the battle, I want a containment or destruction method available immediately."

Belial leans back in her chair. She flicks her eyes into the distance to avoid Neil's gaze. "I'll write down whatever I can remember."

Neil doesn't thank her. Instead, he returns his attention to the others seated at the table. "Now that we understand the worst-case scenarios, I'd like to present everyone with an overview of our logistics and battle capabilities. Please turn your attention to this screen on my right."

After rising to his feet, Neil strides over to a large viewscreen nearly ten feet wide and four feet tall. He pulls a laser pointer remote from his pocket and presses a button, activating the screen to reveal several maps of Tarus II, Maiura, and a few other planets.

"Right now, looking at our battle capabilities, we have about three million people within the human populace. Additionally, there are more than a million monsters of varying species and even a few thousand demons on our side. However, sixty percent of humanity will be unable to assist us, should war break out. We have many elderly individuals and countless children among our ranks. They will be a prime target for the demons to attack. As such, we will need to ensure their survival if we hope to reign victorious in the event of a war."

Neil smirks. "Luckily, thanks to the Wordsmiths and *Her Majesty*, the Second Emperor, we've almost no sick or injured. Moving our people to a centralized location should be our first priority."

The Commander's sarcasm causes Belial to scowl, but she bites her tongue and keeps quiet. Every time Neil refuses to call Belial by her name, she becomes a little angrier. However, for some reason, she never hauls off and strikes the man.

Henry smiles inwardly. *The Commander might be a fool who has fallen for Hope's slick words, but his heart is in the right place. He treats the traitorous succubus with the disrespect her kind deserves. Even if Miss Oshina wishes for me to execute Neil as a traitor, I cannot help but respect his convictions. If at all possible, I would rather turn the Commander away from the demonic magic of the Wordsmiths and toward the righteous path of us, the unempowered masses.*

The delegates at the table keep silent as Neil aims his laser at a map of Tarus II. "Right now, we stand amidst the warpgate facility on our capital world. Thirty-seven miles to our west, across these lightly forested woodlands, sits one of Tarus II's three vast oceans. Ten miles to the east, Hero City stands atop a two-hundred-foot-tall mountain plateau. It is our great fortune that Bahamut built her city atop such an easily defensible position. The plateau stands nearly fifteen miles wide, with several pyramids to the south, the general hospital at the westernmost edge of the city, and the populace resting within the center."

Neil's words target the foreigners sitting amongst the soldiers, as well as a few of the newest delegates. Brunhilda, the warrior tribeswoman from a recently liberated world, raises her hand. "Given the hospital's position, I worry that it will present a prime target for the demons to attack. It rests on the plateau's edge, nearest the warp-gate. If the demons break through the warpgate, they won't have to travel far to reach our sick and injured."

"You are correct," Neil says, a faint smile on his face. "However, the hospital's position is also close enough for Miss Hiro's emergency teleporters to warp injured soldiers directly from the battlefield to clinical and emergency wards."

"Emergency teleporters?" Brunhilda asks, cocking her head slightly. "I do not understand this term."

Henry turns to her, his neighbor. "Teleporters are special devices that can move people instantly across vast distances. However, I didn't know Miss Hiro had developed such advanced devices for our usage, already."

Phoebe shakes her head. "If it weren't for Kar's warning, I wouldn't dare use them. I've spent the past year and a half trying to develop an emergency rescue system for anyone wearing a T-REX battlesuit. Unfortunately, I couldn't integrate the systems properly into Centurion's mainframe. I only managed to create addon devices that attach to T-REX's and add the functionality, but there are still bugs I haven't worked out."

Several officers glance at each other with looks of relief. *Miss Hiro is once again doing everything she can to protect our lives*, their gazes say.

Neil purses his lips. "Unfortunately, Miss Hiro has only created enough emergency teleportation systems to attach to half of our available exosuits. Anyone with the device will have a strong likelihood of surviving a fatal attack, should the demons reach our planet. Anyone without one, will likely fall."

The commander falls silent for a moment. He sweeps his gaze around the table, meeting the eyes of everyone present.

"I considered equipping our best soldiers with the rescue beacon addon. I even considered equipping our freshest recruits, since they would likely need its services more. In the end, I settled on having Miss Hiro install the devices inside T-REX's at random. Nobody will know who can be rescued; not even me. Act as if you have only one life. Do not enter into foolish engagements or life-threatening situations recklessly. Assume that if you fall, your exosuit will not have a rescue device."

After pausing for emphasis, Neil concludes. "After all. Even if your T-REX does possess a rescue addon, it might fail to activate."

The looks of ease on the faces of those present fade away. Their expressions turn grim as they realize that even if they luck out and obtain a rescue-device-enabled exosuit, it might not activate in their moment of distress.

The 'important' members present might not survive even if humanity wins the war.

Neil returns his gaze to the monitors. "Miss Hiro's environmental shield, which covers the entirety of Hero City, serves many important purposes. Its most critical function lies in blocking demon Warpers from teleporting into the heart of our city. However, they can still easily make landfall outside its barrier to summon an attack force at our flanks. The southern and eastern sides of Hero City are most at risk in that scenario."

Despite her grievances with Neil, Belial still raises her hand to speak. "Warpers do not possess omnipotent teleportation abilities. In order to establish a rift between locations, they must have visited the entry and exit point recently — within the last few months, at a minimum. Some Warpers are more proficient than others and can teleport to places from, say, a year before, but their numbers are few."

Brunhilda raises her hand. "I do not follow, Emperor Samantha. Why tell us this?"

Belial blinks. "Unless a Warper has secretly roamed our borders within the last few months, they will not be able to open a warpgate to our world. However, if the demons break through our warpgate and make landfall on Tarus II, the Warpers will be able to teleport around our defenses and arrive at our flanks. We must prevent my people from breaking past the Core at all costs."

Henry's face twitches. He forces down the anger in his heart as he stares at the succubus with simmering hatred. *'Your people' indeed, bloodskin filth.*

Neil, too, shares nearly identical thoughts to Henry. However, he maintains a neutral expression and merely nods. "Yes. We must avoid losing the Core at all costs. Even if the Warpers don't somehow evade our defenses, we have an equally pressing matter that will endanger our efforts. *Burrowers.*"

He presses a button on his remote, changing the viewscreen to show multiple demon grunts with huge claws, along with a bunch of goblins.

"Miss Hiro's Environmental Shield may protect our capital from the elements and Warpers, but it will do nothing against Burrowers and goblins. While the Goblins will scale our cliffs with ease, the Burrowers will create tunnels under our city to funnel enemy troops into our weakest areas. Should anyone decide to hole up inside Bahamut's pyramids, they will become tombs for those trapped within. Common military tactics of using earthen shelters are little more than suicidal folly when dealing with Burrowers."

"That brings me to my next point," Neil says. He returns to the previous screen with maps and geological data via a click of his remote. "We need to prepare for the worst eventuality. If the demons overrun us, we will need to retreat to Kelkin; this planet's moon. Such a measure will only delay our inevitable extinction. Kelkin is a hostile world with barely enough sustenance for the two thousand

scientists working to empower our military, let alone the rest of us. Luckily, Jason Hiro did come up with a little surprise last year."

Neil aims his laser pointer at the northern edge of Hero City's plateau, where a wide, open field stands. Its barren, rocky surface appears flat and empty.

"Some of you may recall a certain event from six months ago, when Kar and Henry oversaw the setup of multiple chainlink fences to cordon off this section of Hero City from the rest. We never stated the public reason for why nobody could enter that area, but today, I will reveal the reason for our secrecy."

Neil changes the slide once again, revealing an image of a humongous, 1000-foot-long starship with a 300-foot-diameter body. Its circular design looks somewhat like a gigantic blimp, with a smaller blimp attached at its rear; the engine room.

"This ship is called the Covenant. It has enough room inside to house 5,000 humans and monsters comfortably for an indefinite amount of time. However, when packed to capacity, it can fit nearly 20,000 people. It possesses a highly advanced rationer system capable of synthesizing food from sunlight, meaning that so long as the ship orbits a star, it will be capable of feeding its crew of 5,000. However, when packed with 20,000 people, the Covenant can only last 5 years at most due to technical limitations."

Once again, Neil pauses for emphasis.

"...We have ten Covenant ships. At most, we can only rescue 200,000 citizens in the event of a total demonic overrun. I need not say what will happen to those who don't make it aboard."

A muscular, dark-skinned man sitting opposite from Brunhilda, raises his hand. Having said nothing since the meeting started, his action draws the gazes of everyone present. "Commander Neil. How shall you determine who may come aboard the Covenants?"

"Elder Skarde," Neil says, bowing his head politely. "If Tarus II requires a planetary evacuation, we can safely assume the demons will have overrun our troops and our civilian populace, too. It will be every person for themselves at that point. I don't imagine a full 200,000 people will make it offworld alive if our defenses fail."

The massive, muscled man, Elder Skarde, sits with his arms crossed. He stares at Neil with a deep, melancholic look of acceptance. At nearly fifty years old, he has reached the peak of his life and has witnessed many horrors among the demonic raids conducted against his world.

"I see. We should pray we never need to use these starships, then."

Henry raises his hand. "Commander, a question. You say there are ten Covenant ships ready and waiting, but why have I never seen them before? I helped construct those fences, yet there were no ships there even as recently as last month."

Neil nods. "Miss Hiro covered the ships with a 'cloaking net' to hide their existence. Our goal was to prevent any demon spies from learning of our potential escape plan ahead of time."

Henry lowers his eyes to the table. *Miss Oshina told me to warn her about stuff like this. When I get out of the meeting, I'll have to tell her about everything I've learned here today! Even as a lieutenant,*

there's so much I don't know about humanity's capabilities.

Brunhilda raises her hand. "Commander Neil. You've spoken at length about Tarus II. That is well and good, but what of the other alliance worlds? My world does not have the protections yours does. If the demons invade, I am afraid my people will fall before the gods can protect us."

"I am glad you asked," Neil says. Once again, he taps a remote button to return to the map screen. This time, he aims his laser at a map of Maiura. "The situation on Maiura is almost the exact opposite of here on Tarus II. Tarus II's warpgate rests upon an open field with few natural defenses. Hero City stands erected atop a mountain plateau, with the majority of its population capable of hunkering there for defense. However, on Maiura, the Warpgate sits nestled within the bowl-like chasm of a mountain, offering excellent natural fortifications. Meanwhile, Maiura's populace is more spread-out, with small villages and cities here or there. Countless people live within small dwellings in its vast, lush forests."

"If the demons attack Tarus II, we will have plenty of methods to defend its populace," Neil continues. "But if they attack Maiura, Genos, or your world, Feloria, then I cannot say for certain that the results will be anything but catastrophic."

Brunhilda's expression contorts into a mixture of shock and outrage. She jumps out of her chair and shouts at the Commander. "What! Neil, your people came to my world and offered asylum from our slavemasters! You told us you would protect us, and yet now you claim that we will have to die without your help?! What absurdity! If we had known this would happen-"

Neil raises a finger. "What would you have done? Would you have turned us down? I did not anticipate a war without the Wordsmiths supporting us. If even one of them were here, and especially if that one was Hope, I can say with a high degree of confidence that we would drive the demons back again and again. Without them, we will have to rely on ourselves. We will have to show our enemies that we will not falter when they come knocking at our door."

"Maybe so," Brunhilda scowls. "But the Wordsmiths *aren't* here, and now my people are likely to perish, all because I bought into your promises of salvation."

"I promised nothing," Neil says, his expression turning cold. "Do you think our ambitions are a joke? Do you think this coming war is a game? Had we not liberated Feloria, what sort of fate do you think you would be facing now? Would the demons merely bypass you to go for our jugular? No! They would begin systematically weeding out those with the most rebellious thoughts among your people. They would force you into labor camps to mine demonstone, all while ignoring the old treaties. Fighting alongside the rest of humanity, you have a slim chance of survival. Without us, you would only end up suffering a slow, necrotic death."

"Commander Neil speaks the truth," Elder Skarde rumbles. He rests his elbows on the table and folds his hands together to form a resting spot for his chin. "My world would rather die a quick, merciful death than suffer under the whips and whims of the torturous bloodskins."

Skarde's slur causes Belial to shift uncomfortably in her seat. A younger Demon Lord on the other side of Doctor Fathy, likewise, reveals his unease at Elder Skarde's casual slur. However, neither of them voice

their opinions. They keep quiet due to the guilt caused by their fellow demons' actions.

However, Phoebe doesn't. "Elder Skarde. Please. Whatever anger you feel toward those who have harmed you, please keep such crude language out of this discussion."

Elder Skarde turns to look at Phoebe. His hardened expression reveals no emotion, but a hint of contempt boils within his eyes.

"Hmph. As you wish."

The table falls silent for several seconds. Neil clears his throat to begin offering his final thoughts.

"Ahem. In conclusion, we have a difficult fight ahead of us. Our enemies number in the trillions, while we possess only a fraction of their might. In a traditional war, we might not stand a chance. However, we can still survive, and possibly even win, provided we keep our wits about us."

Neil returns to his chair. He points a finger toward the sky while speaking. "An ancient story goes a little something like this: Once upon a time, a small army of three hundred humans needed to defend against a military force more than a thousand times their size. Rather than attempt to face their foes head-on, the brave and intelligent warriors created a chokepoint that forced their enemies to come at them in a steady trickle. In this way, three hundred men held off a million battle-hardened warriors for two days, allowing their populace to escape. Likewise, we must mirror these ancient warriors to create a miracle of our own."

"The demons are innumerable. They are relentless. They will not stop, no matter what. Only by drowning the Labyrinth with their blood will we be able to establish our foothold in this galaxy and prove that we have the right to exist! We have the right to pursue happiness! We have the right to break our chains and regain our freedom! I will not allow the demons to punish us for the sins of our ancestors. I will fight until I draw my last breath, as long as it takes, to ensure I never bow my head to those filthy, murderous, *bloodskin* bastards."

Neil shoots a meaningful look toward Belial.

"Succubus. You claim to be an ally of humanity. We will see if you are all talk, or if you have the will to back up your words."

Belial crosses her arms. She meets Neil's gaze with a look of disgust. "Have you forgotten, Neil? There are no Wordsmiths here. If I wanted humanity enslaved or dead, you wouldn't be able to stop me. If you have something to say... either say it, or shut your mouth. I've proven myself a thousand times over, yet your closed-minded bigotry never fades. In my eyes, you're no different from those I left behind when I came here."

Neil snorts. "Strong words, but your little jabs mean nothing to me."

Without waiting for Belial's reply, Neil turns his gaze toward the others present. The discomfort on their faces at his spat with their beloved healer doesn't faze him in the slightest. "Does anyone have any questions before I wrap this meeting up?"

Brunhilda raises her hand. "Yes. What can I do to ensure my people's survival?"

Neil gestures toward Brunhilda's skimpy clothing. "Miss Hiro will supply your planet with enough exosuits that if the demons do attack, you'll be able to use their enhancements to put up a fight or flee. The demons aren't omnipotent. If your warriors master their T-REX's, they will be capable of fighting with Demon Barons on equal footing. Henry is the perfect example. He slew several wyverns on his own, and his T-REX is the most basic model."

"Chrrup! The most basic model?" Doctor Fathy, the Harpie, asks. "Are there new exosuits available?"

"That's right. Miss Hiro designed several powerful new variants, including one for medical personnel. I don't want you performing field surgery without protection, after all. The nanites will bond to any human or monster's body with ease, so don't worry about losing the functionality in your wings and claws."

Henry perks his ears up. "Commander, how many of these new variants do you have available for us?"

"Not many. Two thousand at most," Neil replies. "The Thundercats and Spectres we have now only perform at twenty percent of their maximum efficiency. Miss Hiro informed me that the Mark II's would perform at close to sixty percent of their maximum output."

Neil turns to smile at Phoebe, but she gives him a cold glare in response. After the way he spoke to Belial, the Wordsmith's wife maintains a frosty demeanor. "Sixty-five percent, *Neil*."

The Commander ignores Phoebe's biting tone. "Well done, as usual, Miss Hiro. We all depend on you for our survival."

Several other leaders around the table raise their hands. They ask Neil various questions, but the contents usually relate more to their specific planets than the war situation as a whole.

Kar turns to look at Henry. "Hurgh. Young Bull. Can you teach me how to use a T-REX?"

Henry smiles at his big, crocodile friend. "Of course, Mister Kar. You've always been there for me. But why do you want one? I thought your scales were stronger than the exosuits?"

"It was my idea!" Blinker yells. She flies off Kar's shoulder to hover between him and Henry. "If the stupid, stinky demons are gonna attack, then I want Kar to get all geared up! An extra layer of protection can't hurt!"

Kar snorts. "I only do what my Butterfly wishes."

Henry sighs. "I wish we had the T-REX's years ago, back when Beelzebub first attacked the Core. Maybe they would have saved Piper's life."

"Piper..." Blinker mutters. "Ah. Your fox friend. I'm sorry you lost him. We've lost a lot of friends to the demons. Kar lost his whole family."

The gigantic reptile flinches at Blinker's words. "Hurgh. I have yet to repay the Battle Brothers for their sins. With any luck, I will meet them in battle."

"I'll be there for you," Henry says, while patting Kar's back. "Anyone who's your enemy is mine, too. We're all in this together."

"That is right," Kar says. "Just like how we must pay back Hotface for killing Piper."

"You said it," Henry grunts.

Across the table, Elder Skarde rises to his feet. "I will recall my people to Tarus II within the hour. If the demons make it inside the Core, my planet will be defenseless to their onslaught. However, on this capital world, we can survive longer and offer extra hands for when the fighting worsens."

Neil smiles. "You speak the words of a wise man. Tarus II will accept all the help we can get."

"I will recall my people as well," Brunhilda says. She nods at Elder Skarde as she speaks. "You have the right idea, brother."

With the meeting concluded, Henry rises to his feet along with the others present. He and Kar head off into the Core, but as they leave, Henry glances back over his shoulder to see Neil sitting at the table, staring at Belial's back. The succubus and Phoebe take their leave, but Neil's gaze doesn't leave until she walks out of his eyesight.

I wonder why the Commander hates Belial, in particular, so much? Henry wonders inwardly.

With a shrug, he returns his focus to Kar.

Not that I care. After all, every bloodskin must die.

Part 223: Insurance

After the conclusion of the Tarus II meeting, the gathered elites spend only a few minutes chatting with one another before taking their leave. Kar and Neil spare a few words, before the reptile king and his wife eventually head off after Phoebe and Belial. Doctor Fathy travels to the Core to deal with some business on Maiura, and Elder Skarde and Brunhilda return to their planets to transfer their populace to Tarus II. Several other alliance leaders mimic them, with everyone sharing the goal of unifying their forces on one centrally defensible planet; the capital world of Tarus II.

However, even after the elites vanish, three people remain.

Neil Adams folds his hands together and rests them on the table. He watches and waits for the participants to disperse, only for his eyes to fall on Makoto Ueda and Hans Wagner, his two closest friends. The Japanese and German man, hailing from the 16th and 20th century, respectively, come from eras before and after Neil's birth. Having endured the pain of 100,000 years of servitude under Bahamut, all three men spent time together carrying out their master's will as shapeshifted monsters.

Hans Wagner wears the same white lab coat as always. His dark, frizzy hair sticks up erratically, giving him a sort of crazed appearance. However, he leans back in his seat calmly and flashes a grin at Neil. "Brother Adams. It is good zat you've decided to stay. I have news to share."

"I expected as much," Neil replies, his tone neutral. "How many nanite bombs have you completed over the last month?"

"Two hundred and twenty, with plenty more on zee way," Hans replies.

Hans and Makoto sit in the middle of the table, off to Neil's left. Makoto closes his eyes and inhales deeply. "Much war, soon to come, Adams-san. I hope you still remember my stance on such matters."

"Naturally," Neil says. "I don't expect you to fight."

"That not what I refer to, Adams-san," Makoto replies, his tone gentle. "Your eagerness to kill come from dark place. Fighting to protect friend very different from drawing blood for revenge. How many demons will you hunt before satisfied?"

Neil lowers his gaze. "As many as it takes. You know better than anyone what I've lost."

"Hoh..." Makoto mutters. "Do I? Maybe so. I lose people, same as you. Whole family. Whole life. Am I sad? Yes. Do I seek retribution? No. Such action only further a cycle of violence."

Makoto continues. "Killing demons never bring family back. Nothing you do will change history. Instead, focus on rebuilding humanity. That what Melia-chan would want."

Neil flinches. "I know what I'm doing, Makoto. Don't act like you know my wife's desires. You never met her."

"Perhaps not," Makoto concedes. "However, why demons come knocking? Because you enter Labyrinth to slaughter them. Your actions, dangerous. Double-sided sword. They make demons hate us."

Now, we face major crisis."

"Dangerous?" Neil retorts. "Naturally. Hope and I have liberated more than a hundred worlds. Thanks to the soldiers in the Core, we've rescued countless slaves from the clutches of our enemies. Killing the slavemasters was a necessary step in helping to prevent further tragedies. What would you have me do? Leave them alive to capture and torture more of our people?"

Neil shakes his head. "I respect your pacifism, Makoto. However, if everyone thought like you, nobody would fight back against their oppressors. Someone has to step up and make the hard calls. We won't beat the demons with hugs and kisses."

"Haah..." Makoto sighs.

The Japanese man plucks the straw hat off his head. He scratches his scalp silently before replying. "You misunderstand, Adams-san. There exist big chasm between man who slaughter and man who blindly forgive. I not mindless pacifist. I always willing to fight if it protect friends and family. However, I refuse to murder and pillage. Such actions only make enemies angry; make them want revenge. Then they repeat my action, make me want revenge back. What then? Endless cycle."

"I understand what you're saying," Neil counters. "You want me to act with restraint. Instead of killing demon slavemasters and brutalizing their corpses, I should only use the minimum amount of force necessary to rescue and protect other humans."

Makoto nods. "Yes. That what I want."

Tarus's military commander chuckles. "You're too naive, Makoto. Such beliefs may have been correct in the old days, when humans fought each other, but today, our only enemies are demons. They respect and fear those stronger than them, and nobody else. If I were to act with restraint, they would think of me as a coward too fearful to shed blood."

Neil continues. "And, since that is the case, I would rather kill as many of the bloodskin bastards as I possibly can. Since they only respect brutality, I must become brutal. Since they only fear those who rule with an iron fist, I will forge mine into a diamond gauntlet of their destruction."

"Demons not so different from humans," Makoto counters. He narrows his eyes meaningfully. "Demons kill and pillage. You kill and pillage. Demons torture humans. You torture demons. How will they change ways when you no better than them?"

"It's not my job to pity and coddle our oppressors," Neil replies. His tone frosts over as he meets Makoto's gaze. "Countless people have tried to make peace with demonkind. Buddha came the closest, but he failed. Confucius tried to reason with the bloodskins, but his words fell on deaf ears."

After a moment, Neil smiles. "Not only those two, but Sun Tzu as well — the man you admire most. If even that man could not defeat his enemies with kindness, who can? I am not even qualified to breathe in the same direction as his legend. Don't you think comparing me to him is an insult to his legacy?"

Makoto falls silent. His eyes lower to a wooden sword hanging at his waist. He doesn't speak for several seconds, but when he does, his tone softens. "You underestimate yourself, Adams-san. Sun Tzu was legend, yes, but he was not a Hero. He was ordinary man, just like you and me. He fought with brain;

he used words to defeat his enemies. Do you remember his wisdom? Pen is mightier than sword, Adams-san. True victory comes not from the sword, but by turning your foes to your side without bloodshed."

"Demons won't listen to reason. They can't," Neil replies. "They're animals. No matter how hard you try, you will never change their nature. They will always be your enemies."

Makoto shakes his head. "I not believe that, Adams-san. Even if your words true, and even if my beliefs wrong, I will always walk path of forgiveness."

After finishing, Makoto rises to his feet. He steps out of his chair and pushes it against the table.

"I will prove you wrong, Adams-san. Someday, you will see that path of sword is weak compared to the way of tongue."

"I doubt that will ever be the case," Neil says, "but as always, I respect your beliefs. If you ever prove me wrong, I will readily admit my defeat."

"Then I will hold you to your word, Adams-san."

Makoto nods at Hans. He leaves the table, allowing silence to fall between Neil and his German colleague.

"Sorry," Neil says. "I didn't mean to go off on a tangent with Makoto. You know how he is."

Hans smirks. "Haha. We are all good friends. Zere is no bad blood between us."

"Indeed. Makoto's beliefs might not be pragmatic, but if all humans and demons were to imitate him, perhaps we might finally find Paradise."

Hans waves Neil's words away. "Bah! Where zere is peace, zere will always be zose who wish to destroy it! I know zat much from experience. Now zen, let us discuss zee recent projects I've completed."

With both men pushing Makoto's concerns to the backs of their minds, they return to business.

Neil shifts his weight against the table to lean on his elbows. "You told me you had two hundred and twenty nanite bombs ready for deployment. Did you encounter any issues with their fabrication?"

"Only Jason's appearance," Hans replies. He flicks his eyes around the nearby area, scanning the rooftops and hill leading down into Tarus II's forward base. With the conference table simply placed in the middle of an outdoor area, it doesn't lend their discussion much privacy. "As I mentioned when we last spoke, zee Wordsmith told me to quit making zee bombs."

"You didn't?"

"Of course not, but I did slow zeir production somewhat. I placed zem in one of zee secret labs where I, alone, would have access."

"Good. You know better than anyone what will happen if we don't have those aces up our sleeves. Not even the Dukes will be able to resist their might. They're an essential weapon against the bloodskin elites."

"Naturally," Hans says. His eyes light up with excitement as he lowers his voice. "By zee way... Neil... I made a breakthrough. I finally completed zee Atlas targeting enhancements. It has a much higher precision, making it capable of striking targets within a two meter radius."

Neil's heart skips a beat. "You succeeded already? You told me you'd need another five years!"

"Aye, but I had a random moment of inspiration recently, due to a thought zat came to me in zee shower. Truly, zee Creator moves in mysterious ways."

Neil cracks a huge grin. "Hans, you sly dog. All that talk about how Phoebe was smarter than you... but you've been holding out on me."

"What can I say?" Hans asks. "German engineering is a zing of beauty."

"Don't sell yourself short. You've accomplished so much, even without Solomon's knowledge. Phoebe is a genius in her own right, but I think if you had the same opportunity to converse with the Knowledge Seeker, you'd easily outpace her."

After a brief pause, Neil clears his throat.

"Ahem. Hans? I do hope you haven't forgotten why I called you here, today."

Hans blinks. The two men stare at each other for half a breath before Hans turns red with embarrassment. "Ach mein gott! I am so stupid! Forgive me, Neil, but I forgot to bring zee glove!"

Neil frowns. "I explicitly requested that you deliver it today. We haven't any time to waste. With the demons on the move, they're bound to attack at any moment. Every second I go without that insurance-"

Hans jumps out of his chair awkwardly, interrupting Neil mid-sentence. "Say no more! Ah, give me just forty minutes! I left zee damn zing in my house."

"Oh? At least it's not on Kelkin. Please retrieve it post-haste. I'll head to my office to wait with bated breath."

Hans shuffles away from the table, an awkward grin on his face. "Yes, yes! Just forty minutes! I will return with zee item soon, Neil!"

After Hans jumps into a nearby vehicle and drives away, Neil sighs.

"It's true what they say. A great man's work is never done."

Neil rises from his seat. He pulls back his sleeve to glance at an old-fashioned watch, one Hope created for him a few years earlier.

"Every minute counts."

Neil nods at several low-ranking officers as they salute him. However, he doesn't stop to chat with his subordinates. He never does.

Instead, Neil strides out of the warpgate toward his office in the corner of the Core's main room. He pauses for a moment to glance at a monitor showing thermal scans of the nearby Labyrinth sections. Not a single life-sign appears on Centurion's sensors.

"Hm."

Neil continues walking. His eyes flick around the room, observing the status of his troops. Very few soldiers stand idly, talking with one another. The vast majority jog around, hustling to get as much work

done as possible before the demons invade.

Good, Neil thinks to himself. That discussion with my fellow alliance leaders had a strong effect on the troops' morale. I can't take any chances with them dozing off on the job. Our survival depends on their readiness.

After walking for a minute, Neil arrives at his office. The two guards stationed outside stiffen and salute while keeping their eyes locked forward. "Commander!"

"At ease. Did anyone drop by while I was at the meeting?"

The soldiers relax their posture. "No, Commander. However, your assistant, Debra, did arrive a few minutes ago. She's waiting for you inside."

"Just the person I wanted to see," Neil says. "Keep your guards up, gentlemen. The demons could attack at any moment."

"Yes, Commander."

Without another word, Neil walks past the soldiers to enter his office. He arrives inside to find all of the lights on, and his assistant resting against his desk. Debra sips from a glass of ice water, but her face flushes red with embarrassment when she notices Neil. "Oh! Sir, my apologies. I didn't expect you here for another forty-two seconds."

Debra sets her drink down and smooths the front of her black pencil-skirt. While Neil takes a seat, she walks over to his desk to pour him a glass of beer. However, Neil raises his palm. "No, not today, Debra. Just coffee. I can't dull my senses with a demon invasion imminent."

Without missing a beat, Debra's hand glides past Neil's favorite beer mug to a plain brown coffee cup. "Of course. I watched your meeting with the alliance members. Are you still unable to contact Hope?"

"We can't even get a sensor ping," Neil says, his voice as tranquil as a lake. "Hope must have traveled deeper into the Labyrinth than ever before. I still haven't a clue why he didn't tell me his destination."

Debra drops three cubes of sugar into Neil's coffee, then adds a hint of nutmeg milk for flavor. "Hope is still a young man, just like Jason. He's matured a lot over the last six years, but you know as well as I that he suffers from an inferiority complex."

Neil stretches out his hand to take his coffee from Debra. After taking a sip, he nods. "I do. I try to maintain it, too. These Wordsmiths are dangerous. After we defeat demonkind, Hope will become more of a liability than an asset."

"Oh?"

Debra leans against Neil's desk. She pulls her straightened, shoulder-length blonde hair forward to fall across her white blouse.

"You always speak as if our victory is a foregone conclusion. What makes you so sure we'll beat the demons? We've already lost once."

Neil smiles. "War is not a simple game of controlling territory, Debra. It's not about the body count on either side, nor who carries the biggest guns. It's a combination of all of those things. Most importantly:

the mindset each side takes into battle."

Neil continues. "Overconfidence can destroy our chances at victory before we even begin. However, fear and doubt will shred our morale. The key is to strike a delicate balance. I must stand firm like a mountain and never waver in front of the troops. So long as they believe me invincible, they will fight to their last breath for humanity's sake."

"Hm. I can't say I understand," Debra says, shaking her head. "Even if everyone fights with all their heart, how can three million humans and one million monsters defeat trillions of demons? Even when humanity had superior numbers and firepower, we still lost."

Neil falls silent. He takes several sips of coffee before resting the mug on his knee. "Without a doubt, numbers and firepower matter in war. However, information will always be the deciding factor when two military powers come to blows. For example, if I did not know about the existence of Burrower demons, I would not be able to combat them until the last minute. Such a mistake would be my undoing. Similarly, for every secret weapon humanity possesses, we will be able to maintain an advantage over our enemies."

This time, Debra is the one who falls silent. Her eyes lose their focus as she gazes past Neil to ponder his words.

Seeing his assistant's confusion, Neil continues. "Debra. Unlike the rest of us, you were Bahamut's personal secretary. She kept you in your human state, and thus, allowed you to witness the end of the Energy Wars. You saw the mistakes our former leaders made. You watched as they conceded to demonic rule, and thus, gave up their ability to fight back. You maintained your humanity for 100,000 years, aided by Bahamut's Sphinx magic. Don't you think that, due to what you've witnessed, you've lost a part of yourself to the ages?"

Debra shakes the fog from her brain. "Sir? I don't follow."

"All humans possess an indelible curiosity, a trembling in our bones to explore the universe and uncover its secrets. We loathe shackles and seek freedom. We want to break the limiters placed upon us by outside forces. Some of those forces come from nature itself; the fundamental laws of the universe. Others come from our enemies, such as the Volgrim and the demons. No matter the source, they seek to hamper and contain our growth, but they will always fail."

"Debra," Neil says, his tone solemn. "you believe that humans are incapable of defeating demonkind not out of malice, nor due to any logical factors like the size of our military, but because Bahamut broke your spirit. She destroyed your creativity; your curiosity. I will tell you this, now: humanity will someday defeat the demons and the Volgrim. The demons cannot kill us, because they rely on us for sustenance. As long as that is true, we will continue to break our chains and fight back. Eventually, we will persevere and reign victorious."

Debra sighs. "I don't know, sir. I want to believe... but no matter how you spin it, I don't see us ever overrunning our oppressors. They outnumber us a thousand to one. What can 'battle spirit' accomplish against such raw, overwhelming numbers? Not to mention how demons like Bael, an indestructible,

invincible warrior, exist. If the demons manage to capture or kill the Wordsmiths, then I worry we won't last one month without them."

Neil polishes off his mug of coffee, then sets it on his desk. A glint appears in his eyes. "Ah, now *that* is an interesting thing worth mentioning, dear assistant. The Wordsmiths are more than fifty percent of the reason I think we'll eventually overcome demonkind. If something happens to our Heroes, then our future certainly does appear bleak."

The Commander raises a single finger. "However, the Heroes, in the end, are only two men. Their godlike power is little more than an accelerant to our growth. Once humanity reaches a critical mass, we will become unstoppable."

Neil pauses.

"Have I ever spoken to you about Kar's mother, Marie?"

Debra raises an eyebrow. "Marie? No. That name does sound human, though."

"Marie is a human, yes," Neil nods. "I won't bore you with the details, but let's just say that she is our key to someday casting aside the power of the Wordsmiths. Her full name is Marie Becker. She was humanity's Supreme Commander during the Energy Wars."

Debra's heart skips a beat. She pulls away from Neil's desk with a look of disbelief in her eyes. "What? Marie Becker?! That's impossible. That woman died 100,000 years ago, back when the Volgrim annihilated Earth!"

"She didn't," Neil replies, his voice as calm as a cloudless sky. "Marie Becker survived. She transformed her body and those of her researchers into android vessels. She has continued working for the Volgrim all this time, doing their dirty work."

"Most importantly," Neil adds, "Marie has become exceptionally powerful. She has created weapons capable of annihilating planets. She possesses a godlike AI with enough computing potential to make Solomon's Crown look like a joke. Do you believe a woman with such aspirations has given up on obtaining her freedom? No. I think not. Marie is the one who can help us unlock humanity's true potential. That is why I say that the Wordsmiths serve as little more than gasoline for humanity's fire. Once we secure Marie's power, we will no longer need the Heroes."

Debra wrings her hands together. "But, sir... how do you know Marie will help us? Has she contacted you in the last six years? Have you spoken to her at all?"

A strange smile spreads across Neil's face. "I haven't. However, I've a feeling that, due to certain upcoming events, Marie will have no choice but to assist us. Kar has spoken about his mother at length. She dotes on him like no other, always telling him her secrets, which he relays to me. I've learned a great deal about what Marie's capabilities, and that knowledge allows me to prepare all manner of uses for her."

"Even if Marie is everything you claim," Debra says, "I don't see how she can help us. She led humanity 100,000 years ago and we lost the war. Won't the same thing happen again?"

"No, it won't. We will succeed this time. Please, Debra. Believe in me, if not Marie. When have I ever failed you?"

Debra lowers her eyes. "In the six years I've known you? Not once, sir."

"That's right. Remember when Bahamut died? You became lost. You had no purpose. I've spent every day since my release from Bahamut's magic plotting and planning to defeat the bloodskins. Do you think I would be so foolish as to overlook Marie's past failures?"

"Of course not, sir," Debra says, her voice low. "I... I just worry that you might... you might..."

"Die? Perhaps. Everyone does eventually," Neil says. "Even the angels. Death is only a precursor to the afterlife. I must leave this existence with enough dignity that the Creator will allow me to see Melia, Barth, and Sierra in the next world. How can I fail when I have drawn so close to my goal?"

"I understand," Debra says, a faint smile on her face. "If you can't succeed, who can? You're the only person I believe in, sir."

Neil and Debra both fall silent. Neil gazes at his assistant's face with a mixture of compassion and nostalgia. Eventually, he sighs.

"Oh, Debra. You remind me of Melia in so many ways. You have the same hair, the same eyes as her. Sometimes, when I look at you, I almost feel as if I never left my old life behind."

Debra blushes. She folds her hands behind her back and smiles. "Sir. If... if it would make you happier, I could speak to Hope. He... he could alter my appearance a little. He could change me into-"

"No," Neil says. He cuts her off without hesitation. "Even if you made yourself look like Melia, and even if you shared her memories, you would never become her. Much like how Hope and Jason are two different people, you mustn't try to mimic others in an attempt to fit in. Do not pity me, for I am not weak. I will endure, just as I always have."

"Sir..."

Neil shakes his head. He clasps his cup's handle and hands it to Debra. "More coffee."

"Um. Yes, of course."

The two of them fall silent as Neil turns his attention to the myriad assortment of papers on his desk. However, before he can examine them in detail, a knocking sound at his doorway pulls his attention away.

"Yes?" Neil asks, turning toward the disturbance. "Who is it?"

"It's Hans Wagner," One of Neil's guards says. "He said you were expecting him."

"Ah, right. Let him in. I had almost forgotten."

Neil smiles as his German friend saunters through the door with a small wooden box in his hand. "Hans. I expect good news."

"Neil! I found zee box faster zan I expected," Hans says, a weird smile on his face. As he steps into Neil's office, his eyes flick to Debra. "Oh! Ah, should I come back later? I did not, ahem... anticipate zat you might have company."

Neil waves Hans's concerns away. "Debra is my closest aide. Anything you have to say to me, you may always say in front of her. Now, show me the device. I've waited long enough."

Debra finishes making Neil's coffee. She turns around to watch as Hans approaches with a small, oaken box. A lock rests on its front, one with a fingerprint scanner.

"Sir? What's that?"

Neil glances at Debra. "Insurance."

Hans presses his finger against the scanner. After a moment, the box releases a faint *clicking* sound. It pops open, revealing a beautiful, satin glove. Its black coloration mixes with finely stitched, golden borders, giving it almost a regal appearance.

Without hesitation, Neil plucks the glove from Hans's box. He slides it onto his hand and flexes his fingers with a smile. "The fit is perfect. How does it function?"

"Zee device does not work as perfectly as I had hoped," Hans says, bowing his head meekly. "I tried to make it capable of discharging multiple times in a row, but zee damned zing would need enormous capacitors for zat to work. However, you will still be able to neutralize one target every half hour, after it recharges."

Neil frowns. "Hm. How long will it stun someone?"

"Five minutes at best," Hans replies.

"That will have to suffice. Thank you, Hans. You may go, now."

"Ah! No problem, Neil. Zees fellow is always ready to help! Haha..."

Hans waves awkwardly at Debra, then shuffles out of the room, leaving the Commander and his assistant alone.

Neil continues to flex his fingers, adapting himself to the feeling of having only one glove on his hand. As he does, Debra leans forward to examine it more closely. "Sir? I don't understand. Why do you call this glove 'insurance?'"

"In uncertain times, the more aces a man has up his sleeve, the more capable he is at dealing with unforeseen situations," Neil says, keeping his words cryptic. "This glove is a weapon, one that will prove harmless to anyone without magical abilities. However, the more powerful they are, the deadlier it becomes."

Debra nods, still uncertain as to what he means. However, she doesn't press further. "I see. Well, before I leave, did you have any errands you wanted me to run?"

Neil nods. He plucks a manilla folder off his desk and hands it to her. "These are the patrol routes I want delivered to the Core personnel. Make sure Units B and C get theirs first. I want everyone working double shifts until the Wordsmiths return or the demons attack."

Debra trades Neil his cup of coffee for the files. "What if neither one happens?"

"We'll have to stay vigilant forever, then," Neil says, without a trace of sarcasm.

"In that case, I will pray for our success against the demons," Debra murmurs.

Neil's assistant takes her leave. As she heads out of his office with the files in hand, she pauses at the doorway.

"Sir. Have you heard from Annette recently?"

Neil nods. "Your sister? She's doing well. I spoke to her a few months ago."

Debra smiles. "Alright. As long as she's happy, so am I. Thank you for keeping in touch on my behalf."

"Anything for you, Debra."

Neil nods goodbye as Debra leaves the room. With a sigh, he takes several sips of his coffee and groans with pleasure.

"Damn. That woman always makes it just the way I like it."

Neil returns his attention to his desk. After polishing off his coffee, he spots an unfamiliar envelope tucked under his Bible.

"Hm? What's this?"

With a frown, Neil snatches the envelope and glances at its front.

Immediately, his eyes narrow.

"Damn. It couldn't be!"

Neil jumps out of his chair and power-walks to his office's entrance. He grabs the shoulder of one of his bodyguards. "Did anyone come here while I was at my meeting earlier?"

The soldier jumps in surprise? "What? No, Commander! Nobody! Only your assistant, Debra!"

Neil gazes into the man's eyes, looking for hints of deception. Eventually, he pulls away and nods. "I see. Never mind. Keep on your guard."

"Y-yes, Commander."

The young soldier shuffles nervously and breathes a sigh of relief as the head of the Core's internal forces strides back inside. Once Neil leaves earshot, he whispers to the other bodyguard, "...I think I peed a little."

Inside his office, Neil tears open the envelope. Its contents prove brief, but alarming.

"...Something always has to go wrong. That stupid woman! She must have borrowed some of Hope's idiocy to stride into the Labyrinth without my permission. Damn!"

Neil's eyes glaze over. He gazes at a painting on the wall while debating his next move.

"I can't spare the manpower to retrieve her. Hopefully, Amelia will manage on her own. If Hope returns and she isn't here... I don't know what he'll do."

"Leave it to a foolish, love-struck woman to throw a wrench in my plans."

Author Notes:

This is Neil Adams.



This is Hans Wagner.



This is Makoto Ueda.



These are all three men.



Part 224: Gressil's Children

Shadows shift. Specters skulk. Within the Labyrinth's recesses, an army stomps the floor, creating thunderous footsteps and shaking Hell's foundations. Despair follows in their wake. Goblins, orcs, skeletons, and a host of other monsters march together while forming orderly ranks. Each species keeps to its own cluster, allowing the most durable among them to take up the forward positions, while the weaker, nimbler ones keep to the rear.

A goblin, one with blackened skin and bright red eyes, plays with a knife while marching. Unique among his species, the charcoal-skinned creature stands out among the greenery of his comrades. As the hallway begins to expand and widen, the goblin chuckles to himself.

"Hehe. Stupid fleshies ain't survivin' til nightfall. Kekeke..."

Hungry, the lone Obsidian Goblin among the advancing army, spreads his lips apart to reveal a vicious, bloodthirsty smile.

"Me want find fleshy girl. Hehe... hold her down... cut skin... kekeke...!"

To Hungry's left, a scrawny, malnourished-looking goblin, draws a little closer. "Hungry big strong! Me think you find best girly for cutting! Keekekeke!"

Hungry stretches to stand on his tip-toes while marching. "We get close, yet? Where big Core at?"

"We still ways away!" The scrawny goblin says. "Why big rush? We find cute girly soon enough!"

"Don't like waiting," Hungry complains. "Stupid orcies blocking path. All me see is orc butts!"

The two goblins grumble and whine, but they don't dare step out of line. With orcs and minotaurs up ahead, and harpies and skeletons at their rear, the goblins know better than to cause a ruckus.

"All halt!" A minotaur up front roars. Tormud Goldenhorn, leader of the Goldenhorn tribe, raises his fist to slow the procession. His warriors and the orcs come to an abrupt stop, forcing the other species in the rear to halt their advance as well. Countless grumbles and complaints come from the back, but Tormud ignores them.

"Hm? Where this place?" Hungry asks.

"Smells familiar... smells scary..." The scrawny goblin replies.

Ignoring military etiquette, Hungry decides he's had enough. He leaps toward the nearest wall and grabs onto it with his specially adapted climbing claws. They tear into the Labyrinth's hardened dirt surface without any resistance, allowing him to scabble toward the ceiling. Once he reaches the top, Hungry twists his head nearly 180 degrees, a feat few other monsters can perform.

"Hm? This place... we went to prison?!"

Hungry's curiosity instantly disappears, replaced instead with a nameless fear. The trembling goblin stares ahead at a long, dimly lit corridor, his eyes narrowing to slits so they can better pierce the darkness.

Several burnt-out torches hang from sconces on the walls, each mounted beside one or more unmarked oaken doors.

Whimpers and wails drift down the corridor, their sources originating from the poor souls trapped within Hell's heartless prison system. The stench of death lingers in the air like a stale slaughterhouse, churning the goblin's stomach. Even for a scavenger like Hungry, the decayed bodies lurking behind many of the prison's doors are far too rancid for his liking.

Boom. Boom.

A sound like thunder begins to rumble in the distance. A pair of demon imps run up to the Minotaurs and Orcs in front of the army while bowing and kowtowing profusely. They babble rapidly at the raid leaders, but Hungry can't make out their squeaky words from such a distance.

After shooting a hurried look behind themselves, the two imps dart down a path to the right, quickly fleeing the horrible creature pursuing them.

As Hungry watches, his expression grows uglier every second. Soon, he manages to make out multiple red dots drawing nearer from the darkness. A demon, standing more than nine-feet-tall, with two heads and four arms, approaches the awaiting army at a pace one might describe as 'leisurely.'

Gressil, the Labyrinth's prison warden, makes his way toward Tormud Goldenhorn. He crosses both pairs of his arms and slows to a stop before the minotaur, barely giving the commander a once-over.

"Tormud."

"Gressil."

The prison warden and minotaur leader greet each other brusquely, not bothering with any pleasantries. Tormud's normally calm and collected appearance loses its luster as beads of sweat drip down the bull's head, soaking his red and gold vest.

"You've prepared your... ahem... children, I presume?" Tormud asks.

"How could I let down my precious little sister?" Gressil asks, without a hint of camaraderie. His cold, lifeless eyes give no indication of love toward the current reigning emperor of demonkind. "She asked. I delivered."

Tormud wipes his sweaty palms on his billowing, Arabian-like pants. "Truly, you are a kind and generous brother."

Gressil narrows his eyes. "Where is Mephisto?"

The moment Gressil voices his question, a faint, ghostlike specter emerges from the wall beside Hungry. The Obsidian Goblin shrieks in fright at Mephisto's unexpected appearance and nearly loses his grip on the ceiling. He leaps to the opposite wall on his left, where he stares at the Duke of Mist with trepidation.

"D-Duke Ghost! You big scare me!"

Mephisto glances at the shivering goblin, then rolls his blood-colored eyes. "Nothing worssse than a coward."

Instead of flying over the heads of the orcs and minotaurs, Mephisto lands on the ground with a *click*. His skinless feet clack against the Labyrinth's floor as he turns his body corporeal. Mephisto pushes through the tightly packed bodies of seven and eight foot behemoths without hesitation.

"Ssstep assside, monsssterssss..."

Several orcs pause to gape at Mephisto with drool in their mouths before remembering how their feet function. Their brain-dead, turtle-like movements makes Mephisto groan.

"Ssstupid, brainless orcsss."

Mephisto hisses like a snake as he speaks. He finally makes his way to the front, where he raises his head to meet Gressil's gaze, some five feet above him.

"Gresssil. Your sssissster tellsss me you've made me a fun toy. How... thoughtful."

Gressil gazes at the Duke of Mist with a strange expression, one resembling a mixture of hatred and disgust. However, no matter the emotions swirling in his mind, Gressil doesn't bother voicing his complaints.

"My children are unruly. Do you have what it takes to control their wild instincts?"

Mephisto rises to his full height of nearly five feet tall. He straightens his posture and tries to look tough, but his skeletal body doesn't nearly come close enough to matching Gressil's dominating demeanor.

"I am the ssstrongesst necromancer who hasss ever lived. I manipulate thousssandsss of ssskeletonsss and undead every day. Do not condessscend to me, *prisson massster*. Know your place."

The orcs and minotaurs stare, wide-eyed, at Mephisto's tiny form. Watching the Duke of Mist confront a demon as intimidating as Gressil sends shivers down their spines. Mephisto's boldness and lack of respect for Gressil makes some of the brighter orcs wonder if the necromancer has a death wish.

"Haha," Gressil laughs coldly. "The strongest necromancer. That's a bold claim, coming from a mere *duke*."

Mephisto bristles at Gressil's taunt. "Implanting sssoulsss into bodiesss isss mere child'sss play. Any fool capable of touching the Nether can ssSummon zombiesss and ssskeletonsss mindlessly. Usssing them to their full potential isss what makesss me sssuperior to *Valac*. That isss why he died ssso many yearsss ago, while I ssstill live."

Gressil's expression contorts as a faint smile appears on his face. "We will see if you have what it takes, *Duke*. One wrong move, and my children will rip apart your cute little army."

Hungry crawls along the wall. He draws a little closer to watch as Gressil motions with his hands and summons a blood-colored marble of mana. The prison warden holds out his palm, allowing the magical bead to hover within Mephisto's reach.

"...Careful," Gressil says, his eyes revealing a hint of menace. "I spent six years honing their killing intent. It's become quite... intense."

Mephisto doesn't hesitate. He snatches the mana orb out of Gressil's hand and begins weaving his own magic into it. "Ksss. Posssture all you wisssh, prissson massster. I wasss the one who ssseized the body of Leviathan, the lassst dragon. Nothing you create will ever compare to the leftover miasssma of- hm?"

Mephisto's eyes flick to the bloody marble hovering between his palms. The Duke of Mist grunts as he tries to forcibly suppress the energy contained within, but his voice becomes strained as he focuses his mind on the task at hand.

"Grgh...! Ksss. Thisss... thisss key isss putting up more of a fight than I expected...!"

Gressil's smile widens. "Haha. Having trouble, *Duke*? Would you like my help?"

"Ssshut your mouth!" Mephisto hisses. He spends another minute pouring his magic into the orb before finally tinting its blood-red color with some of his greyish mana.

"Ksss. That wasss tougher than I expected," Mephisto admits. "But a mere trifle under ordinary circumssstancesss. I could not tap into my mana ass I wissshed... it felt ass if ssssomething wasss suppresssing me."

Gressil's smile disappears.

"Faith's End has that effect on the weak. You still have a long way to go before you can call yourself the 'greatest necromancer.'"

Hungry decides he's seen enough. The little goblin scurries along the wall back to his friends, where he merges back into their ranks seamlessly.

The scrawny goblin picks his nose. "What you see, Hungry? Anything good? Anything fun?"

"Nah, just two demons wavin' their demonhoods around," Hungry says, brushing off his junior's question. "Big bunch of dumb stupids. We gonna move, soon. I bet prison is last stop before we go to Core!"

The goblins chat with one another for a few more minutes. Eventually, Tormud Goldenhorn bellows toward the backlines. "Soldiers, forward! We're going to merge with the main assault force!"

A harpie positioned behind the goblins chirps in annoyance. "Main assault force? I thought *we* were the main assault force. This is supposed to be my chance for guts and glory!"

"Gypsy, you're such a sadist," A second harpie mutters. "Who cares if we go first or second? We'll kill plenty of humans either way."

"Yeah..." Gypsy mutters. "...But I want to see the looks of terror on the humans' faces when we attack. They're going to piss themselves with fear! They won't know what hit them."

"Don't be so sure," The other Harpie replies. "The humans in the Core are scary. Why, they killed Lord Poloron just last month! They have those weird, faceless armor-suits, and the big guns that make loud noises... I don't want to fight them, but mother wouldn't give me a choice."

"Mother does hate cowards," Gypsy replies, a somber look on her face. "But cheer up, sis! Once we start ripping into that juicy human flesh, our troubles will finally disappear."

Both harpies click their beaks at each other, hoping to boost their morale.

The army moves forward at a steady pace and begins stomping through Faith's End, following Gressil as he and Mephisto lead the monsters toward some unknown destination.

The sounds of prisoners crying and begging for release grow louder and louder every minute. Occasionally, Hungry will glance at a door as he hears a man or a woman whimpering and crying.

"Me wonder if there any cute girlyies chained up in here?"

Eventually, the army slows its pace once again, with Gressil and Mephisto having reached their destination. Once everyone comes to a stop, Hungry starts tapping his foot impatiently.

"Jeez! Start, stop, start, stop! Stupid demons always wastin' me precious time! Me gots good grub at home!"

Hungry's friend, the scrawny goblin, merely shrugs nonchalantly. "No big deal. We fight fleshies soon. Who cares if take longer?"

Hungry rolls his eyes. "You too stupid understand, Melter. Me hate wasting time- hm?"

Hungry's gaze flicks toward one of the nearby doors. Unlike all of the others the army has passed so far, this one appears far more heavily fortified, with more than two dozen locks, latches, and bolts preventing its occupant's escape.

Hungry takes a step toward the door. As he does, he notices a wooden plaque hanging on its front, one with a single word scratched onto its surface.

Forbidden.

"Hm? Hehehe... me wonder what inside here?"

Hungry's curiosity makes him walk toward the door. However, his scrawny friend, Melter, grabs his arm. "No touch! This place Gressil's prison. Don't you remember? Kippo came here, made big mess. Now he dead!"

Hungry frowns. "Me just want take a peek..."

"No, dummy! That door locked up real tight! Whatever inside, you no want see. Gressil kill you!"

At the mention of Gressil's name, Hungry's curiosity dims dramatically.

"Eh! You right. Me not stupid enough to touch door. Me go see what Gressil and Mephisto doing instead!"

Melter relaxes noticeably. "Yeah! Me go with you! Standing around too boring."

The goblins once again leap onto the walls and scurry toward the ceiling. Their eyes flick into the distance, where Gressil and a trembling Mephisto stand in front of an open cell. Odd-sounding slurping and chewing noises emanate from inside, along with the sounds of snapping bones and sinew.

Rather than getting closer, both goblins keep their distance. They strain as hard as possible to hear Gressil and Mephisto's words.

"...cute? I made them exceptionally durable," Gressil says. The prison master's tone remains unemotional and distant, as if he's only describing a meal he ate ten years prior. "The humans will find their 'guns' lackluster against my children's bone armor."

Mephisto takes a step back from the doorway. His expression becomes a mixture of disgust and awe as he gazes at whatever lingers within the cell.

"Ksss. Gresssil, you are truly... a nasssty creature."

"Don't flatter me," Gressil growls. "Now, go. Take my children and leave. I've no interest in how you use them."

Gressil turns to walk away. After he walks a few steps, Mephisto calls out to him. "Ksss, wait! Thesse creaturesss... what ssshould I call them?"

Gressil pauses. His dominant head turns to look at Mephisto.

"Why should I care? Name my children whatever you like."

After a slight pause, a glint appears in Gressil's eyes.

"...However. If I had to pick... I'd call them..."

"...the *Gre*z."

Part 225: Stormbringer Begins

Attention: All Core personnel. Demonic activity has been detected in sector 2.

Alert! Threat level has now risen to yellow.

Attention: All Core personnel. Demonic activity has been detected in sectors 2 and 3.

Mobilize immediately. Take your positions at your battle stations. This is not a drill. Execute lockdown procedure Neil Foxtrot Alpha.

Warning! Warning! Demonic attack on sectors 2 and 3 imminent. Threat level has now risen to red. Automatically activating all available Transforming Replicant Exosuits. Hostiles are now approaching the Core's entrance!

* * *

All across the Labyrinth Core, thousands of soldiers leap into action. Monsters, humans, and even the demon defectors who left behind their species. While all of the humans and a large majority of the monsters gear up in their T-REX battlesuits, the demons unable to use battlesuits take to the rear and begin activating magic to prepare themselves for the imminent battle.

Neil Adams, commander of the Core's military, arrives at the center of the room while donning his bright blue-and-red T-REX, a specially modified exosuit equipped with an advanced autonomous battle function. With heavier armor to protect his vital organs, Neil's exosuit affords him more defense than the standard exosuit, but at the cost of speed and mobility.

At his side stands Lieutenant Henry, the highest ranking officer among all of the young recruits. Unlike Neil, his exosuit appears identical to the standard models, with its only distinctive design choice being the three orange arrows on his chest, revealing his military ranking.

The young Lieutenant begins issuing orders immediately, while Neil observes.

"Brace the entrance! Throw down all the support beams you can manage! Johnson, train your squad's guns on the central area! Make sure there's a three-foot gap so the bloodskin bastards can slip through! Funnel them in like we practiced. Ruger, I want your snipers ready to tag anyone who slips past the forward lines! Aim for the Brutes and anyone above the Lord rank!"

Henry flicks his eyes around.

"Where is Kar?! Has anyone seen him?"

"Aye, Lieutenant!" A nearby soldier says. "Kar left to eat about thirty minutes ago! He went to Tarus II!"

"Well, don't just stand there!" Henry shouts. "Recall him immediately! Damn, of all the unlucky moments he could choose to leave..."

Henry flicks his eyes back to the entrance. Already, a distant series of shrieks and clicks begins to draw near the giant double-doors protecting the Core as countless demons and monsters rush toward the

human's encampment.

Warning! Demons have annihilated the defenses in Sectors 2 and 3. The demonic army is now approaching Sector 1. Warning! Threat level has been revised to maximum!

A robotic female voice speaks overhead, her words transmitted through not only a series of speakers embedded in the ceiling, but also the helmets of the exosuit-wearing soldiers.

"Skree! Skreeee!!"

Outside the Core, a series of terrible, monstrous screeches increase in volume and intensity as the horde draws nearer. Sounds of cannonfire tear through the air as the Core's automated lasers begin ripping the horde to shreds, along with a few hundred soldiers stationed outside the doors. In less than a minute, the armored soldiers jump inside, moving as quickly as they can.

One of the newcomers leaps toward Neil and Henry. "Commander!" He yells, as he hits the ground with a heavy *thud*. "Something's not right! The demons approaching us... we couldn't hurt them at all! They're different from what we expected!"

Before Henry can reply, Neil speaks. "Different? In what way?"

"I... I can't explain!" The man says, as his voice begins to tremble. "They had heavy armor all over their bodies, and they looked more like monsters than demons! They-"

"They're here!" A soldier near the doors cries.

Moments later, a tremendous *bang* mirroring the sound of a 500 pound bell crashing into concrete rings out from the double doors. The demonic horde crashes against them with the fury of a hundred hurricanes, smashing both doors open as if their fifty-ton-weight were nothing at all.

"What the hell?!" Henry exclaims. "The doors! Only a Duke could-"

"Get down!" Neil barks. He grabs Henry and yanks him to the ground right as a two-ton steel beam goes flying toward them. It narrowly misses taking them out and instead crashes into the sniper squadron, killing thirteen men and women instantly.

Henry and Neil jump to their feet. They barely give each other a once-over and instead turn their attention toward the cloud of dust and smoke at the entrance.

"How... how could the demons unleash such power?" Henry asks. "Not even Kar can shove the doors open so effortlessly..."

With a cloud of smoke and debris obscuring their vision, the humans nearest the doors try to pick themselves up. They clamber to their feet, ignoring the agonizing injuries dotting their bodies. Despite the exosuits' defensive properties, demonkind's battering-ram attack still manages to kill and wound more than a hundred soldiers.

"SKREEE!"

A terrifyingly high-pitched scream erupts from within the smoke. A moment later, a two-foot tall monster leaps out of the debris. It barrels toward a male marine faster than he can react. The man's

exosuit does nothing to protect him against a mass of fangs and teeth as the creature shreds through his nanite armor like a hot knife through butter.

The marine's comrades spin to face the invader. They unload a hail of bullets at it, only for their shots to ricochet off a hardened dermal carapace enveloping its body.

Angered by the tiny, ticklish pellets, the creature raises its head to screech again, finally giving everyone a good look at its appearance.

Two short, stumpy little legs sit attached to the underside of the monster's long, slug-shaped body. The creature's slender tail presses against the ground, giving it lots of flexibility and movement options, while its triangle-shaped head narrows to an arrow-like point. Knife-shaped teeth stick out of the creature's mouth, making it resemble a miniature shark, while its beady yellow eyes flick toward anything that moves.

Even scarier, two long protrusions stick out of the creature's back. Both of them narrow into powerful bone-spears, resembling the talons of a praying mantis. Thus, the monster can pierce even the thickest armor when impaling its prey.

This creature is none other than one of the *Greze*.

Neil and Henry stare with wide-eyed horror at the monster that has emerged from the smoke. "Mother Mary and Father Joseph," Neil whispers. "What... what is that?"

He doesn't get an answer. The Grez unfurls a pair of thin grasshopper wings from its side and flaps them like a hummingbird. Before anyone can react, it pounces at another soldier and stabs its bone-lances through his chest, spearing him to the ground and ending his life in an instant.

Moments later, the rest of the horde arrives. One hundred more Grez barrel out of the smoke like jaguars stalking prey. They pounce and fly at anything in their path, shrugging off bullets and plasma blasts with ease. In the blink of an eye, the monsters rip apart the Core's well-prepared defenses, sending waves of panic throughout the humans' ranks.

Neil narrows his eyes. *Well played, Ose. You caught me off-guard with these new shock troops. However, you're not the only one with a few tricks up their sleeve.*

The Commander darts away, leaving Henry on his own. The Lieutenant leaps toward the nearest Grez and unsheathes a nanoblade at his waist. He swings the weapon upward, aiming for the monster's fleshy underside. Before it can kill his comrade, Henry impales the abomination's gastrointestinal tract, causing it to shriek in pain. What follows are ten seconds of desperate struggling as Henry dodges the creature's snapping jaws and talons. He keeps it at bay with his sword while ducking and dodging its erratic movements.

After a few seconds of intense combat, Henry yanks out his blade, spins it around, and plunges the pointy end into the monster's eye.

The Grez finally shudders to a stop, its life-force spent.

Henry pants like an exhausted dog. "Gods! How... how could this thing give me more trouble than the average Baron?! It's too ferocious!"

Henry yanks the soldier he just rescued to his feet, then turns his attention toward the other Grez entering the battlefield. With a flick of his eyes, he activates his Commander Frequency, allowing him to transmit a message to everyone on the field.

"Attention, all troops! Do not fight these invaders one-on-one! Tackle them in teams of three or more! Aim for their underbelly and head. Their dermal armor is too strong for our low-caliber munitions to pierce."

Henry continues joining the melee, using his sword to take on the horrible new demon monstrosities all on his own. With humanity's ranks in disarray, the other allied monsters jump in to help pick up the slack.

Several allied harpies fly above the double doors and cling to the Labyrinth's walls with their clawed feet. They clutch the weapons wielded by the fallen sniper platoon and take potshots at any invader they can land a clean shot on. Meanwhile, three minotaurs use their tremendous muscle and bulk to assist their human allies wherever possible.

Thanks to the molding properties of the T-REX's, every allied monster wears armor adapted to their body shapes. The Minotaurs manage to triple their strength, bringing themselves up to the level of an average low-ranking Demon Baron. Even so, they can't fight the enemy monsters one-on-one, given their inability to pierce the monster's carapaces.

* * *

Minutes pass.

Henry, the most talented fighter in the entire Core, manages to solo-kill more than twelve of the invading creatures. Even so, his stamina begins to run on fumes as he hacks, slashes, and stabs the thirteenth invader to death. Gasping for breath, Henry jumps backward to put some distance between himself and Ose's monstrosities.

At that moment, Neil calls out, "Henry. Catch!"

Henry whips his head around just in time to see three baseball-sized metal balls flying at his face. Despite his exhaustion, the young lieutenant raises his arms with practiced swiftness and snatches the devices out of the air. He holds one in each hand, and a third under his right armpit.

"The nanite bombs!" Henry yells. "Just what we needed!"

Henry activates the grenade-like devices by pressing a button on their top, then he lobbs them at the doorway. The moment they strike the Labyrinth's floor, five-foot masses of nanites erupt out of the containment grenades and leap at the nearest Grez, engulfing them like giant squids devouring crabs. The Grez shriek in anger, only for their screams to fall silent as the nanites chew through skin, bone, and armor to eviscerate their weakest points.

Each grenade takes out four to five of the invading monsters at once, slowing their movements and preventing their entry. However, after less than two minutes, the nanites lose their charge and scatter to the wind, becoming little more than inert masses of ash amidst the creature's bodies.

"Damn!" Henry curses. "Give me more, Neil!"

Henry turns to look for his Commander, only to frown. Neil's red and blue battlesuit is nowhere to be seen.

After scanning the Core's gigantic chamber for a split-second, Henry finally locates Commander Adams. Neil holds a giant four-foot-long anti-tank rifle, with a barrel extending more than two feet forward. Thanks to the strength his exosuit gives him, Commander Adams lifts the 100-pound gun as easily as if it were a plastic toy.

Batoom! Batoom!

One shot after another, Neil sends bullets flying with pinpoint precision at the Grez's centers of mass. His bullets rip through their armor and tear out the other side. Each shot kills a Grez without fail, spraying their entrails fifteen feet across the Core.

Slowly but surely, humanity manages to push back the demonic invaders. Ten thousand Core personnel fight back against two hundred of the demons' newest shock troops. Still, the horror the monsters inflicted earlier in the battle leaves severe psychological wounds on the survivors.

Neil's helmet gives him another bullet flight prediction, allowing him to nail a ghoulish monster right as it pounces at one of his Captains. "Their numbers seem to be slowing. Ready yourselves! The main demon attack force is sure to strike soon! They won't give us a moment to regroup."

His words transmit into every exosuit soldier's earpiece. Allied demons sling fire and ice at the invaders, while the Harpies continue sniping all the heads they can locate.

However, despite Neil's warning, several more minutes pass. The monsters terrorizing the Core dwindle in number while slowing to a trickle from outside.

Henry's heart revs to maximum as he slays his thirtieth armored beast. He flicks his eyes around, only to survey the battlefield in confusion. "That's it? Only two hundred of these creatures? Something's not right."

Hardly has Henry voiced his concerns, before a voice speaks from his right. "No! Behind us!"

The young Lieutenant whips his head around, only for a lightning bolt of shock to rip through his body. "Mephisto!"

Behind humanity, from three of their seven available warp-gates, a flood of zombies, skeletons, and other undead monsters come pouring out. Their numbers rapidly increase, as if they were a river breaking free of a dam's constraints.

At the same time, the sounds of even more screeching than ever resound from outside the Core's dual-doors. A flood of monsters, far denser than before, barrels toward the Core at full speed.

The color drains from Henry's face. "That was only the first wave. There are more coming, plus Mephisto's undead! Everyone, fall back! Protect our paths of retreat! Defend the warp-gates!"

Above the battlefield, an aetherial Duke hovers with his head poking out of the ceiling.

Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, grins evilly. His bloodshot eyes glow with an eerie luster as he scrutinizes the battlefield.

"Hehehe... you sssilly humansss... alwaysss underessstimating usss demonssss. That will be your downfall..."

"Now go, my prettiesss... I ssstill need to sssnatch my ultimate prize today. Ossse be damned."

Author Notes:

Expect to see the other models soon!

This is the Standard-issue T-REX.



Part 226: Humanity's Might

From the innermost depths of Hell, a flood of Grez four times bigger than the first wave barrels toward the Labyrinth Core. Behind them, countless orcs, goblins, harpies and skeletons join together to create a balanced array of talents. They rush down the great hallway leading to the Core and leap through the swung-open double doors, only to arrive in the midst of chaos.

Humans, monsters, and demons join hands to fight back the flood of fearsome Grez, each of Gressil's children wielding strength comparable to Demon Barons. The terrifying monsters rip through armor and flesh with their bone-spears, allowing them to skewer anyone daring or foolish enough to block their path.

"Gah!" Henry cries out, as his astoundingly-sharp nanoblade glides along the underside of a leaping Grez, peeling the monster's skin back like a potato. The Grez utters a screech of pain and crashes into an allied female minotaur, its dead body becoming a battering ram. The minotaur roars in anger, but before she can lift the dead Grez off herself and leap to her feet, a second Grez jumps at her from the side and chews her head off with a single bite.

Henry turns to howl at the dead minotaur. "Sheera! No!!"

Despite the agony and fatigue wracking his body, Henry dives toward the Grez that killed his friend and decapitates it with a perfectly aimed swing of his sword. He narrowly pierces the chinks in the monster's armor and leaves it dead in a puddle of bubbling blood.

"Gasp... gasp... my chest, hnngh! Every bone in my body aches..."

While Henry takes a moment to steady himself, Neil's voice transmits into his ear. "Everyone, watch out. A horde of low-level monsters has just arrived in the Core. I'm activating our first trump card in response."

Henry's heart skips a beat. *The automated railguns!*

He raises his eyes to the ceiling, where a flurry of movement reveals the disappearance of cloaking technology, as the Core's roof 'tiles' melt away, revealing more than fifty turret armaments.

"Finally!" Henry roars. "Attacking us will be the last mistake these bastards ever make!!"

Hungry arrives along with the rest of his goblin comrades. As an Obsidian Goblin with skin as hard as demonstone, he assumes the role of their leader, raising his fist to the air. "Kill fleshies! Rip heads off and tear skin! Nyehehehe!"

Despite their diminutive height, the goblin species boasts incredible speed, cockroach-like wall-crawling, and the ability to leap more than thirty times their body length. When coupled with their above-average intellect and burrowing prowess, they become a versatile group of harassers capable of assisting the bulkier monsters.

Hungry and the rest of the goblins leap atop the shoulders of nearby orcs and minotaurs. Despite their makeshift mounts' awkward and clumsy movements, the goblins stand firmly without clenching their toes, all thanks to their remarkable sense of balance.

Boom!

Hungry's mount, the great Minotaur Clan Leader known as Tormud Goldenhorn, stomps his feet and flares his nostrils. The mighty minotaur bellows a warcry, then rushes through a gap in the Grez's flanks with his greataxe raised over his head.

Before him, a human soldier with a nanoblade fights two Grez all by himself. He finishes the first one off with a stab to its head, only to turn and take a step back in surprise when he sees the enemy minotaur barreling toward him.

With a deft hop, the human narrowly avoids the second Grez's bonespears as they lance toward him with deadly intent. He pushes off the nearest one with his hand and leaps at Tormud, intending to meet the clan leader's axe with his sword.

Both combatants swing at each other. However, contrary to the human's expectations, the clan leader arcs his swing slightly to avoid the human's nanoblade. He aims for the exosuit's chest, while allowing Hungry to protect him from the incoming blade.

Hungry's lips curl into a menacing grin. *Four hands better than two! Stupid fleshie!*

Hungry leaps into the sword's path. His body acts like a solid, impenetrable barrier, deflecting the human's sword while allowing Tormud to land a crushing blow against the human's chest.

THUNK!

The human, unprepared for the combination of minotaur and goblin, goes flying backward. He crashes into the ground, bounces, and rolls. He lands at the feet of two other commandos, who cry out in horror. "Henry!"

Hungry, having taken the nanoblade's attack like a champ, plummets to the ground, then lands on his hands and feet like a cat. He springs into the air and repositions himself atop the clan leader's shoulder without missing a beat. "Nyehehe! Nice teamwork, big bull-man!"

Tormud flashes a wicked grin. "Haha. For a king to have the best assistant, truly, I have the Devil's blessing. Once we crush these rebels, I'll make you my most trusted squire!"

Hungry's eyes widen. "Oooh! Squire! That my favorite food!"

Tormud ignores Hungry's silly comment. He charges at Henry and the other two commandos, confident in his upcoming victory.

However, at that moment.

From the ceiling above, a series of *piff* noises resound, each one sounding vaguely like a child spitting gum.

Hm?

Tormud flicks his eyes upward.

Splort.

The minotaur's head evaporates as a four-millimeter piece of shrapnel tears through his skull at fifty times the speed of sound. Even with his resilient body, the minotaur king doesn't get a moment to contemplate his existence.

"Huh? Big boss? Why you- uwah!"

With his head gone, Tormud's body falls forward into the dirt, sending Hungry sprawling. The obsidian goblin faceplants onto the Labyrinth's floor, bewildered at how Tormud could have stumbled over his own feet.

"Stupid clumsy bull-faces! Always tripping over nothing!"

Hungry jumps to his feet. He spots the faceless human soldier Tormud 'killed' rising as well, and frowns. "Huh? Fleshie make live? How? Big axe hit chest!"

Turning around, Hungry starts to open his mouth to question Tormud's skills. At that moment, he finally notices the minotaur's headless body.

"W-what?! Who kill... how?!"

Piff. Piff. Piff.

Bursts of air continue exploding from the ceiling. Silent beacons of death rain from the sky, piercing even the heaviest of demon armor.

"Skreeee?!"

A hundred Grez fall to the human's first trump card. The railguns, developed by Phoebe and perfected by Hans Wagner, demonstrate their power by targeting the strongest monsters among the invaders. When coupled with the Harpie snipers and the practiced movements of the resistance commandos, they manage to kill fifty monsters every time they fire a salvo. The Core's elite warriors synchronize their movements, always managing to step away two seconds before the railguns fire, preventing themselves from getting caught in the crossfire.

"Augh! What's going on?!"

"Filthy fleshbags! Who killed my friend?!"

"You'll regret pissing me off, you damned-"

The last voice falls silent, as its speaker perishes to a metal shard entering their skull.

Waves of fear sweep through the invader's ranks. Even with the power of 800 pseudo-Barons and countless monsters, they can't break the humans' morale.

From the ceiling, Mephisto narrows his eyes. He continues to puppeteer the Grez and undead, making them attack the humans from their front and flanks. However, the resistance forces prove ten times more resilient than he expected. The humans cover each other's backs, while the invaders rush recklessly and

without any teamwork. The gap in skill allows the humans, along with their superior weaponry and exosuits, to push the monster army back time and again.

Mephisto manipulates the mana orb Gressil gave him. He scowls angrily as another fusillade of shrapnel slaughters thirty more of his Grez. "Ksss! I only have a thousssand of Gresssil'sss monssster sssoldierssss! If only their intelligence wasssn't sssso poor, I could more easssily control them!"

Despite their fearsome appearance, the Grez suffer from a lack of brainpower. Born via the corrupted bodies and souls of prisoners, their tortured minds lose all sanity, transforming them into mindless killing machines. Even Mephisto's superior puppeteering only allows him to direct their rage at specific targets. He can't control their individual movements beyond the lowest levels of persuasion.

"The Grez may possesssss sssstrength and defenssse in abundance, but their lack of witsss allowsss the flessshbagsss to overcome them with intelligence. Cursssesss! I thought thesssse monsssterssss would be undefeatable, but they aren't any more valuable than my zombiesss and ghoulsss!"

Mephisto curses his bad fortune. However, even as he does, a sense of satisfaction appears in the back of his mind.

"Hehehe... but sssso what if the humanssss win thisss battle? I am the one who controlsss the River Ssstyx. Our numberssss are endless. Let usss ssssee how long the flessshbagsss hold out, while our assault continuesss... neverending."

Piff. Piff.

Another hailstorm of shrapnel launches from the ceiling, killing fifty additional invaders. The allied Harpies continue to offer supporting fire, sniping from above the double doors at any monster who comes close to killing their friends.

As the demon's forces pour into the Core, Mephisto's eyes flick along the ceiling, where he spots the strange machinery killing his minions.

"...It ssseemsss I mussst dirty my bonesss with thisss mundanity... kekeke..."

With a flash of his eyes, Mephisto skitters across the ceiling like a hellish specter of death. Despite possessing the lowest strength among all the Dukes, he still manages to coil his hands around the nearest railgun and rip its titanium frame apart, piece by piece. With a vicious grin, Mephisto rears back his arm and hurls the one-ton metal embattlement toward a cluster of humans below.

CRASH!

The destroyed railgun crushes ten human soldiers into blood soup, startling the others and causing them to jump back in alarm. They raise their eyes to the ceiling and gape as they witness the Duke of Mist destroying their precious Grez-killing lifesavers.

"One! Two! Three!" Mephisto cackles, as he flits from one railgun to the next. Each time, he hurls their destroyed carcasses toward the densest cluster of humans, summoning pandemonium among their ranks.

Several allied harpies spot Mephisto darting around. They take aim and fire at him with surgical precision, but their bullets pass through his aetherial body without so much as making him flinch.

Mephisto glances at the harpie snipers. "Sso, you wisssh for death, eh?"

Swish!

Mephisto hurls the fourth railgun at the harpies, causing them to chirp in fright and dart away from their perch atop the double doors. The twisted metal machine crashes into where they stood and explodes into a pile of debris, narrowly missing their fleeing forms.

All around the Core, destroyed computer terminals, once used to calculate the vectors of planets for the warpgates, intermingle with the bodies of humans and monsters, along with the twisted wreckage of the fallen railguns. The battlefield shifts as Mephisto's zombies continue swarming from the worlds he prepared prior to the fight. They clamber over the fields of debris and attempt to overwhelm humanity's resistance forces with three times their numbers.

Neil holds firm. He stands next to the Tarus II warpgate, waving his hands and firing off orders to assist his comrades in their struggles. Thanks to his leadership, the battle-hardened commandos continue pushing their enemies back time and time again.

However, despite Neil's fierce courage and his aura of leadership, the human commander begins to sweat under his suit.

Damn. We're only facing the first wave, and already I've lost 300 soldiers. Not since Beelzebub's ambush two years ago have I lost so many brave men and women. Aside from the demon's newest abominations, we've only fought the weakest of their forces. Under ordinary circumstances, we'd crush them without mercy!

Once Mephisto destroys the rest of our railguns, we'll become sitting ducks. I can only imagine how far we'll fall after the other Barons and Dukes appear!

Neil continues to order his troops around. A particularly large zombie squadron rushes the soldiers, soaking up their bullets while allowing a horde of orcs to leap over their heads, but Neil directs his troops into better positions. Humanity takes out that threat with ease.

Meanwhile, Hungry skitters along the walls and chases after the harpie snipers. Thanks to their flying abilities, they manage to dodge Mephisto, but they find themselves unable to shake off the relentless little obsidian goblin snapping at their heels.

"Neil! Chrrrup! Get this little ankle-biter off our tails! We need support up here!"

Neil frowns at their request. *Only one goblin? Ah! An obsidian-type. I missed the little bastard amongst all this chaos.*

Rather than directing manpower toward the lone goblin, Neil flicks his eyes toward the wreckage of a nearby railgun. To his amusement, it still appears mostly functional.

"We'll see how sturdy your skin is, you little wretch."

Neil grabs the mass of metal and swings its big, bulky frame toward Hungry as the goblin pounces at an allied harpie. The harpie tries to dodge, but she doesn't flap her wings quickly enough. Hungry latches onto her armored wing and scratches it over and over. "Fall down, big ugly bird! Fall!!!"

With her balance thrown off, the harpie plummets to the ground below, where she crashes into the Labyrinth floor hard enough to snap her neck. Luckily, her T-REX absorbs 99% of the impact, leaving her only momentarily stunned.

Hungry grabs the Harpie's helmet and tries to yank it off, but with Centurion's nanites bonded at the molecular level, they prove more durable than titanium. His scrawny little arms don't even scratch the exosuit.

Neil smiles as he aims his railgun at the goblin's head.

"God rest your soul, servant of evil."

Piff.

Neil utilizes Centurion's aiming systems to their fullest extent. He fires a piece of shrapnel directly at Hungry's head while chuckling in anticipation of the goblin's imminent demise.

Reality proves crueler than even Neil expected.

The shrapnel strikes Hungry at fifty times the speed of sound. However, instead of bursting the goblin's head like a balloon, the impact merely resembles a watermelon crashing against a titanium barrier. Hungry goes flying from the impact and smashes into the far wall. The little goblin disappears among the sea of incoming monsters, making Neil curse like a sailor.

"Shit! How could that goblin's skin be so resilient?! Even the Grez can't withstand a shot from our railguns!"

Hungry lays on the floor, out of sight, unmoving. The poor little goblin's brains bounce around inside his skull, blinding him with pain. When finally Hungry opens his eyes, his vision appears as a blur of exotic colors, making it difficult to see.

"Uhhhh... me head... uhhhh..."

Hungry gingerly touches a spot above his right ear, where he finds a razor-sharp piece of shrapnel embedded in his skull. Somehow, the railgun's projectile became stuck in his iron-like bones, saving him from an instant death.

However, fresh blood continues to trickle from the wound, making Hungry wince in pain. "Nnngh... mama... mama, me hurt real bad..."

Neil casts aside any thoughts about the obsidian goblin after he doesn't see it get back up and rejoin combat. "I might not have killed it, but I bet that little bastard will be smarting for a while."

His eyes flick to the ceiling, where Mephisto finishes dismantling the final railgun. After casting it to the ground, the Duke of Mist flashes a devilish grin at the blue-and-red human gazing up at him.

"Kekeke. Neil Adamsss... sssuch a wonderful ssspecimen. How unfortunate for you that Ossse will capture you, today. With you in our cussstody, we will sssuppresss the sssecond Wordsssmith. He will not dare to ssstrike usss with you in our clutchesss... hehe..."

Mephisto whispers conspiratorially to himself as he disappears into the ceiling and begins flying through the walls in his ghost form.

"Kss. Where isss Beelzebub? I have done my part to bait out the humanssss' firssst attack. Mussst I do everything by myssself? Wait! Hm? Ohohoho... look who hasss showed up."

Mephisto senses the appearance of a powerful magical aura. He pops his head out from behind the warpgates, where he witnesses a gigantic creature striding up behind Neil.

Neil flinches as a huge, green hand suddenly grabs his shoulder. "Jesus, Kar! Don't scare me like that!"

Kar, the King of All Monsters, flashes a croco-grin. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Ox-arms. I could not bring myself to waste White-Hair's delicious food."

Neil glances at Kar's chest. There, he notices something he's never seen before.

"Kar. You have a T-REX, now?"

"White Hair's present. Butterfly insists that I wear it."

"As do I," Neil says with a nod. "You haven't a clue the horrors we've been facing. The demons brought out a horde of new monsters. Each one was nearly as strong as a Baron."

"Yet you survived, as I predicted," Kar replies. The croco-sphinx presses his T-REX's activation button three times, causing nanites to swarm out of its straps and engulf his body. "And now, I am here. You do not need to worry anymore."

Kar's green skin vanishes as the silver colored metal wraps around him and solidifies, making him resemble mecha-Godzilla, from the classic science fiction movies.

Blinker flies out of the portal behind Kar. She lands on her husband's helmet and sighs. "It's too bad those metal suits won't fit me! I wanna look all cool and badass too, you know!"

The Monster King strides toward the horde of monsters and laughs. "Hurgh. As long as I am around, you will never fear anyone, my dear Butterfly. Watch as your husband easily destroys these weaklings."

Several minotaurs and orcs spot the metal-covered Sphinx as he nonchalantly strolls toward them. Kar's crocodilian mana washes over them, causing instinctual fear to bud in their hearts. Still, they grit their teeth and charge, forcing that nameless terror into the backs of their minds.

Kar sighs. "How unfortunate. You will be the first to die."

The reptile raises his hand into the air. Immediately, the nearest minotaur follows his movements and realizes with a start that he cannot dodge.

"Oh, shit!"

Kar casually swings his palm downward. The movement appears slow and sloppy, yet it carries the formless power of the lizards and the Sphinx.

Slap.

Without even trying, Kar bats the head off the minotaur, transforming it into a deadly projectile. The monster's skull crashes into the orc on his left and explodes in a shower of shrapnel, breaking thirty of the orc's bones.

"Aaargh!"

The orc cries out in pain while falling on his ass. The mere act of speaking triples his agony, causing him to blackout and faint.

The other ten monsters immediately realize how badly they've screwed the pooch. However, they don't have enough time to contemplate their life choices.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

Kar backhands three more orcs and minotaurs, killing or crippling them for the rest of their lives. Within ten seconds, he effortlessly carves his way through the enemy's forces.

"Hurgh. Being king is fun. However, I feel a little guilty picking on such weak losers."

Blinker laughs. "That's 'cause you're such a nice guy! Now, Kar, dear, remember to finish them off! It's not nice to leave these poor guys laying around in pain."

Kar nods. "Hurgh. You are right, as always, Butterfly. Sometimes, I can be so very dense. I will give them a proper burial."

Kar's eyes flash with magical energy. He drops to one knee and slaps his palm against the ground, conjuring his elemental affinity for the earth to grab and pull hundreds of nearby enemies into the dirt. Their eyes widen in terror as the Labyrinth's floor opens up to swallow them whole.

"No! Noooo!!!"

Kar sighs as he observes numerous goblins, minotaurs, and orcs falling into the floor. "This is what happens when you step onto my turf, little ones. Sadly, you will not live long enough to take my lesson to heart."

A minute later, half of the enemy forces disappear, leaving the others to sweat bullets as they gaze at the monster king.

"He's too powerful!" A minotaur exclaims.

"What're you morons standin' around for?" Hungry jeers, his vision having spottily returned. "Make a run for it!!"

The same thought crosses the minds of every enemy monster; all except for the mindless, fearless Grez. Two thousand enemy monsters turn to make for the exit, only to freeze in place as they sense a second, equally powerful mana signature traveling toward the Core.

"No way! Finally, he made it!" Hungry yells. "It's... it's Beelzebub!"

"It's Beelzebub? We're saved!"

"Haha! And you guys were gonna run?! Not me! Nope!"

The monsters who were about to flee regain their courage. They turn to face the Monster King, all while wearing looks of outrage.

"Traitor Kar! Now you're gonna die!!"

Kar's gaze travels past the monsters to the blindingly bright light flying toward the Core in the distance.

"Hurgh. *Hotface*. Finally, I will repay you for all the innocents you've butchered."

Part 227: Ose's Plan

Hundreds of monsters funnel through the fifty-foot-wide corridor leading to the Labyrinth Core. Orcs, Grez, and Minotaurs all bellow warcries, while their accompanying allies, the Harpies and Goblins, chirp and chitter amongst themselves.

Behind all of them, and behind the walls of skeletons making up the backline, a Demon Emperor and Duke stand idly, their attention on more pressing matters.

Beelzebub, the Duke of Inferno, simmers in silence, occasionally exhaling flames through his nostrils. As he watches another legion of monsters march toward the Core, he flicks his gaze toward Ose.

The Emperor of Infiltration stands with her shoulders and posture slumped. Her head hangs forward, while her eyes remain closed. She uses her Astral Form to observe the situation in the Core, while Beelzebub taps his foot impatiently.

What's taking this she-devil so long? Beelzebub wonders. *It can't be that hard, scouting out a bunch of humans. Ose has already watched them in secret for the last three days.*

Beelzebub glances down the corridor, toward the Core over a mile away, then returns his eyes to the slumped Emperor.

The moment his gaze falls on Ose's motionless form, her eyes open. She quickly raises her head, straightens her posture, and sweeps a few strands of white hair out of her face.

"As expected. The Grez aren't all my brother claimed. They have some serious flaws."

"Wonderful," Beelzebub grumbles. The Duke of Inferno crosses his arms. "Now, is it time? I've been waiting for fifteen minutes!"

Ose sighs. "I told you I'd make you part of the vanguard, Beelzebub. I'll keep my promise. Just have a little patience."

"Patience?" Beelzebub hisses. "Mephisto is your first attacker, not me! Why must I stand here and watch while he hogs all the glory?!"

Ose rolls her eyes. "*Men*. I already told you why you have to wait. Do you think I'm punishing you, Beelzebub?"

"I do!" Beelzebub exclaims. "This is all because I questioned you in front of the Wordsmith. Was my apology not good enough? Shall I curtsy, too?"

"You didn't apologize at all," Ose retorts. "and, in any case, my keeping you here has nothing to do with that incident. It's not as if any other demons witnessed you undermining my authority, so why should I need to make an example of you? No, instead, I'm keeping you here because... something is *wrong* with the human's resistance."

Beelzebub's protests come to a halt as he raises an eyebrow. "Oh? In what way?"

"Jason hasn't shown up at the battlefield, and neither has Hope. I need to capture both Wordsmiths today, yet neither of them have revealed their faces. From what I gathered over the last three days of reconnaissance, Hope and Jason both headed into the Labyrinth several weeks ago. Hope mysteriously disappeared, while Jason left Hell Harbor and traveled to space."

Ose continues. "My Astral Form isn't omniscient. Since my ascension to Emperor, I have increased the range I can leave my body by a factor of ten thousand. However. I still can't travel to space, nor can I observe multiple places at once. I haven't a clue where either of the blasted Wordsmiths went, but I *do* know that they never returned to the Core."

"I don't understand," Beelzebub says. "...Isn't that good news? Without the Wordsmiths, humanity will fall. How can the resistance forces stop us without their reality-bending Hero there to save them?"

"They can't," Ose admits. "but they can certainly wound us and leave a mark on our ranks. The weapons the humans have crafted are nearly as fearsome as those they built during the Energy Wars. Nevertheless, winning this war will be impossible for them as they are now, provided the Wordsmiths don't return."

Beelzebub flinches when a violent explosion detonates down the hallway, toward the direction of the Core. However, Ose pays it no mind.

"You must be worried that the Wordsmiths will go into hiding and consolidate their power," Beelzebub says, after returning his attention to the Third Emperor. "If we defeat humanity today, the Wordsmiths will, most likely, go into hiding and escape our grasp."

"Indeed. As I've said before, my plans go further than merely capturing the Wordsmiths and defeating their resistance. That is why I need you to stay behind, if only for a few minutes longer."

The Duke of Inferno stretches hard, popping his back as he releases a big yawn. "Hnngh, fine. Fine! But if you don't give the order soon, I'm going to fly in there and start lobbing fireballs, come Hell or high water. I'm sick of standing around and twiddling my thumbs."

"Noted."

Ose watches for half a minute as another thousand orcs and skeletons continue charging toward the Core. Eventually, she and Beelzebub both turn to look further upstream, where a series of demonic mana signatures emerge from the Labyrinth's depths.

"Took them seventeen minutes longer than I'd prefer," Ose mutters. "But like my mother used to say, better late than never."

Moments later, several Baron-ranked demons come rushing out of the shadows. They screech to a halt before Ose and Beelzebub while offering only a respectful tip of their heads as greeting.

Laharl, the Baron of Misery, flips her blood-red cape back and cackles madly. "Well?! Is everyone else ready to rip these fleshbags to pieces? I've been dying for some fresh, muscled meat!"

Mara, the Baron of Games, twiddles several magical cards between her fingers. "My sister is on her way. Ying-Ying wanted to make sure her nails were perfect before she joined us."

"I won't allow any mishaps," Ose snaps. "Your sister is our best Warper. She's crucial to my plans. Do what you must to get her here, and don't delay."

Mara frowns. "Fine."

Despite the Baron of Games' attitude, Ose ignores her to move onto other things. "Laharl. I want you by my side at all times. Our mission is to capture several of the high-ranking human commanders. Right now, I don't know where the Wordsmiths are. If they return, I want bargaining chips."

This time, it's Laharl whose expression deflates. "Whaaat?! C'mon, why waste my time with capturing a bunch of weaklings? I want to get out there and fight! That Kar fellow has some fat muscles; he's just my type!"

"You can have play around *later*," Ose growls. "Devil's sake. All of you! Start acting like proper, high-ranking demons! This is no time for fun and games. All of our asses are on the line. We have missions to complete, and I want them done properly. Understood?"

From behind Laharl and Mara, a different Baron steps forward.

Orias, Baron of the Stars, raises his voice, grabbing everyone's attention. "Forgive my interruption, Ose, but I don't understand. What do you mean 'our asses are on the line'? Are you saying there's a chance we'll lose today?"

"Not exactly," Ose says, her tone curt. "However, if we don't finish Operation Stormbringer *properly*, the consequences will be dire. As mere Barons, you're not privy to the information I'm withholding. It's limited strictly to Dukes and Emperors only."

"That means me," Beelzebub says, with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Maybe if you pledge yourselves to be my slaves, I'll let you in on this secr- ulp!"

Beelzebub swallows his words when Ose shoots him a nasty glare. "What?! It's a joke. Devils, you're ten times more uptight than usual."

"You're all about to find out what sort of mood I'm in, if anyone here interrupts me again. Now, listen carefully. I'm not going to repeat myself."

Ose quickly begins speaking. Occasionally, the sounds of screams or monster battlecries in the distance echo from the Labyrinth Core, but the lower ranked demons listen to Ose without interruption. Something about her mood spooks them, causing them to wonder what could make her so fearful.

"...Got it? Bael, Artorias, and the Battle Brothers will arrive last. They're too brutal for my liking, so I want them to help mop up the survivors. Most importantly, I don't want them waving their damned demonhoods around, breaking things before I get a chance to search them."

For once, Laharl tones down her frantic energy and lowers her voice. "This 'Trifancium,' you mentioned... what is it? Why are you so dead-set on finding it?"

Ose coughs into her fist. "It's an extremely precious natural resource, one which Bahamut's slaves used to mine before the humans killed her. Let's just say the applications are too profound for any demon to understand, but its value is incalculable. The Tarus II mines contain one hardened drop of Trifrancium

for every 500 tons of bedrock the miners excavate. The planet possesses abundant reserves of the mineral, which is why we cannot allow the humans to occupy it any longer. The problem is, I have yet to locate where Neil has hidden the reserves he stole from Bahamut."

While Ose finishes explaining the plan, Beelzebub retreats into his thoughts.

Trifrancium. The Overlords need it for their warp travel. I don't understand much about the galaxy outside the Labyrinth, but whatever this mineral is, Ose must believe that retrieving it will put us back in the Overlord's good graces. I fail to see how tiny rocks will be our salvation, but perhaps that's why Ose is Emperor, and I'm not.

For once, Beelzebub's thoughts toward Ose turn appreciative.

*I like to think of myself as intelligent, but compared to Ose, I'm nothing special. Still, it might not always stay that way. Given time, I'll surely outperform her in intellect. It will just take me some time to catch up. She **does** have 90,000 years on me, after all.*

"Alright," Ose concludes. "These are the teams. Beelzebub will charge in first and create chaos among the humans. Laharl, you'll come with me. I need your keen senses and combat abilities to capture and interrogate the human leaders, especially Neil Adams. Orias, you will protect Mara and Ying-Ying to get them to the designated positions. The more portals we can open around the humans' capital city, the better."

"Yeah, while Bael, Artorias, and the Battle Brothers will cover our asses, right, right..." Laharl mutters. "Are we done? Can we finally get to work? Once I help you find those special rocks, I'm gonna rip some heads off."

Ose's gaze turns distant. A look of annoyance washes across her face, only to be replaced by despair.

Beelzebub stifles a smirk. *Ose hates talking to demons dumber than her. I know how she feels.*

"Beelzebub, now is your moment to shine," Ose says, turning away from the Barons. "You and Mephisto need to tear the Core apart, piece by piece. Break the human's morale and shatter their spirits as quickly as you can."

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I'm an undying god compared to the rats hiding in the Core," Beelzebub laughs. "I won't need five minutes to clear out the humans' infestation."

Beelzebub ignites fire underneath his boots. Just before he leaves, Ose grabs his arm. "One last thing, before you go."

The Duke smiles. "Haha. What's the matter? Do you want a goodbye kiss?"

Ose doesn't echo his grin. "No. The humans originally planned to blow up the Core if they were in danger of losing it. Doing so would naturally destroy the warp-gates and bring an end to Stormbringer."

Beelzebub's smile disappears. "Can you stop them?"

"Of course. However, that isn't my point. Be careful. You've fought the humans dozens of times. They have a way of developing technology that can counter even the deadliest Demon Emperor. If they're

willing to destroy the Core to protect their species, you can bet they'll do anything to bring you down, especially after all their comrades you've killed."

"Haha," Beelzebub laughs. "Is that all? Color me unimpressed. If the humans had the power to stop me, they'd have done so already. Certainly, Hope would have done so. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a date with some human barbecue."

Without waiting for the go-ahead, Beelzebub blasts off and starts rocketing down the corridor, leaving Ose and the Barons behind.

Ose exhales a breath of turbid air.

"That Duke is a handful."

Mara and Laharl share a meaningful glance.

"I don't like him one bit," Mara says. "He's too headstrong, he doesn't use his brain enough, and he disrespects everyone."

"Yeah," Laharl adds. "Plus, he doesn't got any muscles. Gross."

Ose closes her eyes. "Protect my body while I scout the Core. I'll give all of you the go-ahead when the time is right. Trust me... you don't want to step inside while Beelzebub is melting steel."

Mara leans against the wall. "Fine by me. I'll just wait for Ying-Ying."

Orias mumbles something under his breath, then he takes a cross-legged seat on the ground before levitating in the air.

All of the demons wait for the Duke of Inferno to complete his initial mission, but little do they know that even the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

Part 228: Casual Domination

Kar, the Monster King, slaps aside a dozen minotaurs and orcs with the ease of a father spanking his children. The morale of the invading monsters plummets as they realize they can't hope to deal with just the one, singular crocodile in their midst.

However, their sentiments reverse as the Duke of Inferno's mana rushes toward them at 200 miles an hour.

"Beelzebub... Beelzebub is coming! We're saved!"

"Traitorous Monster King! Today, your treachery ends!!"

Enemy harpies screech angrily at Kar while pelting him with arrows, all of which bounce off Kar's armored T-REX. Kar doesn't even flinch. The last crocodile stands casually, with his arms crossed, and watches as the fire-flinger who slaughtered his comrades rockets toward the Core's entrance.

"Hurgh. Robot suit. Activate the anti-Hotface measures."

"COMMAND ACCEPTED, PILOT 'BIG DADDY.' ADVANCED FLAME RETARDANT SUBROUTINES ARE NOW IN EFFECT. HEAT DISSIPATION HAS REACHED THE MAXIMUM. LEVEL 4 WEAPONRY IS AUTHORIZED!"

Kar chuckles. "White-Hair. You've picked the perfect nickname for my ID. Hurgh. That is why Turtle chose you as his mate."

The Monster King doesn't move as the fireball-wreathed Duke rushes toward him from the distance. Beelzebub screeches to a halt at the Core's double-doors by unleashing a wave of flames from his palms. The sudden reversal causes more than 50 G's to press against his body for a split second, but he doesn't feel the impact at all.

"Hahaha! Perfect! We meet again, you slithering slug!" Beelzebub cackles. "After I flay the skin from your bones, I'll have my tailors turn you into a leather suit!"

Beelzebub's taunts boil the blood of the humans while invigorating the invaders morale. Immediately, the enemy and allied monsters turn to blows, joining the still-rampaging Grez to reinforce their ranks.

Kar, however, merely cocks his head.

"Hurgh. Strange. To flay the skin from my bones, you must first defeat me. Since you cannot accomplish such a feat, I can only assume you have lost your mind. How sad. The Hotface who once defeated me has degenerated into a drooling mess! I do not like to pick on the weak and stupid, but for you, I will make an exception."

Beelzebub's eyes twitch. "Such bravado, coming from the King of Monsters. Run your mouth all you like, little lizard, but today, I will drag you to the afterlife!"

The Duke of Inferno claps his palms together, sending a spherical blast of fire in every direction. Dozens of his allied monsters scream in pain as the 600-degree heat surges across their bodies, searing

their exposed skin where it appears.

"Aargh! Beelzebub, you bastard! We're on your side!"

"What the hell are you doing?! You cooked my brother alive! Heartless Duke!"

Beelzebub ignores the pleas of his lessers. He grins with satisfaction as the wave of fire sweeps across Kar's armor, forcing Blinker to take cover behind her husband's mountain-like form. "Ack! Kar! Don't just let that prick burn us all to bits!"

Kar watches without moving as the wave of fire finishes surging throughout the chamber. However, aside from the cooked skin of Beelzebub's allies, Kar's comrades take negligible damage thanks to their T-REX's.

"Hurgh. Was that your opening move? How sad. Let us see how you deal with mine."

Without any preparation, Kar leaps toward Beelzebub like a jumping spider. The sudden movement surprises the Duke of Inferno, who never expected such agility from his formerly slow and clumsy enemy.

"Don't think I'll let you get close!" Beelzebub roars. He aims both of his palms at the rapidly approaching Monster King, sending a blazing firefall at Kar's chest. "Get back on the ground, you little-augh!"

Kar ignores Beelzebub's magic. He rushes through the Duke's infernal flames without slowing down and crashes into Beelzebub at a hundred miles an hour, making Beelzebub fly backward and slam against the ceiling with Kar's fist rammed through his stomach. The Monster King grins wickedly behind his faceless mask as he twitches his bloody, armored fingers.

"I know this won't hurt you, punk," Kar chuckles. "But damn, does it feel good."

Beelzebub summons two soccer-ball-sized lumps of fire in his palms, each one blazing at over a thousand degrees. "So does this!!"

The Duke swings both of his hands toward the Sphinx's exposed sides.

Boom!

A blast of heat erupts from the nanite armor protecting Kar's body. The Monster King goes flying backward, where he crashes into a pair of orcs on the ground, killing both of them instantly. The poor bastards don't get even a second's reprieve before their corpses turn into meat-paste.

"Hurgh."

Kar grunts as his scorching-hot armor cooks and boils the orcs' remains, surrounding him with a dense, bloody mist.

Beelzebub regenerates the hole in his gut instantly. "Haha. Was that all, Monster King?"

Suddenly, Kar appears from out of nowhere and leaps at Beelzebub from behind. "Never underestimate the King, Hotface!"

"What?!" Beelzebub shouts in shock. He whirls to face his opponent and lobs seven fireballs at Kar, only for Kar's body to disappear.

Immediately, Beelzebub realizes what happened. "Stupid, worthless fairy magic! Damn your illusions!"

The Duke of Inferno yanks his gaze to the ground below, where Kar's body no longer sits. The cooked corpses of the two orcs simmer and cool, but no matter where his eyes scan, Beelzebub can't locate the Sphinx.

I hate that damned fairy, Beelzebub thinks to himself. Even when I expect her illusions, I still have to defend against them.

* * *

While the Duke of Inferno battles his crocodile opponent, Mephisto keeps to the shadows, where he reaches out and touches the bodies of dead monsters and humans alike, converting them into ghouls, ghosts, and skeletons for his wicked purposes.

"Kekeke... no matter who winsss or lossseesss today, it isss I who will reap the rewardsss of thissss battlefield."

Mephisto darts around underground, beneath the feet of the allies and invaders as they fight one another. Each time someone falls, Mephisto tags their body with his magic and cackles cruelly to himself.

"Yesss... yesss... good. Die fassster, sso that I may increassse my power... kekeke!"

* * *

Neil watches Kar's battle from afar. He stands directly in front of the warpgate to Tarus II and issues commands to his soldiers, ensuring no gaps appear in their defenses.

"Only seven more of the armored-type monsters remain. Keep on your toes. Unit 7, watch your flank. Three minotaurs with obsidian axes are approaching you from your 3 o'clock. Henry, are you still breathing? Give me a status report."

Henry's voice crackles in Neil's earpiece. "I'm alive, Commander. Tired, but alive. I'm trying to conserve my energy as we fight. At the rate the monsters are funneling in, we'll probably be overwhelmed within the next twenty-four hours."

Neil narrows his eyes. "Leave the strategizing to me, Lieutenant. Just keep hacking our enemies apart. We only need to stall for time until Hope or Jason arrive."

"But, sir? What if neither of them returns?"

Henry stabs his sword down and impales a minotaur, ending the monster's life with a single blow. Neil purses his lips. "We may lose the Core, and we may lose our allied worlds, but we won't lose Tarus II. I'll make sure of that myself."

The young Lieutenant falls silent, allowing Neil to return to directing the other soldiers. "Unit 7! I told you to watch your flank! Two orcs and three goblins are approaching from your 9 o'clock!"

As Neil speaks, doubts surface in his mind.

The demons won't be able to overwhelm us with such meager forces, not even if they assault the Core for a month straight. However, aside from Beelzebub and Mephisto, they've yet to send in any Lords,

Barons, or Dukes. Why are they holding back? They must have a reason.

Neil's eyes flash with insight.

Could it be? Does their leader, Ose, know where I hid the Trifancium? Beelzebub wouldn't have fired off a wide-range blast of fire otherwise. He must have been confident he wouldn't ignite the Trifrancium. If he had, he might have destroyed the whole Labyrinth.

Perhaps the demons haven't learned of Trifrancium's existence. However, I can't just pray for their ignorance. The Creator rewards those who glorify His name, not those who sully it with buffoonery.

Neil shakes his head.

If the Wordsmiths don't return, I'll have to destroy the Core. I won't allow the demons to use it against us.

* * *

Kar leaps out of the ceiling after using his earth-manipulation to burrow behind Beelzebub. The Monster King pounces at the Duke of Inferno like an angry lion, tackling the demon to the ground. Just before Beelzebub strikes the Labyrinth's floor, he flicks his gaze toward one of the many burning bodies ignited by his first attack.

Fireportation!

Instantly, Beelzebub vanishes from Kar's grasp, causing the Monster King to slam into the bodies below him without his captive.

"Hurgh! You are slippery, Hotface."

Kar turns to face Beelzebub, only to frown as the Duke of Inferno conjures a two-thousand-degree orb of fire, one bright enough to blind anyone looking directly at it.

Fwoosh!

Beelzebub begins unleashing a steady stream of unbearably hot solar energy at Kar. Its power transcends imagination as it strikes Kar at the speed of light. Instantly, Kar gets knocked backward, yet somehow, he grinds his crocodilian claws into the floor to hold himself in place.

"Huuuurg!"

Kar grunts angrily as his suit's temperature skyrockets. Beelzebub cackles like a hyena while intensifying the solar energy. It becomes a molten monsoon of fire, one which holds the Monster King in place.

"Hahahahaha! How long can you hold on, little slug?! This is your punishment for trying to deceive Ose and me! Today, you will learn the taste of defeat!"

As Beelzebub concentrates, he wills his solar beam to become fiercer than ever. Its heat skyrockets to three thousand degrees, killing anyone within two hundred feet of its path. Countless invading monsters screech to a halt outside the Core's entry to shield their eyes from its blinding radiance.

However, even as the thick, molten energy crashes into Kar's chest, the lizard king smirks.

"Thank you for the meal, Hotface."

Kar's nanosuit begins to glow with power as Beelzebub's solar beam charges its capacitors to the maximum. Kar's exosuit, a specialized model developed by Phoebe for combatting high-level demons, expels the radiation and heat out its rear ventilators while absorbing the solar beam's latent energy for itself.

Eventually, Centurion's voice blares in Kar's earpiece.

"PILOT BIG DADDY, THE DUKE CONTAINMENT MECHANISM IS FULLY CHARGED. YOU MAY RETALIATE WHEN READY."

Hardly has Centurion spoken the words before Kar leaps forward, startling Beelzebub. The Duke flinches reflexively as the ten-foot-tall Monster King flies at him like a stinger missile, pushing through Beelzebub's flames without any resistance.

"What?!"

Beelzebub only manages to utter one word of surprise before Kar stretches out his arms in a glorious bear-hug. He wraps them around Beelzebub and yanks the Duke down to the Labyrinth's floor below, while yelling into his suit's audio receptors, "Discharge!"

Crackle!

A colossal burst of electrical energy surges from every inch of Kar's T-REX, making Beelzebub scream in pain. "EeeyaaAUGH!!"

The Duke's muscles seize up, while his normally inactive pain receptors ignite with electrical energy, making him faint. Kar slams Beelzebub into the ground, then grabs the Duke's neck with his thick, meaty claws.

"Capture complete."

Kar chuckles as his T-REX disassembles itself and wraps around Beelzebub's body like an angry anaconda. The suit's nanites transform into powerful shackles and mitts, pinning Beelzebub's arms behind him while also morphing into a head covering to wrap around his face and gag him, making it impossible for the Duke to speak.

Moments later, Kar rises to his feet and glances at the shocked invaders surrounding him. They gaze with wide-eyed astonishment at the bound and helpless Duke of Inferno, unable to process the scene that just unfolded. Even as their human enemies continue hacking the stunned invaders to pieces, they can't help but stand, frozen in fear, after witnessing Kar's supreme strength.

"So this is all a Duke is worth," Kar grunts. "Hurgh. Can't believe I left White-Hair's delicious food early for this. Not even a challenge."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Kar grabs Beelzebub's face, lifts the Duke over his head, and hurls him toward the Tarus II warpgate. Beelzebub flies through it and vanishes, landing in the awaiting arms of the soldiers outside.

"One down, lots more to go. Which of you punks is next?"

* * *

Mephisto freezes in his tracks. He hovers over the battlefield and stares in complete disbelief as the Monster King throws Beelzebub into the Tarus II warpgate like a bag of garbage.

"Im... impossible! Even for a ssstupid, insssignificant little ssshit like Beelzebub, how could he fall before a mere monssster?! Disssgraceful! When Ossse hearsss of thisss, ssshe'll have no choice but to promote me to the rank of Firssst Duke! Ksss! That iss what you get for underessstimating the almighty necromancer!"

* * *

Ose's astral form hovers near the Core's entrance. Her gaze hardens as she watches Beelzebub's humiliating defeat.

It never fails to amaze me how quickly humans can adapt to their enemies. They've fought Beelzebub countless times, but I never imagined they'd develop such an effective counter to his powers. If their development keeps up, it's likely they'll find ways to neutralize Mephisto's mist-body, reveal my astral form, and even bypass Bael's invincibility.

Ose shakes her head.

No. That last feat is impossible, even for someone possessing Solomon's Crown. Not even humans during the height of the Energy Wars could injure Bael. These humans haven't a chance of beating him. However, now that Beelzebub has failed... I'll have to advance my plans.

Ose's astral form instantly vanishes. She reappears inside her main body, opens her eyes, and speaks to the gathered Barons.

"The humans have captured Beelzebub."

Mara, Laharl, and Orias almost jump out of their skin in surprise. "What? How?"

Ose ignores their question. "Change of plans. I want all of you to rush in, full force. Crush the humans' resistance at once. I'll fetch the others as quickly as I can. Mephisto is still running interference, but if the humans start destroying corpses, all his work will be for naught."

A shared look of surprise and panic passes between the three Barons. Immediately, they nod at Ose. "Alright," Mara says. "Ying-Ying dropped by while you were out, so I told her the plan. She's gone to fetch a few friends. We'll attack in five minutes."

Laharl extends her vicious, steel-rending claws. "Hah! I'll go right now! You guys can catch up with me after you clean the piss from your pants! Come on, Orias! It's our time to shine!"

Orias rolls his eyes. "If I must."

The two Barons leave while calling their underlings for support. Mara travels in the opposite direction, leaving Ose alone.

"Dammit," the Third Emperor whispers. "How could I have overlooked such a development? The hero's wife is a bloody nuisance. Only she could have developed such a sophisticated containment

method. Beelzebub was utterly helpless in front of that suit's might. Even after I warned him, he still overestimated himself. Stupid bastard."

With one last furtive glance at the Core, Ose transforms into a bolt of lightning to zip toward Bael, Artorias, and the Battle Brothers.

Once they arrive... humanity will surely fall.

Part 229: Gressil's Regret

The sun rises on Tarus II, spreading its warmth across the planet's surface. As the start of a mild, mid-summer's day, most people might feel obligated to pause and take a deep breath, inhaling nature's scent. Compared to the world humanity once originated on, Earth, Tarus II possesses a universally mild climate, aside from its north and south poles.

However, as Daisy and Phoebe enter Hero City's singular hospital, their hurried movements betray their lack of interest in the beauty of the environment surrounding them.

Inside, dozens upon dozens of humans and monsters sit on benches or chairs while clutching the gruesome wounds inflicted upon them. Their broken T-REX's sit in collection bins placed at random along the walls, useless after suffering catastrophic damage from the Grez and monster attacks.

Having visited the hospital hundreds of times over the years, Daisy doesn't even bat an eye at the bloodied and beaten soldiers limping around the hallway. Already, the child has grown used to the horrors of war.

Phoebe trots over to the receptionist desk, where Grima, the well-spoken goblin, shuffles dozens of patient reports together, categorizing them into different color levels. Red patients require immediate care, while yellow and green will probably survive without Belial's intervention, even if only for a few hours.

"Grima. Do you know where Samantha is? Have you seen her recently?"

Phoebe keeps her voice calm while glancing around at the injured soldiers. Her gaze flicks to two kobolds and a harpie assisting Grima behind the reception desk, though the Harpie is not Doctor Fathy, but someone else entirely.

Grima barely looks at Phoebe before returning to her papers. "Miss Hiro. Now is not the best time. We've over 600 wounded, with 137 in critical condition. The Second Emperor is sure to run her mana dry just taking care of this first wave."

As always, Grima's excellent linguistic skills stand apart from other goblins, making his words simple to parse, while his deep voice commands a certain level of innate respect among those listening. Phoebe nods in response.

"I know, but I have to see her before I head to the Core. Please, if you know where she is-"

"Room 73," Grima says, interrupting the hero's wife. "Please be quick with your visit. Ten people have already died while waiting for care."

Grima raises his head again, revealing deep, dark circles beneath his eyes. "One of them was my closest friend."

Phoebe flinches, taken aback by Grima's suppressed emotions. "I... I understand. I won't need more than a minute. Thank you, Grima. And... I'm sorry for your loss."

"I will not be the only one who suffers today," Grima mutters. He continues shuffling his papers, before yelling out, "Adrian Hunts! Next!"

Phoebe bows away from the reception desk and hurries down the hall to the left, dragging Daisy along behind her. Eventually, she reaches a long line of people, all of them laying in gurneys while moaning in pain.

"Mother... hnggh, mother... help me..." One man whimpers. A huge stab wound through his ribs reveals where a Grez impaled him, while he managed to survive, but with a heavy injury.

Daisy looks at each person as they walk. Despite the calm expression on her face, the young girl clenches her mother's hand tighter. "Mommy... is everyone going to be okay?"

"Of course, sweetheart," Phoebe lies through her teeth. "Aunt Samantha can heal any injury, don't you worry."

Daisy grimaces when she spots a man with a face covered in blood. Both of his eye sockets appear gouged out by some horrific attack, causing him to fall into a coma from the injury.

Neither Phoebe nor Daisy voice their concerns. *Samantha can't heal injuries to the brain. Only a Wordsmith can, and only if he possesses Solomon's Crown.*

Sadly, the comatose man may never awaken from his sleep.

* * *

Phoebe arrives at the doorway to room 73. Inside, she spots Belial, the 2nd Emperor of Demonkind, covered in sweat. Belial's chest heaves with great difficulty as she casts a healing spell, revitalizing her current patient with all of her power. However, unlike during normal times, when Belial might heal even the deepest wound within seconds, it takes her nearly a minute to fix the man's broken ribs, then his lung, before moving onto his shattered leg and knee. Eventually she finishes, but doesn't bother with several dozen other superficial scratches and gouge marks covering his skin.

"Th-there. You're fit for duty, Private Reynolds. Next."

The young man nods at Belial, even while trying to hide his pained expression. He tries to lift himself off the bed, but his remaining injuries clearly slow him down.

However, not once does the man complain. Clearly thankful for having his life saved, he staggers out of the room while looking like a ghost, barely acknowledging Phoebe's presence.

The hero's wife watches the man as he limps down the corridor. She grabs the stretcher nearest the door and wheels it inside to help Belial's assistant, Rosalia. Rosalia notices Phoebe, but her thousand-yard stare reveals her preoccupation with other matters.

"Oh, it's you."

"Yes," Phoebe confirms. She helps Rosalia lift the injured soldier onto the blood-soaked bed next to Belial, not even bothering with swapping out its sheets. Presumably, once the Wordsmiths return, they'll be able to cure any bloodborne diseases, or Belial can do it after the war.

But that's only assuming we survive, Phoebe thinks, grimly.

"Sam," Phoebe says, getting Belial's attention. "I've brought Daisy. They need me at the Core."

Belial finally notices Phoebe, even though it takes her a second to register the human's words. "Huh? Oh, right. I wish I could go with you, but as you can see..."

Belial trails off. She quickly weaves another healing spell, then grits her teeth as she activates its effects. She manages to heal the man's broken shoulder and regrow his missing ear, but it takes slightly longer than the previous patient.

"That's fine. Daisy's can help you while I fight. Isn't that right, sweetheart? Help aunt Sammy with anything she needs. Fetch tools for her, anything you can to help. If she doesn't need anything, then sit quietly and don't get in the way."

Phoebe directs her words toward her daughter. However, to her surprise, Rosalia pipes up. "We don't have time to babysit, *hero's wife*. Can't you see all the injured men and women outside? Take your daughter to the shelter with all the other kids."

"Rosalia!" Belial snaps, her irritability rising through the roof. "Shut your mouth! I already arranged to protect Daisy. She's not like the other kids. Ose is likely to target the Hero's daughter, so it's best if she's near me for protection."

"We have two thousand heavily armed guards at the children's shelter," Rosalia counters. "I don't want some little brat getting in our way! Put your personal feelings aside and-"

"Not another word," Belial interrupts, her voice deadly calm. "Don't presume upon your position, little *grunt*. I am still the Second Emperor. Know your place."

Rosalia's eyes lock onto Belial's. "Y-yes. Of course. My apologies, Second Emperor."

A chill descends upon the room. Phoebe keeps her expression neutral, but inside, her emotions turn chaotic.

I've never seen Sam so... so angry. I didn't know she had a side like this.

Daisy bows her head. "I'm sorry. I'll stay out of the way, aunt S'matha. The fat lady is right."

"Daisy..." Phoebe growls. She starts to chide her daughter's rudeness, only to sigh. "...I don't have time for this. Sit over there, in the corner. If you need to go to the bathroom, come back immediately. Don't go far, alright?"

Belial helps her second patient out of the bed while ignoring another half-dozen cuts and gashes on his arms. "My senses are far sharper than you might think, Phoebe. Don't worry. If anyone leaks even an ounce of bloodlust for your little girl, I'll rip them a new... *you know*."

"Alright. Take care, then," Phoebe says. She waits for the second patient to leave the room before striding out behind him, leaving her daughter behind.

...However, not ten seconds later, Daisy comes running out and grabs her mother's leg, nearly tripping Phoebe.

"Mommy! I'm scared. Where's daddy? Why hasn't he come back? Where are you going??"

Phoebe starts to push her daughter away, only to pause.

Today might be the last time I see Daisy. What if Jason doesn't return? What if I don't? I need to leave her in a good place.

Phoebe sighs. She ignores the glances of the injured in the hallway and drops to one knee while resting a hand on her daughter's head.

"Mommy has to fight, Daisy. Just like daddy. I want to stay with you, but they need me in the battle."

"You'll get hurt!" Daisy cries. "I don't wanna lose you!"

"You won't, love, you won't," Phoebe coos. She caresses Daisy's face while forcing a pained smile. Phoebe steadies her trembling lower lip before continuing. "You and me are good girls, so we have to stop the bad people. We have to stand up against evil, even when it seems useless. You understand, right?"

Daisy shakes her head. "No! I don't! Stay with me, mommy! Don't go... don't leave me, not like daddy did..."

The hero's wife lowers her eyes. She swallows hard while trying to reassure herself of Jason's safety.

"Daddy... he'll be fine, sweetheart. Don't you know? The hero always shows up at the last minute. You have to believe in your father. He's never failed us, and he never will. Your daddy can do all kinds of incredible things. That's why the demons waited to attack until they thought he was gone. Once he shows up, they'll run away."

"But... but daddy is gone..." Daisy protests. "Mommy can't even find him."

Daisy touches a ruby hanging from a necklace on Phoebe's chest.

"Mommy said she could call daddy whenever she wanted... but you can't! Daddy's gone! He's gone!!!"

Daisy breaks down into tears, finally succumbing to her suppressed emotions. She grabs her face and bawls, unable to control the anguish in her heart.

Several of the more lucid soldiers watch with pitying eyes as the symbol of their pride, the jewel of humanity, Phoebe Hiro, tries to console her daughter. All of them respect the hero's wife. She's been there for them and brightened their days on numerous occasions.

However, all of them fall silent, secretly agreeing with Daisy's words.

Hope, gone.

Jason, gone.

Both of the Wordsmiths left nearly a month earlier, and neither of them have contacted the Core.

The injured men and women glance at one another while imagining the worst.

The demons chose today to attack because they've captured our heroes. Even Jason's daughter knows the truth.

Phoebe entertains similar thoughts for only a moment before pushing them away. She gently leans forward and cradles her daughter, patting the back of Daisy's head affectionately.

"You're a good girl, sweetheart. Daddy will never disappoint you. Have faith in him. There's no way a bunch of weak little bully demons can take him down."

Daisy snuffles. "R-really?"

"Yes. I bet wherever daddy is, he's thinking about you right now."

Phoebe rises to her feet. She caresses her daughter's cheek and wipes away her tears while flashing a genuine, radiant smile.

"Jason brings me joy, and he brings me purpose. He freed me from the shackles of my past, and he gave me a beautiful little girl. I'll never stop believing in him. Jason is our hero. He's *my* hero."

Phoebe sweeps her gaze across the people gathered in the hallway. Her conviction sends tingles down their spines, temporarily dulling the pain wracking their bodies.

Several soldiers feel a sense of shame. How could they doubt their king? Phoebe never once wavered in her convictions, and neither should they.

Eventually, Phoebe straightens her daughter out and sends her back to Belial's ward with a sigh. "Be good to your aunt, Daisy. I'll come back as soon as possible."

Daisy waves goodbye, having finally dried the tears from her eyes. "Okay, mommy. I love you! Bye!"

"Bye-bye," Phoebe waves.

Once Daisy disappears into Belial's ward, Phoebe inhales a deep breath, then releases it, allowing her tension to drain away.

She rests her hand against the magical medallion Jason gave her, wondering when he'll reply.

"Jason. Come back soon. We need you."

Recommended Listening.

Elsewhere.

Deep within the Labyrinth's recesses, lurking within the confines of its darkest, dankest prison...

"Mmmmghhh!!"

Hope screams through the cloth gag covering his mouth while tears pour from his eyes. His head lolls from side to side as his lucidity continues to slowly slip away.

Ten feet from the Hero, a two-headed demon stands with his back to the human and all four of his arms crossed. He gazes at a shimmering mirror hovering before him with rapt attention, watching as it displays scenes of hellish carnage between monsters and humans.

"Haha. What a wonderful sight. Your people are putting up quite the fight, Hope. They'll fall, of course. Humanity's numbers are finite, while the demons' are neverending."

Gressil, the prison warden, and the head of Faith's End, chuckles softly to himself.

"Haha. It took a hellishly long time, but finally, the chaos I've awaited has begun to play out on a galactic stage. What a beautiful symphony of death and destruction."

"Mmmhhngh! Mgggnn! Huk-huk..."

Hope groans and whimpers as his head continues thrashing from side to side. Eventually, Gressil turns around to stare at the drugged and bound human.

"Quiet."

Immediately, Hope falls silent. A terrible, unspeakable fear grips the hero's mind, penetrating even the basest survival instincts begging for his freedom.

Gressil's gaze falls upon the blood covering Hope's body. With Hope's arms and legs sawed off, the casually thrown-together gauze holding his guts in place only slows 99% of the blood flowing from his wounds. Trickle of plasma leak through the rotting, infected bandages, landing on Gressil's metal torture table with soft *plips*.

Hope's limbs rest inside buckets thrown off in the corner of the room. Their decayed stench, capable of gagging even the hardest orc, doesn't affect Gressil at all.

A metal shackle wraps around Hope's neck, pinning him to the table with less than an inch of movement room. Gressil, ever the kind torturer, allows his prisoner enough slack to thrash around. Hope's helpless motions only serve to exacerbate his terror, making Gressil smile.

"Haha. Even now, as a quadruple amputee, you still have enough spirit to scream and beg for mercy. That is what I like about you... Hope. There's nothing more boring than a prisoner who doesn't fight back. It isn't fun. It isn't... satisfying."

Slowly, Gressil walks over to the helpless human, making Hope freeze in place and stare at his tormentor with widened eyes.

"Haha. Poke."

Gressil jams a claw into one of Hope's open wounds, making the young man chomp down on his gag and howl in pain. "Hnnnghh!!! Hmungh! Hrrrgh!!!"

The warden's smile fades away.

"It's been a while since I could play with someone as fun as you. Birdy lost her voice a long time ago. The other humans I capture usually die within an hour. But you... your little nano-bugs are quite handy. You can really take a beating. Haha."

Poke.

Gressil jams his finger into Hope's groin, making the human scream three times louder than before.

"Haha. It never gets old. Pain. Torment. Misery."

Gressil pulls away from Hiro, removing his claws from the helpless human's body. Hope sags in place, while tears roll down his cheeks.

"I wasn't always like this, you know."

Gressil returns to his magical mirror, but this time, he pays little attention to the events unfolding on its surface.

"Mother made me this way. She wouldn't let me be."

Hope's chest heaves as he struggles to breathe. He barely even hears Gressil's words through the frantic flaring of his nostrils, let alone comprehends them.

The prison warden sighs.

"Did you know? Demons are the worst creatures in existence. Violent. Psychopathic. Torturous. Barbaric."

"You're not wrong to hate us, but you shouldn't hate me. I'm not the monster here. I'm a victim. A creation of the twisted aberrations leading our society."

Gressil raises his lower right arm. He opens his palm face-up, summoning the illusion of a jade-colored butterfly.

"All I ever wanted was to play with my butterflies. I was gentle. I was kind."

"I was a bad demon. That's why they hurt me."

The warden's eyes gloss over, as his memory travels back in time, to a different era, a time before humanity fell.

"Mother always loved Ose more than me. I was a burden. An obligation. Haha."

Gressil's laugh comes out with the same raspy tone as the rest of his cold, dead speech.

"All demons have to be strong. They have to become powerful. But why? Nobody ever answers that question. Nobody ever asks."

* * *

"I don't remember when it happened. I don't even remember why. I snapped. I killed Mother."

"It was the first time I ever felt joy — the first time I experienced the taste of someone else's misery. I understood why Mother trampled me."

Gressil closes his eyes.

"You never had a mother. Your parents abandoned you when you were a child. Many think it's better to have a bad parent than none at all."

"But what do they know? I envy you. I wish I didn't have to suffer. My mother made me who I am, today. A monster."

The warden opens his eyes. He glances at the still, unmoving second head attached to his left shoulder.

"Look at you. Sleeping. Haha. After everything you've done to me... you get to spend your days living in a dream. Must be nice."

Gressil curls his right arms into fists. A flash of rage appears in his eyes.

"Even in death... you still taunt me. I hate you. I hate everything about you."

Wham!

Gressil's fists crash against his second head, jarring it awake.

"Ack! Hey, what do you think you're doing, hitting your mother?!"

Lucifer, the Emperor of Providence, awakens. Her eyes turn crystal-clear as she turns to look at the other head attached to her body.

"Little brat! Worthless! What sort of filthy little mongrel raises his hand to the one who raised him?! I'll teach you a lesson!!"

Gressil's anger vanishes. Instead, a look of fear appears in his eyes.

"N-no, Mother! It... it wasn't me! I'd never-"

Crash!

Gressil's left arms reach up and grab his throat while punching his face. Lucifer takes over the entire left side of Gressil's body, pummeling and beating him without mercy. Gressil tries to cower, but all he can do is fall against the wall while screaming.

"No, Mother! Please! I didn't mean it! I'm sorry! Augh!!"

Lucifer continues beating and bashing her son. Her power swells within him, eventually overtaking even his right side. All of Gressil's body, except for his head, turns into a self-harming weapon.

Lucifer punches her son without rest. She slams his head against one wall and then another, making his cries of pain ring out throughout all of the nearby Labyrinth corridors.

Ten minutes later, Gressil whimpers and moans, his pitiful figure echoing Hope's. Lucifer inhales and exhales ferociously, her anger spent.

"Ptuh! Filthy little runt! Look at you, pissing yourself in fear! That's why you'll never measure up to my precious little Ose! You're a weak, worthless little shit! Sorry excuse for a demon!!"

However, Lucifer's energy begins to drain. Eventually, her eyes flutter closed.

"Now... don't disturb me again... I need... need to sleep. So very... tired."

Lucifer's head lolls forward as she falls unconscious, returning control to Gressil.

The prison warden crumples in the corner of the room. For half an hour, he whimpers like a beaten dog.

"Why... why does Mother hurt me..."

Gressil's vicious aura disappears, replaced instead with the figure of a battered, broken child.

* * *

Eventually.

Gressil pulls himself together. He leans against the wall and wipes his tears away, all while casting furtive glances at his second head.

"No... stupid. Foolish! Why did I hit Mother? I can't do that. I shouldn't."

Slowly, Gressil turns to face Hope. The young man stares at Gressil with a strange look. Pain, pity, and fear mix into a bizarre cocktail of emotions, darkening Gressil's eyes.

"You... don't you *dare* look at me like that."

Gressil's lingering fear washes away, replaced instead with hatred and malice.

"That's right, *human*. After I make you one of my *eyes*, I can finally rid myself of Mother, forever."

Gressil's mouth curls up into a horrifying smile.

"Haha. Playing with you is too much fun. I nearly forgot my original plan."

Before Hope can react, Gressil charges toward him and jabs multiple fingers into different wounds on Hope's body. The Wordsmith screams so hard that he nearly faints from the agony.

"Yes. Scream. SCREAM! The more pain you feel, the sooner I can integrate you. The moment you beg me for death, you'll become *mine*."

Gressil chuckles.

"Haha. Hahaha!"

Part 230: Neil's Investigation

Inside the Labyrinth Core.

The King of All Monsters releases a sigh of boredom as he drags another fifty weakling monsters into an early grave. The ground opens up beneath them, engulfing their bodies with the viscosity of quicksand. The last sounds the poor creatures ever utter are cries for mercy.

But sadly, for them, Kar hasn't any left to give.

"Come into my Core... kill my pet humans... grumble grumble..."

Kar growls in annoyance as his twenty-third sequential horde of enemies disappears. By now, the majority of his foes have either perished or fled. Even Hungry, the Obsidian Goblin, runs away. His demonstone-skin won't protect him from suffocating inside the Labyrinth's bowels.

As the last of the invaders retreats, Kar crosses his arms. "Hurgh. Finally, I've finished off the second wave."

"Well done," Neil says. The Core's Commander strides over to Kar's side and pats his back. "I always knew you were strong, but not even I could imagine your power had reached this level."

Blinker flies over and lands on Kar's shoulder as the Sphinx turns to meet Neil's gaze. "Haha! Didn't Kar tell you? We went to visit his lizard family! They made him King of the Lizards!"

Neil deactivates his exosuit. Once his head reveals itself, he frowns. "I don't follow. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Hurgh. The lizards granted me a shard of their legacy," Kar says. "King Bloodscale stepped down from his throne and made me the leader of his people. As such, my power now reaches into the ranks of a Demon Emperor."

"When Kar says King Bloodscale, he means King Ghidorah," Blinker explains. "I got a piece of that power, too! I'm pretty badass now, as well!"

Neil glances around the Core at all of the fallen soldiers and invaders. Their bodies litter the server grounds, making traversal of the terrain tough to manage.

"I see. Well, that's among the best news I've heard in a while, Kar. We might lack Wordsmiths, but at least we have you. However, you shouldn't act cocky. The demons are sure to regroup and attack again. I need to burn these damned bodies before Mephisto turns them against us."

Kar follows Neil's gaze. "How sad. Many of my friends rest among the fallen. I have seen too many atrocities in my life. Even now, the sting of their loss burns my heart."

"Indeed. Such a tremendous loss of life is an abomination we mustn't tolerate," Neil replies.

The Commander squeezes Kar's scaley, muscled arms for a moment, before turning away. Kar watches Neil leave, and shakes his head.

"Ox-Arms carries a heavy burden. He wishes to grieve, but he will never show weakness before his troops. What a lonely existence."

"What about you, big guy?" Blinker asks, her voice soft. "Are you doing okay?"

"Hurgh. As long as I have you, my beloved Butterfly, I will maintain my composure. However, I too, feel..."

Kar trails off. His deep green reptilian eyes flick toward the bodies of two fallen soldiers near his feet.

"...Never mind. Come. We will stand guard at the double doors. None shall enter the Core without my permission."

* * *

Kar leaves the massacred bodies behind him. As he walks away, Neil arrives at the Warpgate to Tarus II. Already, the soldiers have shut down all the other warpgates to keep Mephisto's undead from flooding into the Core.

"Where is that blasted necromancer, I wonder?" Neil mutters. He glances around the Core, a tingling of worry itching at the back of his mind. However, Mephisto doesn't reveal himself. Hundreds of soldiers, those who survived the first two waves of the invader's assaults, begin burning bodies at a superhuman speed. Even as they activate specially created flamethrowers, several corpses suck into the ground, unbeknownst to them.

Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, slithers around underground, beneath the feet of his enemies. He uses his necromantic abilities to drag his chosen future elites into the same abyss where Kar buried the monsters, all while tittering to himself with glee.

"Ksss. Ssstupid Monssster King, kekeke! Did you think you did me a dissservicce? By killing my minionsss and burying them in quicksssand, you've only pressserved their bodiesss perfectly for my purposssesss!"

Mephisto glides toward the recently deceased bodies of three thousand minotaurs and orcs, their eyes and mouths opened wide due to their final moments of panicked breathing.

"Ssskeletonsss and ghoulsss are alwaysss a wonderful sssurprissse, but what could be better than perfectly ssservicceable, recccently ssslaughtered monsssterssss?! Kekekeke!"

However, as Mephisto glides around, turning the corpses of fallen humans, orcs, and minotaurs into his mindless slaves, he pauses for a moment to sigh.

"Ksss. That damned Ossse. How could ssshe predict thiss far ahead? Ssshe had no way to know Beelzebub would fall, and yet it ssseemsss as if hisss capture will do little to delay our victory."

Mephisto pokes a hole in his jaw with his bony finger.

"Sssomeday sssoon, I will make that woman my pet... kekeke! Ssshe daresss humiliate me now... but eventually, I will reign sssupreme over all of demonkind! Ksss, yesss, the powersss of a necromancccer are abssolute. The more who die, the ssstronger I become... kekeke!!"

The Duke of Mist merrily resumes his skullduggery, chuckling evilly to himself as he drags more bodies into his open arms.

* * *

"Commander. You need to take a look at this."

Neil and Debra stand and chat with one another, only to turn and look as one of the several thousand soldiers in the Core walks over to them, breathless.

"Private Cody?" Neil asks. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I *wish* that was it," The young, red-headed man says. "Sir, about the inspection you ordered... we've just completed it. Someone disabled *all* the explosives. We can't self-destruct the Core."

Debra flinches in surprise. "What? How?? When?!"

Neil doesn't visibly react. He maintains a calm appearance on the surface, but underneath, he simmers with rage. "Is that so? I should have known. How long will it take for us to repair the damage?"

Cody shakes his head. "I don't know if we can, sir. If Hope were here, maybe a day. Without him, weeks at the least. The damage appears... extensive."

Neil folds his hands behind his back. He assumes a dignified posture, but his eyes turn as cold as ice.

"We have a traitor in our midst. I've suspected as much for years, but it's been hard to pin the culprit down. At least now, I've narrowed the suspect list."

Cody raises an eyebrow. "Commander?"

"Only five people, aside from myself, know enough about the layout of the explosives we've planted to be capable of destroying them to this extent. I had more than 300 technicians install them, but the detailed schematics of the plastic explosives were kept strictly confidential. Debra, fetch me General Chadwick, General Caddis, Corporal Hurent, Lieutenant Henry, and Lieutenant Samuel."

Debra's face turns ashen. "Sir... you've known all of them for years — since the very beginning."

"That, I have," Neil nods. "Which makes this news all the more saddening. Private Cody, you're dismissed. Debra, carry out my request, please."

"Aye, Commander," Cody says, bowing meekly.

"Yes, sir," Debra adds.

Both of Neil's subordinates withdraw, giving Neil a moment of respite. The Commander flares his nostrils and narrows his eyes as sensations of rage boil in his stomach.

"There's nobody worse than a filthy, devil-kissing *traitor*."

* * *

Several minutes later, four men and one woman, all having disabled their exosuits, stand before Neil in a line. They fold their hands behind their backs and stand at attention, waiting for their Commander's inevitable speech.

"We haven't much time before the demons' next assault wave," Neil says. "So I won't mince any words. One of you has betrayed me. Someone destroyed the self-destruction system we put in place to prevent the demons from seizing the Core. I'm going to figure out who it was, and punish them *severely*. Before I begin, take off your exosuits and place them at your feet."

General Chadwick, a portly-looking 40-year-old Norwegian with a thick beard, doesn't hesitate. He immediately unstraps his T-REX and sets it on the ground before himself.

"Commander."

General Caddis, a much thinner man with a pale complexion and big, thick-rimmed glasses, pauses for a half-second before following Chadwick's lead. He places his exosuit on the ground only a moment after his predecessor.

"Commander."

Corporal Hurent, a black-haired woman in her mid-30's, moves the fastest. Hardly have the words left Neil's mouth, before she's already begun unstrapping and setting her T-REX at her feet. She even gives it a slight kick to nudge it toward Neil.

"Commander."

Lieutenant Samuel, an African man in his late 20's, with thick, muscular arms and a piercing gaze, matches Chadwick's speed perfectly. Both of them set their T-REX's on the ground simultaneously.

"Commander."

Lieutenant Henry, the young prodigy who slew countless Grez during the invasion, lags behind everyone else noticeably. He stares at Neil for several seconds, as if shell-shocked by the news. By the time everyone else has placed their T-REX's on the ground, he's only just started unstrapping his.

"C-Commander."

Immediately, Neil's gaze fixates on Henry. "Lieutenant? You seem surprised. Somewhat nervous, even."

Henry swallows a lump in his throat. "I-I'm sorry, Commander. I was just taken aback by what you said. I didn't think something like this would ever happen."

"You didn't think the demons would be capable of corrupting someone to their side? Huh. I've always thought of you as someone with a robust imagination. How strange for you not to envision such a scenario."

Neil clicks his tongue, but doesn't pursue the line of conversation. Instead, he turns his attention to the first member of the lineup, General Chadwick.

"When was the last time you performed an inspection of the Failsafe Demon Response System, General?"

Chadwick stares Neil right in the eyes. "One week ago, Commander."

"And were the 'FADERS' still functional?"

"Aye, Commander. We estimated they would only take three seconds to reach full saturation."

"I see. General Caddis. What about you? When was the last time you performed a routine inspection?"

"Three days ago, Commander Neil," Caddis replies. The General pushes his glasses further up his nose before folding his hands behind his back. "All systems were still nominal at that time."

"Do you mean to tell me that in only the last three days, someone, or something, managed to tear apart all the wiring and infrastructure of our failsafe?"

Caddis shifts his weight. "I suppose so, Commander."

Neil falls silent for several seconds. His eyes flick across Caddis's face multiple times, scrutinizing every inch of the General's features, before eventually moving onto the lone woman of the group.

"Corporal Hurent. You've only been with us since we liberated your planet five years ago. Isn't it strange that you've risen through the ranks so quickly, despite your gender?"

The black-haired woman frowns. "Commander? I... I have always been loyal to humanity. I worked hard to make you proud."

"In this situation, anyone would say such a thing," Neil muses. "How do I know you're not simply telling me what I want to hear?"

Hurent's expression falls. "Commander... I would never betray you. You and Hope are the spark of life that will guide humanity into a glorious future."

Neil lowers his gaze to Hurent's T-REX. "You seemed eager to give me your device. Were you, perhaps, trying to make yourself look more innocent by kicking your exosuit toward me? Those who are eager to please are often the most willing to backstab the ones who helped raise their status."

The Corporal meets Neil's gaze, as he raises his eyes to look into hers. "Commander. With all due respect, I would never betray humanity. Frankly, knowing my life's story as you do, I'm angered you would even think to accuse me of such a thing."

"The demons murdered your husband and children," Neil concedes. "Or did they? I've only your word to guide my thoughts. Nevertheless, I'll move on."

Neil continues to eyeball the Corporal for a half-second before turning to the next in line. "Lieutenant Samuel. When did you last inspect the failsafes?"

Samuel shakes his head. "Never, Commander. You made it clear it was not part of my duties."

"That's right. And yet, you know the layout of all the bombs. You know where we've placed the explosives, and where the weak points are in their infrastructure. Might you, perhaps, have collaborated with our enemies in the last three days to doom us all?"

Samael shakes his head without hesitation. "No, sir. I would sooner fall on my sword than bring harm to my family."

Neil nods. "That's right. You have a family on Maiura. Suppose the demons came to you, one day, offering to spare them from a gruesome death during Ose's invasion. Might that not persuade you to their

cause?"

Samuel and Neil lock eyes with one another. "Commander. I love my family deeply. However, I would never listen to the whisperings of any *bloodskin* bastard. Their lies are innumerable. Their plots and deceptions, infinite. We've discussed as much in the pub."

"That, we have," Neil murmurs. "However, one of you has betrayed me, and I must find out *who*."

"I will not judge you for your harsh questioning, Commander," Samuel says. "Whoever here is the traitor, I'll execute them myself."

"As will I!" Corporal Hurent shouts. However, when Neil's gaze returns to her, she falls silent. "S-sorry, Commander."

"Don't speak out of turn," Neil says. "It will only deepen my suspicion."

Finally, the Commander returns to Henry. The young man looks like a disaster. Unlike the cool, calm, and collected appearances of the leaders before him, Henry appears as if he's just stepped out of a sauna. Sweat drips from his hair and forehead.

Neil cocks his head. "Lieutenant Henry. If looks were all I had to go by, I'd assume you were guilty from the very beginning. Why, pray tell, do you look like death? Why are you so nervous?"

Henry wipes his forehead. "C-Commander. I'm not nervous... I just... I've spent the last four hours fighting, and haven't had time to rest. My entire body aches."

"A good excuse," Neil says. "but do I believe you? That is the question. In terms of killing demons, you are by far the leader here. It's hard to imagine that someone who has slaughtered as many bloodskins as you would ever compromise on their loyalty."

Henry starts to reply. However, before he can get a word out, Neil turns to General Chadwick at the head of the line.

"General. How many demons have you slain?"

Chadwick hesitates. "In the last year, Commander?"

"No. Since six years ago, when Jason freed us from Bahamut's bondage."

"Ah. A few thousand, I'd wager."

Neil nods. "General Caddis. How about you? How many have you killed?"

Caddis, having heard Neil direct the same question at his predecessor, replies without hesitation. "Two-thousand, six hundred and thirteen, Commander."

"Oh? Such a precise number."

The second General nods. "Yes, Commander. I consider each dead bloodskin a trophy kill."

"Have you hunted any recently?"

"Naturally," Caddis replies. "Just today, I killed another forty-three."

"Good, good. Corporal Hurent. What about you?"

Neil turns to the female Corporal. She blushes from embarrassment. "I... I'm sorry, Commander. I don't know. A lot, I'm sure."

"A lot? Give me a ballpark number at the least."

Corporal Hurent shrugs. "Ah... perhaps... six thousand? As you know, I've gone on hundreds of incursions. When there's so much chaos happening, I merely swing my sword and fire my rifle. I don't pay attention to how many bloodskins I kill."

Sensing Neil's lingering gaze, Hurent hastily adds, "B-but! I could check my T-REX's records for you, sir! I'm sure it would have a detailed breakdown!"

"That won't be necessary," Neil says. "However, I do have a follow-up question. Given the number of times you've gone on missions, isn't it possible you've had instances where the demon leaders could contact you? Perhaps they might have pulled you away from your fellow soldiers and made you offers you couldn't refuse. Perhaps they may have even corrupted you, without your knowing. Isn't that a distinct possibility?"

Hurent's crestfallen face makes the other gathered leaders sigh out of pity.

"Sir! I, I mean, Commander! No. I would never, ever turn my back on humanity. You know that! When the demons ambushed you, two years ago, it was me who saved you!"

"You did," Neil concedes. "But perhaps that was a ploy to get you in my good graces. I can't rule out the possibility."

"If I planned to betray you, I could have killed you then! Commander... I'd never..."

Corporal Hurent lowers her gaze. Tears well up in her eyes, forcing her to wipe them away.

Neil ignores Hurent's sadness. He immediately turns to Lieutenant Samuel and continues his line of questioning. "How many demons have you killed, Lieutenant?"

Samuel smiles. "Not enough, Commander."

"A number, Lieutenant. Give me a number."

The Lieutenant shrugs. "Fifty thousand."

His words cause the eyebrows to shoot up on both of the General's faces. Chadwick and Caddis both turn to look down the line at their comrade, surprised by his words.

"Fifty thousand. That amount seems almost braggadocious," Neil says, his face showing no reaction to Samuel's claim. "Do you think firing off such a big number will make me suspect you less?"

"Think what you like, Commander. I'll never stop killing bloodskins." Samuel replies. "No number will ever be large enough to satisfy me."

"Your attitude seems commendable. However, words are merely words. How many bloodskins did you kill today?"

"None, Commander," Samuel says, still smiling. "After all, we've only fought monsters, so far. Once a few grunts and Lords pop their heads up, I'll remove them from their necks."

"Hmm."

Neil flicks his eye back toward General Caddis.

"You said you had killed forty-three demons today, Caddis. However, Samuel just reminded me that none have shown up. What say you in response?"

The thin, wiry-looking General bows his head contritely. "My apologies, Commander. I spoke without thinking. I assumed you meant my number of kills in general, not the number of demons, specifically."

During Neil's entire line of questioning, not once has he changed his posture, nor moved an inch from where he stands.

However.

Now, Neil takes a few steps toward Caddis.

The Core's Commander, a military genius wise beyond his years, walks within inches of Caddis. Despite standing only eight centimeters taller than his senior officer, Neil somehow appears two feet taller. He cuts an intimidating figure as he causes Caddis to shrink back, ever so slightly.

"Caddis. You've slain forty-three enemy combatants today. Is that correct?"

Caddis flicks his eyes toward Chadwick for a brief instant, then back to Neil. "Y-yes, Commander. My T-REX will confirm as much."

"Perhaps it will," Neil murmurs, his voice as tranquil as an untouched lake. "However... would you like to know a secret? Two, in fact."

The General steels himself. "Commander?"

"I watched the entire battle today from our backlines. I commanded every garrison and every individual trooper," Neil whispers. "I watched as you killed... no-one. Not once did you land the killing blow on any of our enemies. I saw your incompetence with my own two eyes. Multiple times, you unloaded a hail of bullets, always striking the invaders' where it would only cripple them."

Caddis shivers. His eyes meet Neil's, now only half a foot away. "Commander. I... I would never-"

"Did you know?" Neil asks, his tone gaining a tinge of menace. "The current leader of the demons. Her name is Ose. I read a detailed report on her powers, given to me by the Second Emperor..."

Henry, Chadwick, Hurent, and Samuel all strain to listen to Neil's whispered words.

"...Her primary abilities revolve around technology. She's a hacker, Caddis. In other words... altering your suit's video files would be trivial for someone of her capabilities."

Caddis pales.

"Commander. You... you can't trust a word that succubus says-"

"I am aware," Neil says, cutting Caddis off. "That's why I confirmed Ose's powers with Kar. His mother has worked extensively with the demons' current leader, after all. Do you think I should distrust Kar, too?"

"No. Of course not, Commander. But... I would never betray humanity. I would never betray *you*!"

Finally, Neil leans away from Caddis. A strange smile appears on his face.

"You were the last person to inspect the FADERS. If Chadwick had betrayed us, you would have noticed his deception during your inspection. Neither of the Lieutenants was ever tasked with an inspection, and the Corporal inspected them over a month ago, before it was even my turn. That leaves you."

Neil exhales deeply, expelling the remnants of his anger.

"Why did you lie about your kills, General Caddis? Were you merely trying to hide your incompetence? No. You're Ose's little puppet. I wonder what she offered you to turn against us."

Caddis's posture relaxes. The look of fear vanishes from his eyes as he lowers his gaze.

"...You're a damned fool."

Suddenly, a spark of malice appears in Caddis's eyes. He starts to make a move, only for Corporal Hurent on his left to cry out in alarm.

"Knife!"

Caddis pulls his arms out from behind his back and lunges toward Neil with a dagger in his grasp. He aims to impale the Commander through his eye, only for the Corporal to tackle him to the ground. Their sudden flurry of movement catches the attention of all the nearby soldiers, making several of them rush toward their leaders.

"Filthy bitch!" Caddis roars at Hurent. "Get off me! You'll doom us all!"

"You fucking traitor!" Hurent shouts. "I trusted you!"

Chadwick, Samuel, and Henry all jump in to help the Corporal subdue their enemy. Samuel's expression turns nasty as he wrenches the knife out of Caddis's grasp. "Commander! Allow me."

"No," Neil says. "Don't kill Caddis. Arrest him. If we survive this invasion, I aim to squeeze some answers out of him."

Caddis struggles to break free of his captors, but once the armored commandos appear, he gives up.

A look of hatred boils in Caddis's eyes. "You stupid fool, Neil!" Caddis roars. "We can't win against the demons! We should bow to them before it's too late! They'll kill us all! Our blood will be on your hands!!"

Neil sighs. "Soldiers. Take him away."

Two commandos decked out in T-REX's slap movement-inhibiting shackles on Caddis and drag him toward the Tarus II warpgate.

"You'll kill us all, Neil! Do you hear me?!" Caddis screams. "You'll kill us all!!"

* * *

Caddis disappears through the warp-gate, leaving Neil alone with his other four leaders.

"Chadwick. Hurent. Samuel. Henry. I'm sorry for anything I said that may have offended you. Now, return to your posts, everyone except for Chadwick. The demons are sure to strike soon."

Corporal Hurent smiles meekly at Neil. "Yes, Commander. Thank you for believing in me."

"You've saved my life twice now," Neil says with a nod. "Who else can I believe in, if not you?"

"I wish you'd have let me kill that bastard," Samuel mutters. He and Hurent both retrieve their T-REX's and walk away.

"Yes, but even a rat has its uses," Neil murmurs.

Henry is the last to leave. He straps on his exosuit and pauses for a moment. "I'm still exhausted, Commander. I'll, uh... I'll take a breather."

"Yes, please do," Neil says, offering a smile.

Henry leaves, along with the other soldiers.

Soon, only Neil and Chadwick remain.

The Commander's expression darkens.

"Chadwick. What do you think about Lieutenant Henry's performance during my questioning?"

The broad-shouldered General crosses his arms. "Hmph. Suspicious. He's hiding something."

"The demons are resourceful," Commander Neil whispers. "They have many methods to slip past our ranks. I want you to keep an eye on the Lieutenant until further notice."

Chadwick nods, but follows up with a frown. "Commander. Do you suspect Lieutenant Henry of being a demon spy? He's killed more bloodskins than many of our platoons combined. He's a legend on the battlefield."

"If sacrificing tens of thousands of grunts will allow her to infiltrate our ranks, I don't doubt Ose would do so for a second," Neil mutters. "Don't let nostalgia cloud your vision, General. Always remain vigilant when it comes to a bloodskin."

"What about me?" Chadwick prods. "What makes you think I won't betray you?"

"Haha," Neil chuckles, as a wry grin creeps onto his face. He glances up at the General and smiles. "I'm more likely to betray humanity than you, General. Let's not pretend you have a chance in Hell of walking the road less traveled when you could get revenge for your brother."

Chadwick nods. "It is as you say."

The two men exchange a few pleasantries before departing from one another.

After Chadwick leaves, Neil gazes toward the great doors, where Kar stands, his vigilant gaze aimed down the only hallway leading to humanity's fortress.

"Even without the Wordsmiths... we still have a chance of survival. It may be slim... but it's still there."

Part 231: One Punch Monster

Five thousand monsters, comprised of black-scaled basilisks, grey-furred kobolds, and a diverse mixture of demon grunts and Lords, line up behind the Baron of Misery, Laharl. Unlike the first wave that attacked the core an hour prior, this one features no orcs, undead, or minotaurs.

"Are you maggots ready?!" Laharl screeches. The iron-clawed demoness points a talon down the hall, toward the distant light of the Core. "Once we kill that traitorous monster king and rip the fleshbags limb from limb, the real fun begins! Kyahaha!!"

"Kss!"

The snake-like basilisks snap at one another while hissing in excitement. Their appearances resemble giant river-serpents, with two thin arms sticking out of their sides for dexterity purposes. Sadly, most basilisks are far too weak to use their arms in melee combat.

"Kill all them fockin' fleshbags," A Kobold yells. The fur-covered reptilian pounds his claws together to get his blood boiling. "I'm bloody starvin' fer some meat!"

"Yes, that's the spirit!" Laharl cackles. "Now, follow me, you insufferable weaklings! Whoever lands the killing blow on that shit-sucking Sphinx will get a *special* reward, hahaha!!"

Without hesitation, the entire company of monsters rushes down the great hallway leading to the core. Its hundred-foot width provides an unusual amount of breathing room for the monsters to spread out and overtake one another. A makeshift race ensues as several of the strongest warriors take the lead, trying to beat their rivals to the Core.

Hungry, the lone goblin among all the stronger monsters, clings to one of the reptilian-kobolds, using its perfectly-straightened horns as a handhold.

"H-hey, don't go so fast..." Hungry mutters. "We no need be first, haha..."

The kobold laughs. "Weak little gobby! That's why your kind licks the skarn-droppings off our feet! You're too bloody scared to stand up for yerselves! Bahaha!"

Unlike many monsters that come in uniform colors, kobolds feature a variety of reds, yellows, greens, and greys among their scales. A few kobolds even stand out for their bright yellow patterns. Their appearance, a mixture of draconian and crocodilian, make them look like slimmer versions of Kar.

Hungry's newest battle-buddy is a multi-colored kobold with black scales and a soft, white underbelly. Krugar, the head of the cave-dwelling Coal Eaters, exhales a small plume of fire as his face contorts into a grin.

"No matter how strong that Sphinx bloke thinks he be, he ain't nothin' 'gainst these numbers!" Krugar laughs.

The third invader contingent rushes toward the Core at breakneck speeds exceeding sixty miles an hour. Within less than a minute, the still-open great doors loom within view, making them grin.

However.

Amongst the light pouring out of the Core's entryway, a small, shadowy silhouette stands alone.

Kar, King of the Monsters, stands with his arms crossed, waiting patiently for his enemies to arrive.

Blinker lays on Kar's shoulder, fast asleep. When Kar starts to move, she awakens from her slumber while blinking her droopy eyes.

"Huh? Oh, they're here. Sheesh! Took them long enough!"

"Did you enjoy your catnap, Butterfly?" Kar asks.

"It was alright. Gotta keep my stamina up so we can kick butt."

Kar nods.

"Hurgh. Our enemies are numerous. Once the strong ones show up, I will have to rely on you."

Blinker's bravado fades. "Yeah. Don't worry, gator-man. As long as we're together, we can't lose."

"It is as you say, Butterfly."

Recommended Listening

The horde arrives.

Fifteen basilisks pounce at Kar, their serrated teeth lunging for his neck, legs, and arms.

Kar steps forward to meet them.

Slap.

With a wave of his hand, the Monster King ends five of their lives in an instant. Their skulls shatter and their snake-like bodies crumble under his palm's power.

However, the other ten manage to evade his attack.

Chomp!

The monstrous snakes, each one fifteen feet long, with three-foot heads, grab hold of the Monster King's scales.

A moment later, their teeth shatter when Kar flexes his muscles. The power coursing through his body makes his defenses harder than titanium. Horrified, the basilisks recoil in pain, screeching as blood spews from their mouths.

"Never should have come here," Kar mutters.

The Monster King scuffs his heel across the ground, spewing a hail of rocks up at the injured basilisks. The pebbles tear through their scales like bullets through wet paper. All ten of the remaining basilisks turn into bloodied paper mache as they flop lifelessly to the dirt.

An instant afterward, ten kobolds and seven Burner demons leap into the fray. The recently evolved demons fling fireballs at Kar's face, while the kobolds swing their steel-rendering claws at his chest. Kar spins on his heel, ducks down, and balls his fingers into a fist.

Thoomph!

Kar punches the air, summoning a boulder from under his feet. It catches the drake-like kobolds off-guard by scattering them like bowling balls, only to explode immediately afterward, peppering Kar's foes with rocky shrapnel. The Burner demons barely get a split-second to watch as their fireballs miss and Kar's counterattack meets its mark. They perish, unable to retaliate.

However, the first wave of kobolds survive their encounter with the Monster King. Thanks to their hardened scales, mirroring his, and their relatively high intelligence, they dart toward him with deadly intentions.

"Don't give 'im a moment ta' think!" One of the kobolds barks. "Keep hittin' 'im til he croaks!"

Hungry, still riding atop the dual-colored black and white kobold, arrives in the next wave. He grits his teeth and readies himself for a beating. "Oh, no! Me no want this! Me no like this!!"

Kar falls forward and lands on his hands. He skitters around in a four-legged stance, using his hands and feet like a taijitsu master to throw off his opponents. One after the other, dozens of kobolds and basilisks swarm him, their numbers increasing rapidly. None of them so much as scratches the legendary Sphinx.

The Monster King pounces into the air. He grabs hold of the ceiling and yanks with all his strength, collapsing fifty tons of debris atop the neverending swarm of monsters. However, a brigade of earth-manipulating Burrowers meets his advance, using their powers to fling the debris left and right. They save ninety percent of Kar's targets, sending sighs of relief among the invaders.

"Kar! We can't stop them all!" Blinker yells.

Kar flicks his eyes backward. He spots fifty kobolds and basilisks rushing toward the Core Doors. Having skirted around him, the enemies beeline for the humans, making Kar frown.

"My pet humans can protect themselves... but *when did I say you could enter?*"

Kar falls from the ceiling. He raises his fists overhead and smashes the enemies beneath him into bloody mulch, continuing his attack through them, into the Labyrinth's floor. A massive earthquake rumbles the Labyrinth for miles in every direction, sparing only the Core itself.

Hundreds of tons of rubble collapses outside the Core's double-doors. The monsters and Lords who dared to bypass Kar jerk their heads upward and scream as an avalanche plunges toward them.

Crunch.

The avalanche continues, unabated. It buries the Core's entrance behind more than a thousand tons of debris, making entry impossible for the moment.

Kar smiles.

The Monster King leaps to his feet and stretches out his arms. "None may pass! If you want a taste of my pet humans, you'll have to get through me, first! Now, come! Give me a challenge!"

The monsters nearest Kar jerk back in fright as the Monster King lunges at them. Their faces turn pale as his deathly specter dwarfs their shadows. Kar grabs two kobolds by the legs and uses them as blunt

weapons, beating their comrades to death with their scaled bodies.

"Bahaha!" Kar laughs. "Too weak! Too weak!!"

Suddenly, a flash of movement catches Kar's eye. A single demoness, one with a distinctive blood-red cape, skitters toward him on her hands and feet.

A Baron! Kar observes.

She leaps toward Kar, raising her clawed nails over her head. Kar retaliates by swinging his comatose kobold weapons toward her. However, the moment the kobolds strike the demoness, she vanishes.

An illusion? Aaargh!

Kar's inner self howls in pain as the Baron of Misery materializes behind him and rakes her talons across his back, drawing deep red rivulets of blood.

"You're not so tough!" Laharl cackles, taunting Kar. She lands on her hands and feet and jumps toward the wall of debris collapsed before the Core, only to frown.

Damn! Not even a little hole I can slip through. Guess I'll have to kill the Sphinx before I can get inside where all the juicy man-meat is.

Kar drops his living battering-ram-kobolds. "Hurgh. That woman's claws pierced my scales. She is quite strong... for a *Baron*."

Blinker hovers overhead. She activates her fairy magic, summoning the illusion of invisibility around herself. "Do you want any help?"

Kar chuckles softly. "Heh. No. You stay safe, Butterfly."

The Monster King claps his hands together, weaves a magic symbol, and presses both palms against the ground. This time, two boulders bubble out of the Labyrinth floor, causing the five nearest basilisks to shrink back as they try to figure out where the Monster King will aim his next attack.

However, Kar doesn't throw the boulders. Instead, he stands still for a moment and uses his inner mana to carve two shapes into the center of the giant rocks.

Two seconds later, the boulders split in half to reveal two Kar-shaped statues, each one only half the Monster King's size. The two statues spring to life, their crocodile mouths opening in a silent roar.

Laharl skitters along the wall adjacent to the Core's entrance like a cockroach. Her eyes lock onto the statues with a look of disbelief. "What? It can't be! The Monster King... he's become a soul manipulator! Those are golems!"

Kar ignores Laharl's shock. "Go, my children. Kill the weak ones. I'll handle Little Miss Cricket myself."

Kar's stone elementals nod. They spring toward the dumbfounded basilisks and swing their fists like hammers, shattering skulls as if they were made of chalk. Each one possesses only a tenth of the Monster King's strength, but nearly the same amount of durability.

"What a scam!" Krugar, Hungry's battle-buddy, yells. "That damned Monster King's a dirty, rotten cheater!"

The battle intensifies. Kar's clones tear through the kobolds, basilisks, and demon grunts with ease. A pair of Demon Lords working under Laharl join forces to try and defeat just one of Kar's golems, but even with the combined power of wind and water, they can't break the construct's defenses. All they manage is to briefly slow it down.

Meanwhile, Kar focuses his attention on Laharl. She zips around surprisingly fast, using her arms and legs with a level of dexterity mirroring Kar. Whether in a two-legged or four-legged stance, Laharl manages to skirt around Kar while keeping a wary eye locked on him.

"Hehehe... bit unfair, isn't this? One little Baron girl against a big, strong monster like you!"

Kar's expression turns unsightly. "Hurgh. Cut the crap, tiny Cricket. If you can't take me on, then you should run away with your tail between your legs. Nobody forced you to come here."

"Don't you dare compare me to a bug, you shit-swallowing pissant!" Laharl shrieks. The Baron of Misery coils strength into her arms and legs as she prepares to pounce. "You're about to find out why they call me the Strongest Baron! Raaahh!!"

Laharl leaps at Kar from the collapsed rubble. Her body becomes a guided missile, making her travel the fifty-foot distance to her opponent in the blink of an eye.

Fwish!

She vanishes an instant before colliding with Kar's fist, then reappears between his legs.

Kar's eyes widen. "Hurgh!"

Too late, he tries to grab the Baroness, but she slashes the comparatively soft undersides of his thighs, ripping out massive chunks of flesh before vanishing a moment later.

"Aargh!" Kar howls, more angry than injured. His eyes turn bloodshot as he instantly locks onto Laharl's new position, ten feet to his right. Blood drips down his legs and splashes at his feet, mixing with the blood from his back.

"Hahaha!" Laharl cackles. She spins on her palm and rolls away, narrowly avoiding Kar's tail when he tries to swipe her. She licks Kar's blood off her fingers, her face flushing as various sexual feelings spring up in her chest. "Too slow, you tasty little gecko!"

Kar's nostrils flare, expelling the anger he felt only a moment before. His emotions return to normal as he eyeballs the Baron of Misery.

"Hurgh. Cricket seems to be teleporting, but that isn't it. An illusion? I wonder..."

Despite his muttering being barely audible, Laharl's demonic hearing allows her to pick up on the Sphinx's words.

"Everyone told me you had big brains, Sphinx-thief, but I didn't believe them! Now I see that I was wrong! You're as *sharp* as my claws! Kyahaha!"

Laharl stops laughing. Her expression turns menacing.

"If I kill you, Ose will have no choice but to make me a Duke. Why don't you be a dear and *die* for me?"

Laharl vanishes. Suddenly, she reappears behind Kar, both of her claws pulled back to impale the Sphinx's heart from behind.

Kar smirks. *As I thought.*

The Sphinx side-steps Laharl, causing her to strike nothing but air. She stabs the spot where Kar stood only a split-second earlier, missing him by a single millimeter.

"What? How?!"

Laharl jerks her eyes toward the Sphinx's new position. Time freezes as her blood runs cold.

"You're not as clever as you think," Kar rumbles. His reptilian eyes fixate on the Baron of Misery, making her feel as small as an ant.

Slap.

Slowly, almost casually, Kar backhands the Baron, sending her flying backward. She slams into a random piece of rubble, bounces off, and crashes against the ceiling. A moment later, she falls to the floor and hits it with a *thud*, dazed and confused.

"Hngh... he... how did he... see through... my illusions..."

Several of Laharl's ribs stick through her chest. Blood bubbles from inside her and spills all over the ground.

The Baron of Misery lays limp, unable to move. Her broken arms and legs make it impossible for her to flee as Kar ambles toward her without a care in the world.

"Hurgh. Stupid girl," Kar chuckles. "My wife is a fairy. Could such poorly-summoned copies fool me? Every time I spoke to you, your body was only an illusion. You vanished the moment you left my sight and made me follow your fake body with my eyes."

Kar's lighthearted tone darkens as he gazes at the haggard, broken husk at his feet.

"Even now... how stupid do you think I am? Come out. This false form will not deceive me."

Laharl stiffens. She meets Kar's gaze and grins.

"Haha. You've even figured out this much, eh?"

The Baron's figure disappears, while three other copies of herself reappear on Kar's right, left, and behind him.

"Projections, not illusions," Kar says, his smile devoid of any pleasure. "Illusions cannot interact with the physical world... but projections can. That is what makes you confident enough to attack me head-on."

Laharl's eyes flash with excitement. She watches as the Sphinx turns to face her, crosses his arms, and assumes a haughty pose.

"Hahaha... that's what I love about men like you! Yes, perfect! Big muscles, big brains!! Who could be a better slave for me than you? I'll make you my pet, crocodile! I'll make you MINE!!!"

Laharl's tongue lolls out of her mouth as she pants like a dog. Her tongue slips between the gaps in her razor-sharp teeth, giving her a wild, untamed look.

Kar glances past her, at his golems, as they continue to absolutely destroy legions of monsters.

"Hurgh... this game... it isn't any fun when my enemies are so weak."

"Don't mock me!!" Laharl shrieks. "You haven't even begun to fathom my power!"

"Oh? And have you, perhaps, grasped mine?" Kar asks.

Slowly, the Sphinx lowers his arms. He inhales deeply, relishing the smell of blood.

"Crocodiles are not like lizards..." Kar mutters.

"...my people... are predators."

Before Laharl can react, Kar lunges toward her summoned projection on his right. He moves without any preamble, without coiling strength into his legs, and without revealing his intent.

Laharl misses her chance to react. Her projection explodes as the Sphinx's fist lands with the power of a volcano. He liquefies her body, turning her into a blood-balloon that explodes and spatters its innards in a 180-degree half-sphere. By the time Laharl's other two projections realize what's happening, Kar has already leaped at the second one and raised his fist above his head, before swinging it down like a sledgehammer.

SPLAT!

Kar turns the second projection into a blood-bomb while grinning like a madman.

"Demons killed my wife!"

Kar leaps at Laharl's third projection as she jumps backward, narrowly avoiding his clutches.

"You killed my children!"

Kar claps his hands, blasting a shockwave at Laharl and flinging her against the Labyrinth's wall.

"You exterminated my species!"

Kar grabs the Baron of Misery, wrapping his giant claws around her comparatively tiny, female body.

"And today, I'll get my REVENGE!"

Kar slams her against the floor, crushing her final projection and splattering her innards a hundred feet in every direction.

Kar rears his head up and gazes at a rock three hundred feet away. There, he senses a faint, suppressed mana signature.

"Found you!"

Kar shoves his palm through the air. He opens his hand and pretends to push the boulder, using his earth manipulation powers to shove it away, where it strikes the real Laharl and flings her backward, smashing her against the Labyrinth wall.

"Aargh!" Laharl howls, her cry of pain mirroring those she drew from Kar only minutes before. "You-you can't possibly... gah!"

Laharl shoves the boulder off her body. She falls to her knees, her legs broken, as she watches the Monster King pounce toward her.

What can I do?! I didn't think a mere monster could be so powerful!!

All the blood drains from Laharl's face as the Monster King leaps at her. With her best trump cards exhausted, she hasn't a chance against the nearly unkillable Sphinx.

At that moment.

A flash of light appears in the air. A magical playing card appears, summoning an invisible mana-bubble to protect Laharl.

Slam!

Kar crashes against the force-field, full force, hitting it with the power of a stinger missile. Nevertheless, the wall holds, preventing him from killing his prey.

"Who dares?!" Kar snarls, his expression echoing an enraged lion.

"Sorry I'm late," A woman says. "I had to get Ying-Ying."

Kar jerks his head to Laharl's right, where a portal appears in midair, allowing Mara, the Baron of Games, and her sister, Ying-Ying, to emerge.

"Our backup is almost here," Mara says, as she pulls her black hood up to obscure her face. "In the meantime, you will help me kill this Sphinx."

Kar's rage slightly dims.

"Hurgh! Peaches? Blossom? Ah... that's right..."

Kar's thoughts turn inward. *Turtle erased their memories. Based on his actions, I can only assume he did not wish to kill them.*

However.

They have appeared before me now as enemies! I am sorry, Turtle, but I cannot let them hurt my pet humans.

Mara motions with her hands. She summons a magical card into midair and throws it at Laharl's body, where it slaps against her face and explodes into a flash of light. Moments later, Laharl's broken bones snap back into place, healing herself to full.

"You're lucky I came when I did," Mara says. "Any later, and my time reversal magic wouldn't have worked. Now, are you ready to assist me?"

Laharl licks her teeth. She snuffles at Mara, but bows her head. "Kss! Fine! We'll do things your way... but only this once!"

Ying-Ying leaps backward into her portal, closing it behind her. "I'm out! Won't be any use here!"

Finally, the mana-bubble preventing Kar from reaching his prey begins to crack. Spiderwebs appear on its surface as Mara's magical card fades away, giving the women mere moments to prepare.

"We have to kill the Sphinx, or hold on until the Dukes arrive!" Mara says. "And knowing our luck... those lazy bastards are going to take their time!"

Kar watches the wall, waiting until the instant before it disappears to lunge toward the women.

"Hurgh! Too bad! I'll kill you before they arrive!"

Part 232: The Sphinx's Game

Recommended Listening

The King of All Monsters, the Legendary Croco-Sphinx, Kar, leaps at the pair of demonesses the moment their shield breaks. His mountain-like shadow, formed by his ten-foot-tall height, dwarfs the pitiful Barons at his feet. They haven't a hope of defeating him.

Or so might the average person think.

Mara, having prepared for Kar's attack, holds up her arm, allowing a card to fly out of her sleeve and into her grasp.

"Wind Blade, **Evoke!**"

The card explodes with a dazzling flash of light. A split-second later, a hurricane-like gust of wind bursts out of the card's front, slams into Kar, and flings the Monster King backward. Kar yelps in surprise as his momentum reverses, causing him to smash into the wall beside the Core's double-doors.

Immediately afterward, Mara's card turns grey, having had its power drained. It fizzles away and disappears into the void, unusable again for seven hours.

Mara glances at Laharl. "Hide yourself. Wait for an opportunity."

Laharl nods. "Tch. Don't have to tell me twice."

Kar recovers immediately, but by the time he locks onto Mara's crouching form, her compatriot has already disappeared into the huge piles of rubble.

"Hurgh. Interesting. Mother has mentioned the Tarot Sect before. This fight will be a learning experience for me, Peaches."

Mara doesn't reply. The look on her face gives away how worried she is that she won't be able to defeat the Monster King, even if she puts her life on the line.

If I somehow eke out a win, Ose will surely give me enough souls to advance to the rank of Duke. I'll be able to wield at least ten cards if that happens! For now though, seven is my limit. Defeating the Sphinx is unlikely... but for the sake of my peers, I must give this battle my all!

Once again, Mara raises her arm to summon another card from her sleeve. Her motions mimic those of a street magician, making the card's summoning appear effortless. However, her actions are anything but ordinary, having spent over five thousand years honing her skills.

"Shadow Tendril, **Imbue!**"

Mara's body becomes hazy as the power of darkness swallows her whole. Her figure begins to bend and twist, copying the powers of a Shade with just a hint of Belial's stretchiness. Additionally, her activated card disappears, while a golden dot appears on her forehead.

Golden Aspects will stay imbued for ten minutes before they return to my spiritual deck. I'll need to use all of my best trump cards to defeat the Sphinx... but I also have to wear him down, first.

Mara flits toward Kar, her body shimmering through the terribly illuminated battlefield like a reaper of death. Her figure becomes indistinct as she lunges both of her arms toward the Monster King, intending to impale his organs.

Kar snorts. "Do you think I'll just stand still? Hurgh!"

The Monster King pounds his foot into the ground to summon an earthen wall. It blocks Mara's attack, but reveals a greater purpose when Kar punches it and sends the huge stone slab flying at her.

From behind the slab, Mara yells out, "Siegmund's Troll, **Summon!**"

A massive, heavily armored monster, standing twenty-feet-tall, with its head missing the ceiling by only five feet, emerges from Mara's third card. The troll squats down and uses its shoulder to block Kar's attack, causing the earthen wall to shatter harmlessly into a thousand splinters. Mara leaps atop the creature's shoulders, her shadowy forehead now bearing a blood-red dot in addition to the gold one from before.

"Siegmund's Troll! Crush the Monster King!"

Kar's reptilian eyes narrow to slits as the gigantic monster, twice his size, bellows a war-cry and stomps toward him. Each stomp of its feet sends tremors deep into the Labyrinth.

"Pretty big guy..." Kar mutters.

A harrowing battle ensues. Kar trades blows with the troll while fending off Mara's shadow-attacks. She uses her arms like lances, attempting to stab Kar from behind while the Monster King battles her summoned creature.

After three minutes, Kar finds an opening. He knocks aside the giant troll's fist, scoots under its arm, and uppercuts it smack in the middle of its chest.

Thoomph!

Kar's fist, possessing power akin to a Demon Emperor, knocks the troll off its feet while shattering its ribs. The creature tries to howl in pain, but it fails to utter a sound. All the wind flees from its lungs thanks to Kar's punch, making it unable to fight.

"Sorry, kid," Kar grunts. "War sucks. Facing me was just bad luck."

Kar scoops his claws across the dirt, summoning a powerful rock-spike to envelop his arm. An instant later, he leaps toward the troll's head.

All the color drains toward Mara's face as she tries to stop Kar's attack. "No!! You bastard!"

Kar ignores her angry screams. He impales the troll through the underside of its jaw while unleashing enough strength to rip its entire head off. A second later, the troll explodes into a flash of light, making its blood-red sigil on Mara's forehead disperse into the wind.

The Sphinx lands on his feet and whirls to face Mara. She grinds her teeth together, enraged. "You fucker! It took my sect five hundred years to craft that card, and now it's gone! I'll make you regret facing me!"

"Hurgh. Do not lecture me," Kar says. He lands on all four of his limbs and coils strength into his muscles. "You came here intent on killing my pet humans. Death will be your reward."

With a hearty bellow, Kar pounces at Mara like a jaguar. He extends his claws and prepares to rip her shadow-body in half. However, the instant before Kar lands the killing blow, Mara's enraged expression disappears, replaced instead with a smirk.

"Silly reptile. You just activated my trap card."

Kar's heart skips a beat. A massive fist, one comprised of fire and lightning, explodes from the ground underneath him. It rockets toward his body at the speed of sound and strikes him with the force of a meteor, pounding the Sphinx upward, where he crashes into the ceiling with a deafening *boom*. The card fades away, its evoked effect returning it to Mara's spiritual deck with the rest.

However, Mara's expression morphs into disbelief. *Seven devils! How did the Sphinx survive an evocation of the Thunder Giant?! That was my only Platinum Aspect!*

Kar falls from the ceiling. His body, more durable than any tank from prior to the Energy Wars, trembles with pain. He hits the dirt and coughs up blood while clutching his chest.

"H-hurgh! Hngh! Damn... hurts... hurts like hell..."

For once, the Monster King's invincible presence seems to dim. He glances at Mara with a hint of respect.

"Not... not bad, Peaches. You... you caught me... off-guard."

Mara, seeing her foe crippled before her, doesn't hesitate. Immediately, she summons another card from her sleeve. However, her expression distorts into fury.

Useless! I didn't want one of my Bronze Aspects! Not at a time like this! I need enough power to finish the Sphinx off!

Despite her anger, the Tarot Master has no choice but to activate the card. "Steel Viper, **Summon!**"

This time, a razor-sharp sword appears in Mara's grasp. Its curved appearance mirrors a scimitar, while its handle resembles a metallic snake. The bottom of the handle snaps and hisses, desperate for blood.

I need another twenty seconds before I can draw another Tarot card, Mara thinks. Until then, I'll have to make do with the remainder of my Shadow Tendril imbuelement and this Steel Viper!

Mara jumps into the air. She lunges the Steel Viper toward Kar's helpless body, forcing him to go on the defensive. Kar weakly raises his arms to bat away Mara's living blade, but it twists and bites with a mind of its own. Sometimes the sword chops and hacks into Kar's arms, while other times, its handle bites between the gaps in his scales and injects venom into his body.

However, after twenty seconds pass, Mara summons a new card. Her face brightens as its details appear in her mind.

"Temporal Cricket, **Enchant!**"

Mara's Shadow Tendrils fade away, erasing their golden dot from her forehead. However, the Steel Viper and Temporal Cricket appear instead, with a green and blue dot, respectively.

The Temporal Cricket's magic enchants the Steel Viper, giving it the effect of time dilation. Each time Mara lunges toward Kar and lands an attack, her sword strikes him thrice, making it impossible for Kar to defend.

Over and over, Mara forces Kar backward. The Sphinx roars and howls as he drags his beaten and battered body away from the Baron of Games.

The Baron's heart begins to tremble with glee. *I'm doing it! Somehow, I'm pushing the Sphinx backward! Maybe the Monster King wasn't as strong as I first thought! Maybe Laharl weakened him during their fight!*

However, even as Mara lands several gruesome attacks on the Sphinx, Kar's chest finishes regenerating, all thanks to his reptilian body.

Kar's eyes narrow, as a wicked grin spreads across his face.

"Hurgh. I hope you're not thinking this is an easy fight, Peaches."

Mara's expression falls. She draws a new card without hesitation, scowling once again at her terrible luck.

Another Bronze Aspect?! Dammit! I can't keep wasting my mana on such trivial Tarot cards!

Three times, Mara has tried to draw cards. Each time, they ended up being her weakest cards. Naturally, bronze cards might not be useful in a fight against someone like the Monster King, but even for the sect leader, filling her Spiritual Deck with nothing but silver, gold, and platinum aspects would drain the sect's resources and cost her far too much mana.

As a Baron, Mara's mana reserves fall short of any Duke or Emperor. The number and quality of the Tarot cards she can activate prove inevitably worse than if she were only one rank higher.

"Kar!" Blinker yells from above. "Are you alright?! Do you need my help?"

"No!" Kar yells. "You stay out of this. Leave these weaklings to me!"

Mara suddenly remembers the Monster Queen's existence.

That's right! If I locate Kar's wife and break her invisibility, I can capture her and use her as a weapon against him! Fairies are far too weak to be any use in combat!

Mara's thoughts inevitably turn toward the bronze-ranked card she continues to hold in her mind realm, one which she contemplated discarding only a moment before.

The Three-Eyed Gecko. It's useless against the Monster King, but against the Queen, who has only fairy magic to work with, it will prove invaluable!

"Laharl!" Mara yells. "I need you!"

The instant Laharl pokes her head up from behind a rock, Mara's gaze locks onto her.

"Three-Eyed Gecko, **Imbue!**"

A third dot appears on Mara's forehead, while the power of her card transfers to Laharl. The Baron of Misery blinks in surprise as her vision widens, allowing her to see things she couldn't before.

Having never fought alongside the Baron of Games, Laharl finds herself surprised. "What the hell's going on?"

"Grab the Monster Queen!" Mara yells. "I'll keep the Sphinx pinned down!"

Kar jumps to his feet as Mara's words inflame his anger. "I am your opponent! You will regret touching my Butterfly!"

"Oh, we'll see about that!" Laharl cackles. She quickly flicks her eyes around the room before locking onto the tiny, six-inch fairy hovering near the roof, her invisibility magic useless against the power of the gecko's peerless vision. "Found you! Eeeyah!"

Laharl shrieks with glee. She and three of her projections leap out of their hiding places and rush across the rubble, ignoring Kar completely while lunging for his wife.

"Butterfly!" Kar roars. "You stupid demons! I warned you not to touch my wife- gah!"

Kar doesn't get to finish his sentence. Mara whips out another card and activates it before attacking. "Ice Orc, **Imbue!**"

Mara jumps at Kar as a fourth dot appears on her forehead. Her muscles swell with icy power, strengthening her while chilling her surroundings to below zero.

Clang!

Kar raises his arm to deflect Mara's blow, only for her attack to nearly break his shoulder. The Monster King's joints shudder under Mara's astounding power, forcing Kar to refocus on her.

"Hurgh! Cowardly woman!"

Mara begins swinging her sword at blistering speeds, using the power of the Temporal Cricket to strike Kar five times per second. "Not cowardly! SMART!"

Over and over, Kar gets forced back by Mara's merciless onslaught. Even with her lowly Baron status, she still manages to suppress the Monster King long enough for Laharl to strike at Blinker.

"You can see me?!" Blinker yelps.

Laharl's projections pounce at the diminutive little fairy. "Haha!! I can kill you, too!!"

The Baron of Misery moves faster than a cheetah. She grabs at Blinker with the intent to crush the fairy into pulp in her grasp, only for Blinker to teleport away.

"Hm?"

Laharl misses her target. She flips in midair, bounces off the ceiling, and leaps toward Blinker's new position.

"Your tricks won't stop me!"

Laharl's three projections mirror her. They jump in different directions, intending to surround Blinker with attacks from every angle.

Blinker's expression darkens.

"Stupid woman. Don't you get it? Kar doesn't want me to interfere, not because he's afraid you'll hurt me..."

Blinker rapidly weaves ten magic signs with her fingers.

"...but because he doesn't want me to make the fight too easy. I'm the Monster Queen, dumbass! I'm strong as shit!"

Suddenly, Blinker's body explodes in size. With a flash of light, she transforms into a twelve-foot-tall fairy, one that dwarfs even Kar's size.

Laharl continues beelining toward her enemy. "Your pathetic illusions won't fool me, little fairy!"

The instant Laharl's hurtling body reaches within ten feet of Blinker's giant form, Blinker sighs.

"You're a terrible illusionist. Obviously, *I* can make projections, too."

Slap.

Blinker's arm moves at a speed too fast for the naked eye to follow. She swats Laharl out of the air like a cockroach, sending the screeching Baron of Misery hurtling toward the distant battle between Kar's golems and the enemy monster horde. Laharl crashes into a wall of Kobold corpses, making them explode into a gruesome, bloody mess. Her three projections disappear immediately afterward.

Blinker sighs. "Aw, man. It's no wonder Kar hates fighting weaklings. That wasn't fun at all!"

Blinker stomps her feet in annoyance before turning to look at her husband. Kar battles Mara, but the fight appears to have put Kar into a dangerous situation.

"*Kaaaaaar!*" Blinker whines, her giantess body summoning a booming voice. "It's not faaaaaair! Why do you get to have all the fun?!"

Mara spares a glance toward Blinker amongst her battle with Kar. Her heart skips a beat as, instead of Laharl striking a victorious pose, the Monster Queen stands in a stupidly oversized body while whining like a baby.

What the hell?! Where did Laharl go? What happened in the last ten seconds?!

Kar, 'suffering' from Mara's onslaught, casually replies. "Please, Butterfly. I am trying to enjoy myself here! I will let you play when the important demons show up!"

Mara's heart suffers a horrible blow thanks to Kar's words. "What? You're just toying with me?! Lies!"

Kar, still defending against Mara's lightspeed-sword-slashes, shrugs. "Hurgh. I... I didn't want to hurt your feelings. You were putting so much effort into our fight, after all."

With a sigh, Kar breaks character. Mara tries to slash him again, but the Monster King suddenly stands upright, twists his wrist, and grabs Mara's hand, stopping it mid-swing.

"Huh?!"

Mara, now completely baffled, tries to break free of Kar's iron-like grasp. She fails.

The Monster King blushes out of embarrassment.

"I am sorry, Peaches. It looked like you were having so much fun... so I tried to give you a good fight. Truthfully, your attacks barely hurt, but I didn't want to embarrass you in front of your friend."

Every drop of blood drains from Mara's face. She tries desperately to pull away from Kar's grasp, only to find his fingers tougher than any prison's shackles.

"You scheming bastard!" Mara howls. "Let me go! Lemme go!!"

Kar stands and watches awkwardly as the Baron of Games tries to pry his fingers off her hand. "Hurgh. Can't we all just get along?"

"Screw you!" Mara roars. She summons another card, only for her heart to skip a beat.

Yes! Chance! No matter what, if I don't break the Sphinx's grip, he'll certainly kill me in the next few seconds! I have to bet it all on this!

With her left hand entangled in Kar's grasp, Mara uses her right hand to invoke another Tarot Card. "Matured Drake, **Transform!!**"

To Mara's relief, the card doesn't instantly shatter. Thanks to its rank as a Golden Aspect, the card's value is incalculable in her eyes. Mara's body begins to rapidly shift and deform as the power of a massive half-dragon crystallizes in her veins.

"ROAAAR!"

Mara loses part of her sanity. Her body quadruples in height, turning her into a twenty-foot-tall and fifty-foot-long fire drake. Unlike the dragons of old, this one possesses only a fraction of their power.

Still, its might is fearsome to behold.

Kar releases Mara's hand and jumps back while assuming a defensive posture.

"Hurgh. It seems Peaches does not wish to be my friend."

"Kar!" Blinker yells. "Watch out! That thing looks hungry!"

Mara, having fully realized her drake form, howls at Kar while unleashing three-thousand degree flames. Kar leaps to the left, narrowly avoiding the cone of fire as it sweeps across where he stood only a moment before.

"Peaches! Please! I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings!" Kar says. "I'm sorry if my power offended you!"

"GROOOOAR!"

Mara howls in reply, confusing Kar for a second.

"Hmm. I can't tell if she's angry, or..."

"Kar! Stop talking to yourself!" Blinker says. She returns to her tiny six-inch form and rushes the matured drake while summoning magic signs. "I'll take this lady on for you!"

Kar's eyes widen. "No, Butterfly! She's my prey! Stop stealing my kills!"

The Drake battles the husband and wife combo, unleashing a fearsome power as it belches lava-like liquid flames without end. Kar smashes the drake's face, its side, and its limbs, but his attacks prove surprisingly ineffective.

"Hurgh! This creature is stronger than I thought," Kar says. "Peaches will make a formidable ally once I convert her to Turtle's side!"

Blinker explodes with a flash of light. She transforms into a four-armed gorilla, one with a head that brushes against the ceiling. She jumps atop the drake and rides it like a bucking bronco, using the narrow space and the drake's limited movements against it. After wrapping her arms around the Drake's neck, she locks it in a chokehold and grins.

"Two points for me, hubby!"

Kar waves a fist at her in frustration. "Not fair! You cheated with your fairy magic!"

"Nuh-uh! I'm just better than you!"

Mara, still a drake, struggles desperately to break free of the fairy's arm wrapped around her throat. However, she fails, and her consciousness begins to fade.

Somewhere in the back of the Baron's mind, a deep sadness appears.

I never stood a chance against the Monster King, nor his Queen.

Eventually, the drake sags in Blinker's grasp. With her mind having fallen asleep, Mara's transformation deactivates, returning her to her normal six-foot self.

Blinker climbs off Mara and gently lays the Baron of Games on the ground. After returning to her tiny fairy form, she wipes her arm across her forehead. "Whew! Using projection magic is tough! I can turn myself into anything, but it takes SO much mana!"

Blinker lands on Kar's shoulder. The Monster King kneels to check Mara's pulse and sighs. "Hurgh. You poor thing. Grumble grumble..."

"Aww, are you mad at me?" Blinker asks, batting her eyes innocently. "Cheer up! I'm sure the big, strong demons will show up soon! In the meantime, what are you going to do with little miss card-wizard here, hmm?"

Kar licks his lips. "This female has an excellent figure. Look at her hips and upper body. I think she would make a good mate."

Blinker's heart skips a beat. "What?! Kar! You can't cheat on me! You lousy, no-good jerk!"

"I meant for Turtle," Kar says, ignoring his wife's anger. "This little one would not be able to withstand my strength. If we attempted copulation, I would snap her like a twig. However, she would make an excellent bed-mate for Turtle. I say we tie her up and deliver her to him when he returns."

Blinker glances down the corridor, where the sounds of monsters fighting Kar's golems have grown distant. Already, the bodies have piled up so much that it's become hard for anyone to even make it down the hallway.

"Hmm. Nah! Jason wouldn't like that. He's a one-gal kind of guy, y'know? It would be a shame to kill such a cutie, though. Why don't we just let her go with a warning, huh?"

Kar shrugs. "Hurgh. It makes no difference to me. I didn't use even a tenth of my power against her. She will not be able to threaten me anytime soon."

However, Kar doesn't let Mara go. Instead, he binds her arms behind her with hardened dirt shackles while also covering her mouth with a gag.

"I will deliver her to our prison. Perhaps, when this war concludes, we can reform her into an ally."

Kar taps the ground, making it swallow Mara and pull her away. He sends her into the inner reaches of the Core with an earthen sign stuck to her chest.

Prisoner of war. With love, from Kar. XOXO.

"Ox-Arms will not hurt her," Kar says. He rises to his feet and dusts off his body, before finally looking into the distance. To Kar's surprise, only one of his golems continues to function. The other one lays in a heap with its body turned into sand, while the functional one has lost its left arm at some point.

"Hurgh. Return, my child. I will take over, now."

The golem stops mid-fight. Its body collapses, startling the bloodied and beaten monsters fighting it, making them wonder what the heck just happened.

Blinker cocks her head. "Where did that other Baron girl go? I slapped her pretty hard. Sure hope I didn't kill her..."

"She is fine," Kar says. "Cricket is a resilient little girl. However, her heart is evil, unlike Peaches. She is a terrible woman who has committed many atrocities. I shall kill her before the rest of her ilk arrive- hm?"

Kar pauses. He glances into the distance, past his fallen golems, into the deepest recesses of the Labyrinth's darkness.

There, the Monster King detects the slowly approaching signature of two Demon Dukes, multiple Barons, and fifty different Lords.

"Ah. It seems our enemies have decided to stop playing around. Butterfly, I will be counting on you for this next wave."

Blinker flops on Kar's shoulder and sighs. "Fine! Just lemme get a few minutes of shuteye, alright? Using all that magic really tuckered me out."

"Hurgh. Do as you please."

Two miles away, just out of the Monster King's sight, Bael and Artorias begin slowly trudging toward the Core. Orias, Vepar, and the Battle Brothers follow, along with a massive contingent of other demons.

"Dumbasses," Bael mumbles. "That's why they should've waited for us. Now Mara and Laharl have gone and gotten their asses beat."

Artorias's temper flares. "What worthless creatures these new, young demons are. Back in my day, a demon knew the meaning of respect! We knew to wait for orders from our Dukes and Emperors!"

"Yeah, yeah," Bael groans. "You sound like an old coot, Arty-boy. Long as you'n me are around, that Chump King's gonna go down. Let the kids have their fun. That's how they learn the important lessons in life."

Bael glances to his right, at Vepar's shriveled, rotting face.

"Like you, girl! You've been around long enough ta' know better'n fighting Monster Kings on your own. Ain't that right?"

Vepar hisses in annoyance. "Kss. Yes."

"Bahaha! You've screwed up plenty o' times. Remember when you fought that one Archangel gal by yourself? What was that broad's name again...?"

"Uzziel..." Vepar growls.

"Right! That one! Damn, the tits on our spirit momma! Bahahaha! She just about turned you inside out during that bigass war in heaven. Bet you learned a few life lessons that day."

"...Indeed."

Vepar's muted reaction echoes the sentiments of all the non-Duke demons. Thanks to their enhanced senses, all of them have witnessed the battle between the Monster King and his Baron opponents. The nervousness spread across all the gathered demons could freeze a glass of water solid.

Bael ignores the nervous expressions on his comrade's faces. However, when he glances past Vepar at the two demons trailing them, his laughter dies off.

"Hey. What's the matter with you guys, eh? I thought you'd be pumped and ready to kick ass."

Bael's gaze settles on Zamiel and Duriel, the Battle Brothers. Neither of them speaks. Instead, a look of acceptance appears on their faces, as if they've already discounted the upcoming war as nothing more than an annoyance.

Zamiel, the older, shorter brother, shrugs. "Yeah. We've got a buncha stuff on our mind, Big Bael. Actually, we were thinkin' of holdin' off on our attack. We should stay back and let you guys handle the early stuff."

Bael's eyes bulge out of his head. "Huh?? Since when are you two the types of guys to get cold feet? I don't get it! What gives?"

Zamiel scratches his head. "Eh, I dunno. We, uh, we went drinking last night, had a little too much ganja juice. Don't feel like going out there 'til our stomachs settle, y'know?"

Bael glances at Artorias. The Duke of Steel shrugs, not caring whether a couple of cowards come or stay.

"Let them stay behind if they want. I'd prefer they come, but half-hearted comrades will prove just as dangerous as enemies during this war."

"True, true," Bael says with a nod. "Aight. You punks can stay back if you want. I'll be real disappointed if ya don't come soon, though."

Duriel and Zamiel slow their pace and allow the rest of the demons to pass them. They nod at Bael. "Yep. We'll show up when the time's right, Duke of Pain. *Don't you worry about that.*"

Eventually, the Battle Brothers lose sight of Bael and the rest of the invading army. Both brothers sigh in annoyance and trot off down a side hallway, unable to contain their frustrations any longer.

"Dammit," Duriel growls. "Why's the boss doin' this to us?! We've got a prime opportunity to carve the last crocodile to pieces! Think of how much stronger we'll become if we get a piece of that punk!"

Zamiel leans against a wall and watches as more demons continue filing down the adjacent corridor, all of them slowly increasing their speed as they near the Core.

"I'm sure the boss has his reasons, little bro. We've gotta follow his orders, and that's all there is to it. Do you want him to turn us into ghouls?"

Duriel crosses his arms. The giant tilts his chin up haughtily as he speaks. "No! But I don't wanna be someone's bitch either! I make fleshbags my bitches! That's how things are 'sposed to work!"

Suddenly, a figure emerges from the wall to Zamiel's right, startling both brothers. "Oh? Have my termsss caussed you ssssome minor lossseeee? You poor thingsss..."

Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, slithers out of the wall to hover in the corridor between the Battle Brothers and the approaching army.

"Foolsss... how dare you quesstion me. Where you would be without my giftsss, hm?!"

Zamiel and Duriel stare evenly at the Duke of Mist. The older brother, Zamiel, is the first to speak. "Look, we ain't goin' against you, boss! We just wanna know... what's the deal?! Let us rip that fat croc to pieces! You know we've got what it takes to off the bastard!"

"Yeah, what big bro said!" Duriel adds.

Mephisto shakes his head. "Ksss. Thisss iss why you follow my orderssss, ssilly little Baronsss... you would ruin all of my hard work over nothing!"

Mephisto hovers closer to Zamiel. His skeletal expression turns menacing as he curls up the corners of his mouth. "The Monssster King'sss body will be my greatesst acquirement sssince I losst my dragon. Think of it! With hisss body, I will possseeee enough ssstrength to forcce my way into the Emperor ranksss. Perhapsss, with hisss ssstrength, towardsss Ossse, I can even..."

Mephisto trails off. His eyes turn bloodshot as an evil Cheshire grin spreads across his face.

"...ksss! If Ossse ssshould sstumble upon an 'accident' in the future, wouldn't it be dreadful if I ssseized her body for myssself, hmm? Kekeke!"

Duriel and Zamiel glance at each other and nod approvingly.

"Damn, that's why you're the boss, boss!" Duriel says. "You're totally the smartest guy around here!"

"Yeah, pretty smart," Zamiel concedes. "Alright. We'll follow your lead then. I guess we've gotta catch the Sphinx when he's all alone, right? What if someone kills him before we can get to him?"

Mephisto laughs. "Kekeke! How could Bael or Artoriasss kill the Sssphinx? He hasss yet to unleasssh hisss true power! We mussst let the Dukesss wear the Sssphinx down... and then we ssshall ssswoop in and kill him with one blow!"

This time, it's the Battle Brothers who sport evil grins. "Haha. You're devious, boss. That's why we follow you. Nothing quite like the element of surprise. Maybe we'll use that croc's corpse as a fuck-toy for a while before you 'rez him, eh? Bahahaha!"

Mephisto waves his hand nonchalantly. "If fun iss what you desssire, fun iss what I'll give you... kekeke!"

The Duke of Mist fades into the wall, leaving the Battle Brothers behind by their lonesome.

"Well, guess we're gonna be waiting a while," Zamiel grunts. "What say we play some Sticks and Bones, eh, bro?"

"Hell yeah!"

Part 233: The Dukes' Onslaught

Bael, Artorias, Vepar, and Orias join hands with countless other demons. They walk down the blood-soaked corridor leading to the Labyrinth Core, all while passing the bodies of thousands of dead demons and monsters. Kar's golems, each wielding only a quarter of his power, still possess more than enough strength to handle the weakest dregs of demon society.

The Duke of Pain sweeps his gaze past dozens of dead friends he barely recognizes. His expression turns grim as he sighs. "Damn shame. Should've sent me in from the start."

Artorias shakes his head. "No. The humans managed to capture Beelzebub. Ose can gather intel behind enemy lines via her Astral Form, but she can't be everywhere at once. Who knows what devious capture methods they've planned for you?"

Bael chuckles. "Let 'em try. Humans have nabbed me lots of times. Can't ever keep me locked down, though. Can't torture me for intel. Can't hide me. Can't kill me. They're better off aiming for you or miss Ice Queen."

"Yes. That's what worries me."

Artorias falls silent. The black-metal-clad Duke of Steel walks side-by-side with Bael, leading their troops forward without hesitation. Soon, they arrive at a point where the bodies thicken to ten times their previous density. Six powerful golems stand at the ready, each one mirroring Kar's appearance. The stand with their arms and legs spread apart, as if taunting their enemies and daring them to attack.

Bael yawns. "Ahh, geez. Arty-boy, you take care of these things. If I get any more bored, I'll fall asleep."

"Hmph. Everyone, stay back," Artorias says. "You heard the Duke of Pain. These clay sculptures are mine to kill."

Kar's golems leap toward the demon army, making several of the weaker demons tremble with fear. They know they wouldn't stand a chance against these earthen creations, since not even the vanguard could handle them.

However, Artorias doesn't flinch. He presses his boot against the ground and rushes forward while weaving magical signs.

"Once, I was known as the Baron of Earthquakes. My earth manipulation was unparalleled across all of creation. Now, my powers have only strengthened after merging with my brother, foolish Monster King!"

Heaps of dirt jump from the Labyrinth's floor and attach to Artorias's arms, before hardening and solidifying into stone. Thanks to the power of transmutation, Artorias shifts their elemental structure into a far more durable and resilient material.

Crack!

Artorias's fist strikes the nearest golem. He pulverizes Kar's doppelganger into powder, spraying its body over a hundred feet into the distance.

Again and again, Artorias punches the golems, using his overwhelming power to crush them with ease. Each strike turns them into mud, rock, or granite fragments.

Within less than a minute, Artorias finishes. The remains of Kar's golems lay spread out all over the Labyrinth floor, making his allies whoop and cheer.

"Hell yeah! That's Artorias for ya!"

"Damn, isn't he overpowered? He might be the new strongest Duke!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Artorias is a badass, but he can't win against Bael."

"Eh, I don't know... Bael seems invincible, but if he has to fight the Duke of Steel..."

Several demons lower their voices, not wanting to piss either of the Dukes off. However, Bael and Artorias both possess incredibly sharp hearing. They ignore the ranting of their younger comrades who can't help but feel excited when witnessing Duke-level strength.

In the end, all demons desire power, Artorias thinks. It is in our blood to envy the strong.

Artorias kicks aside the remains of the final golem and marches down the hall once again. After hopping over the mounds of dead monsters blocking his path, he finally draws close enough to see the Monster King and Queen.

Kar stands upright, with one hand casually gripping the back of Laharl's neck. The unconscious demoness hangs limp at Kar's side like a sack of groceries.

"Hurgh. Metal-mouth," Kar growls. "We meet again."

Artorias pauses to allow the other demons to catch up. Bael hops the heap of bodies, as do Orias, Vepar, and the other demons following them.

"Last time we fought, I broke your body worse than I broke your spirit," Artorias says. "That was a year ago. It seems you've become stronger since then."

Kar nods. "I have. Hurgh. If you fight me here, I will not go easy on you. I will crush you, just as I did to Hotface, Peaches, and Cricket. Turn around and leave, little Duke."

"You might have gained a modicum of strength," Artorias says, his eyes tightening into a glare, "but against me, you'll still fall. My control over the earth will always exceed yours."

"So you say," Kar growls. He flicks his wrist, sending Laharl flying forward. The unconscious demoness crashes to the ground at Artorias's feet. "Here. I had to pick up your trash. Don't make me do it again."

Artorias's glare dims. He nudges Laharl with his foot. "Oh? You didn't kill the Baron of Misery. That seems very unlike you."

Kar crosses his arms. "Hurgh. Killing a defenseless female, especially one who is so weak, just doesn't sit right with my heart. Next time, I will not show such mercy."

Artorias nods. "Noted, but I'll make sure there is no next time, Sphinx. Warpers, send Laharl to the healing pits."

A demoness emerges from behind Bael. The beautiful young woman clutches her hands to her chest as she stares at Kar with trembling eyes. "Y-yes, Artorias. You! Monster King! Where is my sister?! What did you do to her?"

Kar's gaze lowers to the demoness wearing a Chinese-style dress. "Ah. Blossom. Do not worry. Peaches is uninjured. I merely captured her. I would never kill a woman if I didn't need to."

"Captured?! You gave my sister to the fleshbags?!" Ying-Ying exclaims. Her expression turns pained. "Bastard! Those animals will tear her apart! They'll rip her clothes off and defile-"

"Warper. *Silence.*" Artorias says. His voice cuts Ying-Ying off mid-sentence, preventing her from speaking. Immediately, Ying-Ying remembers her place and bows her head. "Yes, Duke of Steel. I'm... I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be efficient. Follow my orders and *get out of the way.*"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Ying-Ying's anger disappears, replaced instead with fear. When her eyes meet the fierce, glowing red orbs of the Duke of Steel, any thoughts of protesting vanish. His demonic aura, strengthened after countless millennia of struggling against the Archangel Uriel, proves even more overpowering than Bael's.

Without another word, Ying-Ying opens a portal, grabs Laharl, and drags her inside. The portal closes, leaving the invaders to finally face off against their monstrous enemy.

Bael chuckles. "We'll stay back and let you have some fun, Arty-boy. Take this punk down a peg."

Artorias shakes his head. "No. We will crush the Sphinx today. Operation Stormbringer hinges on his death. Everyone... attack at once! Just like I drilled you! Hold nothing back, and kill our enemies!"

"Roar!"

A series of battlecries bursts out behind Artorias. Countless demons and monsters pound their chests, summon fireballs, and ready themselves for battle.

Bael sighs. "Cripes. Ain't no fun attacking all at once."

Recommended Listening.

Kar's body transforms into a tornado of terror. He spins forward on his heel to swing his foot down like a hammer into the Labyrinth floor. A bomb-like explosion detonates in front of him, flinging a maelstrom of earthen bullets at his enemies.

Artorias offers a retort. He jumps toward Kar while thrusting out both of his palms, using his powers to halt Kar's earth manipulation in its tracks. Kar's bullets freeze in midair and fall harmlessly to the Labyrinth's floor.

Behind Artorias, dozens of Burner grunts lob fireballs overhead, aiming to scorch the Monster King to a crisp. Harpies fly to the ceiling and attach their clawed feet to the ripped-up, jagged remnants of what

was once its smooth surface. They fire demonstone arrows at Kar, each one capable of penetrating a tank's steel armor.

Kar, unable to protect himself from the incoming onslaught, relies on his wife. Blinker summons an illusory wall above Kar's head and uses her projection abilities to solidify it. Despite her magical prowess, the arrows still manage to rip through her projections, but she slows their speed enough that they bounce harmlessly off Kar's scales.

Over and over, the enemy monsters and demons combine their strength to attack the Monster King and Queen from all directions. Kar trades blows with Artorias, only for Bael to join in. The two Dukes, each the pinnacle of power for non-Emperors, assault Kar relentlessly from his left and right. The Sphinx deflects punches, dodges kicks, and shrugs off projectiles, all without batting an eye.

Vepar transforms into poison fog. She swarms the Monster King with highly corrosive, acidic gas, forcing him to retreat. Kar coughs violently, vomiting blood as he tries to blink the mucus out of his eyes.

"Kah! Shitty demons! Pathetic cowards!"

However, despite his complaints, Kar can't help but notice Artorias's attacks weakening. Driven back by Vepar's poisonous gas, Artorias hesitates to join the fray, while Bael ignores the acrid gas entirely. His immunity to poison allows him to shrug off 100% of Vepar's most lethal toxins with ease.

"Having trouble breathing?" Vepar cackles, her voice emanating from the gas. "Perhaps you need a breather? Pahaha!"

Despite the pain in his lungs, Kar smiles. "Cough, cough. How fearsome! It seems I'll have to use half of my strength against you bullies!"

Suddenly, Kar lunges toward Bael, startling the Duke of Pain. The crocodile's muscles explode with power, allowing him to deliver a mighty uppercut to Bael's chin. The First Duke screams in disbelief as his Sphinx opponent pounds him into the ceiling, knocking the Harpies loose. They yelp in surprise before reorienting themselves and reattaching to the roof.

Artorias's heart skips a beat. *So strong!*

Just as Kar turns to face Artorias, a mysterious figure appears in his blind spot, crouched down with a fist at the ready.

Crack!

The shadow-shrouded demon blasts Kar in the ribs with a mighty punch, sending the Sphinx tumbling to the side. "Aargh!"

Kar crashes against the side-wall, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Artorias smiles. "Excellent work, Orias."

The Baron of the Stars, Orias, clutches a blood-red Ruby in his fist. "If that Sphinx lands a punch, I'll die. This is all I can do."

Artorias nods without replying. He dashes toward Kar, using his earth manipulation to glide along the ground like a roller-blader. Artorias scoops his hands into the ground and grabs two balls of dirt. They

transform into tightly compacted pebbles, adding a tremendous amount of mass to Artorias's arms.

Boom!

Artorias punches Kar's body, sending a cataclysmic tremor throughout the Labyrinth. Behind the Core's entrance, the assembled humans howl in fear as chunks of the ceiling plummet down and crash against the floor, killing dozens who couldn't evade the falling debris.

Thanks to the pebbles, Artorias manages to exert far more strength than usual. He puts enough power into his strike to pulverize the Monster King into bone-paste.

However, as the dust settles, Artoria's eyes widen.

"What? He's not here? I know I struck him!"

The Monster King no longer lays against the wall. His body, having somehow disappeared, leaves Artorias stunned.

"An illusion? Did the Monster Queen turn her husband invisible at the last second? Was the body I saw merely a projection?"

"What are you guys waiting for?" A voice yells out from behind Artorias. The Duke of Steel whirls around, only to see *himself* standing a short distance away. The false Artorias points at the real one and shouts, "That damn Monster King is trying to trick us! Hurgh! Get him!"

Artorias blinks in disbelief. "What? No! You're a fake! You're- ulp!"

A hail of demonstone arrows and fireballs suddenly rushes toward Artorias, startling him. He raises his hands to summon a barrier, only to blink in confusion.

His arms, no longer coated in blackened demonstone armor, now appear green and scaly.

"Spawn of a broodmother! That fairy must have used her illusion magic to make me- aaaargh!"

Countless fireballs and demonstone arrows blast Artorias, engulfing him in flames and armor-piercing projectiles. Unlike Kar, who had Blinker's barrier to slow the arrows' speed, Artorias has no such protection. Most of the arrows bounce off his demonstone plating, but several find the gaps in his armor and drive deep into the Duke of Steel's flesh.

"You- you fools!" Artorias howls, his voice a perfect facsimile of Kar's. "That fairy is tricking you! Stop shooting!"

"Keep shooting!" Kar yells. "Hurgh! We've got that handsome crocodile on the ropes!"

Artorias summons an earthen wall in front of himself, but thanks to the Burners' fireballs, it quickly melts to slag and offers little resistance against the harpies' arrows. Frustrated, the Duke of Steel dives underground and uses his earth manipulation to swim toward Kar.

Meanwhile.

Bael, the Duke of Pain, watches as his idiot comrades attack the so-called Monster King.

"Huh. That's weird... Arty went over there to attack the Sphinx, but then only the Sphinx was left, and Arty-boy popped back over here again. That don't make no sense."

A dull sensation appears in the back of Bael's mind. Groggily, he tries to reactivate the thinking centers of his brain. However, the long-underused areas take a while to warm up, making his mouth loll open and drool.

Suddenly, Bael snaps back to attention. "Huh. Wait, doesn't that mean this Arty-boy over here's a fake?"

Bael turns his attention to the fake Artorias, who continues to yell and pump his fists like an idiot. "Hurgh! We've got that gorgeous reptile on the run, boys! Good work! I'm proud of you!"

Bael blinks.

"...nah. Sounds exactly like Arty-boy. How could he be a fake? I must be imagining things."

Suddenly, Artorias bursts out of the ground. Having disengaged from Blinker's line of sight when swimming underground, his illusory appearance vanishes, revealing the appearance of two Artorias's.

Bael takes a step back in surprise. "Wha...? Oh! Shit! Everyone, one of these Arty-boys is a fake!"

Vepar materializes beside Kar. "Which one, Duke of Pain?"

Bael glances at the Artorias on the left. He summons dirt to coat his arms and fires a devastating punch at the Artorias on the right. The Artorias on the right laughs like an idiot. "Hurgh! Now we're having fun!"

The Artorias on the left scowls like the Devil. "You damned face-stealer! I'll make you pay!"

"I liked you better when you had scales," The Artorias on the right says. "Now you're as ugly as me!"

They continue trading blows, making Bael sigh.

"Not a clue. They're exactly the same."

"What?!" Vepar screeches. "The one on the right is the fake! How can you not tell?!"

"Dunno. You're pretty smart though, so I'll just go along with what you say."

With a shrug, Bael lunges toward the Artorias on the right and punches him in the shoulder. The Duke of Pain strikes Kar so hard that his brain rattles in his skull, sending the Monster King crashing into the debris field blocking the Core's doors.

"About time!" Artorias snaps. "How did you fools not realize he was a fake?!"

Bael shrugs. "He sounded exactly like you, Arty-boy."

"He sounded nothing like me!" Artorias bellows, exasperation in his voice. "You're just an idiot!"

Bael nods. "I get that a lot."

Both Dukes turn to look at Kar's body, laying in the debris field. Suddenly, from behind them, a quivering in the ground makes both Dukes whirl to face an unexpected threat. Kar bursts out of the Labyrinth's floor with two fists raised.

CRACK!

The Monster King pummels both Dukes, flinging them toward his 'body' laying in the rubble. It disappears as they arrive, vanishing into mist.

Artorias and Bael crash into the collapsed ceiling fragments, but the impact barely hurts them.

"Again, that fairy caught me with her illusions!" Artorias yells. He leaps out of the rubble and lands on his feet a short distance from Kar. He searches the sky for Blinker, but she hides herself with invisibility, making her impossible to locate.

"Fairies... grr! I hate tricksters! I hate cowards who hide behind- hm?"

Artorias pauses.

In the back of his mind, several gears click into place.

Something's not right. Illusions can make people disappear into their surroundings, but they can't teleport people from one place to another.

I struck the Sphinx earlier and sent him crashing into the sidewall. How could he have disappeared when I had my eyes on him the whole time? Even with the dust obscuring him, there's no way he had enough time for the Monster Queen to hide his body, replace him with a fake, and allow him to slip past me.

That can only mean...

Artorias's gaze grows cold.

Temporal Magic. The Monster Queen must possess high-level temporal magic, just like the reigning fairy queens. Whatever method the Sphinx used to strengthen himself, it must have broken his wife's limiter.

Artorias glances toward the ceiling, as anger clouds his vision.

Tricky. I underestimated the Monster Royals. They're stronger than I ever could have imagined.

Kar stands with his back to the demon army. He faces the two Dukes as they climb out of the rubble blocking the Core's entrance and dust themselves off.

"Hurgh. At this rate, I may have to use all of my strength if I aim to make you weaklings vanish."

"Cut the crap," Bael grunts. "Stop holding back. I'm not even having fun, bub. Are you going to use your Sphinx Form or what?!"

Kar's eyes ignite with a fierce hunger.

"Hehe. No. I won't waste my trump card on trash like you. Instead, how about something better?"

Kar takes a step forward, causing Bael and Artorias to flinch. Then, he slams his fists into the ground and rips up a massive chunk of dirt. Artorias readies himself for the Monster King to fling the one-ton boulder at him and Bael, but Kar doesn't.

Instead, the Sphinx uses his earth manipulation to liquefy the boulder into mud, covering his body like a gooey syrup. Seconds later, it hardens into a rock-like substance, mimicking Artorias's feat from earlier.

Artorias snorts. "A little extra armor, hm? What could you possibly hope to achieve with such a pathetic layer of defense?"

Kar doesn't answer. Instead, he further refines the rock-armor, hardening it to a level beyond Artorias's expectations.

Artorias's smug smile vanishes, and a look of disbelief replaces it. "Crystallization? How has the Monster King achieved such a legendary level of transmutation?!"

"Huh?" Bael grunts. "Wassat?"

Artorias's eyes widen. Kar's crystalline armor eventually turns transparent as it becomes solid and diamond-like, allowing his enemies to glimpse his reptilian scales underneath.

"Adjusting the earth's elemental bonds to such a level... I thought it wasn't achievable! The amount of control needed to tighten the molecular structure was supposed to be only theoretically possible!"

Kar smiles. He finishes covering his body in diamond armor and flexes his muscles. "Hurgh. It may not be demonstone, but it's the next best thing. Come at me, if you dare."

Artorias jerks his head toward the gawking spectators. "Burners! Harpies! Don't just stand there! Launch everything you've got! Don't hold back!"

His orders, absolute, cause a wave of attacks to fire at Kar once again.

The Sphinx shakes his head. "Using all of my power... it will result in a boring victory... but at least I will protect my pet humans. Hurgh."

Part 234: A Shocking Development

Glistening diamond armor engulfs Kar from head to toe. The Croco-Sphinx somehow appears twice as massive as before, despite not gaining an inch of height, making all his enemies shudder at the thought of fighting him.

All except for Bael.

"Eh? I don't get it. Why'd that mud turn into glass? Seems kinda flimsy ta' me."

Bael's question goes unanswered. A storm of arrows and fireballs falls from the sky and crashes against the Monster King's body, bouncing off him like water droplets against a window. The Sphinx's diamond armor shines from the firelight, giving him the visage of a demigod.

Kar coils strength into his legs. "Hurgh. I will hold nothing back, Metal-mouth, Thick-skin. You both will fall today!"

With a burst of speed, Kar shoots forward, his fist held at the ready. He swings it like a hammer against Artorias's head and pounds the Duke of Steel away before he can prepare himself. The Crocodile's lightning-like movements are both quick and unpredictable, making his fists impossible to dodge. A second later, he switches targets to Bael.

Bael tries to block the Sphinx's swift punches, but Kar counters with a tail-swipe, sweeping Bael's legs and knocking him to the ground. An instant later, he delivers ten punches to the Duke of Pain's head, throat and chest, summoning shockwaves to knock the nearby Barons and Lords off their feet.

Vepar turns into poison gas. She tries to suffocate Kar, only to find her toxins doing nothing to the Sphinx. Kar lunges toward the wall of gathered demons, making them scream in terror as his fist blasts ten of them into the roof.

"What the devils?!" Vepar hisses. "Choke, you damned reptile! Choke! Why isn't my poison doing anything?!"

Kar summons an earthen warhammer. He smashes it across the face of some unknown Baron, shattering the demon's skull with a single blow and flinging him down the corridor.

"Hurgh. Stupid Gassy-ass. I am King of the Reptiles. Your poison is little more than a tickle to He Who Walks with Snakes."

Vepar tries burrowing into Kar's nostrils, but even when she succeeds, Kar's breathing doesn't change at all.

"Nonsense! Earlier, I had you vomiting blood!"

Kar's warhammer smashes straight down onto a fireball-wielding Burner demon, crushing the monster into a bloody pulp. "Hurgh. You were easy to deceive. My wife's illusions always fool the stupid."

"Who are you calling stupid?! You rat bastard! Aaaargh!!!"

Vepar retreats to a corner of the room and returns to her physical form. Her breathing comes in fitful gasps, not due to fatigue, but because of pure, unbridled rage.

She watches helplessly as the Monster King battles many of demonkind's strongest warriors. He shatters their bodies, breaks their minds, and leaves them lying dead in the dirt. Ten thousand demons perish within minutes, even after Artorias and Bael rejoin the fight.

"How? How can the Monster King be so powerful?!" Vepar screeches. "Monsters are inferior to demons! That's how it's always been! That's how it's supposed to be!!"

While Vepar yells and stomps her feet, a tiny flicker of movement above her goes unnoticed. Blinker, the Monster Queen, rolls her eyes.

"That's what you get for stereotyping, dummy..."

Blinker motions with her hands, summoning five invisible fists around Vepar. Before the Baron of Toxicity can react, the fists solidify and lunge at her, catching the demoness offguard. They strike her head, chest, and back all at once, spinning her around at dizzying speeds before slamming her against the dirt. Seconds later, her body crumples into the corner, a broken mess.

Crunch.

"Aahhh... aaaah..."

Vepar, failing to keep her wits about her, falls to Blinker's sneak attack. The Monster Queen no longer worries about protecting Kar from the demons' artillery. Instead, she goes on the offense, using all her power to help Kar kill demons twice as fast.

Bael ducks one of Kar's fists. He grins evilly as he readies himself to fire a punch off at the Monster King's stomach.

Suddenly...

Foop!

Bael teleports. He reappears behind his comrade, Artorias, with his fist still in mid-swing. Unable to stop himself, Bael blasts Artorias in the ribs and sends the Duke of Steel hurling to his left, where he crashes into the Labyrinth's sidewall.

Bael blinks. "Huh? What the heck? Why'd I punch Arty-boy?"

A lightbulb activates in Bael's head.

"Ohhh! That sneaky fairy!"

He jumps toward Artorias's collapsed body.

"Thinkin' you could fool me. Heh. I'm too smart for that."

Artorias, still reeling from Bael's punch, feels his blood turn cold as the Duke of Pain raises his fist.

"Wait, Bael! What are you doing?! You imbecile! It's me-"

Bael grins.

"Not gonna fool me this time, mister Sphinx!"

BLAM!

Bael decks Artorias in the face, nearly snapping the Duke of Steel's neck.

"Haha! You think I don't know what you're up to? Tryin' ta' make it seem like your wifey turned you into Arty-boy. Nuh-uh, buster! I see through your tricks!"

Bael, strangely proud of himself, begins to whistle merrily as he beats the ever-loving crap out of his buddy, Artorias.

Several seconds later, Bael frowns.

"Huh! That's weird. You'd think by now he'd turn back into a crocodile."

With a shrug, Bael continues punching Artorias's face into a mass of black and blue welts.

"Bah! Fairy magic is so tricky these days! Can't be too careful."

A flash of movement appears at Bael's left. Orias, the Baron of the Stars jumps over and grabs Bael's waist. "Bael! Stop! You're killing Artorias!"

Bael pauses. "Huh? Nah, don't be stupid! This guy's a fake. It's the Monster King! He tried to trick me by turning into Arty-boy. Heh. Seems you fell for his tricks."

Bael crosses his arms and smirks with far too much confidence. "Yeah. Guess I outsmarted all of ya today."

Orias rubs his face in frustration. "No, Duke of Pain! No! Look, over there! THAT guy is the Sphinx!"

He points toward the giant reptile crushing a bunch of demons with his warhammer. Bael follows Orias's gaze, only to smirk even more deeply.

"Dumbass. That ain't him. The fairy lady made Arty-boy look like that. It's all part of her evil game to turn us against each other."

"No! It IS the Sphinx!" Orias exclaims. "Why would Artorias kill other demons?!"

It takes more than a minute, but eventually, Orias breaks through to Bael.

"Oh, shit! Shit, shit, shit!" Bael curses. He leans over and grabs Artorias's knocked-out form. "Yo, Arty-boy! Wake up! Are you still alive?! Aw, jeez, now I've done it."

Artorias mumbles something incoherent before falling comatose.

"Huh? I didn't catch that, Arty-boy! Argh... never mind!"

With a deep grumble, Bael turns to Orias.

"Can you help me? I dunno if I can beat the Monster King all by myself."

"I'll try," Orias replies. "I've landed a few blows on him so far, but my strength isn't even enough to dent his armor. At most, I might be able to restrain him a little or slow him down."

Bael's gaze lifts to Orias's forehead, where a beautiful, multicolored rainbow gem sits wedged right in the middle of his noggin.

"What if you used Big Bertha?"

Orias scowls. "What if *you* turned into the Balrog?"

"Alright, alright, I get it. Sheesh."

Bael flexes his muscles. He jumps away from Orias while yelling, "Never mind! You get Vepar and take her outta here! I'll wreck this croco-punk myself!"

The Duke of Pain leaps atop the Sphinx, catching Kar by surprise. He crashes into Kar with all 400 pounds of his body weight and wraps around him like a professional MMA wrestler.

"Hey!" Kar snarls. "Get off me!"

Bael sticks out his tongue. "Pblt! Make me, shithead!"

"Fine!"

Kar leaps backward and throws himself against the wall, trying to batter Bael unconscious. The Duke of Pain barely notices the impact.

"Hah! Weak! Take this!"

Bael clobbers Kar over the back of the head, making Kar's ears ring. "Hurgh! Get off me, Thick-skin!"

"I won't!" Bael says. "Now, take this!"

Whap!

Bael slaps Kar silly, making the Monster King reel in pain.

"Hurgh! Butterfly! A little help, please?"

Blinker's voice rings out above Kar. "Oh, sure, NOW you want my help! Maybe I should let you get your kicks in, mister big, strong croco-man! Hmph!"

"Butterfly, please! Ow, stop that!"

Kar twists his body and thrashes from side to side, using his crocodilian Death Roll ability to its fullest extent, but not even that manages to throw Bael off his back.

"Fine, I'll help!" Blinker says, a tinge of pride in her voice. "But from now on, you have to call me Empress!"

"Hurgh. Deal!"

Satisfied, Blinker begins motioning with her hands to teleport Bael off Kar's back.

However, at that moment, with a flicker of movement, a familiar demoness appears before Kar.

"How insufferable. It seems I have to do everything around here *myself*."

Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, flits in into existence before Kar, her fist coiled and ready to spring.

Blinker's eyes flash with recognition. "Wait, no!"

BOOM!

Ose's fist crashes against Kar's chest like an atom bomb. Her punch, infused with the power of an Emperor and the speed of lightning, accelerates to a thousand times the speed of sound. She strikes Kar so hard that the shockwave slams Blinker against the wall, instantly knocking the Monster Queen out.

Bael, still attached to Kar, pounds the side of the Labyrinth at over ten thousand miles an hour. Even with his nigh-invincibility, the Duke of Pain hasn't a chance of anticipating Ose's strike. He and Kar rip apart at the moment of impact. Kar bounces off Bael's body and flies forward, his head rushing toward Ose's already recoiled fist.

"Again." Ose murmurs.

BOOM!

A second punch blasts Kar's face. The Monster King flies to his left, crashes against the wall, and drags across it for more than a mile, carving a three-foot-deep crevasse all the way down the Labyrinth's hallway.

Seconds later, everything falls silent.

Bael, dazed and confused, staggers to his feet. His left arm hangs limp at his side, broken by Ose's punch. With his head reeling from dizziness, Bael stumbles like a drunken sailor toward Ose.

"Blurgh... oh, hell... think I'm gonna barf..."

Ose pants like a dog. Sweat drips off every inch of her body. Her uniform, now soaked with perspiration, dribbles ceaselessly.

"Hah... hah... shit. You... you damned, fat, lazy bastard! I broke my arms punching that fucking crocodile!" Ose bellows. "You call yourself the strongest Duke?! Pathetic! Gah... my entire body aches, now, and it's all because of you!"

Bael nods dumbly. He glances down the pitch black corridor, past the dazed and confused demons who were flung aside by Ose's punch. There, in the darkness, he barely makes out the motionless form of Kar's body.

"...You got him? Damn, toots. You've got a hell of an arm."

"Oh, shut up," Ose snaps. She turns to walk toward the Sphinx, only to pause midstride. She twists her head down to look at the unconscious Monster Queen.

"Right, the *pest*. Can't let her leave here alive."

Ose's hand darts toward Blinker like a viper. She grabs the fairy and squeezes with all her strength, intending to crush Blinker into meat-paste.

However, Ose's grip proves incredibly weak. After punching the heavily-armored Monster King, every one of her fingers creaks and groans, sending sparks of agony up her arm. "Aargh! Damn! Bael, kill this cockroach for me. I need to finish off the crocodile."

Without waiting for a reply, Ose drops Blinker on the ground and trudges off into the distance, leaving Bael behind.

The Duke of Pain watches her for a few seconds before lowering his gaze to the unconscious fairy at his feet.

"Uhh... wait, does Ose want me to kill the little lady?"

Bael gently reaches down and scoops up Blinker. He stares at her barely breathing body for a few moments and sighs.

"Man. Fairies are cute. It's no wonder the croc married one. Lucky bastard."

Bael pokes Blinker's face.

"Hey. Hey, you. Little lady. You alive?"

Blinker doesn't respond, making Bael scratch his head.

"Aw, heck. I can't just kill a broad. She can't even fight back! Besides, that Sphinx chump let Laharl go earlier. What to do... what to do...?"

With a frown, Bael turns to look at Ose. Normally, she would arrive at Kar's side instantly with her lightspeed movement, but due to her broken fingers and arms, Ose can't use much of her magic.

Ose walks up to the Sphinx's beaten and battered body. Kar's diamond armor, previously thought invincible, lies in shards all around him. Some diamond chunks cling to his scales here and there, but with the exception of several pieces embedded in his chest, most of it appears to have been blown away by Ose's Railgun Punch.

Kar lays motionless, his chest barely moving. Ose scowls at him. "Mara. Laharl. Vepar. Artorias. *Beelzebub*. All defeated or captured by you. I'll give you credit, Sphinx. You're far mightier than I expected. In the end, all you've done is delay my plans for Stormbringer slightly. Nevertheless... now, you will die."

Ose's eyes crackle with electricity. Mana amasses and builds inside her brain as she aims her eyes at Kar's chest, intending to make him suffer a cardiac arrest.

The moment before Ose can unleash her attack, Kar's eyes open.

Danger!

Kar's instincts warn him of an impending catastrophe. Without hesitation, he digs his feet into the ground and flings himself backward a split-second before Ose fires 1.21 gigawatts of electricity at his former position.

"No! Damn you!" Ose howls. She tracks Kar with her eyes, only to frown as the Monster King slows to a stop and shakily pulls himself to his feet.

"Hurgh. Thundertongue. Y-you... so it was you who struck me..."

Ose narrows her eyes. "You're far too resilient for my liking, Monster King. Stand still so I can send you to the Great Beyond."

Lightning crackles in Ose's eyes. Once again, she readies herself for another blast of electrical power.

Kar staggers from left to right. This time, his injuries go well beyond the surface. Multiple bones sit broken in his chest, making his breathing a painful chore. He leans heavily against the wall, barely able to support his own weight. When Ose is about to fire her attack, Kar tries to dodge, but his legs give out, making him flop to the ground.

Kzzat!

Ose fires, and this time, she doesn't miss. She strikes the back of Kar's neck, sending her corrosive lightning deep into his body. Kar's nervous system starts melting together, making the Sphinx seize up and writhe helplessly.

"Aargh! Hurgh! Aaah!"

Kar cries out in pain, but Ose merely blasts him again, striking him while he's helpless.

"Die, already! Die, you damned, filthy traitor! You chose the humans, and now you will follow them into the afterlife!"

Ose prepares a third lightning blast.

However, right at that moment...

Foop!

Kar vanishes.

The Monster King disappears into thin air, making Ose freeze in place.

"W-what? Where did the Sphinx go? Wait, he couldn't possibly...?!"

Ose whips around to see Bael in the distance staring at her with a goofy smile on his face. He shrugs helplessly as if to say, *eh, whaddya gonna do? Shit happens.*

"Bael! You nimrod! I told you to kill the Monster Queen! Where is she?!"

Bael meanders toward Ose, a stupid grin on his face. "Aw, shucks. You won't believe this! Haha, it's the funniest thing! I was about to squash that broad, just like you told me, but then a bug crawled inside my butt! I couldn't just let it get all comfy and make a home, y'know? So I had to take a minute to *really* dig up in there with my finger and-"

"Devils! Stop! STOP! Not another word! Ahhhhh!!!"

Ose squeezes her fingers into fists, treating the pain like a release-valve to vent her anger. "You bloody imbecile! You had one job, Bael! One job! Now both of the monster royals are gone, and it's all your fault!!"

"Yep! Tough luck, but we'll get 'em next time, ain't that right?"

Bael shoots Ose with a finger-gun while winking. His smirk drives the Emperor of Infiltration up the wall, but against the invincible Duke of Pain, all she can do is rant and rave.

Eventually, Ose swallows her anger. She takes a deep breath and forces her rage into the soles of her feet.

"Stupid. Just damned stupid. Never mind! You continue leading the invasion! Take out the humans, assuming you can *manage* that much! I'm going to take Artorias and Vepar to the blood pits. I'll return later! In the meantime, use all the troops you want! Don't hold back!"

Furious, Ose starts to head over to Artorias. However, she stops after three steps and stares at Artorias's resting place, where his body no longer lays.

"Huh? Where did the Duke of Steel go?"

Bael's reply nearly gives Ose an aneurysm.

"Oh, that fairy lady teleported him outta here once she woke up! Foop! Hahaha! Pretty funny, right?"

Ose finds no humor in the Duke's words.

"BAEEEEEEEL!!"

Part 235: Preparing for Round Two

Foop!

A heavily armored demon suddenly appears in the center of the Labyrinth's Core, right in front of fifteen exosuit-wearing troopers. Startled, the humans nearly jump out of their skin as they swivel on their heels and aim their guns toward the intruder.

A split-second later, the demon slumps forward and flops against the ground lifelessly, allowing the humans to breathe a sigh of relief. Blinker, Queen of the Monsters, appears shortly after, followed by her husband, Kar.

"Oh, heck... I'm SO tired!" Blinker complains. "But hey, it was real nice of that Bael guy to let me go! Hey, you! Skippy! Where's Neil? Get him over here on the double! Chop chop!"

Blinker aims her words at one of the troopers, purely at random. With their faceless armor, it becomes impossible to tell them apart. The commando merely nods before lowering his rifle. "Alright, miss Blinker. Is Kar alright? He looks terrible."

"The demons screwed my husband up real good, especially that Ose!" Blinker growls. "Now, hurry up! I ain't got all day, buster! I've gotta get this demon contained and my husband to the medic!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The soldier turns away and taps the side of his helmet. He falls silent as Centurion's nanites dampen his voice, preventing even the slightest leakage of noise.

"A minute later, Neil trots over, his bright red and blue suit catching everyone's gaze. His helmet disappears, but the rest of his body stays armored. "Blinker! Thank the Creator you're alright. What happened to Kar, and what happened out there? We've had earthquakes hitting us, Mephisto playing peekaboo, and all the while, we've had no clue how Kar was faring against the demons!"

Blinker's expression turns uneasy as she glances at the ceiling and walls to search for the Duke of Mist. However, no matter where she looks, she doesn't notice him or his mana signature.

"Izzat so? Yeah. Things got crazy. Kar sent you that card-playing demon lady- you got her, right?"

"We did. She's in cuffs and on the way to our prepared demon containment facility. We don't know anything about her powers, though, so if you could give us any information, we'd appreciate it."

"Later," Blinker says, waving Neil's concerns away. "We've got bigger fish to fry. The debris blocking the Core won't keep the demons out for long! I'm sure the Burrowers will come through and start yankin' that crap outta the way super soon. Listen, Neil, there's something you need to know."

Blinker quickly rattles off a bunch of information to Neil, making the military commander frown. As she talks, several commandos grab Artorias and engulf him in a nanite-based hardening agent, sealing his movements and preventing him from breathing. As a demon, breathing is not something he needs to stay

alive, but he can't remain conscious without air. The soldiers drag Artorias away within a minute, right as Blinker finishes speaking.

Neil sighs. "I knew Kar was strong... but this... whatever boost the lizards gave him, it made him truly a monster. If Ose was able to beat him in one punch, then I'm afraid our counter-measures won't be much use against her."

"Forget Ose," Blinker says. "That hussie broke both of her hands punching my precious darling! Serves her right! I doubt she'll be a big threat in the upcoming fights. It's Bael you need to watch out for! He's the only demon Kar couldn't stop!"

"You said Bael let you go," Neil mutters. "Why?"

"Dunno. He mentioned something about 'paying back a favor.' I didn't stick around to ask what he meant."

"Unexpected, but a bit of good fortune from the Creator, no doubt. Let's assume we don't have any favors left, then," Neil says. "We've known of Bael's threat for six years. Every time we've fought him, humanity came up short. However, I've had Hans develop countermeasures for each of the demon leaders. With any luck, they might slow the Duke of Pain down."

Neil gestures toward Kar.

"Get Kar healed, Blinker. He's our best bet at stopping the demons' advance. Until he returns, I'll hold them back at the Core as long as possible."

Blinker nods. The tiny fairy motions with her hands to summon a projected wagon, then levitates Kar atop it, making Neil frown.

"Oh? You can use telekinesis?"

Blinker bats her eyes. "I don't know *what* you're talking about! I'm just an illusionist, silly! You must be seeing things."

"Haha. *Mysterious*. I'll wait for your return with bated breath."

Blinker nods. She pulls her projected wagon along, leaving Neil to his own devices.

Once the Monster Queen and King disappear into the Tarus II portal, Neil seals up his helmet. It provides him a level of anonymity, preventing others from seeing his expressions or hearing his mutterings.

"Hmm. Still no word from Hope or Jason. With both Wordsmiths gone, it's unlikely we'll be able to hold the Core. What should I do?"

The Commander taps his foot slowly. He rests one hand on his thigh, and the other beneath his chin, while gazing at the floor contemplatively.

"Fighting Bael in an enclosed space would result in a tremendous waste of personnel. He'll kill hundreds, possibly thousands, before we so much as prick him. Even if Bael doesn't come, we've lost the ability to funnel our enemies through the great doors. Once they clear away the debris, they'll pour in like water through a sieve."

"The demons outnumber us a hundred-thousand to one. Even assuming we merely have to fight them a hundred to one, their advantage increases in such a tightly confined space. Centurion. Run a battle simulation based on these probabilities."

Neil's eyes elevate to his helmet's Heads Up Display, where he gives a list of projections regarding the demon's forces.

"Eliminate Target Barbatos-Artorias from the enemy pool. Eliminate Target Beelzebub, too. Run a simulation where we only have to face Bael, Mephisto, and demons below the Baron level."

"COMMAND ACCEPTED. PERFORMING SIMULATION NOW, PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FIVE."

Neil sighs. "If we survive this war, I really need to get those identifiers changed. Too damn confusing."

Shortly after, Centurion speaks. **"PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FIVE. I HAVE COMPLETED THE SIMULATION YOU REQUESTED."**

"Great. What are the results?"

"RESULT: TOTAL ANNIHILATION. 216 DEMON CASUALTIES, AND 17,455 ALLIED CASUALTIES."

"Damn."

Neil releases a long, pained sigh.

"...I always thought we'd have the Wordsmiths on our side when the demons attacked. To think a day like this would come and we wouldn't even be able to contact them. I haven't a clue where they are, nor what fates have afflicted them."

Neil's heart hardens.

"No. This is a test given to me by the Creator. Humanity *will* reign supreme. We've endured for a hundred thousand years while waiting for an opportunity to exact our revenge. I won't let my people fall!"

Neil turns and walks toward the Tarus II warpgate. As he stares up at the thirty-foot-tall, circular metal device, his expression turns complicated.

If only we could destroy the warpgates. Perhaps Kar could, but he's not here. Whoever built the warp-gates, they used metal alloys comparable to demonstone. The best we can do is annihilate the servers and make repairing them a slow, arduous process.

Come, demons. Attack us if you dare. I would sooner die than allow you an easy victory.

As Neil muses to himself, the wall of rubble barricading the Core's double-doors begins to tremble slightly.

The demon Burrowers have arrived.

Blinker sits on her husband's chest. She uses her magic to drive her projected wagon along the road to Hero City at a rapid eighty miles per hour.

Wind rushes past Blinker's red hair, causing it to whip around her face. The tiny fairy barely even notices.

"Grr. My whole body still hurts from hitting that wall. Damn you, Ose! What a selfish brat. If she had the strength to knock out my husband in one punch, why didn't she do that sooner? She's an idiot! A numbskull! Hmph."

Blinker waves her fist at the sky.

"Who cares if you break your arms?! Dumb broad! I'd break my whole body to protect my friends! You let Kar beat two of your Dukes and one of your Barons! Even if you think you can still win, I hate you for sacrificing them! I hate cowards like you, you big-boobied-bimbo!"

The paved road leading from the military outpost at Tarus II's warpgate, one which creates a straight line to Hero City, cuts through the forest in between. Even six years after the first Wordsmith, Jason, made the path, humanity still uses it daily.

However, as Blinker races down the two-mile long road, several giant holes in the road, created by the Hydra's attack, open up in front of her.

She ignores them.

The Monster Queen's projected wagon flies across the crater-sized potholes magically, making it seem as if nothing has harmed the flat-top whatsoever.

Minutes later, Blinker's wagon leaps into the sky, acting as if it's hit a ramp leading to the heavens. The 300-foot-tall cliffside shielding Hero City from the world below it proves no barrier to the Monster Queen. She soars into the sky and arrives at the western edge of the city, where the general hospital awaits.

After dissipating her projection, Blinker levitates Kar with telekinesis and flies him into the hospital through its double doors. Surprisingly few soldiers sit in the lobby, awaiting treatment. Many of them appear to be in relatively high spirits, and hardly any have any life-threatening wounds.

Blinker smiles as she glances around. *Not bad! That Sam-girl has quite the healer's touch! I'm surprised she could heal so many people even with her Emperor mana reserves, considering how badly the demon's surprise attacks caught us off-guard.*

Blinker doesn't bother checking in with Grima at the front desk. Several soldiers gawk at her as she floats Kar's unconscious, badly beaten body down the hallway. Their morale plummets upon seeing the Monster King's limp figure.

Oh, no! their eyes say. What happened out there?! Has the Core already fallen? Are we doomed without the Wordsmiths?

Blinker doesn't bother assuaging their concerns. She's in far too big a rush to bother.

Within seconds, Blinker rushes down one of the hallways toward the massive blip of demonic power at the end, where Belial, the Second Emperor of Passion, slowly trickles mana into an injured soldier's body. As Blinker arrives, her spirits drop.

"Sam! Hey, Sammy! Uh... are you okay? You look exhausted."

Dark circles line the bottom of Belial's eyes. Her face looks like death, thanks to the burden of mana exhaustion wracking her body. It takes several seconds for Samantha to even recognize Blinker as the fairy arrives. "...huh? Oh. Blinker. It's you."

Slowly, Belial's eyes lower to the crocodile floating behind Blinker. A spark of surprise appears in her gaze, making the Emperor jump to her feet. "Seven Devils! Kar!"

Slowly, Blinker nods. "Yeah... he's in bad shape. I was going to ask you to heal him, but..."

Belial shakily drops into her seat. Her voice trembles as she suffers a wave of exhaustion. "I've healed countless demons and humans over my lifetime. Never have I revived so many from the brink of death, back-to-back. Rosalia tried giving me some of her energy, but it barely made a difference. Demon Grunts just don't have enough to help Emperors out."

Blinker turns to the left, where she spots the similarly-exhausted Rosalia slumped with her back against the wall.

"How are you holding up, new girl?"

Rosalia closes her eyes. "...terribly. I... I knew fleshbags were fragile, but some of these injuries are just ridic-"

"Humans," Belial snaps, interrupting Rosalia. "They're called *humans*."

Rosalia ignores the anger in Belial's voice. "Right, right. Same thing. Ugh, when will we finish? How many more are there? I feel like I'm about to die!"

"My friends *are* dying out there," Belial retorts. "I won't let them down by giving up. You may only be a grunt, but even you can learn what it means to persevere when your body wants to drop."

Blinker glances between the Emperor and her subordinate, shivering as she observes their interactions.

Geez! These two are like fire and ice, or water and oil! No chemistry at all. If Rosalia says the wrong thing, Sam's likely to take her head off!

Blinker cringes inwardly, but doesn't say anything out loud. Eventually, Belial manages to heal the soldier's wounds, but her expression turns sour after he leaves. The Emperor of Passion watches silently as Blinker lays Kar's comatose form upon the blood-stained hospital bed. Once the Monster Queen finishes, Belial sighs.

"How much do you know about healing, Blinker?"

Blinker shrugs. "A little? I know you can, um... heal!"

"Right. Healing a human isn't like healing Kar. The amount of magical power someone has directly correlates with the difficulty of healing them."

The Emperor of Passion rubs her forehead.

"Simply put, I've been running on fumes for the last thirty patients. It takes me several minutes just to restore their most severe injuries and get them walking again. I can't bother with getting them back to

mint condition, and all of my patients so far have been mere *humans*."

Blinker nods. "Uh... uh-huh...? I don't follow."

"Your husband is not only a monster, but someone with Duke-level power. He's too-"

"Emperor," Blinker says, quickly correcting Belial. A hint of pride enters her voice. "My sweetie is as strong as an Emperor!"

"That's even worse," Belial says. "It takes a tremendous amount of mana to heal Dukes and Emperors, especially when they suffer grievous injuries. Kar's entire ribcage appears to have been shattered. I can sense electrical energy coursing around his body, injuring him more and more, every minute. If you want me to heal him, it will take me hours."

Blinker rubs her chin. "Kar can heal himself once you restore him to a certain point. He's a reptile, after all! How long will you need to wake him up?"

Belial's expression brightens. "Oh? Well, if that's the case, it won't take me nearly as long... but I do need to deal with this leftover electrical energy first. The mana seems oddly familiar..."

"That's probably because it's Ose's," Blinker says.

The fairy quickly explains what happened earlier to Belial. Being stuck inside the hospital, she hasn't a clue what's transpired inside the Core. When Blinker finishes, Belial's eyes appear as wide as saucers.

"Incredible! I didn't know you and Kar had become so strong! Taking out two Dukes and two Barons... impressive! But Ose... she's become far more powerful than I ever imagined. The Ose I knew was only a Baron, but even then, she was uniquely adept at fooling humans into doing her will. Now that she possesses speed and strength aplenty, I worry we may not be able to defeat her."

Blinker smirks. "That broad's not as tough as she seems. She broke both of her hands punching my sweetie! Unless the demons have a secret healer, she won't be able to do much."

Belial shakes her head. "They don't. Not in the First Hell. In the Tertiary Hells, there exist a few... but they wouldn't ever help Ose. Too much bad blood. The Hidden Emperors are far more likely to kill Ose if they smell blood in the water."

"That's good to know," Blinker says.

* * *

Many minutes pass.

Blinker hovers in the air silently, watching as Belial heals Kar in small trickle bursts, all while occasionally dispersing bits of Ose's electrical energy into the air around her.

To Blinker's surprise, Belial manages a weak smile. "Oh? How interesting. It seems Ose's electrical mana is somewhat compatible with my physiology."

"Hm?" Blinker grunts. "What do you mean?"

"I can absorb some of it to restore my mana. Not much, but every little bit helps."

"Oh, good! Very good!"

Blinker claps her hands, then falls silent again. Eventually, her eyes roam the room, where she spots a familiar little girl, sitting quietly in the corner, not saying a word.

"Huh? Daisy? Have you been here the whole time?"

Blinker directs her question to the Hero's daughter, who nods in return.

"Is that so? You're a good girl! Your daddy will be so happy when he hears how much you've been helping your aunt Samantha!"

Daisy nods again. She kicks her legs back and forth under the chair while resting her elbows on her knees. "Mhm."

The little girl's expression shifts to the door. "Aunt S'matha, I need to use the bathroom."

Belial nods. "Again? Alright. Go ahead. Don't take too long."

"Okay!"

Daisy hops off the chair and bounces away, leaving the others behind.

Blinker sighs. "That girl... it's too bad she has to sit around all this blood and misery. War changes people. It will only hurt her in the long run, given she's still only a child."

Belial extracts another bit of electrical energy out of Kar, absorbs a portion into herself, and disperses the rest. "Maybe. Daisy's a sweet girl, though. She always goes outside and says hello to the soldiers. She thinks I don't know, but I do. She's not really going to the bathroom; she just wants to make sure everyone's okay."

"Oh?"

Blinker floats over to the doorway. She peeks outside, where she spots Daisy yapping at an injured soldier while holding his hand. The soldier smiles at her and pats her head, then she walks over to the next one and holds his hand as well.

However, Blinker's gaze doesn't follow after Daisy. Instead, she focuses her attention on the first soldier. After a minute or so, he stands up and pats his chest, where his injuries appear to have dimmed slightly. Surprised, he glances down the hall at Belial's room, decides not to trouble her, and leaves.

Blinker's eyes widen.

"...no way. Did... did Daisy heal that man?"

Her words are barely audible, merely a whisper in the wind. Despite this, Belial's ears still perk up.

"What did you say?"

Blinker doesn't answer. She stares, wide-eyed, at the next man in the hallway, as Daisy bounces past him and grabs the hand of a third injured soldier while babbling at him to raise his spirits. The second man, too, gets up and leaves.

The Monster Queen's heart soars.

"Jason's daughter... she's... she's a healer too, Belial! I don't believe it!"

Belial stop healing Kar. Her eyes widen. "Seriously?"

"Seriously?!" Rosalia echoes.

"Mhm. Come over here and see for yourself!"

Both demons leave Kar behind. They trot over to the doorway and watch silently as Daisy heals yet another injured soldier.

A smile appears on Belial's face. "So *that's* why I haven't gotten as many patients as I expected. A bunch of them just left without checking out. It was starting to bug me."

However, Rosalia's expression appears dire.

"Could... could Daisy be another Hero, just like her father?"

The implication lingers in the air, unanswered.

"Who knows?" Belial murmurs. "Perhaps humanity has another miracle on their hands."

Part 236: Bael the Negotiator

"Pull! Pull! Pull! Come on, ya lazy blubber-butts! Put your backs into it!"

Bael, the Duke of Pain, stands off to the right side of the Labyrinth's great doors. Before him stands the thousand-ton pile of earthen debris blocking access to the sweet, succulent humans trapped inside. One hundred Burrower demons stand together and use their unified strength to slowly pull the debris toward themselves. After more than thirty minutes, they've managed to clear only around half of the rubble, but already, small openings appear at the top with enough room to slip through.

Knowing full well the devastation their earlier assault suffered against humanity, no grunts, Lords, or Barons find themselves hungry enough to squeeze inside all by their lonesome.

Bael rolls his eyes as he looks at the Burrowers trying their hardest to clear out the pathway into the Core. His right arm hangs uselessly, having been accidentally broken and dislocated by Ose's attack on Kar. The throbbing pain proves an unfamiliar sensation to him, one that drives his irritation up to levels he's not experienced in millennia.

"Weak little bugs..." Bael growls. "Arty-boy would've had that crap pulled away with one yank. The kids these days are all a bunch of shrimps."

As Bael mutters to himself, the sound of approaching footsteps makes him turn to his left, where he spots the Battle Brothers. Duriel and Zamiel, the younger and older of the two, respectively, amble toward him casually with their fists on their hips.

"Yo, Bael!" Duriel says, raising his hand to wave. "You kicked butt, man. Heard you and Ose took out the Monster King."

Bael doesn't smile. "Tch. Nah. Ose swooped in and stole all the glory. Broke my damned arm too."

The Duke of Pain's annoyance comes through his words clearly, making both brothers shoot a knowing glance at each other.

Zamiel speaks. "Heyyy, man. Chill out! Tell you what. You had your way with the Monster King already. Why don't you let me and Dur-Dur take over from here? We'll wipe out those pesky fleshies, pronto. Won't take us ten minutes!"

Bael shakes his head. "Can't. You kids are only Barons. We already lost Mara, Laharl, Vepar, Arty-boy, and Beel-ze-boob. Captured or KO'd. Had ta' send Vepar and Laharl to the Blood pits, too. I've gotta go in there 'n do it myself. Ose's orders."

Duriel scoffs. "Pah! Since when were you Ose's bitch, eh, Duke of Pain? She broke your arm! Besides, me and Zammy ain't weak like the rest of the Barons. We're pretty tough, ya know. Just let us in and you'll see some real carnage!"

Bael shakes his head. "No can do. I like you guys too much. If I had gone in first, we wouldn't've lost fire-boy and the others. I thought it would be fun to let 'em have a shot before me, but it backfired. I'm

gonna do this part myself."

Zamiel lightly socks Bael's left arm, the uninjured one. "Come on! You know what we can do! At least let us pop in there and-"

Bael pulls away from Zamiel. His exasperation doubles as he glares at the young Baron. "Hey! I'm the First Duke, kid. What I say goes! You can help out once we start fighting on the planet. Got it?!"

Zamiel takes a step back. For a brief moment, his eyes flash with a look of pure, unbridled rage. However, he quickly swallows his anger and forces a smile. "Ahaha, well, of course, Big Bael! My apologies! I just thought with your arm like that, you'd like a little help. We'll hang back and wait for the signal then, alright?"

The Duke of Pain, placated by Zamiel's words, grunts in approval. "Good. No offense, Zammy-boy. It ain't that I think you're weak, but the humans've got a bunch of dangerous weapons 'n shit. It's better if I go in there first."

The Battle Brothers nod. They turn around and walk away, while waving to Bael.

"Sure thing! We'll be there at the first sign of trouble."

As the two Barons leave, Bael continues staring at them. His eyes fixate on their backs, and a strange, sage-like look appears in his eyes.

Those punks ain't as simple as they appear, and I know 'simple.' They're up ta' somethin'. I can feel it.

After the two Brothers fade into the distance, Bael returns his attention to the Burrowers as they continue clearing away debris. The Duke of Pain rubs his chin contemplatively while his tiny pea-brain struggles to come up with thoughts regarding the Battle Brothers.

Hmm. There were those rumors 'bout them. Somethin' about how Zammy-boy and Duriel were in league with the Hell of Blood. That can't be right, though. They don't smell like Vampires. I'd know that stink from a mile away. Must be somethin' else.

With a shrug, Bael starts to yell at the Burrowers, only for pain to shoot through his right arm. "Argh! I keep forgetting! Damn, that shit stings. Fuckin' Ose... broke my favorite right arm. Stinkin' cow."

Bael exhales through his nose and closes his eyes.

"Pain equals pleasure. Pain equals pleasure. Gotta remember my motto at times like these."

Suddenly, with a tremendous crash, the wall of debris blocking the Core groans and slides forward. Fifty tons of rock and dirt rushes toward the Burrowers at the bottom of the pile. All of them dive into the Labyrinth's floor, narrowly avoid a death by crushing. They pop out seconds later, unharmed.

"Duke of Pain! We did it, boss! Plenty of room to get in!"

Bael raises his gaze to the top of the great doors, where a ten-foot gap, both wide and tall, sits.

"Huh? Hey! Are you lazy grunts screwin' with me?! The humans'll turn you morons into pincushions if you try to squeeze through a gap like that! Ain't you guys ever heard of a... a... what were they called, again?"

Bael's eyes turn foggy for a moment.

"...a chokehold?! Humans love chokeholds! Yeah. That's the word. Definitely."

The Burrowers sigh. "It's tough movin' all this dirt, boss! We need a break!"

"What you need is my hand upside the back of your head!" Bael barks. "Keep clearing, ya lazy dogs! I'll go in first."

Bael mutters several curses to himself under his breath as he coils strength into his legs. With a single *hup*, the Duke of Pain leaps eighty feet into the air, toward the top of the rubble pile. He crashes into the debris with a light *thud* and lands lightly, steadying himself with his good arm.

Inside the Core, multiple human voices suddenly become audible. The sound of a female AI overhead speaks throughout the Core. **"...detected. All soldiers to battle positions. Target positively identified as the Duke of Pain. This is not a drill..."**

The frantic loading of guns makes Bael sigh. "Humans."

Bael walks forward, balancing on the precarious rubble with the grace of an elephant. His giant, fat feet crush several chunks of limestone into dust, making his walking a little clumsier than he'd prefer.

The moment Bael arrives inside the Core, a hail of gunfire unloads. Hardly has he become visible at the top of the rubble pile before three thousand machine guns, two thousand plasma launchers, fifteen hundred particle guns, and countless other weapons fire at him.

Bael's vision turns white as every conceivable weapon known to man blasts his body from head to toe. The Duke of Pain stops in place and closes his eyes, frowning as numerous faint tickling sensations spread across his body.

Boom! Boom! Ratatat! Brrrrt!

Three chainguns unload ten thousand bullets upon the immobile Duke of Pain, but their bullets merely bounce off his invincible hide, embedding into the walls, ceiling, and floor.

One soldier, Henry, aims an anti-tank rifle at the Duke of Pain. He hunkers in the back, waiting for the right opportunity, along with a pair of Harpies, each equipped with sniper rifles.

"On your mark," Henry says, transmitting his voice to Neil.

Neil Adams, the commander of humanity's military, stands with two burly minotaurs flanking him on his right and left. Each one wears a red and blue T-REX identical to his.

"We can't use explosive munitions in such a confined space," Neil replies. "If this plan fails, we'll abandon the Core. The Duke of Pain is not an opponent we can face, not without Kar or Hope."

Henry grits his teeth. "Don't worry, Commander. I never miss."

The young Lieutenant shoots a glance at the round chambered in his three-foot long weapon. The munition, dubbed the 'Anti-Bael Bullet', is one of Hans' special creations, a projectile made exclusively to target the Duke of Pain. Created over the last two years, it represents the pinnacle of humanity's current engineering capabilities, fusing a guided munition with a nanite delivery device.

"Even if I hit him perfectly..." Henry mutters, "...there's no guarantee I'll kill the bastard."

Neil's voice transmits over the private comlink line. "The odds are high we won't kill the Duke of Pain, but at the least, we should be able to cripple him. Have faith in Hans."

* * *

Atop the rubble pile, Bael's eyes remain closed, more out of boredom and irritation than anything else.

Fucking hell. This is always the worst part.

Bael takes a step forward. With his eyes shut, he doesn't see where he's going. The rubble around him, liquefied from countless superheated plasma projectiles, gives way under his feet, making him stumble.

"Fuck!"

Bael falls forward, opening his eyes just in time to see the edge of the rubble pile disappear.

Bounce. Tumble. Crash.

Bael's body comically rolls down the hill, making him bounce off the debris and crash into the floor with a staggering *bang!* The Duke of Pain hits the ground hard enough to shatter the bones of any lesser being.

One soldier nearby howls in surprise. "Holy-! Is he dead?!"

Bael lifts his head, annoyance in his eyes and dirt stuck in his teeth.

"No. Ptuh."

Once again, a hail of gunfire falls upon the Duke of Pain. With a deep groan, Bael pushes himself off the ground and raises his voice. "Hey, humans! Stop shootin' for a sec!"

The gunfire continues.

"Stop shooting, dammit! Stop!"

Still, a hail of useless, ineffective bullets, lasers, and plasma crashes against Bael's invincible body, bouncing off harmlessly.

"HEY!" Bael bellows, his voice barely penetrating the sound of gunfire. "I said **STOP!!**"

Bael pounds his left fist against his chest. With one crash, the Duke of Pain releases an explosive shockwave, flinging hundreds of the nearest commandos off their feet. Even with their T-REX's, the soldiers still go flying. They reorient themselves in midair and land on their feet, but their confidence crumbles as they realize they haven't so much as scratched their Duke enemy.

"Hold your fire."

Neil's voice transmits through everyone's mics, making the gunfire finally stop.

Eventually, as the fires of superheated lead and plasma begin to cool, Bael's uninjured form appears amidst the smoke, making him appear like an unstoppable war god. The Resistance's morale plummets.

"We can't beat that guy..." One soldier mutters. "He's unkillable!"

"Don't lose faith," Another whispers. "Neil has a plan. He always does!"

Bael exhales, releasing some of his anger as he forces a smile. "Uhh, which one of you is in charge?"

From the back row, three blue and red troopers take a step forward. The middle one, much shorter than his minotaur bodyguards, raises his hand. "I am."

Neil Adams lowers his arm. With a single command, he dissipates his helmet to meet the Duke of Pain's gaze from the three-hundred foot gap separating them.

Bael waves. "Uh. Hi!"

"Hello, Duke of Pain," Neil says, his voice cold. "I've told my men to stop. Since you haven't started attacking, I can only assume you must *want* something. What is it?"

Bael shrugs, making him wince as he remembers his dislocated shoulder. "Aah, well, it's like this, see..."

The Duke gestures with a sweep of his arm at everyone in the Core.

"I, uh, want you guys to give up. Like, just put down your guns and surrender."

"*What?*" Neil asks, his tone incredulous. The Commander takes a step toward the Duke of Pain while folding his hands behind his back. Neil assumes a dignified pose, allowing his body language to communicate confidence. "Give up? You may be nigh-invincible, Duke of Pain, but even from you, that demand is difficult to swallow. Why would we ever concede, when Ose is certain to kill and torture us as prisoners of war? Your leader is far less intelligent than I thought if she believes sending you to issue such a demand will sway my hand."

Bael frowns. The Duke of Pain straightens his posture and meets Neil's gaze. "Ose didn't give me this order, bub. I'm telling you myself. Give up, and I'll make sure no more humans die."

The Duke's words send a wave of confusion among the ranks of humanity's soldiers. More than a few glance at the faceless helmets of their comrades, wondering why the Duke would say such a thing.

Neil snorts. "How imbecilic. You can't guarantee humanity any protections, Duke of Pain. I might applaud your sentiment if it wasn't so damned insulting. Do you think crushing us will be so easy? You may be invincible, but you are only one demon! My people will never give up. We want only to live our lives in peace! We want to live free of bondage, and free of the grasp of demonkind! So long as your kind wishes to drink our blood, feed upon our bodies, and torture our souls, we will always resist your rule!"

Bael's shoulders sag. "So that's how it is, huh? You're just a bunch of peaceful hermits who want to be left alone. 'Zat right?"

This time, it's Bael who chuckles.

"I ain't the smartest demon, bub, but that's a line of shrakh if I've ever heard one. You humans are a bunch of murderers. How many times have you come into the Labyrinth, lookin' for some mooks ta' pick off? Always in the name of 'justice.'"

"Demons continue to enslave humans all across the Labyrinth," Neil says, his eyes narrowing. "I won't stop until I've freed every last member of my species from your claws."

Bael nods. "Freeing slaves is pretty noble, bub, but that ain't what you're doin'. What, do ya think this is my first rodeo? I've fought so many Heroes, so many kings, so many conquerors, I can smell 'em comin' from the other side of a planet. You're a bloodthirsty killer, no better than Beelzechump or any of the worst demons I know."

Neil raises an eyebrow. "Oh? And what about you, Duke of Pain? You've slain countless humans over your life. From one hypocrite to another, you've no right to judge me."

"I like fightin'," Bael replies. "I don't like killin'. Big difference. I don't stomp weaklings unless they give me no choice."

The Duke pauses.

"That means *you* punks."

Neil's smile turns sinister. "A demon always has his excuses. No matter how you attempt to twist your words, we'll never believe you. No matter what you promise, we'll never trust you. For us to surrender, we'd have to give up our weapons, our armor, and our freedom. We'd have no recourse when your Emperor decides to execute our leaders."

The Commander concludes. "Surrender isn't an option, and it never was. You've wasted your breath."

"Sigh..."

Bael's posture relaxes.

"Guess so. Man. That's what I hate about you humans. You're always so damned bullheaded. I might be dumb, but at least I can shut up if someone's got somethin' ta say. Why'd you even hear me out if you knew you weren't gonna listen?"

A moment of silence follows, as an oddly crooked sneer creeps across Neil's face.

"Oh... I had my reasons..."

Neil's hands, still folded together behind his back, pull apart for a moment as he flashes a hand signal behind himself, to the hidden team of snipers.

Henry, who has one eye focused on Neil and the other on the Duke of Pain, smiles.

"I never miss."

Fwip.

Bael, his gaze locked on Neil's face, frowns. A barely audible pop of air is the only thing he hears a split-second before the vision in his right eye disappears.

Skreeeee!

A horrible, blinding pain explodes in the Duke of Pain's eye socket.

"Aaaaaaarghhh!!"

The Duke of Pain leaps backward instinctively. He loses his footing and crashes against the pile of debris, slamming his spine against the fallen Labyrinth ceiling.

A vicious, barbed needle, forged from the finest demonstone, sticks out of Bael's eye. Blood pours from the wound, making Bael holler and howl like an enraged lion.

The Duke of Pain grabs at his eye with his good arm. He thrashes around on the ground, kicking his feet angrily while hollering countless obscenities.

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD! AAARGH! YOU SHOT MY EYE! FUCKIN' LITTLE CUNT!!!"

The Duke's roars cause all of the Resistance member's hearts to leap into their throats. They take several steps back, terrified of what will come next.

Neil shouts at the Harpie snipers. "Now!"

They fire their sniper rifles, but instead of bullets, two barbed devices shoot out and land on either side of the Duke's thrashing body. They jam into the ground and explode into clouds of nanites, before leaping onto the Duke of Pain and engulfing him in rapid-hardening agents. The nanites swarm over Bael's head, entering through his mouth, nose, and ears, while also transforming into a device more torturous than any ever designed in humanity's past.

Neil watches, his smirk deepening, as Bael's cries cut off. The Duke of Pain loses his senses thanks to the nanites transforming into an ultra-hard helmet around his head. They seal off his sight, hearing, and oxygen supply, preventing him from taking a breath. Bael tries to grab at the helmet and rip it off, but his fingers clumsily slide off its smooth surface.

"Any second now," Neil says. "There's no way that bastard can stay awake without air. Just like Artorias, he'll soon fall, and then we can capture him."

The barbed bullet, dubbed the Anti-Bael round, shows its power. Nanites embedded in its tip burrow deep into Bael's eye and enter his brain. They latch onto his neurons like parasitical organisms and deliver agonizing bursts of electricity to his cortex, where not even Bael can protect himself.

...However.

Minutes later, Neil's smile vanishes, replaced instead with a look of disbelief. Bael continues to thrash around silently, the only noise he makes coming from his fists and legs striking the area around him.

"What the hell? Why hasn't Bael fallen unconscious?! Don't tell me the bastard doesn't need to breathe!"

Neil doesn't know.

Unlike Jason and Hope, who both witnessed the Ancient Era thanks to Solomon's wisdom, the human Commander hasn't any idea that Bael can survive underwater or in the vacuum of space.

Air is only something he needs to speak. His body and mind don't require it to stay awake.

Eventually, the Duke's thrashing begins to slow. Neil and the commandos take a step forward, thinking he's finally begun to fall comatose, only to recoil in horror.

Dark, blood-red miasma begins to erupt from the Duke of Pain's body. His muscles swell and his bones crack, sending terror through the hearts of everyone present.

Neil doesn't hesitate. "E-everyone! Evacuate immediately! Retreat to Tarus II! Bael is transforming into the Balrog!"

The nanites surrounding Bael's head begin to hiss and pop as ten-thousand-degree flames lick at them from the insides. Suddenly, the ones covering Bael's mouth explode, spraying molten cinders forward like a grenade.

"GROOOOOOAR! ME SMASH! ME KILL!"

The Balrog awakens.

Part 237: The Balrog's Only Weakness

Recommended Listening (Custom Cryopod OST!)

"ATTENTION, ALL PERSONNEL! THE BALROG'S BIO-SIGNATURE HAS BEEN DETECTED WITHIN THE CORE! EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY. DO NOT ENGAGE. ATTENTION, ALL PERSONNEL! THE BALROG'S BIO-SIGNATURE..."

Centurion's voice booms overhead. Its robotic tone mixes together with the enraged roars of the transforming Duke of Pain to create a cacophony of despair. Bael's mouth frees itself thanks to the several-thousand-degree flames belching from his insides, but he only manages to clear away the nanite-metal impairing his breathing.

Six inches of pseudo-steel glues itself to the Balrog's head, making the fifteen-foot-tall demon roar ceaselessly as it tries to tear off the strange thing obstructing its vision. Still, like an annoying piece of tape stuck to a cat's paw, no matter how the Balrog claws at the torturous helmet, he only manages to deform it for a moment before it shifts its shape and re-hardens.

"Let's go!" Neil yells, transmitting his voice through the intercom. He forces his soldiers to abandon the Core, making all of their hearts jump into their throats. They flee for their lives from the Balrog as Bael smashes his head against the floor and the wall, trying to free himself from the nanites.

"STUPID FACE THING! GET OFF HEAD!! GET OFF! GETOFFGETOFFGETOFF!!!"

Every time the Balrog swings his arm, a hurricane-level gust of wind fires in a random direction, taking dozens of Core personnel by surprise and flinging them off their feet. The soldiers and non-combatants howl in alarm as their bodies crash against each other, but thankfully, their T-REX's absorb 99% of the impact.

All around the Core, twenty thousand humans and monsters flee toward the Tarus II portal. Several stop for brief moments to disable the other portals and smash their control pieces to bits, but otherwise nobody dares to dawdle.

Neil stands next to the Tarus II portal while waving the others through. He fixes his gaze on the screaming Balrog as Bael thrashes around like an enraged bull. Eventually, Bael starts stomping forward in random directions, attempting to pound his head against things to shatter his helmet. This forces Neil and his minotaur guards to leap at the Duke of Pain and activate the full power of their T-REX's.

"Henry!" Neil shouts as he enters the fray. "Covering fire!"

Henry and his sniper team begin pelting Bael with high impact anti-tank rounds. Each shot blasts off chunks of Bael's flesh, only for it to regrow within seconds at a speed visible to the naked eye.

Neil and his minotaur commandos summon golden gauntlets onto their left wrists. Their T-REX's activate the rapid-energy-expenditure mode, transforming them into the powerful Thundercat exosuits!

The commando's golden gauntlets become three times harder and more armored than the other areas of their exosuits, limiting the movement of their hands and fingers, but turning their fists into miniature shields capable of deflecting almost any blow. Three knife-like blades extend from the gauntlets, mimicking the utility of Barbatos's claws during the Ancient Era.

Neil leaps forward right as Bael blindly swings his palm in a wide arc. The Core's Commander holds up his left arm and winces as the Balrog backhands him, but to the astonishment of those who take a moment to gaze at their commander, he holds his ground and doesn't go flying.

"Tie-downs!" Neil barks.

His minotaur bodyguards grab onto Bael's right and left legs. They wrap their right arms around the Balrog while aiming their left arms at his feet.

Thwip! Thwip!

Two harpoons, forged from demonstone, fire from their golden gauntlets. The two-foot-long barbs stab through both of Bael's feet, impaling him to the floor.

"GROOOOAR! THAT HURTS! BIG MEANY NO HURT ME!!"

Bael swipes at the minotaurs to try and fling them away, but the nanite helmet continues to block his vision, allowing the Thundercat-wearing monsters to bob and weave while evading his clumsy grabs.

Neil jumps behind the Balrog. He pulls out a barb of his own and fires it into the back of Bael's neck, impaling the Balrog right through his throat. Bael utters a shocked gurgle, but his voice catches as the human commander uses all of his strength to pull on a rope attached to the demonstone barb. With one mighty *tug*, Neil yanks the Balrog backward, forcing him to fall on his ass with both of his feet still stuck to the Labyrinth's floor. Neil finishes by impaling the other end of the rope into a sidewall, where it forces Bael to lay backward, unable to break free.

"GRRRRGH! GLLAUGH!"

Balrog chokes and gasps. He tries to grab Neil or his bodyguards, but fails. Blind and half-immobilized, the Balrog begins smashing his fists into the floor in a frenzied rage.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Earthquakes explode in every direction, tossing Neil and his bodyguards around like pancakes in a frying pan. The entire Core starts to fall to pieces as chunks of the already torn-apart ceiling come loose and plummet to the ground below.

One of the minotaurs looks up just in time to see his death coming. A thirty-ton chunk of debris crushes him and his Thundercat exosuit into a bloody pulp, leaving Neil and the other minotaur with pits in their stomachs.

This damned Balrog! Neil roars, mentally. What insane power! If Bael ever becomes an Emperor, we're all doomed! I have to kill the bastard today!

Despite knowing how futile an attempt on the Balrog's life might be, Neil still feels an ache in his heart, one which he believes must be sated. The Commander summons his triple-bladed claw and dives toward

the Balrog's right arm, still thrashing around like an angry octopus.

Slash!

Neil swings his gauntlet in an upward arc. To his astonishment, the blade slices through Bael's arm as if it were a tender cut of beef. The Balrog's limb falls halfway off and dangles from a few sinewy pieces of muscle and skin.

What?! Could it be? Does Bael lose his invincible defense when he become a Balrog?! That must be the case! He exchanges defense for overwhelming strength!

Neil's eyes flicker with a deep realization as the Balrog howls in agony. **"GLAAAAARGH! HUCK! HURKS! IT HURKS!"**

The Balrog clutches his arm, which begins spewing lava-like blood more corrosive than any acid known to man. Several droplets splash onto Neil's armor, making the nanites on those sections hiss and boil away.

Neil takes multiple steps backward. With the Balrog temporarily pausing his rampage, Neil transmits his newly found information to the remaining Core personnel.

"Attention, all soldiers! This is Commander Neil! I have just learned that Bael loses his invincibility in his Balrog form! We may actually have a shot at killing this sonuvabitch!"

By the time Neil returns his attention to the Balrog, Bael has already pressed his half-severed arm back together. His skin and muscle reattaches itself within seconds, regenerating to its former level faster than anyone can fathom.

"...On second thought," Neil mutters. "...maybe I spoke too soon!"

Bael's rage temporarily subsides. The Balrog hesitates for a moment, as if considering his current predicament.

Then...

Hup!

Bael slaps both of his palms against the ground. He ignores the barb in his neck and yanks himself upward with all his strength, ripping out a terrifying amount of muscle, bone, and gore from his throat. A veritable river of acidic blood spews from the front and back of Bael's throat, forcing his adversaries to retreat several feet from the corrosive liquid.

Next, Bael summons power into his knees. He crouches down for a moment before leaping skyward, toward the ceiling! The Balrog tears out of the demonstone barbs holding him to the floor without any trouble, but he overlooks one crucial thing.

Crash!

Unable to see, due to the nanite-helmet, Bael's entire body blasts against the ceiling at 300 miles an hour, flattening him like a cartoonish pancake. Another hellish rain of rubble descends upon Neil and his final remaining bodyguard as they rely on Centurion to guide their movements. Five times in succession,

they avoid instant death-by-crushing as Centurion momentarily autopilots them to avoid the falling rubble.

Bael leaps off the ceiling toward the ground below. Despite his total blindness, the Balrog seems to instinctively grasp the distance between the roof and floor, sending a shiver down the spines of Neil and his bodyguard. The Duke of Pain smashes feet-first into the ground and bellows angrily, his throat having already healed. A wave of fire belches from his stomach, making the Thundercat-wearers retreat to avoid Bael's hellfire.

"By the Creator! This damned Balrog is just as invincible as ever!" Neil laments. "Finish retreating! We can't defeat the Duke of Pain on our own!"

Neil flicks his eyes toward the Tarus II portal. Already, 95% of the Core's personnel have fled, leaving only a couple of hundred troopers behind. They wait with bated breath for their Commander to join them.

"Go, go!" Neil shouts. He jumps toward the portal and stops at its base while waving his soldiers through. "I'll go last! You go first! Move it, move it! Don't make me tell you twice!"

With the Balrog's rampage becoming less chaotic every second, Neil's worst fears become reality as Bael turns to face the sounds of stomping feet. The Balrog's acute hearing picks up the direction of his fleeing prey, allowing his simple mind to deduce where he should attack next.

Neil's eyes widen. "Oh, no."

With another *hup*, Bael leaps toward the portal to Tarus II. He rushes toward the humans with deadly intent, rearing his fist back to deliver a devastating strike.

I can't let the Balrog kill my men, and I certainly won't let him pass through the portal to Tarus II! I have only one option!

Without hesitation, Neil pounces at the leaping Balrog. His six-foot-tall form appears positively puny compared to the 15-foot Demon Duke, but in that moment, Neil's bravery lifts the heart of his soldiers.

"Centurion! Rockets!"

With two rapid commands, Neil ignites a one-time-use pair of thrusters under his boots. They ignite for 1/4th of a second, tripling his speed and turning his body into a battering ram. Neil sweeps past Bael's fist and crashes into the Balrog's chest head-on, neutralizing Bael's forward momentum and sending him reversing into the pile of rubble at the Great Doors.

CRASH!

The human leader and his demonic adversary pound into the rock-pile at mach speed, flinging a dust cloud in every direction. By the time the dust clears, all of the soldiers have evacuated.

All except for one.

Lieutenant Henry stays behind. He stops at the entrance to the portal and narrows his eyes as he gazes at the body of his Commander laying motionless against the Balrog's chest. Bael begins to stir, but Neil doesn't move.

Henry sighs. *Commander... it has been an honor. Miss Oshina told me you were colluding with the Wordsmiths and demonkind, but I never fully believed her. I still don't know what to believe, but I know what you would want.*

Henry glances toward the ceiling, now torn apart enough to reveal dozens of tiny, metallic devices, all with blinking red lights.

"Centurion. Set a five-second timer for the Core self-destruct sequence. Detonate whatever you can, anything *Caddis* didn't sabotage."

"ORDERS RECEIVED, LIEUTENANT HENRY. DETONATION WILL COMMENCE IN T-MINUS FIVE... FOUR... THREE..."

Henry doesn't hesitate. He leaps through the portal, only for it to shut off a second later, leaving Neil alone in a room filled with human, monster, and demon corpses, as well as the Balrog.

Bael tosses Neil's unmoving body off his chest and licks the air. **"HUH? WHERE TASTY HUMANS GO? WHY EVERYONE-"**

Katoom! Katoom!

A hundred explosions detonate overhead simultaneously, taking Bael by surprise. The Balrog jerks its head upward as a sense of imminent danger presses upon him.

Fifty thousand tons of rubble collapses upon Neil and the Balrog, burying them under an unending avalanche of death and misery.

The Core, once a beacon of power among the Labyrinth, filled with thousands of humans and monsters working in tandem, falls silent. Fifty-foot-tall walls of debris bury all of the warpgates, crush the mechanical apparatuses used to control them, and entomb the fallen who fought their hardest in the day's battle.

The battle against the Balrog ends with a bang, sending off the deceased to the afterlife with a terrible loss. Not only their commander, but their home, slips from their control.

* * *

Among the rubble, a ghastly specter emerges. Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, pops out of the ground while holding Neil's unmoving body. The Duke titters to himself as he *plunks* the Commander atop the rubble, where the Core's ceiling used to occupy, within a newly-formed ground and roof area.

"Ksss. You sssurvived ssstriking the Balrog, eh? Thisss human iss quite resssilient, and not becausssse of his fanccey gadgetsss."

Mephisto turns his gaze toward the Great Doors, their tops barely visible beneath the newly created mountain of rubble. A small crawlspace allows multiple goblins to creep inside, sent by Ose to help.

"You! Gobbysss! Take thisss flessshbag to Ossse. Ssshe will know what we mussst do with thisss trasssh."

The Duke of Mist falls silent as the goblins work together to grab and drag Neil's comatose form away. After they leave, the mountain of rubble begins to shift.

A massive, blood-red hand bursts out of the debris-pile. Bael, still in his Balrog form, claws his way from beneath thousands of tons of hardened dirt while roaring in rage. **"GROOOOOOAR!!"**

Mephisto facepalms. "Why isss it alwaysss my job to revert Bael'sss transssformation?"

Bael, upon hearing Mephisto's words, turns to look at him. The unstoppable Balrog pounces toward Mephisto with murderous bloodlust, his very aura threatening to smush the ghostly Duke into bonemeal.

At that moment, Mephisto cups his hands to his mouth.

"Bael! Oh, Bael! I have sssome puppiesss and kittiesss for you to play with! Don't you want to sssee the cute little animalsss?!"

Screeeeech!

Bael grinds to a halt. The almighty Balrog stops within five feet of Mephisto, his fist raised with deadly intent. However, he doesn't punt Mephisto into another dimension. Instead, he stands perfectly still.

"YOU... HAVE PUPPY?"

"Kss. Yesss, many puppiesss and kittiesss... if you be a good boy, I will let you pet and play with them to your heartsss content!"

Mephisto motions with his hand. From underneath his feet, five undead animals crawl out of the ground, summoned by his necromantic magic.

"Arf! Arf!"

"Meow! Meow!"

"Ca-caw! Ca-caw!"

The animals meow, bark, and chirp, their sounds reaching Bael's ears despite the soundproofing helmet attached to his head.

Excited, the Duke of Pain lowers his fist and plunks down on his butt obediently. **"OKAY! ME LIKE PUPPY AND KITTY!"**

Mephisto lowers his eyes. *No matter how many times I do thisss... it never becomesss lesss humiliating. If Bael'sss enemiesss found out the Balrog'sss lone weaknesss... he would be a laughingsstock!*

Slowly, Bael demorphs from his Balrog form, reverting to his main body.

As he does, the nanites surrounding his head seal up over his mouth, preventing him from breathing once more.

...Several seconds pass.

Bael tilts his head toward Mephisto. He raises his finger and taps the side of the helmet three times, as if to ask a question.

Mephisto groans. "...Yesss. I will assk Ossse to remove that helmet for you. In the meantime... jussst play with the animalsss... I have bodiesss to collect."

Bael nods his head vigorously, then gives Mephisto a giant thumbs-up.

The Duke of Mist floats away, shaking his head the whole time.

"...The thingsss I do for that idiot."

Part 238: Phoebe, Humanity's Leader

General Chadwick, second in command for the Labyrinth Core resistance forces, stands beside the warpgate on Tarus II. He remains inside his exosuit, as do fifty-thousand other commandos, all of them perched atop nearby buildings, lined up behind dozens of battlements, and even taking cover inside multiple metal towers, with their sniper rifles trained on the warp-gate.

One by one, dozens of commandos flee from the Core, all of them arriving on Tarus II with fear in their eyes. The Balrog continues to silently rampage inside the portal, but its opaque nature prevents any of the Resistance fighters from seeing inside the warp-gate. Their hearts pound like drums as they fear the worst may occur; the Balrog's emergence on Tarus II.

Suddenly, the flow of soldiers stops. One last soldier darts through and turns to face Chadwick. "General! Only Neil and Henry remain! We're waiting on them!"

Chadwick's fingers tense up. He nods at the trooper and turns his attention to the portal, his alertness at the maximum.

"Ready yourselves!" Chadwick yells. The portly black-haired Norwegian holds his hand over the datapad while a giant red 'close' command flashes on its screen, waiting for him to disable the warp-gate.

Seconds pass.

Half a minute.

A full minute.

Right when Chadwick's heartrate starts to slow, the portal flickers. A single commando dashes through and arrives on Tarus II's side. "Deactivate the portal!"

"Henry? Where is Neil?" Chadwick asks.

Instead of replying, Henry flicks his gaze to Chadwick. He jumps toward the General, startling Chadwick. Before Chadwick can react, Henry slaps his hand on top of Chadwick's, forcing the General to press the portal deactivation button.

"What?! No!"

General Chadwick's heart skips several beats as the Tarus II portal dissipates, but not before a small avalanche explodes through its event horizon. Even with the portal's deactivation, it still takes a second or two to decouple from the warp-gate inside the Core, allowing twenty tons of ceiling debris to spill through and flood onto the Tarus II warp-gate platform. Dozens of troopers leap back instinctively, narrowly saving their lives from a death by crushing.

Moments later, the chaos fades away, and a deep, ominous silence follows.

Chadwick stares, wide-eyed, at Henry's figure. The young Lieutenant deactivates his helmet and bows respectfully.

"General Chadwick. I'm sorry for my hastiness, but I had no choice. I had to follow Commander Adams' final order."

"Final order?"

Chadwick shudders.

"Don't... don't tell me that bastard sacrificed himself! What happened in there?! Explain yourself!"

Henry's eyes gloss over with emotion. He glances around at the assembled troopers, all of whom have already regained their bearings to focus on his words.

"Commander Adams... he gave me one final command. He activated the Core's self-destruct sequence and told me to seal the warp-gate on Tarus II's side. Thanks to his final act of bravery, we will have extra time to prepare for the demon's invasion."

"Bullshit," Chadwick growls. "Lieutenant Henry, I'm relieving you of your position. Deactivate your exosuit at once."

Henry blinks in surprise. "G-General? I don't understand."

"You're lying! Neil would never do something so selfish as sacrifice humanity's best strategic mind. In an instant, he would deem his life more important than yours. He knows damn well our chance of survival will skyrocket so long as he remains with us."

Henry holds his palms face-up. "I'm... I'm sorry, General, but I'm telling the truth. I don't understand Neil's final order, either. It was... bizarre. However, if you insist, I'll submit to incarceration."

"Goddamn right you will," The General hisses. "Neil warned me about you. He said the odds of you being a traitor were at least 50%! I never should have left you and him alone!"

Henry's expression hardens. Immediately, he raises his finger and taps the air, activating Centurion's visual-interface. Even without a helmet, he's grown so used to the positioning of the exosuit's visual indicators that he can manipulate them at will.

"I understand your concern, General, but I also won't allow you to slander me. Here; my data files. See for yourself what happened in there."

Unlike Henry, Chadwick continues to wear his full exosuit, including its helmet. A pop-up appears in the corner of his vision, one with a video file attached. Chadwick taps to open it.

Half of his vision blurs as a video plays, one with Neil battling the Balrog.

"Henry!" Neil yells. "Take these command codes! Bring the ceiling down on this bastard! Don't make me tell you twice, goddammit!"

"Commander!" Henry replies, choked emotion in his voice. "I won't leave without you!"

"The hell you won't!"

Neil dodges one of the Balrog's fist swipes and yells again. "Leave, already! LEAVE!"

The video's perspective changes as Henry jumps out from behind cover, drops his sniper rifle, and rushes through the portal. The rest of the scene continues as normal, including Henry's conversation with

Chadwick.

After watching, the General hesitates.

This... this video is convincing. Is it a fake? Something about Neil's voice wasn't quite right, but... how could Henry possibly forge a video in mere seconds? Was Neil right? Could Ose have somehow used her powers to create a false timeline of events?

The General's suspicions deepen. However, without any proof one way or another, he falters.

"...This recording *does* seem to prove your claims. Even so, I intend to conduct a full investigation, later. Right now, we have a dead Commander and nobody to lead this army. Disable your exosuit and follow Corporal Hurent. She'll deliver you to the prison complex until further notice."

Chadwick nods at a trooper on his left, the female human who Neil questioned not even an hour before. Hurent nods back and lifts her Plasma Carbine flat across her chest.

"Lieutenant. You heard the General."

Henry's complexion turns ashen, but he offers no complaint. After a moment of hesitation, Henry deactivates his exosuit and decouples its straps from behind his back. The young man lightly tosses his T-REX to Chadwick, who catches it easily.

"...General."

"Lieutenant."

Both men eye each other, with Chadwick's expression hidden behind his mask, and Henry's look of guilt visible for everyone to see.

Corporal Hurent leads Henry away, their procession looking almost as if she's captured a prisoner of war.

Once they leave, Chadwick heaves a sigh. "God dammit. Neil's dead, crushed to death by his own creation, and we've lost the Core, too. I didn't expect us to lose, and certainly not so quickly."

As Chadwick mutters to himself, a female voice speaks at his side. "General, don't feel so down. I'd bet good money Neil is still alive."

Chadwick turns to his left, where Corporal Hurent stood only a minute earlier. After she leads Henry away, a different soldier takes her place, one with a black-and-gold exosuit unlike no other.

"Miss Hiro? What makes you say such a thing?" Chadwick asks. He turns to the soldier as she deactivates her helmet, revealing her straight, white hair. "Your exosuits are certainly powerful, but even if Neil miraculously survived the roof caving on him, there's no way he can handle the Balrog alone."

Phoebe Hiro, wife of humanity's leader, clicks her tongue. "Tsk. Come on, Chadwick, don't be such a downer. There's no chance our enemies would pass up a chance to capture our brilliant military commander. Not only would he make an ideal hostage to demoralize us, but he has all sorts of information they can put to good use. He's alive, trust me."

Chadwick deactivates his helmet, then raises an eyebrow. "Are you trying to comfort or scare me, Miss Hiro? I think I'd rather Neil had died than end up in the hands of the bloodskins. They'll torture him endlessly!"

Phoebe frowns at Chadwick's casual slur. "No. They won't. Ose doesn't need torture; she can possess people and read their thoughts. She nearly took over Jason's mind at one point. You might think Neil is in grave danger, but once Jason or Hope returns, there's no way the demons will be able to keep him from us. Now, let's focus on the immediate future. Explain the situation in the Core to me."

The Hero's Wife listens intently as Chadwick explains what happened over the last few hours, how the humans pushed back the demons twice, how Kar nearly died fighting Ose, and many more details. After concluding with Henry's possible betrayal, Chadwick nods at Phoebe.

"So, not to be rude, Miss Hiro, but where have you been? We don't expect you to fight on the frontlines, but I always thought you'd be out here with the rest of us. You've been uncharacteristically absent."

"I have," Phoebe nods. "I had to drop Daisy off at the hospital with Samantha. There's no safer place for my daughter than at the side of the strongest being on Tarus II. After that... well..."

Phoebe chuckles wryly.

"I spoke to Neil two days ago, not long after he debriefed everyone. I made my position clear. Neil runs the Core. Jason and I run Tarus II. Whether Neil is here or not, I'll be taking charge of this planet's defense."

Chadwick blinks in surprise. "...You? I, I mean... I wasn't informed of this. Why didn't Neil tell me?"

"I don't know," Phoebe admits, "but I imagined he was going to tell you once he successfully retreated to Tarus II and saw me here and waiting. If you're right about Henry's possible betrayal, then it would explain why you never found out. Neil didn't expect to lose the Core. He was too confident in his capabilities. Then again, those strange, aberrant demons, the armored ones... they took you by surprise. I'm amazed you survived their onslaught."

Miss Hiro shakes her head. "Two thousand demons, each one with the strength of a Baron. I don't know how the demons created such frightening creatures, especially given how few souls remain within the River Styx, but it's clear they've been preparing for this invasion for the last six years. We can't underestimate Ose's cunning."

"I don't know either," Chadwick mutters. "But what I do know is that I can't just take your word on this matter, Miss Hiro. After Neil, I am the highest ranking member of humanity's military. You may be the Hero's wife, but that doesn't mean you have the qualifications to lead. Why should we entrust our survival to you?"

Chadwick's words contain neither malevolence, selfishness, nor greed. He speaks his mind frankly while eying Phoebe with a complex look. The Hero's Wife meets him on equal terms with a compassionate gaze of her own.

"Jason and I have not stood idly for the last six years. With Solomon's help, we've constructed countless weapons for battling the demons. The war you just fought in the Core was merely a prelude to the real battle. If and when the demons try to make planetfall here, we'll be ready for them. *That* is why I will take command, General."

Phoebe holds her palm up to her ear, allowing her nanite armor to convert into a telephone-like device. "Centurion. Summon the Walkers. Two will do."

"COMMAND ACKNOWLEDGED, PILOT 'PHOEBE HIRO.' NOW ACTIVATING TWO LEVEL-1 PLANET-WALKERS."

Centurion blares in Phoebe's ear, confirming her order. After several seconds, the ground begins to tremble.

From the skies above, two pinpricks of light emerge. Massive metal crates plummet toward the PLANET from the upper atmosphere, dropped by an unseen space-faring vessel.

Centurion speaks. **"DROPSHIP PAYLOAD DEPLOYED. THE PACKAGES WILL MAKE PLANETFALL IN T-MINUS SEVENTEEN SECONDS."**

Hundreds of soldiers turn their gazes skyward. They gasp in awe as they spot the fireballs streaking downward from the upper atmosphere, falling even faster than terminal velocity. Whatever metal Phoebe used to construct the square crates neither sags nor melts under the multiple-thousand-degrees of heat buffeting them from every angle.

Seconds later, the massive crates *smash* into Tarus II's surface half a mile from the outskirts of the warp-gate encampment, sending two shockwaves hurtling across the plains. A bomb-like sound-blast sweeps across the base, startling everyone and making hundreds of soldiers fall on their asses. Their confusion only lasts for a second before they break out into whoops and cheers.

Two gigantic metal machines break out of the crates, somehow undamaged after crashing into the planet at three hundred miles per hour. The automatons rise to a height of over one hundred feet by lifting themselves up via four spider-like legs. Atop the legs, a square-shaped cockpit rests, with two pairs of double-barreled cannons facing forward. Each cannon extends forward some twenty feet and possesses enough firepower to reduce the encampment's walls to rubble with one shot.

The Planet-walkers begin stomping toward the humans at a surprisingly brisk pace, traveling at least thirty miles per hour. Once the Planet-walkers arrive within 100 feet of the walls, they slow to a stop, towering over the defensive barrier like a grown adult standing next to a miniature garden fence. The thirty-foot-walls appear positively puny compared to the monstrosities looming overhead.

Phoebe smiles. "These are two of the first prototypes I built, four years ago. They're a bit clunky, but I think they'll suit our needs. What about you, Chadwick? Do you believe I have the qualifications to lead humanity in Neil's absence?"

The General's jaw practically hits the floor. "I-incredible! If we'd had these machines in the Core, those aberrant demons would never have broken the perimeter!"

"Perhaps," Phoebe replies, trying not to laugh at his stupefaction. "The Archimedes Cannons are capable of causing immense devastation, but Planet-walkers are at their best in a wide, open field. They'd have limited mobility in the Core, while also being more likely to stomp our own troops to death."

Chadwick nods hurriedly. "Yes, I understand, Miss Hiro. You are truly a genius! It's no wonder the soldiers call you Humanity's Goddess. Your ingenuity may just win us this war!"

Phoebe's smile fades away. "No, General. Without the Wordsmiths, we will eventually fall to the demons' unending hordes. My only goal is for us to survive. We must last until Jason or Hope return, and after that, we can come up with a permanent solution for the 'Demon Problem.'"

A moment of silence follows. Phoebe brushes a strand of hair out of her eyes as she turns to look at the soldiers assembled.

"All of you... you need to work together. The demons will surely dig one of the Core's warpgates out of the rubble. With the servers destroyed, it will take them some time to compute Tarus II's dimensional coordinates, perhaps a few days at the least. Once they do, we need to ensure they never break past this warp-gate. Are there any questions?"

Phoebe takes control of the military smoothly and without issues. Despite Chadwick's initial reservations, he quickly discovers that even the Core personnel are more than willing to put their faith and trust in the Hero's wife. After all, who was it that always took care of them, visited them, and made sure to treat everyone with respect and dignity over the previous six years? None other than Phoebe Hiro.

Several hands shoot up as soldiers direct their questions at her, but one person's query catches everyone's attention.

Brunhilda, the Tribe Leader of Feloria, speaks. "Commander Hiro. I do not understand. Why do you not simply destroy the metal gate? Then the demons will not come."

"That's a good question," Phoebe replies. "Simply speaking, we can't. Even if we could, we shouldn't. These gates don't only connect to the Labyrinth Core. They can connect to similar gates on all the other planets, including Feloria. The Core possessed specialized computers capable of calculating the dimensional vectors of each gate more easily, thanks to teams of monsters and humans working together, but Jason once used Solomon's Crown to reconnect all on his own. If we destroy the gate, we will be unable to reach the other worlds humanity currently controls, and the demons will be able to separate us."

Phoebe continues. "Not that anything I just said matters. These gates are damn-near indestructible. I don't know what material the demons used to build them, but if I were to throw one of my Planet-walkers at this gate here, I wouldn't even dent it. The material used for these Volgrim-built gates is five times harder and more durable than demonstone, and appears to be infused with some sort of magical activator which allows for interdimensional travel. It's a potent fusion of technology and magic, one which I haven't a chance of mimicking."

Brunhilda struggles to understand Phoebe's explanation, but unlike the humans who served under Bahamut, her comprehension of technology is several epochs behind theirs. As the leader of a world of

hut-dwellers, she has only the most primitive grasp on technology, making it hard to understand Phoebe's words.

"I... I see. So, the big gate is... hard? It cannot be broken?"

Phoebe shakes her head. "Not by us, it can't."

"Ah. That is unfortunate," Brunhilda mutters. "So, will the demons be able to open the gate and attack us soon?"

"I can't say for certain, but I would assume so," Phoebe says.

Unlike most of the other soldiers, Brunhilda does not wear a T-REX, nor do her fellow Felorians. Unable to truly grasp the intricacies of technology, they instead shun the nanosuits and opt to fight with little more than leather armor, or even none at all. Brunhilda turns to her clan members and speaks to them in a hushed voice, allowing Phoebe to continue answering questions from other soldiers.

Eventually, she finishes. The soldiers disperse and start setting up shifts to guard the warp-gate, while others head off to eat food and prep themselves for what could be a long or short wait before the next demon attack.

Chadwick and Phoebe end up standing alone after the others leave. The General sighs. "I would almost rather the demons attacked us now. Not knowing when they'll open the portal, or if they will at all, makes me uneasy. I feel as if there's a snake somewhere in the tall grass, waiting to strike, but I haven't a clue where it's hiding."

Phoebe nods. "I know what you mean, as I feel similarly about my husband. I'd rather know he was dead or alive, if only to remove this anxious feeling in my heart."

Chadwick shakes his head. "The only thing worse than an enemy you can see is one you can't. I'll take my leave now, Miss Hiro."

"Farewell, Chadwick."

Phoebe watches silently as Chadwick heads off to the local mess hall, leaving her alone at the portal. Phoebe glances at the wall of debris still piled in front of it and sighs.

"This war has only just begun, and already, I wish it was over."

Author's Note:

Check out Brunhilda's artwork!

THE
CRYPOD
TO HELL



Part 239: Bael's Brain Spiders

Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, strides through the wall of demons parked at the entrance to the Core. A pile of debris nearly 100-feet-high stacks up to the top of the doors, blocking entry for more than one demon at a time. Unlike a minute before, a disquieting silence pervades the air, caused by the cessation of the Balrog's rampage.

Decked out in her now slightly-dusty white uniform, knee-high socks, and high-heeled shoes, Ose resembles a catwalk model and female CEO rolled into one. Her gorgeous appearance draws the lustful looks of countless low-ranked demons, but in her eyes, they mean nothing.

"Damn. Still can't hardly move my fingers..." Ose grumbles to herself. She glances at her mangled hands and grimaces. Already, they've lost their usual pink coloration to swelling and bits of bone poking through her skin.

The agony is excruciating, but Ose can only grit her teeth and bear the pain. After all, aside from Belial, the only other demon capable of healing in the Hell of Damnation, the First Hell, is Artorias. Naturally, the only way he can use healing magic is via Uriel's water-manipulation, something he would prefer not to do, which doesn't help Ose's situation out at all.

"...I'll have to visit the Blood Pits to get my fingers working again," Ose says, speaking more to herself than anyone nearby. "A two-hour soak in some fresh virgin blood should do the trick. It'll take me a week to get back to full-power, but if I can weave some basic signs, that will be a great help. Now then, how about that Bael, hm?"

Ose flicks her eyes to the top of the rubble-pile blocking the Core. She coils strength into her legs and leaps upward, clearing 100-feet in a single bound. Thanks to her Emperor physiology, she possesses more than enough strength to manage such a leap.

The Emperor of Infiltration lands atop the rubble without stumbling. Her cat-like dexterity extends throughout her whole body, aided in part by the power of electricity which accelerates her reflexes and thinking speed. A moment later, she darts through the small hole at the top and arrives inside the Core, amidst incalculable devastation. Thousands of tons of rubble bury the dead from both sides, while a small flicker of movement to the left reveals the now-demorphed Bael sitting beside Mephisto and a motionless human commando.

Ose's eyes widen slightly. *Oh? That distinctive armor coloration... Mephisto and Bael saved me a lot of trouble.*

The Emperor hops several times, each flicker of movement bringing her 50 feet closer to the two Dukes. In only 6 bounds, she clears the 300-foot gap and arrives next to her subordinates.

Mephisto raises his head to stare at Ose with his eerie, blood-red eyes. "Ksss. Ossse. The warp-gatesss have been buried. Sssomehow, the flessbagssss fixed the sssabotaged bombsss. They brought the cceiling down, and now we have lossst the initiative."

Ose waves Mephisto's concerns off, her broken fingers making the motion clumsier than it might normally be. "It's fine. I anticipated some losses during Stormbringer. Originally, we were going to face off against two Wordsmiths, remember? Since neither of them are here, that bodes incredibly well for us. We haven't suffered any fatalities yet; only three captures. Beelzebub and Artorias were our biggest losses, but we can still recover them."

Kneeling down, Ose examines Neil's unconscious form. With his armor hiding his face, Ose can't be sure if he's faking his condition or not. She summons electrical power to her eyes, then fires a finely tuned blast of lightning at Neil's chest.

Kzzat!

The nanites enveloping Neil's body shudder visibly. After a few seconds, they fall apart and turn to dust, drifting off Neil's body like sand rolling down a dune. Ose leans in even closer to examine the man's face, but she pulls away after a moment and nods with satisfaction.

"Good. The human is still alive. Mephisto, shackle and outfit him with an anti-Wordsmith containment device. If we can capture Jason's wife and daughter, along with a few other high-ranking resistance members, I'll be able to bring the whole of their society to its knees."

Mephisto frowns. "Ossse. Ssso long ass we haven't captured the Wordsssmithsss, why would the flessshbagsss ever give up? I thought that wasss the point of thisss whole operation! If we capture them, then we will crusssh the insssurrection!"

Ose smiles. She shakes her head ruefully while clicking her tongue. "That is why I'm the reigning Third Emperor and you're not, Mephisto. You don't understand human psychology in the slightest! If I capture Hope's best friend and his woman, while also capturing Jason's family, I will immediately be able to make them dance in my palm. Usually, they could cast a spell to locate their loved ones, but that's the *genius* of my devices. It prevents targeted spells from finding those I've designated. The Wordsmiths will be powerless to save the ones they care about most, and so, they will acquiesce to my demands."

The Third Emperor chuckles to herself. "That's the problem with having attachments. Once you develop a bond with someone, another person can use them as leverage against you."

Mephisto says nothing.

However, deep inside the Duke of Mist's soul, a deep-seated anger smolders. He gazes at the Emperor of Infiltration with hate-filled eyes, unable to forget the humiliation of watching a mere Baron get promoted to Emperor before himself.

"Indeed..." Mephisto mutters. "There iss nothing worssse than a ussleless bond to hold you back."

With her mind focused on a thousand other things, Ose misses the visible anger in Mephisto's eyes. She gazes at Neil's body, her thoughts a million miles away. "Mhm. Alright, take this human and begone. As for Bael, I want you to- huh?"

Ose finally notices the metal nanite-helmet encasing Bael's head. Realizing its purpose, she fires a concentrated burst of electrical energy from her eyes, shattering the nanite bonds with ease.

However, once the nanite helmet fizzles into ash, she spots the foot-long demonstone barb stuck in Bael's eye and shudders.

"What the Devil is that?!"

Ose grimaces as she examines the barb sticking three inches out of Bael's right eye. Bael sits on his butt with his feet sprawled out in front of him, and a miserable look on his face. His right arm hangs uselessly at his side, revealing that his Balrog transformation only managed to heal his grievous wounds temporarily until he reverted to his base form.

"The hell are you lookin' at, princess?"

Bael's hostile gaze chills Ose to the bone. She gapes at him, a mixture of disbelief and incomprehension in her eyes.

"Y-you! What happened?! How did... how did the humans injure you so badly?! That metal stake would have killed anyone else!"

Bael grimaces. "No shit, Captain Obvious. Got anything else y'wanna point out? If you hadn't noticed, I'm in a real shit mood."

"I... I can fetch Hellga. Maybe she can pull that thing out of your eye and heal you back to full."

The Emperor takes a step toward Bael, only to pause when he raises his fist. "Don't you even think about it! I already done tried pulling this little prick-sucker out! Damn near went Balrog-mode again! Ain't no way I'm lettin' anyone touch this!"

Ose narrows her eyes. "Fine. I won't touch it, but let me examine it. Anything capable of injuring you won't be ordinary."

Bael grinds his teeth. "I'm warnin' you, woman..."

"I *said* I wouldn't touch it."

Bael mutters a hundred curses underneath his breath before lowering his arm. With his one good eye, he stares at Ose like a hawk as she walks over and peers at the barb from several angles. Eventually, she brings her face to within a couple of inches from it, making Bael squirm.

"Hey! Do you want me to sock ya in the kisser?!"

"Shut up," Ose growls. "I'm not going to touch the little pokey-stick, you big baby."

Ose's innate demonic abilities include not only the power of electricity, but also Superman-like vision. Her pupils and iris expand and contract several times allowing her to zoom in and gaze at the barb's surface.

Eventually, she pulls away.

"That barb... Bael, you absolutely have to pull it out."

"Piss off!" Bael howls. "If I pull this fucker out, first thing I'm doin' is shoving it right up your-"

"Now is no time for idiocy," Ose counters, shutting the Duke of Pain down. "That barb is overflowing with millions of nanites. The humans designed it with reverse-facing demonstone quills, meaning if we try

to pull it out, it's bound to rip out half your skull along with it. However, if we don't, the nano-bots will chew your brain to pieces. You'll die a slow, agonizing death."

Bael starts to spout off at Ose again, but thinks better of it. The look in her eyes, for once, looks a lot less like smug self-satisfaction, and more like worry, pity, and a slight sense of helplessness.

"You're kidding..." Bael mumbles. "I can't die. The humans hit me in my weakest spot and only managed ta' piss me off. How the hell are a few nano-guys gonna kill me if the bigass-fuckin' metal arrow didn't?"

"From what I've seen, you're lucky to be alive," Ose says. "Based upon the swarming activity around your eye socket, you might have anywhere from an hour to a week left before the nanites devour your brain. I can't give an exact time."

Bael lowers his gaze to his feet. "You might be wrong."

"I'm not known for having poor judgment," Ose counters.

Both demons fall silent. After a few moments, Mephisto hovers toward Bael.

"Ksss. Bael. You are one of the few demonssss I consssider my comrade. We have our differencceesss, but you are alwaysss there for me. I think you ssshould lisssten to Ossse. Human naniteesss are extremely dangeroussss. Jussst today, the flessshbagss killed ssseveral Grez with grenadesss filled with flesssh-devouring naniteesss. I do not wisssh to sssee you meet ssuch a grissly end."

Ose glances at Mephisto, but doesn't vocalize the question in her eyes. *Flesh-devouring nanites? Since when did the humans develop such weapons?*

She remains silent, however, allowing Mephisto to reason with Bael.

"I can't do it..." Bael mutters. "You don't get it, man. This thing freaking hurts. I ain't never felt pain like this before."

"Don't you alwaysss sssay that pain iss the path to pleasssure?"

Bael rolls his still-functional eye. "This ain't the same thing, not one bit! There's a big difference between feeling the sting of a whip across your back or some light pain-play versus a shit-fucking arrow jammed in your eye! It's a thousand times worse, bub!"

Ose smacks her lips. "Yes. I would imagine so. Never mind. If you would rather die an agonizing death from brain termites than to just bite the bullet and rip that thing out and visit Hellga afterward, suit yourself."

The Duke of Pain squirms uncomfortably. "Uh... brain termites? You're kiddin', right?"

A flicker of light appears in Ose's eyes. "Hm? Oh, yes. Nanites aren't like termites. That would be a silly analogy."

Bael smiles. "Good. Cuz if there's one thing I hate, it's some nasty bug-"

Before Bael can finish his sentence, Ose leans in close and whispers, "More like brain *spiders*."

"Guh! Don't screw with me!" Bael yells. "Ain't no such thing as brain spiders!"

The Emperor pulls away and shrugs. "Perhaps, and perhaps not. You'll find out soon enough when they start laying eggs in your eye! Anyway, I've work to do, so I'll be leaving, now. Ta-ta~"

Ose turns to walk away, but before she makes it three steps, Bael jumps to his feet, with panic written all over his face. "H-hey, don't screw with me! F-fine! I'll take the damn thing out!"

Smug self-satisfaction appears in Ose's eyes. She turns to flash a cunning smile at Bael, only to contort her face with disgust as Bael grabs hold of the barb with three fingers. "Wait, you nimrod! Don't just yank it out! We need to have Hellga here when you- ack!"

Bael ignores Ose. He braces himself for a moment, then pinches the barb with all his strength. "AAAAAHHHHHHH!!!"

With one mighty tug, the Duke of Pain yanks the barb with all his strength. A horrific sight follows as blood bursts from his eye, along with an unthinkable amount of cerebral fluids and a thick, black liquid, one which explodes into ash when it hits the floor.

Bael stumbles forward and falls to his knees. He drops the foot-long barb on the ground and howls like a wounded bear. "AAAAARGH! SHITFUCKBITCHCUNTASSTITS!!!"

The Duke of Pain falls forward and rolls on the floor while clutching his face. He weeps like a baby, unable to control himself from the agony tearing through his mind.

Ose starts to walk toward him, only to pause and frown.

Before she can take two steps, Bael suddenly stops crying. He sits up, a surprisingly alert look on his face.

"...huh? Th-that's weird. It don't hurt no more."

Ose blinks in confusion. "What do you mean? Did your pea-brain disable its pain receptors?"

Bael shrugs. Blood continues to gush from his eye, but he smiles like a dopey moron. "Dunno! It just stopped hurting! Thank the Devils, or I might've gone Balrog-mode, bahaha!"

Ose glances at Mephisto, and he meets her gaze.

"...Bael's stupidity never fails to surprise me."

"Ksss. Yesss. You haven't the ssslightessst clue. Hisss mind probably ssshut off. A sssimple matter when one only hasss three brain cccellsss in the firssst placce."

"You said it, not me."

The Emperor of Infiltration trots over to Bael. "It's likely you have some residual brain-spiders left in your head. I have to fry them out with my electricity."

Bael's grin grows even bigger. "Brain spiders... hehe."

"Report to Hellga after this," Ose mutters. "We can't afford for you to lose what brains you have left, and you've lost a *lot* of blood."

With a sigh, Ose summons electrical power into her eyes. She aims her gaze at Bael's gouged-out eye, the only gap in his armor, and prepares to fire. A moment later, she unleashes a hundred-thousand-volt of

electricity at the Duke's bleeding orifice. It strikes him with surgical precision, worms its way through the gaps in his armor, and electrocutes Bael's brain.

Immediately after, Bael falls backward.

Plop.

The Duke of Pain passes out from the shock of having his brain get fried, allowing Ose to straighten her posture and sigh.

"There. Done. That should have destroyed all those pesky nanites. Now, to deal with the other matters."

Without another word, Ose turns away from Bael to face Mephisto. "Like I said. Take Bael to the Blood Pits, and get the humans' Commander inside restraints. The Wordsmiths could return at any moment, and their delaying only makes me nervous. We don't want them to be able to locate him until the time is right."

Mephisto shrugs. "Ksss. Very well. Do not forget my achievementsss during today'sss battle. Your precciousss Beelzebub fell during hisss firsst fight, while I almosst sssingle-handedly took out the flesshbagsss by myssself! That musst count for sssomething!"

"We haven't won this war yet," Ose counters, her tone dry. "Do you want a reward? Souls, perhaps? Have you forgotten that the River Styx is bone-dry? Defeat the humans first, and then we'll talk about battle merits. Now, hurry up and stop wasting my time. I have a Core to clean up."

Ose trots away, leaving Mephisto in her dust. The necromancer glowers at her back, but says nothing.

The Emperor exits the Core and arrives next to the gathered demons outside. Five thousand Burrowers, twice as many as before, sit around, waiting for her orders.

"I want this debris cleared out within the next few hours," Ose commands. "Work in rotations. Start from the top and clear away a fifty-by-fifty opening. I need progress, not perfection. Focus on clearing out just one of the warp-gates, and I'll handle the rest."

The Burrowers begrudgingly nod and get to work. As Ose starts to walk away, another demon walks up to her.

Orias, the Baron of the Stars, clears his throat. "Ahem. Ose, if you've a moment?"

"Hm? What is it?"

Unlike with Mephisto or Bael, Ose's tone turns somewhat cordial. Having worked with Orias in the past, she values him quite highly, respecting him as a powerhouse among the Barons.

"The Core's warp-gates... how will we activate them? All of Bahamut's computers were destroyed when the ceiling collapsed. Won't it take us weeks to clear out and rebuild the Core?"

Ose smiles. "Of course not. I was, after all, the demon who helped build the gates. I worked in tandem with the Overlords to make them a reality. I can also activate them and calculate the dimensional coordinates on my own."

Orias frowns. "Yes, but so long as the humans wish, they can press the emergency deactivation button on their side and seal off the gate. Do you have another plan of attack?"

"No. We will overwhelm the humans with numbers. Don't worry, Orias, I've planned this operation for six years. I have *several* agents working among the humans' ranks. How do you think Neil fell into our hands so easily?"

"Ah, I see," Orias says with a smile. "You always did like to plan ten steps ahead. I'll be waiting for your orders."

"Take a break," Ose says. "You'll be key to the next part of my operation."

After exchanging goodbyes, Ose breaks away from Orias. She slowly heads down the long corridor leading away from the Core, all while sighing to herself.

"...Can't wait to soak my fingers in some nice, warm human blood. Blasted Sphinx, forcing me to use my best attack like that... that's why I hate monsters and humans both. They're all so damned stubborn."

While the Emperor grumbles to herself, a faint beeping sensation appears in the back of her mind. A biochip, installed and maintained by Ose herself, connects to her brain and transmits a message from a high-priority sender.

All of the blood drains from Ose's face.

[LEVEL ONE MESSAGE FROM CONFESSOR VULPANIX. ALERT! CLAN KOKORAT HAS DETECTED A TOTAL BLACKOUT WITHIN THE LABYRINTH'S CORE. ALL WARPGATES HAVE BEEN DISABLED. WE ARE UNABLE TO ESTABLISH CONTACT WITH BAHAMUT. INVESTIGATE AT ONCE AND REPLY WITH AN EXPLANATION! ANY DELAYS WILL RESULT IN A REBELLION SUPPRESSION FORCE ARRIVING WITHIN TWO ORBITAL CYCLES.]

A shudder runs down Ose's spine.

"No, no, no! Not a suppression force! Seven Hells! I knew I overlooked something! If that damned Confessor gets involved, this whole house of cards could collapse! I can't let the Volgrim find out about the Hero's emergence, not until I've captured the Wordsmiths for myself!"

The Emperor's hands begin to tremble. She leans against a wall to steady herself, while drops of sweat pool on her forehead.

[Reply from Emperor Ose. I am investigating now. Will have a full report soon. The intermittent human resistances have caused a slight delay, but I will handle it. Everything is under control.]

Moments after Ose transmits her request, she receives a reply.

[UNACCEPTABLE. THE LABYRINTH CORE IS OUR BACKUP TRANSPORTATION NETWORK FOR BYPASSING THE PLAGUE. WE CANNOT AFFORD TO HAVE IT UNAVAILABLE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. YOU ARE TO PERSONALLY GO AND DEAL WITH ANY ISSUES. IF YOU FAIL, WE WILL REPLACE YOU AS EMPEROR WITHOUT HESITATION!]

Ose receives another mental shock, making her curl her broken fingers together and squeeze them into pain-filled fists.

"Gah! Vulpanix! You damned, worthless meddler! This is my Labyrinth, mine! You stuck-up, filthy Psion!"

Ose vents her frustration for several seconds, howling countless obscenities down the mostly-empty corridor around her. Several low-ranked demons passing by give her a wide berth, not wanting to get involved with whatever is angering her.

After fifteen seconds, Ose stops cursing. She transmits a reply to the Confessor, one laced with all kinds of niceties.

[I understand. Thank you for alerting me to the problem. I will have the warpgates back online before the next orbital cycle completes.]

[WE WILL ALLOW NO MORE THAN TWELVE STANDARD TIME UNITS! MOVE HASTILY AND DO NOT DELAY!]

[I will move quickly, Confessor.]

Ose's eyes gloss over as she heaves a great sigh.

Demons are nothing more than pawns in the grasp of the Volgrim. To them, we are less than garbage. The only reason they allow us to live is due to Unarin's ever-unknowable whims.

The Emperor of Infiltration resumes her course toward the Blood Pits, but she picks up the pace and starts jogging, putting some pep into her step.

"...Idiot Confessor! Your people haven't used the Core in centuries! Stop acting like it going down for a day is going to cause you any problems! Bah! Nothing worse than bureaucracy!"

Part 240: Commander Phoebe's Strategy

Phoebe Hiro, now the Head Commander of the Anti-Demon Resistance, paces back and forth in front of six hand-picked leaders of the various warfronts. Her guests sit on rocks set in the middle of the field not far behind the warp-gate encampment's western wall, while all of them face her and listen intently to what she has to say. Their names and ranks become unimportant as she looks at them with the eyes of a hawk. To the Hero's Wife, these people are merely weapons she must carefully wield in defense of humanity and its monster allies.

In the front row sits General Chadwick, Princess Brunhilda, and Corporal Hurent, along with Blinker, the monster queen. Behind them sits Lieutenant Samuel and Elder Skarde.

General Chadwick, Neil's number one. A black-haired Norwegian with a thick, three-inch-long beard. He wears a long, thin black coat, one designed to allow the air to cool him during the summertime, while his navy-blue military uniform underneath gives him a commanding presence. Chadwick's six-plus-foot height, in addition to his giant muscles and rotund belly, makes him stand out among all the others present. In social situations, he is the one who defeats his drinking opponents, while in grave situations, he is the strong and silent type.

Brunhilda, the Felorian princess. A chocolate-skinned, well-proportioned warrior with long white hair and countless white tattoos across her face and body. She wears only an animal-skin bra and loincloth, revealing her muscled abs and arms. As a tribeswoman, her domineering attitude comes not from stuck-up haughtiness, but from two decades of careful grooming by her parents, the former King and Queen of planet Feloria. Having bowed and acquiesced to the demons her whole life, she now sits and faces the Hero's Wife with a grave expression, knowing she may soon perish in battle while protecting her planet's tribes. At the least, she may enable a new future for her people, one where they no longer cower at the feet of their demonic oppressors.

Corporal Hurent, a decorated veteran with several military accomplishments. Her black hair sits in a ponytail, draped over her left shoulder, while Blinker sits on her right. Combined with her smooth, olive-green military uniform, and lightly bronzed white skin, she appears almost like a shorter, more tomboyish version of General Chadwick. Not bothering with makeup, she has a 'harder' edge to her appearance than Phoebe or Brunhilda, yet her eyes reveal she longs for the war to end. Battle is not in her nature, but merely her current call to action.

Blinker, the Monster Queen. She wears a tiny little set of cream-colored battle armor, crafted in advance by her mother two years prior. Her bright red hair contrasts with the white armor to give her the appearance of a cute little Valkyrie. When combined with her moth-like wings, the trifecta completes itself, making her resemble a battle-angel. Blinker sits on Corporal Hurent's right shoulder, the two of them somewhat close thanks to their interactions over the past few years.

Lieutenant Samuel, a hard-nosed man with a violent past. The ebony-skinned soldier sports several dreadlocks and a mean scar going across his forehead. He rests his elbows on his legs and leans forward, a

look of intense concentration on his face. Combined with his camouflage-fatigues, he looks ready to step into the jungle and disappear amongst its foliage. Few of the leaders gathered have anywhere near the same intense look in their eyes, a testament to how much he hates the demons and what they've taken from him.

Finally, Elder Skarde, one of several tribal elders from the planet Locklorn. As their designated envoy, Skarde speaks for all the people of his world. His skin appears the darkest of all, giving him a rich, coal-colored hue capable of blending in with the night. Skarde's carefully maintained, short-cropped hair combines with his purple and gold robes to give him the air of a merchant king, one with money flowing like rivers. A peaceful man, Elder Skarde nevertheless sets aside his misgivings for the sake of his world. While he might prefer seeking peace with the demons and forgiving their transgressions, he likewise would never consider rolling over and letting them destroy his extended family. He draws a hard line in the sand, one he will never let the demons cross.

With all six of the most important leaders assembled before Phoebe, the recently promoted Tarus II Commander begins pacing back and forth.

"Thank you all for coming. I'd like to have gathered more people, but it's probably best if you simply relay today's briefings to the relevant subordinates. We don't have much time to waste, so I'll get right down to business."

Phoebe shoots a glance at the walls of the warp-gate encampment, listening for a moment to hear if any battles have broken out due to the warp-gate's unexpected opening. Luckily, everything remains quiet and calm.

"I don't know how long we have before the demons clear out the Core, but I do know they will, *eventually*," Phoebe begins, as she returns her attention to those assembled. "The question afterward is how long we have until the demons get the warp-gates back online."

Corporal Hurent raises her hand. "Commander, one thing has been bothering me. We destroyed the computers which control the Core's warp-gates. How can the demons reactivate them? Without the Core's server infrastructure, won't it be impossible for the demons to calculate Tarus II's travel vectors?"

The Corporal's question, prodding at the very nature of warp-gate travel, elicits several nods from the other leaders. After all, from what they understand, calculating the relative position of a planet in the vastness of space, its orbital position, its current facing, and the exact position of the warp-gate on said planet should be impossible without a vast amount of computing power to assist.

However, to the assembled leaders' surprise, Phoebe shakes her head. "Our opponent is no ordinary demoness. She is Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, and the creator of warp-gate technology. Co-creator, technically, but a distinction which matters little in this context. I've spoken with Samantha on several occasions regarding Ose, and everything she's had to say about our enemy's abilities left me feeling shaken and worried. Ose's brain functions on a level far beyond ours, with unmuddled thoughts capable of computing information thousands of times more quickly than anyone else. She is, essentially, a living bio-computer."

Continuing, Phoebe adds, "Further, my husband once used Solomon's Crown to calculate the jump-vectors from Tarus II's warp-gate back to the Core. Kar watched him do it. If Jason can perform such a feat, I imagine the creator of warp-gate technology can do so as well."

The Commander's words end that line of questioning by the other generals. They fall silent and listen as Phoebe continues with her original train of thought.

Phoebe clears her throat. "Ahem. The battle for the Core was over far faster than anyone, especially Neil, first thought possible. Our enemies caught us off-guard with their new, armored soldiers. It seems likely they won't have any more of those terrifying Baron-level bastards available to hit us with, but we should naturally prepare for them. In the meantime, shifting to open terrain instead of the enclosed corridors of the Core will benefit humanity's forces greatly. Our weapons work best when engaging our enemies from a distance. The further they have to travel, the more time we have to kill them before they close the gap."

After pausing for a moment to rifle through her bag, Phoebe pulls out a tiny dime-sized device and presses it against the side of her head, just above her right ear. A small red LED on its side blinks twice once attached, then turns off. Afterward, she pulls out a baseball-shaped mechanical object, then lightly tosses it into the air. Elder Skarde and Brunhilda both reflexively flinch when the device doesn't fall to the ground, but instead stops in midair and hovers next to Phoebe.

"This is my Hovering Personal Assistant. I call him 'Happy.' Happy helps me with all sorts of things, but today, he'll be helping all of *you* to understand my thoughts."

Phoebe concentrates for a moment. She transmits images from her brain through the device stuck to her head and into Happy. In turn, the hovering metal baseball bobs in the air for a moment before beaming out a projected image of Tarus II's landscape, primarily the 20-mile range around and between Hero City and the warp-gate encampment.

The other leaders watch in fascinated silence as Phoebe points toward a small mountain range just over a mile north of the warpgate encampment. "This location is known as the Sphinx Mountain Range, and is going to be a critically important asset we must protect once the demons invade. How many of you have visited it before?"

Elder Skarde and Samuel both shake their heads. General Chadwick, Corporal Hurent, and Blinker all offer hesitant nods, while Brunhilda's are the most emphatic of all. Upon noticing the recognition in the Felorian Princess's eyes, Phoebe smiles. "Brunhilda, what makes you so familiar with that region?"

"I enjoy climbing mountains to gaze at the world from their vistas," Brunhilda replies. "Since that region offers a breathtaking view of the distant ocean, I have scaled it numerous times."

Phoebe's smile stretches further. "Did you ever happen to notice the artillery battlement I built there?"

A look of surprise appears on Brunhilda's face. The Felorian Princess scratches her head sheepishly. "Ah, no? What do you mean, Commander Hiro?"

"Three years ago, Jason and I worked together to build several fortifications for Tarus II. One of those happened to be a network of long range auto-cannon installations in the Sphinx Mountain Range.

Observe."

Phoebe's robo-assistant, Happy, releases a cute high-pitched chirp. "Beep-boop!"

Immediately, a second hologram appears, one of a gigantic gun more than a hundred feet tall, with three cannon barrels aimed diagonally into the sky. The whole thing rests upon a square turret base, with rotatable joints and motors allowing it to adjust its firing angle and distance. The menacing weapon makes all of the leaders gathered raise their eyebrows in surprise.

"Wow!" Blinker gasps. "Phoebe, you built that thing? It's huge!"

Chadwick stands up and walks closer to more carefully scrutinize the artillery cannon. "Very impressive. Why have I heard nothing about this?"

"Because it's one of my many secret weapons," Phoebe says, a tricky smile playing upon her lips. "I call it a King Cannon. We've always worried about demonic spies in our ranks. Bad actors among our fellow humans and monsters might also be an issue, too. I built these cannons in absolute secrecy, telling only Jason and Solomon. Not even Samantha knows of their existence."

Elder Skarde snorts. "Just as well."

"Samantha will never betray humanity," Phoebe snaps, glaring viciously at the elder. "Don't think I've forgotten some of the hurtful things you said. I'd advise you to keep your mouth shut about her if you don't want my foot shoved where the sun doesn't shine."

Chadwick remains silent. As one of Neil's closest confidantes, he too has no trust for the succubus. Still, he knows better than to disparage her in front of Phoebe, especially given the circumstances.

"Ahem," Lieutenant Samuel clears his throat. "If I may. You mentioned cannons, plural. How many of these have you built?"

Phoebe turns away from Skarde to look at Samuel behind him. "Ten. They function by firing shells over long distances which explode shortly before striking the ground. These explosions release hundreds of iron rods, each one capable of stabbing through even the heaviest armor. No demon will be able to withstand a shelling from the King Cannons. I have several other types of ammunition present as well, including explosive munitions, poison gas, and acid for melting flesh. Needless to say, we must ensure our troops don't get caught in the crossfire."

"And," Phoebe adds, "that is one of the biggest problems we face. The King Cannons are explosively powerful and more than capable of turning tens of thousands of demons into puddles of blood. However, they lack precision. They're a double-edged sword capable of harming our soldiers. I plan to use them only if our troops fail to prevent the demons' advance from the warp-gate. That's why I will now move on to the next strategic point."

Commander Hiro disables the hologram for the King Cannon while Chadwick takes his seat. She returns to the original hologram, the one showing Tarus II's topography.

"On the north side of Hero City we have ten Covenant ships to protect. On the south side are the Pyramids. On the east, we have a mixture of forested woodlands and some hilly terrain. Between Hero

City and the Warp-gate Encampment, we have the Horned Forest, with all manner of vicious predators hiding amongst its trees, and the vast open plains where we will most likely engage with demonkind if they take over the encampment. Looking at the encampment itself, we have the King Cannons to the north, Tarus II's great ocean to the west, and finally the southern side."

Phoebe clears her throat. "Here, we run into another problem. Some of you may not be familiar with the southern region, as we rarely go there. It's filled with canyons and ravines deep enough to kill anyone if they should stumble inside. The deepest one reaches half a mile into the planet's crust, so, needless to say, not many people go there. However, it is also home to another of my secret facilities."

"Another?" Corporal Hurent asks, her jaw turning slack. "Just how many facilities have you built?"

Phoebe's smile dims. "Too many to handle on my own, but not enough to guarantee our safety."

That reply makes the Corporal close her mouth and nod along silently. Phoebe continues by activating another hologram, this time showing a massive network of buildings carved into the side of a ravine. The facility stretches far enough into the distance that it goes past the edge of the hologram where nobody can see its end.

"By the Creator..." Lieutenant Samuel mutters. "You've been holding out on us."

"Indeed. This facility is one I haven't even told Jason about. I built it by myself."

Phoebe's casual attitude stuns everyone present. Blinker jumps off Corporal Hurent's shoulder and flies over to Phoebe. "What?! How could you build all that by yourself? That's impossible!"

While the fairy buzzes around the hologram with wide-open eyes, Phoebe chuckles. "Believe me, I did. Don't you remember six years ago, when Jason used to build houses and apartments for people with his Wordsmithing? I created a tool that could synthesize simple square structures out of energy, one which could project and build walls, ceilings, and floors. I built this facility with an upgraded version of that device."

A huge, giddy smile spreads across Chadwick's face. "Absolutely amazing. I never imagined we had a facility like this at our disposal, nor that you would be its sole builder. What is its function, Commander Hiro? Why did you build it in such an out-of-the-way location?"

"It's not out-of-the-way at all," Phoebe clarifies. "This facility's purpose is to create war-machines capable of leveling battlefields, and so I needed it somewhere close where I could send them barreling toward the front lines within minutes. That Planet-Walker I demonstrated earlier came from here, as well as many similar machines. I wanted to ensure we had extremely powerful trump cards prepared, should the demons ever invade. Secrecy was even more important, as I couldn't chance the demons learning of their existence."

Corporal Hurent raises her hand. "Hold on a moment. Regarding not only this robot-creation-facility, but also the King Cannons, how can we train enough people to pilot and control your machines? Those cannons look like they will require countless soldiers to aim and fire them, while the robots you've constructed will doubtless require intense training to use them to their fullest capacity. Have you trained anyone in secret as pilots? Or, perhaps... might these machines be fully autonomous?"

"Neither," Phoebe replies. "The Planet-walkers and other mecha are, indeed, autonomous, but I will require pilots inside them for target designation purposes. Each robot is capable of basic decision-making, but a human in the cockpit is our surest bet for strategically taking out demons wherever they appear. As for the King Cannons, the situation is similar. I will require a few personnel to man them for the sake of designating targets, but their roles will be minor. A bigger issue comes from fuel and munition supplies, which is the next thing I'd like to mention."

Phoebe waves away the southern facility's hologram, returning to the topographical Tarus II map.

"Look here. The King Cannons are immensely powerful, but they are also fragile. Once the demons figure out the cannons' location, if they choose to attack them, they can easily destroy them. I've protected the King Cannons, as well as my southern facility, with holographic obfuscation technology. Even up close, it's nearly impossible to locate the cannons, but every time they fire, the stealth net will go down for a moment, revealing their position. This will make it easy for the demons to find and destroy them."

Blinker nods. "Like Ose's mansion."

"Additionally," Phoebe continues, "the King Cannons have limited ammunition available. I always envisioned them as being supplementary to Jason and Hope's power, giving us a powerful area-attack, but with the Wordsmiths missing, they will end up being our primary suppression device against the demons. If so, then we'll need to establish munition supply lines to keep them continuously firing at all times. The supply line will come from the east side of Hero City up along the northern border until it reaches the Horned Forest. From there, it will continue until it reaches the Sphinx Mountain Range, where the personnel we place can take the shells and reload the King Cannons. At any point, demons might disrupt this supply line, thus rendering the cannons useless. Without ammunition, they will be little more than giant, decorative statues atop the mountains."

Brunhilda pipes up. "So, you wish for me to take control of protecting the King Cannons?"

"That's right. While the number of personnel required to operate the King Cannons is minimal, we will need a substantial number of troops available to guard the mountains themselves from demonic attacks. Think you're up to the task?"

"Naturally," Brunhilda replies.

Phoebe nods. "Good. I have some positive news to report as well, which you all will doubtless find comforting."

She touches the hologram and draws a circle around the warp-gate encampment. "I came up with a temporary fix for the burrower problem. I didn't want them to easily breach our lines by burrowing under us, so I cobbled together a few experimental devices. I call them 'seismic mines.' They detonate when they detect seismic activity nearby. If the Burrowers try to dig a tunnel near a seismic mine, they will perish a quick, explosive death."

Blinker lands on Phoebe's shoulder. "When the heck did you make those?"

"Today," Phoebe says. "Took me about eight hours. I only synthesized a couple hundred of them, and I attached them to mechanical moles to ensure they end up deep beneath our feet. However, given my

limited amount of time, I only managed to surround the warp-gate encampment with them, as well as place a few beneath Hero City. Once a few Burrowers explode, they'll doubtless be able to continue forward, unabated. Luckily, the sensors will still give me an idea of where they're headed."

"You think of everything." Brunhilda says, admiration in her eyes.

"I wish that were the case. I'm only human, so I can't anticipate a demon's thought processes. Doubtless, Ose is sure to find a gap in our defenses. Don't get starry-eyed on me, not unless we actually survive this awful war."

Once again, Phoebe points at the holographic map. "Look over here, to the west of the encampment. There are thirty-seven miles of unprotected land between here and the ocean. If the demons escape in that direction, they'll be able to spread out and go around our borders, as I haven't built any defenses in that area. The King Cannons can certainly fire that far, but their accuracy and coverage will decrease substantially. Lieutenant Samuel, I'll rely on you to keep an eye on the western and southern sides of the encampment, while Princess Brunhilda will be in charge of guarding the Sphinx Mountains to the north. We cannot let the demons stake out a safe haven to the west. If they do, they'll likely summon countless portals to the Labyrinth, removing our chokepoint advantage. We have to keep them pinned down at the Tarus II warp-gate, or else they will rapidly overwhelm us with numbers."

Samuel nods. "As long as I get to kill bloodskins, you can count me in."

Phoebe frowns. "Demons, Lieutenant. *Demons*. Enough with the god-damned slurs."

"I don't care if you like my language or not," Samuel says, his face emotionless. "Bloodskins killed my brother. They butchered him like livestock. Don't preach to me that compassion nonsense. In my eyes, they're all filthy animals in need of extermination."

"Demons tortured my people for countless generations," Elder Skarde chimes in. "We have known nothing but fear and subservience to the bloodskins my whole life. Commander Phoebe, you may feel some twinge of compassion for the murderous wretches, but we do not. We only fight the bastards because of the horrors they've exacted upon us. If you want our help, then you *will* find a way to deal with our feelings."

After seeing the other two leaders stand up for their beliefs, Chadwick adds his two cents. "With all due respect, Commander, how many demons do you know who are righteous and pure? One? Ten? A hundred? You may have the utmost faith in Belial and others like her, but we do not. I have fought alongside Neil and Hope countless times when rescuing human slaves from the core. Some of the things I saw..."

The General starts to fall silent, only to notice a look of curiosity in the faces of Elder Skarde and Princess Brunhilda, both of whom have never stepped foot in the Labyrinth except for its Core.

"I saw a young man who was half-dead," Chadwick mutters, his voice low. "the poor kid had all the skin on his back melted and fused together. His bloodskin tormentor pressed him against a wall after burning him, then left him there, with his skin stuck to the stone. When Hope found him, the boy was

half-dead and delirious with pain. It took Hope fifteen minutes of Wordsmithing to heal the boy's injuries. The lad later killed himself because of the lasting mental pain we couldn't erase."

General Chadwick glances at Phoebe, noticing with interest that for once, she doesn't appear angry at his words. "That boy was not the exception, but the rule. The bloodskins treat us worse than cattle, worse than bugs. They enjoy our suffering. I see no way we can ever truly cohabit with them. Perhaps you might be capable of picking out one or two decent ones, but the rest are all irredeemable, violent psychopaths. We must eradicate them for the good of the galaxy."

Despite a three-pronged verbal assault from Samuel, Elder Skarde, and Chadwick, Phoebe appears unmoved.

"Do you think I don't know all that?"

Commander Hiro tilts her chin up slightly, allowing her to look down upon the still-seated Chadwick.

"I'm well aware of the atrocities demons have committed. I am not Jason, and as such, I don't believe in trying to save all, or even most of them. My husband is a good man. He tries to look at demons as sinners, those who were led astray early in their history. They were born from bloodshed, and so that is all they know. Or so Jason claims."

Phoebe raises her hand and waggles a finger. "I do not think the same thoughts as Jason, General Chadwick. I do not believe demons are necessarily redeemable, but I *do* believe that they are not *irredeemable*. That is why I find myself disgusted when you refer to them with such gross, offensive slurs. Not because I think your hatred is misguided, but because as long as we treat them as inherently evil villains, we will never have even a chance to mend the rift between our species. Hate the demons and wish for their deaths all you want, for I will not stop you from thinking such thoughts. However, please understand that we humans must be better than our enemies. We must show them with our conduct that, so long as they own up to their actions and accept the appropriate punishment, we will always be willing to forgive, if not forget their pasts."

The Commander falls silent, allowing her words to germinate in the ears of those present. Blinker sits on her shoulder silently, saying nothing, while Brunhilda and Corporal Hurent stew in their own private thoughts.

General Chadwick rubs his knee contemplatively. "Hrm. I do not fully understand why you so often choose to defend the demons. Perhaps I never will. I merely wish you would not try to dissuade people from referring to the demons as 'bloodskins,' like they deserve."

"'Deserve' is a strong word, General," Phoebe retorts. "From what I've gathered, humanity stomped on the faces of the demons countless generations ago, and they retaliated in kind. Do we not deserve hatred from them as well?"

"That is a different situation entirely."

"So you claim," Phoebe snaps back. "But, if you so desperately wish to lump all the members of a sentient species under one definition, I suppose I cannot stop you. We haven't time to sit here and wax

philosophical about our beliefs, so let's just hold off on the comebacks for today. If we survive this invasion, we'll return to this discussion at a later time."

Chadwick nods. "Very well."

Elder Skarde and Samuel both share a glance with one another, revealing neither of them plans to change their minds, but at the least, they fall silent to allow Phoebe's continued debriefing.

"Right. Let's finish this, then," Phoebe says. The Commander disables the Tarus II topographical map, and instead summons a series of images of various soldiers standing at attention, all of them wearing basic military uniforms with T-REX's strapped across their chests.

"I've finished doling out the new exosuit models I prepared in advance. Allow me to debrief you on their functionality."

The first trooper's image shimmers and shifts, adorning him in a shiny silver armor, one which all of the generals are familiar with.

"This is the basic T-REX, a mass-produced model with no obvious flaws that merely enhances the average human warrior's speed and durability to beyond that of a Demon Lord. It also helps with aim assist on projectile-based weapons, and features a low-level pilot-assistance mode capable of augmenting its wearer's dodging capabilities mid-battle. An excellent suit for any beginner, but one the demons have long grown used to seeing."

The next trooper also shifts his appearance, appearing in a silver-and-red exosuit with a few utility modules attached to its arms and waist. The red coloration extends in a cross-like shape across the trooper's chest.

"This is Mark I of the Clinician battlesuit. It has lower strength and speed than the basic T-REX, but in exchange, it features greater durability and advanced pilot assistance support. I designed it with our battlefield medics in mind. We can't rely on rescue devices to save all of our downed troops, so having field medics on hand will be essential to saving as many lives as possible. The Clinician also features several medical devices capable of prolonging a dying soldier's life, including nano-injectors to seal and repair wounds."

Corporal Hurent, one of the more technically-minded of the leaders present, nods appreciatively. "I'd have liked to have a few of those on hand when we fought in the Core."

"As would we all," Phoebe replies.

The Commander moves on to the third exosuit, one with an identical silver coloring scheme to the first exosuit, but with four 'struts' sticking out of its back.

"Previously, we've had to rely on Harpies for their excellent battlefield mobility and flight capabilities. Now, we have another option. The Mark I Hummer is our first flight-capable battlesuit, but I've only managed to manufacture fifty of them, so far. The wing struts on the back allow for limited durations of swift flight, but extended amounts of hovering capabilities. Think of them as mobile sniper platforms, rather than flying assault weapons."

"I can already imagine several uses for the Hummer," Chadwick says, his voice low.

Phoebe doesn't reply. She activates the next hologram, revealing a truly menacing-looking exosuit, one with gold and black coloration, a metal horn on its helmet, and two others on its shoulders. With much bulkier armor than the previous exosuits, as well as a long impaling rod sticking out above each wrist, it looks like a nasty melee-capable battlesuit.

Audible gasps go up among the leaders present, making Phoebe smile.

"This is the Mark I Rhino. Truly exclusive, I've only made twenty of them. Each is a precious asset, featuring fifty percent thicker armor than other exosuits and razor-sharp nanite rods for 'sticking it' to the demons. Advanced cooling capabilities also make it effectively immune to flame-based attacks from all but the most extreme sources. I designed them for frontline usage, improving the power of each of our best commandos. Naturally, I hope you'll be the first to try one out, Samuel."

Lieutenant Samuel grins evilly. "Oh, yes. I'll be able to do a lot of damage with one of those."

"I'm sure you will. Let's finish with the last two suits, both of which you should all be familiar."

This time, the holographic trooper shifts his appearance into a stealthy jet-black exosuit, one with the same sleek design as the basic exosuit model, but fewer 'cracks' in its surface. Most notably, four long, metallic 'tendrils' stick out of its back and writhe around like an ant's antennae.

Chadwick blinks in surprise. "A Spectre? We have hundreds of those already, don't we?"

"Correct. This Spectre is different, though, as it's a second generation exosuit. I'm sure all of you have noticed the odd-looking tendrils on its back. I call them 'Needlers,' and they will be key for maximizing the Mark II's improvements over the first generation. In addition to greatly improved passive stealth capabilities in shadow, the Mark II Spectre can initiate Level III cloaking at will, granting it five minutes of near-perfect stealth capabilities. Most importantly, it now features nearly infinite Level II stealth capabilities, meaning it can remain invisible indefinitely so long as the user keeps their movement to a minimum. It will be excellent for setting up ambushes."

"What function do the 'Needlers' perform?" Brunhilda asks. "They look like headless black snakes."

"More than you can imagine," Phoebe replies. "The Needlers allow the user to scale walls and cliffs, assassinate multiple enemies at once, manipulate tools, and countless other such feats. Think of them as four additional limbs, each one stronger and much more flexible than your arm. They can wrap around an enemy's neck to choke him out, or they can pick locks by deforming their shape... the possibilities are endless."

"Amazing as always, Miss Hiro," Chadwick says, bowing his head respectfully. "If we had these suits during the Core invasion, perhaps we could have defeated the demons instead of suffering such a terrible loss."

Phoebe purses her lips. "Not necessarily. The Spectre suits sacrifice durability and defensive capacity in exchange for speed and stealth. Their offensive-power is also sub-par, making them only good for assassination and espionage. In a giant arena like the Core, Spectre pilots would have perished the fastest."

"Ah. I'll defer to your expert opinion, then," Chadwick mutters, slightly embarrassed.

Phoebe clears her throat. This time, when the last trooper shifts his appearance, looks of surprise appear on Chadwick, Corporal Hurent, and Samuel's faces.

"Hm?" Samuel says. "Isn't that...?"

"Yes," Phoebe replies. "It's the suit Neil wore during the Core invasion: The Thundercat Mark II."

The final trooper hologram changes to reveal a bright blue, red, and golden exosuit, one with a bulky golden gauntlet on its left wrist. Three Wolverine-like blades stick out of the gauntlet, suitable for ripping and tearing, while the trooper also sports a vicious-looking nanosword in his right hand.

"Another Mark II," Chadwick marvels. "It's much flashier than the Mark I, particularly with its coloration. You must have given Neil one before the battle."

"His bodyguards too," Phoebe affirms. "Neil didn't get much time to learn its many functions, and sadly, neither will our troops. However, I'll tell you right now what to expect. The Transforming Exogauntlet on its left arm is a powerful utility item comparable to the Spectre's Needlers. It can become a hammer, a blade, a shield, or anything you need for the situation at hand. Merely describe a shape, and Centurion will attempt to replicate it."

Phoebe gestures toward the holographic trooper's right hand. "This nanosword is equally dangerous. When combined with the Thundercat's reinforced defensive capabilities, it will allow its pilot to fight on the front lines alongside our Rhino-wearing troopers. Since the Thundercat Mark II is a modification of the Mark I, we already have several thousand of them available, along with the new Spectres. I advise you to quickly debrief your troops about the additional functions of these new exosuits, as we won't have much time to train them in their various intricacies once the demons invade."

After taking a long, deep breath, Phoebe exhales.

"Alright. Let's wrap this up. Any questions?"

Chadwick runs his fingers through his beard. "Do you have anywhere you'd like to station us?"

"Ah! I almost forgot. Thank you for reminding me."

Phoebe re-engages the topographical map and points toward the southern side of Hero City.

"Over here, this area is part of the southern prison complex, where I've created a specialized Demon Containment Facility. We must ensure the demons don't locate Beelzebub and Artorias. Keep them locked up at all costs. Corporal Hurent, I'm putting you in charge of defending the prison."

The Corporal nods. "Yes, Commander. I'm already familiar with their layout, as I took our prisoners there earlier."

"Good. I'll need you to pull double-duty keeping an eye on Hero City's eastern flank, too. The south and east sides are among our most vulnerable, so if the demons break containment from the warp-gate, I want to know at once if they reach our flanks."

Phoebe turns her attention toward the others. "Princess Brunhilda. As stated before, you're in charge of protecting the King Cannons and their supply line. Samuel, you're in charge of guarding the southern

and western side of the warp-gate encampment. Chadwick, I want you on command duty for the vast majority of our main forces, particularly between Hero City and the encampment. However, Elder Skarde, you may have the most complex job of all."

Elder Skarde frowns. "In what way?"

"You'll be our final defensive line. You will protect Hero City, especially the north side's Covenant ships. You must ensure Burrowers don't make it past our defensive lines, and that any Warpers get taken out before they can circle around to our flanks."

"I will do my best," Skarde replies.

Blinker hops off Phoebe's shoulder and flies around excitedly. "Ooh, ooh, what about me? What do I get to do?"

Phoebe smiles. "Are you fully healed?"

"Yeppers! Samantha got me all fixed up! Kar's still healing, though. I dunno when he'll be ready to return."

Phoebe's smile deepens. The memory of what Blinker told her before the debriefing, regarding Daisy, leaves butterflies in her stomach. However, for some reason, she keeps her mouth shut and doesn't mention it in front the other leaders.

"That's good. I'm glad we have *Samantha* at times like this. Well, even if Kar isn't back, I hope we can rely on you for support against the demons wherever they appear."

"Duh!" Blinker giggles. "I'll smush 'em flat! Those big red dummies won't know what hit 'em!"

Phoebe pokes Blinker's stomach playfully. "Just watch yourself out there. If anything happened to you, it would devastate Kar."

Blinker rolls her eyes. "Psh. Don't you know who I am? I'm the Monster Queen. I'm strong as heck!"

Despite the fairy's tough words, Phoebe's eyes grow distant. "Yeah. But... be careful. Kar already lost one wife. I don't want to imagine what losing a second would do to him. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

With one last, heavy sigh, Phoebe turns to the assembled leaders. "Alright, dismissed. Get out there and make Neil proud. If he's still alive, we'll mount a rescue operation once we survive this war."

Chadwick rises off his rock and raises an eyebrow. "You suddenly sound more confident than before."

Phoebe nods. "Neil always says a leader must look strong for his troops. I can only hope to live up to that ideal."

"As can we all. Words to live by," Chadwick mutters. With a nod of the head, he turns to leave. "I'll see you on the battlefield, Commander Hiro."

"Likewise," Phoebe replies.

The waning sun begins to fade behind clouds to the west, setting on the world of Tarus II and bringing the cover of darkness. As the humans disperse, with Blinker riding on Phoebe's shoulder, they all gaze at

the setting sun with wistful eyes.

Artwork time!

Basic T-REX.



Clinician T-REX.



Hummer T-REX.



Rhino T-REX.



Spectre T-REX.



Thundercat T-REX



This is Brunhilda!

THE
CRYPOD
TO HELL



MINTX
STUDIOS

Part 241: Invasion!

The chill of the night-time wind sweeps across Tarus II's surface. Strange, monstrous beasts hover in the sky, their pill-shaped bodies floating through the air without wings. These creatures, beasts which evolved on Tarus II, travel in packs, allowing vast numbers of sky-bound bugs to float into their open mouths. Known as cloud-beasts, they offer a hint of homeliness to the humans and monsters who've lived most of their lives on the beautiful blue world.

Not far away, in the Warpgate Encampment, hundreds of lights illuminate the area. Spotlights, flying drones with glowing bulbs, ground-mounted halogens, and all manner of other devices brighten up the pitch-black of the night, turning the walled camp into a fortress as bright as the day.

Two soldiers, decked out in fullbody T-REX's, stand next to the warpgate. Between them rests the gate's control pad, a soft white screen waiting for someone to login and input coordinates and calculations to another warpgate.

Both men hold a rifle in their grasp, resting against their chests. They shift back and forth on their feet to try and make the blood flow, and to eliminate the feeling of 'pins and needles' tingling in their toes.

"Hey, John," The soldier on the left says.

"What?" John replies, not even turning his head to look at the other soldier. "Need to shit again, Luke?"

"No! No, I'm good..." Luke mumbles. "I'm just, uh... bored."

"Sounds like a 'you' problem," John mutters. "It's a nice night out. Take in the air. Look at the stars."

Luke rolls his shoulders around to try and work out a kink in his neck. "Easy for you to say. We've been standing here for hours! You do that for fun every weekend."

"It's called 'meditation,'" John growls. "I like to get close to nature. Nothing weird about that."

"That's what *you* call it. The rest of us just want to know why you always disappear into the jungle and come back covered in mud. Got a lover inside a bog? Maybe a cute Medusa chick? What's the deal?"

John lightly waves the tip of his gun toward the Horned Forest, to the east of the encampment. "The only woman I see over there is Mother Nature. Don't you think she's out of my league?"

Luke glances at John. He slugs the other soldier in his arm. "Hah! And here I thought you didn't have a sense of humor!"

"Of course I do," John mutters. "I just don't feel like fooling around, what with the warpgate behind us."

Luke turns his head slightly to glance at the two long, curved arms sticking out of the steel platform beneath his feet. They rise twenty feet into the air and curve their tips toward each other before stopping some two feet apart.

"Yeah... pretty ominous. You, uh... are you scared?"

John shrugs. "A little."

"Yeah..." Luke mutters, his voice a whisper. "Me too. Commander Hiro says the demons are going to open the portal, eventually. Do you think they can? We destroyed the Core, right?"

"Commander Hiro knows better than either of us clowns," John says. "She's our tech-goddess. She made these blasters, these suits, and all of our equipment. If she says the demons will come, then..."

Luke returns his attention forward, toward the bottom of the platform. Dozens of soldiers casually mill around, chatting with one another. Slings attach their guns to their chests, keeping them within arm's reach while also allowing them to free up their hands.

Not far away, a dozen newly-created sentry towers stand fifty-feet tall, their spotlights aimed at the warpgate. Three snipers sit within each nest, all of them chatting up a storm while they wait for instructions.

"Has... has Commander Hiro ever been wrong?" Luke asks, his voice trembling. "About anything. Has she ever made a wrong call?"

John turns his head slightly to look at Luke. His friend's legs tremble almost imperceptibly, a sign of the fear he's trying to contain.

"Not that I know of," John mutters. "There's always a first time for something, but I doubt today will be that case."

Luke's head lowers as he gazes at the ground. "Trillions of demons. Can we win?"

"Unlikely," John says, his voice containing an odd edge. "But then, you know me. I've always been a pessimist."

"Yeah, you sure have," Luke says, chuckling uneasily.

As John and Luke guard the gate, John tilts his head to the side to look at the clock on his HUD.

11:47 AM.

A look of sadness appears on his face, shrouded by his faceless helmet. He glances at Luke.

"Say, why don't you go and grab the next shift early? I think I can handle it here for a minute, by myself."

Luke blinks in surprise as he turns to his friend. "Huh? Early? But Commander Hiro said-"

"Come on, Luke! I'm sure you've gotta use the little Skippy, and so do I. Let the next guys take over a few minutes early. What will it hurt?"

"Well..." Luke says, his voice hesitant. "I don't think we should. I'd never want to make Commander Hiro angry. She's one of my favorite people."

John doesn't reply. He stares at his friend's helmet for several long moments before sighing. "Haa... alright. Suit yourself."

...At that moment, right when the clock strikes 11:50.

A sudden sizzling sound begins crackling from the air behind Luke. The younger man turns to look at the warpgate behind him in horror as sparks of electricity bolt toward its center, connecting from five different points.

"Holy-!"

Luke's jaw drops. He immediately looks at the control panel, as a giant red warning appears on it.

"Initiating warpgate connection. 0:20 Seconds remaining. Decouple? [Y/N]"

A big red button for disabling the connection appears. Without hesitation, Luke jerks his arm forward to press it, just like Commander Hiro ordered.

In that split second, his gaze flicks to John, as the older man takes aim with his heavy blaster.

"No!"

Too late, all Luke can do is cry out one word of alarm before John pulls the trigger.

BLAM!

A heavy bolter shot blasts from the gun's barrel and punches straight through Luke's T-REX armor, rips out his stomach, and flings him backward. An instant later, Luke hits the ground with a wet *thwop*.

John doesn't even blink.

"I gave you your chance."

His single gunshot, along with the warpgate's activation, grabs the attention of every soldier in camp. They quickly beeline for the portal, looking at it, Luke's body, and John's smoking gun. "John! What happened?!"

"Luke was a traitor," John replies. "He tried to stop me from disabling the warpgate."

The other soldier guffaws. "Luke?! *He* did? No, never mind that! Hurry up and disable the gate!"

John smiles. "Sure thing, pal."

BLAM! BLAM!

John's weapon fires two more rounds, ending that soldier's life and alerting the entire base. Seconds later, a hail of gunfire smashes into John, battering him to the side. The last thing he sees is the countdown on the warpgate's initiation cycle.

"Initiating warpgate connection. 0:03 Seconds remaining. Decouple? [Y/N]"

Haha... you're all... too... late...

John dies before he hits the ground.

By the time the soldiers start to leap up the steps to the warpgate, they arrive just in time to see the decoupling notice disappear.

"Warpgate coupling successful. Initiating rift sequence."

The nearest soldier grabs at the keypad and furiously presses all over it. His expression warps into horrified rage. "I... I can't turn it off! Where's the decoupling button? Why did it disappear?!"

A female voice speaks from the console, her tone mocking in nature.

"Stupid humans. I removed that option. This warpgate will never close again."

FWOOM!

The warpgate violently connects with the Labyrinth Core, making all the soldiers shout in unison.

"We've made contact! Move, move, MOVE!!"

At that moment, a massive horde of undead begins pouring through the warpgate like water through a sieve. The fleeing soldiers turn around and fire their guns in tandem, transforming the battlefield into a deafening cacophony of slaughter.

Armored skeletons, unarmored skeletons, zombies, mummies, undead gargoyles, liches, specters, and all manner of other hellish creatures rush down the soldiers nearest the warpgate. Their sturdy T-REX's provide them only momentary protection before the undead tear through the nanites like steak knives through styrofoam. The men and women nearest the gate scream in agony as their innards leave them, flying in wide arcs across the ground.

One female soldier cries out helplessly as a skeleton rams its fingers into her eyes, gouging her brains out before she can even raise her gun. She falls backward, lifeless, as the undead keeps charging forward recklessly, without regard for its life.

Four dozen soldiers die in the blink of an eye. However, the other soldiers manage to hide behind erected concrete blockades, firing full-tilt into the neverending mob of rotted flesh and sinew.

"Reload!" One soldier at the frontlines barks. He jumps backward as another soldier takes his spot, spitting hot lead into the nearest half-dozen zombies. Despite the humans possessing energy weapons, plasma cannons, and other such advanced devices, they opt to use plain old bullets of varying sizes, instead. Thanks to the advanced designs of their weapons, the barrels never overheat, nor do the differing bullets ever jam in the firing cylinders.

However, with only finite ammunition, some of the soldiers sweat crazily as they watch thousands upon thousands of undead creatures pour from the warpgate.

* * *

Not far from the frontlines, Lieutenant Samuel activates his T-REX. A brilliant golden hue materializes over his body as the powerful Rhino armor takes shape, giving him two massive spikes on his shoulders, and one on his helmet. He flexes his arms and howls like a bear as he feels the strength inside the heavily reinforced suit.

"Get me some covering fire!" Samuel barks. "You over there, find Commander Hiro and notify her of the gate breach on the double! And you, get the Generals!"

Without waiting for a reply, Samuel begins dashing forward.

Slowly, at first.

The colossal, one-ton armor supports itself via the billions of nanites forming its surface. Samuel, still getting used to its immense bulk, takes one step forward.

Then another.

And another.

Slowly, he begins to build up speed.

Despite a quarter-mile separating the warpgate from the eastern edge of the encampment, Samuel's Rhino suit eventually begins moving with unstoppable force. He stomps forward at five miles an hour, then seven, and then ten...

Soon, the sounds of massive stomping noises startle many troopers as they see their designated Lieutenant storming toward them like an enraged bull.

Relief appears in their eyes.

"It's Lieutenant Samuel!"

"Make way!"

Miraculously, a path opens up before Samuel as he storms forward unwaveringly. His body becomes a bowling ball as he barrels past his fellow soldiers and careens into the mass of undead right before they break through the forward line.

BOOM!

Samuel swings both of his arms outward, away from his chest. The violent motion instantly crushes the heads of five skeletons and six zombies, flinging them into their nearby comrades and toppling the entire front line. The sheer might behind Samuel's Rhino exosuit turns him into an undead-steamroller.

Samuel raises his fists over his head just as two heavily armored skeletons rush him. He pauses for a half-second to let the skeletons swing their swords toward his chest.

Tink.

The swords bounce off the Rhino's carapace without causing any damage.

Samuel's face contorts into a hideous grin.

"You should have RUN!"

His fists swing down like sledgehammers, flattening the armored skeletons as if their bones were made of wet paper. Over and over, Samuel stomps around the frontlines, taking no damage while beating the undead to death with their own extremities.

As the gunfire roars overhead, annihilating hundreds of undead every minute, Samuel's battle instincts kick in. He glances up the hill as, for a brief moment, the flow of undead slows to a crawl.

A gigantic hand, nearly a foot wide, reaches through the portal.

Samuel's heart trembles.

"By... by the Creator!"

A long-dead gate troll stoops down and steps through the warpgate. The monster's skeletal remains, more than twenty-five feet tall, barely fit through the Labyrinth's portal.

Samuel gnashes his teeth. "You want to play hardball, huh? Come, then! I'll turn you into bonemeal!"

Several minutes earlier, inside the Core.

Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, stands beside the lone excavated warpgate. Mountains of debris sit shoved off to the side, all of it from the collapsed ceiling nearly a day before. With nearly twenty hours having passed, Ose's hands appear only partially restored; severe fractures running across all of her fingers and much of her arms.

The lightning-demoness grimaces as she glances to her right, at Mephisto, the Duke of Mist. He hovers just off the ground, his ethereal body untouchable by physical objects.

"Alright. My hands are nowhere near fully-healed. However, we can't wait on me. I'll be leaving you in charge while I return to the Blood Pits."

Mephisto cackles quietly. "Kekeke... you musstn't overexert yourssself, Ossse. Do not forget that it wasss I who nearly sssinglehandedly defeated the flessshbagsss. Thisss invasssion will be in quite good handsss..."

"Bael did some heavy lifting too," Ose retorts with a frown. "You've always been more eager for power than Bael and the others. I'll bet it irks you that I'm the Emperor and you're not, hmm?"

Mephisto scowls. "Kss. What of it to you, sssnake? Have you sssomething to sssay? I wasss Sssatan'sss protege. It wasss he and I who created the Labyrinth. Without me, you would never have had a chancee to become an Emperor."

Ose's frown deepens. "Watch your tongue, necromancer. You're not as important as you think. I could have entered Heaven and stolen what we needed from the Lazarus Tower just as easily as you. For that matter, so could Belial."

"Pah!" Mephisto sneers, floating close to Ose's face. "What pretty wordsss, but in the end, it wasss I who completed the misssion. It wasss I who ssstole the power of sssoulsss from the angelsss. I reversssed our fortunesss and helped bring an end to the angel'sss wretched waysss. You, in turn, ssstole the Emperor possition from under my nossse!"

The two demons eyeball each other with vicious glares, their faces mere inches from each other.

After a few moments, Ose relents. "Tch. You're the weakest Duke, Mephisto, *and* the stupidest. Making you an Emperor would be a waste of souls. Blame yourself for being a pathetic schemer. I wrapped the others around my finger and thus obtained the helm of demonic power."

Ose smiles. "You're just jealous you lacked the strength to take it for yourself."

Mephisto's eyes turn bloodthirsty. However, he doesn't immediately speak, nor does he lash out.

After several seconds...

"Ksss. You are a wretched woman. May maggotsss infessst your insssidesss, and may roachesss crawl out of your eyesss. You will regret ussurping me, one day."

Ose rolls her eyes. She turns to the warpgate's control system and sneers. "Keep dreaming, necromancer. I'm smarter than you, *and* all of the other demons. Now that I have my power, I'll never lose it."

Mephisto falls silent as the white-haired demoness motions with her hands, conjuring the elemental power of lightning to transfer a portion of her consciousness into the warpgate's controller.

As she does, Mephisto watches, his hate-filled gaze deepening.

Foolish woman. You've sealed your fate.

He stays quiet, but if looks could kill, his evil eyes would murder Ose a thousand times over.

Ose begins rapidly computing a hundred thousand spatial vectors, while her eyes rapidly jerk back and forth behind her closed eyelids. Her forehead knots up with concentration.

"Summon your Death Gates, Mephisto. I'm about to activate the portal."

Mephisto continues to glare at Ose for a moment before turning away to a decent-sized empty space some fifty feet from the warpgate. Not far away, near the destroyed great doors leading into the Core, many upper-ranked Lord and Baron-rank demons stand around muttering to one another. They keep their distance according to Ose's orders as Mephisto begins to motion with his hands.

An unearthly demonic language pours from Mephisto's mouth. His eyes transform into fiery orbs as he summons the power of Death Energy, coalescing it into two spiraling energy rifts hovering in midair. The blackened mana moves further and further away until both of them turn into shimmering, electrified clouds. The energetic clouds crackle with energy and begin emitting a high-pitched screeching noise, like nails on a chalkboard, but far louder and more drawn out. Mephisto ignores the noises, but the demons behind the cloud run away while covering their ears and shouting angrily.

"Weaklingsss..." Mephisto hisses. "Undead would not be sssso cowardly... truly, the living are inferior to the dead."

The plasma-like gas continues to churn unceasingly. Suddenly, it spirals around toward a dot in each cloud's center, as if getting sucked up by a vacuum cleaner.

Foom!

The center-points explode, summoning two portals as dark as the grave. They quickly shoot up to the ceiling and expand sideways, revealing forty-foot Death Gates, all capable of rapidly summoning undead creatures according to Mephisto's necromagic.

Immediately, ravenous-looking mummies and skeletons come pouring out. Ose flicks her gaze back just as the portal begins to activate. She jumps away, letting the warpgate's calculations run normally.

"Alright, Mephisto!" Ose says, as she maintains a faint telepathic contact with the warpgate. "Assuming my agent is in position, he'll hold off reinforcements for the twenty seconds it takes to open the gate. Once it opens, you're in charge!"

Mephisto snorts. "Ksss. In charge. Yesss... I like the sssound of that."

Hardly any time goes by at all before the gateway to Tarus II stabilizes, popping open with the sound of a hundred exploding balloons.

Mephisto glances at Ose as she begins to retreat, then his undead. "Go, my minionsss! Make your massster proud! Rip the flessshbagsss limb from limb!"

Ose slips behind Mephisto's two Death Gates. She watches for a minute as countless undead pour into Tarus II, nodding with satisfaction.

"Good. Mephisto can weaken humanity with his undead. Fewer demon casualties, that way. He can probe their defenses and give me a report in a few days, once I get my damned hands healed."

As she walks away, Ose gently flexes her fingers, wincing as pain shoots up her arm.

"...fucking crocodile."

* * *

After Ose departs, Mephisto's eyes flutter from left to right. He uses his absolute control over his minions to see through their eyes, scouting out the weaknesses of the humans.

"Yesss... good. Go there. And you, do not throw your livesss away. Forget Ossse'ssss orderssss. You are my precioussss children. I mussst sssave sssome ssstrength for oussting Ossse when the time comesss... kekeke."

The Duke of Mist cackles nefariously to himself for several seconds. Once he stops, his eyes grow cold.

"Ksss. Duriel. Zamiel. Come."

From behind Mephisto, two Barons appear; the Battle Brothers. Zamiel, the smaller, but older brother, and Duriel, the taller, but younger one. They quickly walk over and bow their heads politely.

Duriel speaks first. "Boss! When do we get to go in?"

"Yeah," Zamiel grins. "When do we get'ta slice and dice, eh? I haven't gotten to unleash my full power since the last boost."

"Sssoon," Mephisto says, with a slow nod. "The Sssphinx is injured, sstill. Hiss fairy wife livesss, and ssshe isss quite powerful. You mussstn't underessstimate her ssstrength."

"Fairy, shmairy," Duriel grunts. The big guy pounds his fist against Zamiel's. "Stupid little twig-girl won't mean nothing to us, boss. Now that Ose's outta the way, we can do our business in secret."

"Yesss, we can," Mephisto says, nodding slowly. He shoots a glance at the warpgate, checking to see if any humans have stymied the flow of his undead. "But we musst move quickly. Once Ossse returnsss, you may accidentally exposse your true ssstrength to her. Kekeke... Emperor Krissstoff would not like that, would he?"

The Battle Brothers lose their smarmy attitudes at the mention of one of the Labyrinth's many Hidden Emperors. They shift on their feet uneasily. "Boss..." Zamiel murmurs. "Kristoff gave us one hell of a boost, yeah... but don't you worry you're just playing into his hands?"

"All demonssss, humansss, and angelssss become putty in my palmssss onccce they die," Mephisto says, pride on his face. "Krisststoff may be the massster of blood, but when he inevitably diesss, hisss power will become mine. That is the beauty, you sssee, for I control the River Ssstyx."

Both Battle Brothers force themselves to grin. "Y-yeah, boss. I sure hope you're right."

Mephisto waves a bony finger at the brothers. "Prepare yourssselvesss. I will have you ssstrike when the time isss right. Ssstay clossse, and keep Bael occupied. He will only get in my way."

The Battle Brothers glance past Mephisto's Death Gates, past the completely shattered Great Doors of the Labyrinth, out to the outer hallway, where Bael sits around the corner, beyond where they can see.

Duriel sighs. "We'll try. Guy's a total downer, though. Won't shut up about purple dragons."

"Well, do what you mussst," Mephisto says, shooining them away.

After the Battle Brothers walk away, Mephisto aims his mind at the undead.

"Time to give thessse humansss a fright, kekeke!"

With a flurry of Mephisto's fingers, he activates his necromancy magic once again.

A giant, foot-wide hand emerges from one of his Death Gates...

Part 242: Pandemonium

A gigantic undead Gate Troll, twenty-five feet tall, with beady little sunken-in eyes and a small head compared to its body, climbs through the portal to Tarus II. Its presence temporarily stymies the flow of Mephisto's deathless minions, since they can't get past its bulky frame. As it exits the portal and emerges on Tarus II's surface, it draws the attention of nearly every human capable of sparing a moment to look at it.

In a sniper tower behind the frontlines, one newbie soldier wearing a flight-capable Hummer T-REX cries out in surprise. "Sweet mother of God! Look at the size of that thing!"

His comrades ignore him. Having battled countless monsters and demons, these elites immediately recognize the monster and call it out on their wide-frequency comlink channel.

"Red Marksmen speaking. Undead Gate Troll sighted, Class Two, negative on the weapons and armor. Flesh preservation is at 75%. Estimated strength and durability are at roughly B+, over."

"Roger that," comes the reply from one of the many coordinators behind the scenes, someone working to direct the battlefield. "Lieutenant Samuel is on location. Dispatching specialized reinforcements. Arrival time, thirty-five seconds, over."

"Red Marksmen, out," The veteran sniper replies, finishing with his tower's identification. He glances at the younger recruit, someone sniping in live combat for the first time. "Quit gawking and aim for the Troll's eyes! Slow it down until the specialists arrive!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

The younger soldier trains his weapon on the Gate Troll as it engages Lieutenant Samuel in combat. He begins firing one shot every few seconds, sniping small chunks of flesh around the monster's head and shoulders as it thrashes around.

Over at Samuel's position, the Rhino-wearing trooper roars loudly, grabbing the Troll's attention. He grabs a nearby undead by its head, one of the many futilely attacking him, and hurls it at the Gate Troll, momentarily knocking the Troll off-balance.

With an enraged howl, the Gate Troll charges him, its size more than three times his. However, Samuel doesn't retreat. As several low-ranking undead, like zombies and mummies, try to claw at him and damage his armor, he knocks them aside with ease, crushing their heads with well-aimed blows.

"Come at me, big guy. I'm not afraid of you."

The Gate Troll charges toward Samuel with its fists over its head. Sniper bullets tear into its body, but even with powerful armor-piercing rounds, they do little damage to the monster because of its inability to feel pain.

When it arrives within melee attack range, the gate troll swings its arms down, trying to smash Samuel into meat paste. Instead, Samuel raises his palms over his head and surprises everyone by catching the

beast's fists!

"WARNING!" Centurion yells.

Several alarms beep in Samuel's ear. He grunts heavily while glancing at his damage readouts.

"RHINO EXOSUIT HAS SUFFERED DAMAGE TO ITS UPPER LIMBS. SUIT INTEGRITY NOW AT 97%."

Samuel chuckles. "That all?"

With a mighty heave, he pushes against the troll with his legs, shoving it backward with all his strength. The Troll falls backward and lands on its ass, making the ground shudder. "Roar!"

The Lieutenant follows up by charging the monster and jumping at it with his fist pulled back.

Boom!

The Rhino's reinforced gauntlets provide Samuel with a substantial boost to his strength. He hits the Troll's face hard enough to whip its head and body back, flattening it against the ground. The Troll's skull smacks against the bottom of the warpgate's steps with violent force, but unsurprisingly, the monster survives thanks to its high-grade durability.

"Roar!"

The Trolls slaps Samuel aside with its massive arms, making him stumble off its body and fall to the side. He quickly reorients himself, only to look skyward and scowl. "Lieutenant Samuel speaking! Multiple Wraiths have entered the battlefield! Numbers unknown! Strength unknown, over!"

"Roger that," comes the immediate reply. "We're receiving reports from other squads. Retreat to the fallback position for three minutes, over."

"Noted! Lieutenant Samuel out!"

Samuel's gaze falls on the aethereal, ghost-like creatures pouring out of the portal. The shrieking souls, low-level monsters capable of passing through most armor, howl garbled words as they home toward the nearest signs of life.

Three Wraiths fly above Samuel, spot him, and beeline for the Lieutenant. Samuel disregards the Gate Troll and runs away, wincing as the nanites on the outside of his suit begin humming with agitation.

"CLASS-C WRAITH PRESENCES DETECTED," Centurion yells. **"ACTIVATING SURFACE HARMONIC DESTABILIZERS. EIGHTY-THREE SECONDS REMAIN BEFORE POWER LOSS. DO NOT REMAIN IN THE VICINITY."**

Samuel growls to himself. "Bloody *Wraiths* at a time like this. That's gonna cost me a lot of battery life."

The ghostly monsters slash at Samuel's back, but the nanites vibrating on his suit's surface create a powerful electrical field around him, preventing the wraiths from inflicting any damage. Instead, their ghostly claws bounce off the electricity and hiss with steam, making the specters howl in anger.

As Samuel charges through the undead monsters blocking his path, all of them still trying to climb nearby structures or charge past barricades, his electrified fists cause extra damage and kill Mephisto's minions even faster than normal.

With the three angry Wraiths still pursuing him, Samuel breaks through the perimeter. At that moment, a half-dozen Spectre-wearing troopers decloak, revealing their presences to the undead invaders. They stand atop three of the nearby buildings and use the four Needlers on their backs to lunge toward the incoming wraiths. The metallic tendrils easily stab through the Wraiths' incorporeal bodies and pulse with electricity, frying the monsters to ash. Screaming soundlessly, the Wraiths evaporate into mist, departing the corporeal plane forever.

Samuel grinds to a stop as his Rhino deactivates its Harmonic Destabilizers. The immense drain on his battery vanishes, allowing Samuel to turn around and face the battlefield. The Gate Troll roars angrily as it charges toward his position, making several nearby troopers concentrate their fire on it.

"Lieutenant Samuel speaking! Where's that backup? This Troll is about to reach our frontlines, over!"

Instead of the command post, a familiar female voice replies. "Commander Hiro speaking. I'm on my way, over."

Samuel's rhino suit detects a distant shockwave. He glances to the north side of the encampment, where a three-hundred-foot-tall, eight-legged Spider-Mech stomps toward the base. Atop the mech's long, spindly legs rests a human sized cockpit with a laser-turret on its left and a triple-barreled machine gun on its right. The mech appears surprisingly delicate, with very little armor but extremely long legs, each one tapering off into a razor-sharp point capable of stabbing into stone and climbing cliffs and sheer surfaces.

"God damn, Commander Hiro," Samuel mutters. "What the fuck is that thing? It's incredible! I want one... over!"

Phoebe laughs lightly. "Haha. It's nothing much, just a Arachnid-Class Mech. I made it so I would have a mobile vantage platform. Gives me a bird's-eye view, and lets me dish out damage from the skies. Now, watch yourself, and don't get in my line of fire. Commander Hiro, out."

The Gate Troll spots Samuel's giant Rhino suit from a couple of hundred feet away. Remembering the one who knocked it down previously, it bellows at him and begins to charge.

A thin red tracking laser aims directly at the beast's spine as it rushes eastward, toward Samuel. He gathers strength into his limbs, ready to intercept it if the Troll gets too close.

Fortunately, he never gets the chance.

From her vantage point hundreds of feet in the air, Phoebe has a perfect view of the Troll's large, easily targeted back.

Fwip.

A nearly-silent discharge of air is the only thing anyone hears as the tracking laser becomes a deadly focal point, firing a superheated, five-thousand-degree heat-ray at the Troll's spine, one Phoebe dubs the

Asura Laser. Instantly, a massive hole appears in the creature's chest, as well as the ground in front of it.

The undead monster perishes without knowing what hit it. It flops forward and crashes into the dirt, grinding to a halt only fifty feet from the frontlines, amidst the bodies of countless other fallen undead.

"Nice shot," Samuel mutters, a jealous grin on his face. "Gotta get me one of those."

Humanity continues using their superior tactics to outwit Mephisto's brain-dead minions, suppressing them with superior ranged firepower and military might.

Minutes earlier.

Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, watches as his undead Gate Troll finishes stepping through the warpgate. As it arrives on Tarus II's surface and begins taking heavy fire, Mephisto slithers through the portal behind it, hiding in its shadow. He dives underground, disappearing into the soil without any issue, his ghostly body making physical barriers worthless.

While the battle rages overhead, Mephisto breathes a sigh of relief.

"Infiltration successsful... kekeke..."

He praises himself, despite his inability to see anything around him. However, after a hundred thousand years of using his powers, Mephisto has long since lost the need to rely on his five senses, especially once inside physical objects.

Instead, he closes his eyes while hovering deeper underground. His consciousness extends upward to his undead army, where he quickly taps into all of their minds. A visual of the entire battlefield, represented via a three-dimensional, easily manipulated image, appears in his mind. The necromancer chuckles softly to himself.

"Kekeke... sssso many humansss. Their weaponssss appear new, and their ammunition plentiful. Againsst an endless horde, how long can they lassst? Quite a while, if memory sssservesss correctly."

Memories of his exploits against the ancient humans, those he fought in the Energy Wars, appear in the Duke of Mist's mind.

"Thessse weaponss are not the sssame ass thossse the former flesshbagss ussed. It ssseemss the Hero'sss wife created them from ssscratch. No matter. In battless of attrition, my army will never lossse. I will uncover the gapss and holess in their sssecurity and exploit them ruthlessly, kekeke..."

Mephisto falls silent and retreats into his thoughts.

My Death Gates will recall all the minions I've stored throughout the years. They will appear randomly, without rhyme or reason, which is never ideal for a strategic battle... but the advantage is that once opened, I won't have to waste my energy constantly summoning monsters and demons, kekeke...

Casually, Mephisto floats around beneath the soldier's feet. He pokes his head out of the ground a few inches, every so often, confirming the areas his minions can't see visually, before returning underground.

The Duke's movements are relaxed and effortless. The deaths of his subordinates cause him little grief, considering the sum of the total they represent.

As the humans battle the undead, Mephisto takes note of which monster types fall the fastest to which weapons, the placement of snipers, assassins, tankers, and other such things. He watches emotionlessly as Phoebe kills an undead Gate Troll, giving the beast's death no consideration.

Kekeke... fleshbags are intelligent, yes, but they all have the same weakness. They are pattern-seekers. Against this group of stupid monsters, all running forward thoughtlessly, the humans will grow accustomed to their movements. 'How easy,' the fleshbags will say. 'These undead are brainless and easy to kill. We can last forever.' Kekeke... how wrong they will be...

Mephisto takes a mental calculation of his troops.

Skeletons. Mere cannon fodder, they are little more than the reanimated, fleshless bodies of various bipedal beings. Without flesh and muscle, their might is meager. However, some higher beings may die with mana coursing through their bones. They are most suited to become skeleton warriors and mages, with heavier armor. They can take a beating, but are still quite weak. I won't mind losing them.

With a wave of his fingers, Mephisto gently directs a higher proportion of his skeletal warriors toward the frontlines to soak up the humans' bullets.

Zombies. Ghouls. Mummies. These corpses are stronger than skeletons, due to the muscles and flesh they retain from prior to their deaths. However, their rotting sinew tends to slow them down. They are best used to break down barriers and walls, kekeke...

Mephisto directs a group of ghouls and mummies toward one of the nearby buildings, one with a pair of Spectres standing atop it, as well as five troopers with carbines and submachine guns. The troops unload a hailstorm of bullets on the fleshy undead, but the monsters beat their fists against the wall many times until eventually breaking through and pouring inside.

Satisfied at the first step of his plan finishing, Mephisto chuckles to himself.

Kekeke! Many complain about the stench of mummies and ghouls, but their strength is quite good, considering how easily I can acquire them.

Three dozen additional Wraiths enter the battlefield. Mephisto flicks his attention toward them.

Another bundle of Wraiths. What good luck I have! I mustn't waste them. The fleshbags have armor capable of repelling Wraiths and Ghosts, but I know their weaknesses, kekeke!! If I avoid those pesky invisible soldiers, I can poke at the other soldiers and drain their batteries! Once they run out of energy, their suits will fall apart!

Mephisto calls the Wraiths underground, where they descend to the rocky depths, just like himself. The spectral monsters float toward their master while muttering incoherently, their tortured souls revealing painful lives filled with agony and torture.

"Hello, my prettiesss, kekeke! It isss good to sssee you, yesss? Ssstay with me a while, and we'll look for lone troopersss to pessster, hehe..."

All thirty-six of the Wraiths reply with hollow moans, their minds far too broken to speak properly. They merely heed Mephisto's commands and stay close to him, waiting for further orders.

Mephisto's gaze turns toward the surface as a huge portion of his omni-vision disappears. He blinks in surprise, only to turn one of his ghouls to the north, where he spots Phoebe's enormous Spider-Mech, now much closer to the encampment, firing a torrential downpour of bullets from its triple-barreled machine guns. The heavy-caliber munitions tear through Mephisto's minions with ease, shattering their bones and spraying their bodies like cake thrown against a floor.

Brrrrrt!

The mech's weapon fires so quickly that a thousand bullets rain from the sky every minute, killing two thousand undead via their sheer piercing power. Every so often, the Asura Laser finishes charging and takes out a more heavily-armored target in one shot, preventing Mephisto from amassing any significant forces.

The Duke of Mist narrows his eyes as his troops sharply decrease in number.

"Kss. Flessshbag female. Ssshe iss the wife of the Hero, kekeke... I cannot risssk attacking that female myssself, but, perhapsss there iss another way..."

Mephisto's memories travel back in time to a mere six years before. He recalls the method he used to defeat Beelzebub during Beelzebub's Duke Initiation Test.

"Hehe, Beelzebub didn't know, but Bael only wisshed to know how powerful he had become. We would never have denied him his well-earned rissse in rank. Little did we know, but that fire-brain obtained incredible regenerative powerssss, kekeke..."

With a shake of his head, Mephisto returns his attention to Phoebe's spider-mech.

"Ksss. You leave me no choiccce, woman. I will sssummon... a **Brute**."

The Duke's expression turns nasty.

"Wassting sso many of my preciousss minionsss, all to sstop one metal machine. Disssgraccceful! Hehe... but so long ass I ssseize glory here and defeat the flessshbagsss by myssself, I will have the right to sssteal Ossse'sss title of Emperor! Hahahaha!!"

Mephisto's hands become a blur. He rapidly performs countless hand signs while muttering words in the demonic language under his breath.

Grr. This technique requires so many sacrifices, but also so much of my mana. Such a waste, and the Brute won't even last five minutes! What bastards these fleshbags are, making me resort to this!

Mephisto grumbles to himself gloomily, but even so, his eyes contain a spark of vicious glee.

* * *

Aboveground, Phoebe continues wiping out the undead with ease. She sits inside the square cockpit of the Spider Mech, 'Skitter-Boy,' keeping an eye on the many screens arrayed before her. Dozens of buttons and switches control the mech's eight legs, its turret rotation and yaw, and the firing angle of its weapons. She moves both hands around like a practiced veteran while manipulating all of its systems.

"Hmm. Only 15,000 rounds left. I'll need to leave and reload once I run out," Phoebe muses. "I can only keep up my current firing speed for another ten minutes at best."

Phoebe's gaze flicks around the battlefield as she shoots. "Red Marksmen, you've got a few ghouls sprinting around the backside. Hit them when they climb the southern annex's roof. Blue and Magenta Troopers, I want you moving to point three to take over for the frontliners. They're bound to start tiring out soon. This battle is a marathon, not a sprint. Don't exhaust yourself now when our goal is to hold out until Jason returns. Golden Hummers, fly overhead and drop some landmines. Aim for the western side of the warpgate. I have a feeling the demons will try to break our encirclement by retreating to the opposite wall. Hehehe... that would be an unwise choice."

Phoebe chuckles coily to herself. Her gaze drifts to the west, behind the warpgate, where a few hundred feet of plains separates the warpgate itself from the western wall. The area appears barren and empty, but really, that section of the wall happens to be the hardest, most durable point of the entire defensive line. Countless traps lay buried beneath the ground, where any ghoul which chooses to step there will die immediately.

Additionally, more than a dozen turrets rest atop the wall, their automated sensors tracking around, looking for enemies to draw near the wall's base, where they'll form a killbox.

"I doubt we'll last forever, but it's hard to imagine we'll lose anytime soon- hm?"

Phoebe frowns as her entire mech shudders. Suddenly, a gigantic monster explodes from beneath Tarus II's surface. Standing a hundred feet tall, the monster appears terrifying, with a muscled body powerful enough to crush titanium.

The monster roars and grabs hold of one of the Skitter-Boy's legs. Phoebe's eyes bulge out of her head as she gazes at a creature one-quarter as tall as her specially built spider-mech.

"What in the Creator's name is THAT?! Good god!"

She tries to aim her guns downward to shoot it, but their orientation atop the mech's eight legs prevents her from targeting her feet.

With that realization, Phoebe's resolve hardens.

"I don't know what you are, but nobody touches my baby!"

As the monster roars loud enough to strike fear into the hearts of men, all while crumpling the delicate spider-leg it grasps against its chest, Phoebe manipulates one of the other long, spindly Skitter-Boy legs.

She raises the mech's leg into the air, above the Brute's head. A moment later, the pointed, sword-like tip rushes toward the monster's skull.

Skrik!

The Skitter-Boy's other leg tears into the Brute's brain, through its gut, and out its lower orifice, piercing it like a fishing spear through a salmon. Immediately, the monster perishes. Its grip slackens as it releases the Skitter-Boy's crumpled leg, but already, the damage appears extensive.

Phoebe sighs. "That was a close one. I wonder what the heck that creature was? Kind of scary!"

* * *

Mephisto, still underground, gapes at the now-dead Brute lying uselessly in the grass, kicked aside by Phoebe's mech. While she continues her onslaught on the undead pouring through Mephisto's portal, the Duke of Mist loses his composure for several seconds.

"Sh-ssshe did what?! How could that maccchine kill a Brute?! Those long, ssspindly legsss looked ass if they would collapssse with a mere finger-flick, let alone the sstrength of a Brute! Damn you, woman! I've wasssted ten thousssand sssoulsss already becaussse of you!"

If Mephisto had any hair, he might rip it out. Instead, he clutches his skull and howls with rage, unable to believe his Brute died from a single attack.

"Ssstupid, ssstupid! I underessstimated that woman! Gah!"

After a few minutes, Mephisto calms down. His rage sinks into his feet, allowing his mind to clear up so he can think.

Hmm. Never mind, then. It seems I will have to get creative and overrun this base.

Mephisto's mood darkens as he hovers underground. He travels back toward the warpgate and sighs.

My minions number in the billions. I can throw them here for weeks without end, but that would weaken my 100,000 years of foundation. I must save a large force for after this war, when I may need to suppress Ose, kekeke...

The Duke's ambition soars toward the skies as he imagines himself running the show.

Haha! Yes, I am the one who should control demonkind! Satan was my master! He taught me many valuable lessons, things that little hussy, Ose, would never understand! She thinks she's so smart, just because she studied under fleshbags for a few decades. Pfah!

With a sigh, Mephisto begins chanting a demonic incantation. He aims his mind behind the Tarus II warpgate, toward its barren, western side, in the field between the walls.

"Two more Death Gatesss, keke... yesss, sssuch a wissse choiccce, don't you think?"

Mephisto directs the question toward his thirty-six trailing Wraiths, but they naturally have no reply to offer beyond hysterical screams.

"You watch your mouth!" Mephisto snaps. "Don't get hisssy with me, ssstupid ghossstsss..."

With a quiet grumble, Mephisto activates his incantation, which will increase the number of undead at play tenfold.

"Ksss. I could alwaysss open a Death Gate outssside the wallsss... but no. We musst take the flessshbag'sss base if we wisssh to overrun thiss planet with demonsss, hehehe. Ssso, I ssshall put my focuss here for the immediate future, hehe..."

The sneaky skulking demon keeps doing what he must as the battle nears its second phase.

Part 243: Mephisto's Counterattack

First Day: First Hour.

The darkness of night grows ever omnipresent within the warpgate encampment. Mephisto orders his undead to smash and destroy the lights around themselves while they rampage, causing the terrifying swarms of rotted flesh and bones to melt together in the darkness, making it difficult for the humans to distinguish them from one another.

Many troopers thank their lucky stars that their T-REX's, adapted to work in the pitch-blackness of the Labyrinth, make the need for external light sources almost nonexistent. Their bullets rip through the air and tear into zombies and skeletons with small flashes of light, further illuminating the battlefield.

Among the tens of thousands of human troops in the encampment, the majority of them stand atop the small, fifteen-foot-tall concrete buildings littered throughout the area. They crowd together in clumps of twenty to thirty soldiers per rooftop, barely able to fit their masses of bodies onto each roof without falling off. Each rooftop of human and monster warriors takes out a hundred undead monsters every minute, yet still their bullets barely seem to put a dent in Mephisto's army.

A command comes over the soldiers' intercoms.

"Commander Hiro speaking. Two massive portal-type gates have just appeared at the western edge of the encampment. Mephisto is most likely behind their appearance. I need two contingents to travel around the north and south side of the encampment and meet Lieutenant Samuel behind the outer walls, while General Chadwick will take over command for the central army. Attack anything that comes out of those gates! Commander Hiro, out."

Thanks to Phoebe's vantage point, 400-feet above the planet's surface, her early warning allows nearly a thousand troopers to swarm around the outer walls toward the camp's west side. Lieutenant Samuel, still smashing monsters into paste with his Rhino, slowly stomps his way through the never-ending masses of undead, relying on his fellow soldiers to pick off any significant threats before they reach him.

"Damn," Samuel grunts. "Battery's at thirty percent. Those ghosts hit me hard."

He activates his comlink with a quick flick of his eyes. Centurion detects his erratic eye movement and immediately triggers Communication Mode.

"Commander Hiro, this is Lieutenant Samuel speaking. I need a power-pack drop! I've only got a third of my battery left, over."

"Roger that," Phoebe replies. "Can you make it to the western wall? I'll drop a pack from low-orbit. Should arrive at the outer wall within three minutes, over."

"I copy," Samuel says, while jamming his fist into a skeleton's ribs and tearing its spine out. "Have the reinforcements cover me- holy shit! Those things are GIGANTIC!"

Samuel temporarily loses his composure as he makes his way past the warpgate platform. He fights off the ceaseless stream of Mephisto's undead while managing a quick glimpse at Mephisto's two new Death Gates, both of which tower more than seventy feet into the air. The portals continue to coalesce while sucking in mana from the ambient air around them, giving them the impression of giant vacuum cleaners.

"Commander Hiro, what the hell are those things?!" Samuel asks. "Have you ever seen them before? Over!"

Phoebe sighs. "Negative, Lieutenant. No doubt, they're similar to the warpgate in some way. They don't look like Warper portals, however, so I'm not sure if our interspatial dampeners will work on them. Get your batteries refilled and keep doing what you do best; killing demons. Commander Hiro out."

Phoebe's connection terminates, leaving Samuel grasping at straws. Intuitively, he understands the general purpose of the Death Gates, but being unable to see the other two inside the Labyrinth Core, he hasn't a clue as to what they specifically do.

"What a pain in the ass," Samuel grumbles. "Forget it. I'll recharge my suit and deal with anything that pokes its head out."

Samuel's HUD illuminates with green lights, pointing out dozens of landmines in his path, as well as tripwires and traps designed for murdering demons. He makes his way past them and arrives at the western wall just in time for both of Mephisto's Death Gates to finish forming.

"Shit."

Samuel curses in annoyance as the portals stabilize, forming into giant black doorways connected to the world of death. With a size even bigger than the gates inside the Labyrinth, they allow a torrential stream of undead to come pouring out. Fifty powerful Dullahans, horse-riding creatures with heavy armor, burst out of the gate and charge forward. The headless horsemen charge in every direction, stomping the landmines around the gate and causing tremendous explosions all over the place. The ignition of a dozen bombs not far from Samuel's position throws him off his feet and slams him against the bordering wall.

"Aargh!"

Samuel cries out, but more in alarm rather than pain, thanks to his Rhino's protection. He tumbles backward and lands on his ass for a moment before quickly picking himself up. Not wanting to delay, the Lieutenant ignites limited-duration rockets under his boots and leaps skyward, clearing the thirty-foot encampment walls with ease. Despite his boot-rockets running out of juice, he manages to land atop the fifteen-foot-wide battlement without any trouble. A light in the sky makes Samuel raise his head, where he spots Phoebe's care package dropping from low orbit. It rushes toward a spot some hundred-feet from the encampment's outer wall and crashes into the dirt with a *boom!*

Samuel hops the crenels on the steel-and-stone walls and lands on the ground outside just in time to see a thousand other commandos running toward him from the north and south walls.

"Right on time!" Samuel shouts. "Get up there and start shooting! The demons just got some additional reinforcements! Don't let them swarm toward the rest of our troops or they'll overrun us!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Samuel runs toward his rapidly-cooling battery pack and sighs as its container pops open. "I hope we survive the night."

Recommended Listening

Mephisto's Death Gates materialize silently and without fanfare, but their presence on the battlefield marks a paradigm shift. Humanity's forces envelop the insides of the encampment. Soldiers line up along the fifteen-foot-wide walls, unloading hundreds of thousands of bullets at the undead invaders. The Death Gates, facing east, release a landslide of rotted corpses upon Tarus II's surface. What once seemed a terrifying amount of landmines and tripwires becomes useless in the face of so many unending enemies.

The first wave of Dullahans, headless armored warriors riding atop midnight-colored horses, proves to be some of the weakest forces among Mephisto's army.

Countless undead demons, including Burners and Burrowers, erupt from the left Death Gate. They begin digging underneath the encampment while slinging powerful fireballs at the soldiers atop the walls. Hundreds of feet beneath the encampment, explosive rumbles signify the detonations of Phoebe's Seismic Mines. Dozens of burrowers perish instantly, while flames erupt from the holes they dug, scorching any undead too close to those openings.

Humans atop the walls throw grenades toward the ground, aiming for the holes left behind by the dead Burrowers. When the grenades explode, they do so not with fire and shrapnel, but a mysteriously dense quick-hardening agent. The holes immediately seal, preventing Mephisto's undead from traveling beneath the battlefield like termites.

Mephisto, flitting around underground, howls angrily, clearly disturbed by the humans' tenacity. "You won't ssstop me for long!"

Four hours pass.

Among the hundreds of thousands of human soldiers available to fight on the frontlines, only fifty thousand or so work together at any given moment to subdue Mephisto's forces. With space limited by the terrain, the majority of the allied forces stand atop buildings and towers throughout the camp, firing down upon Mephisto's swarm.

Despite their clearcut tactical advantages, humanity begins to lose ground. Mephisto switches tactics, making his strongest undead rip through the concrete buildings to crumble them to powder. This forces many commandos to retreat, which in turn allows the hordes to advance.

With the dark of night at its most omnipresent, the commandos begin sweating like crazy.

"Sweet mother of god! How many minions does Mephisto have?!"

"How should I know?! Keep firing! Blast the motherfuckers!"

The commandos howl at one another, their voices only distinguishable from the constant stream of gunfire thanks to their T-REX's dampening the outside sounds. Fatigue begins to set in among humanity's

ranks, forcing them to swap out for fresh soldiers.

However, with the undead pressing them from the frontlines at all times, they never have a moment to pull back.

"Commander Hiro!" Chadwick shouts. "We need covering fire! If these soldiers keep fighting any longer, they'll die of exhaustion, over!"

His voice transmits to Phoebe, no longer inside her giant spider-mech. She zips around in the skies above, riding inside a sleek vessel, the one her husband uses on the regular, Esther. As she flies overhead, keeping an eye on the battlefield, she occasionally strafe-fires lines of lasers across the undead hordes.

"I copy, Chadwick. The second wave of reinforcements is ready and waiting. You just need to find the right moment to pull our girls and boys out of there, over."

"Dammit, that's the problem!" Chadwick growls. "The moment we stop firing, the horde will rush at us! Further, the dead bodies we hoped would block their path keep sucking into the ground! Mephisto is keeping the path clear for his scum-sucking-"

"Chadwick, calm down, please," Phoebe says, her voice stern. "Casualties are inevitable. We can't save everyone, and we might save no-one. Do the best you can. Get our troops out of there and swap in fresh blood as best as you can. You won't be able to save everyone from such a fierce assault, over."

Chadwick's breathing hastens. "But-"

"That's an order, General. Commander Hiro, out."

Without another word, Phoebe cuts the line, leaving Chadwick flabbergasted.

However, after a minute, Chadwick regains his bearings. He stares at the front line troops for a minute and shakes his head. "This is General Chadwick speaking. Second and third line, swap out! Front line, hold on while we get some fresh blood to back you up."

Immediately, the General causes panic to surge among the hundred or so troopers at the front, all of whom rely on the troopers behind them to help thin the zombie hordes. "What?! If the people behind us stop firing, we're goners!"

Chadwick nods, though the frontliners don't see his gesture. "That's right. I'm sorry, everyone. We have to hold on until Jason or Hope returns. Anyone who dies today, I solemnly swear to give your families the best treatment!"

Every man and woman at the front grits their teeth with determination.

"...So be it, General! We'll hold them off as long as possible! We won't let these bastards advance an inch!"

The General's gaze falls upon the rooftops filled to the brim with soldiers, all packed so tightly they barely have room to fire their weapons.

"Retreat in ten seconds! I'll get the next group there the moment I have room for them to stand!"

* * *

A minute later, after the rear troops retreat, but before the new troops have time to make their way across the rooftops to the frontlines, the undead swarm surges forward, their maws open and ready to bite. They immediately begin climbing the roofs of the buildings, terrifying the frontline troopers beyond belief.

"I-I can't kill them fast enough! Where are the reinforcements?!"

"They're climbing! They're crawling over each- aaaaargh!"

Several soldiers howl in fear as the undead pounce at them and begin ripping at the hardened nanite armor. Despite even the basic T-REX's possessing superior defenses, they aren't resilient enough to resist the clawing of countless monsters and undead demons.

By the time Chadwick's reinforcements begin jumping from rooftop to rooftop toward their comrades, it's already too late. The hundred soldiers he left behind perish horrible, gruesome deaths, only to rise shortly thereafter as Mephisto's newest minions.

"Dammit! SHIT!" Chadwick yells. Angered beyond belief, he points at the newly arisen troopers and the other undead scaling the roofs and yells, "Kill them all! Don't let our friends suffer under Mephisto's control!"

Luckily, thanks to precautions taken many years before, the T-REX's of all fallen warriors become inert and useless if their pilots' bio-signs fail. The newly arisen frontliners become ordinary humans, unable to defend themselves against the hailstorm of bullets from their freshly-arrived allies.

"You scumbag, Mephisto!" One of the new arrivals shouts. "You'll pay for today! We'll kill you for sure!"

Underground, Mephisto doesn't hear the wails and screams of the anguished newcomers. He closes his eyes and continues manipulating his armies, surging forward hundreds of feet deeper into the encampment.

"Kekeke! Yesss, yesss! It iss ass I predicted! Thessse flessshbagsss are no match for my overwhelming numbersss!"

Slowly, Mephisto begins to gain the upper hand. He continuously sucks any fallen bodies underground, clearing a path for his minions, whole also directing his army toward any gaps in the humans' defenses.

"Kekeke! I may not be an Emperor, but you will sssoon find I am more than a match for a bunch of sssimpleton monkeysss!"

* * *

Western wall.

Samuel holds a giant plasma cannon in his arms. The two-foot-wide and four-foot-long weapon charges up and fires superheated balls of energy at the undead below, exploding groups of ten and twenty into meat paste with every shot. The scorching hot plasma melts their biomass down to mere glops of goop, causing tremendous damage every twenty seconds when it fires.

Suddenly, the flow of skeletons and Dullahans from the left gate slows to a crawl.

A shiver goes down Samuel's back as a vague sense of danger appears in the back of his mind.

At that moment, a giant's leg emerges through the seventy-foot-tall Death Gate.

Thirty-feet-long, the leg steps through slowly, lazily. Its pure white coloration stands out in the darkness of the night, giving it an appearance distinct from all the other undead.

One of the troopers nearest Samuel stops shooting his rifle. He gazes at the leg with a look of pure horror. "Sweet mother in heaven! It can't be!"

Samuel jerks his head toward the man. "What is that thing?"

A pair of giant, hairy hands, also colored white, emerge through the gate and grab its sides. By now, every trooper's attention has fixated on the emerging monstrosity.

"It's... it's a..."

The man trembles, terrified to spit the creature's name out.

"...a F-Frost Giant! From Antica!"

Samuel's stomach sinks to the bottom of his feet. "Antica?! The frost world? That hellish, ceaselessly cold planet?!"

"Yes!" The man screeches.

Everyone watches with unblinking eyes as a twenty-foot head emerges through the portal, its face looking like a horrible cross between a gorilla and a wolf. Its snout sticks out of its face, along with its mouth. The creature's beady black eyes flick around as it surveys the area.

"Open fire!" Samuel roars.

All 1,000 of the troops on the western wall get into position to fire at the front of the frost giant's Death Gate. They unload a hailstorm of bullets, missiles and grenades, only to widen their eyes in shock as their attacks bounce off the giant uselessly.

After a moment of hesitation, the Frost Giant climbs through the Death Gate and emerges onto Tarus II's soil, its 120-foot-tall body barely managing to squeeze through the 70-foot portal. Once it straightens its posture, sheer panic erupts among humanity's forces.

"We're not hurting it! We aren't even tickling it!"

"Backup! We need backup!"

Samuel's eyes hurriedly flick around his helmet's HUD, activating his comlink. "Commander Hiro, Lieutenant Samuel speaking! Get the heavy munitions to the western wall now! Right now! We've got a Frost Giant here, over!"

Phoebe's reply comes immediately. "What?! A Frost Giant?! How is that possible? Ah! Don't tell me Mephisto somehow obtained one of their corpses?"

"How the fuck should I know?!" Samuel screams, blood veins popping on his forehead. "Just get me something- anything! We have to kill this thing before... before..."

Samuel falls silent.

The Frost Giant, now fully within the confines of the world, turns around to look toward the western wall. However, its eyes fall not upon the wall or the soldiers defending it, but the portal it just stepped through.

At that moment...

A second pair of Frost Giant hands grab hold of the Death Gate's edges.

Another massive head emerges.

All the while, the western soldiers' morale sinks into the abyss.

"T-two... two Frost... Giants..." Samuel mutters, his heartbeat slowing to a crawl. "Backup. Please. We're all about to die."

Phoebe's voice comes quickly but quietly, her words a whisper. "Samuel. Pull your men out of there. I've just ordered Chadwick to retreat as well. I'm going to activate the King Cannons."

"They won't-" Samuel says.

"That wasn't a request, Lieutenant," Phoebe says, cutting him off. "Commander Hiro, out."

Moments later, all of humanity's forces begin a quick and furious retreat. With two insanely powerful presences on the battlefield, their immediate loss becomes inevitable.

* * *

Underground, Mephisto cackles with glee. "Yesss! Yessss! I lucked out! To think, thossse Frossst Giantsss would emerge! Sssummoning them myssself would require a tremendousss amount of mana, but stepping through the Death Gate cosstsss me nothing! Kekekeke! My victory isss inevitable now!"

The Duke of Mist peeps out of the ground to gaze at his newly emerged Duke-Level monsters with excited eyes.

"Sssturdy, nearly invinccible, and big enough to crusssh all the flessshbag'sss defensssssss! Now I can finally win thiss war! Go, my prettiesss! The flessshbagsss have already retreated! Thiss planet isss ass good asss oursss!"

His command transmits to the pair of undead giants. They nod imperceptibly and begin stomping toward the east. Every step crushes a dozen undead into pulp, but Mephisto pays the low-level minions no mind.

Within ten steps, the giants arrive at the buildings to the east. They casually and effortlessly stomp every structure into rubble, causing earthquakes throughout the region.

"Kekekeke! Too magnificccent! Too powerful! What will you do, flessshbagsss? Will you unleasssh the nuclear bombsss you onccce coveted ssoo dearly?! Bahaha! That will only sspell your own end! You cannot sstop my mightiessst minionsss!"

Without any humans to thin the herd, Mephisto's army size swells to over a hundred thousand. The undead rush the half-mile toward the eastern wall and begin climbing atop one another to clear its thirty-

foot hurdle.

As Mephisto watches, one of his minions reports a strange light in the sky. The Duke of Mist immediately raises his eyes toward the starry night, where he discovers a tiny ball of light, barely any bigger than a star, flying overhead.

"Hmm? A ssspaccccessship? No. Too ssslow. Sssomething elssse?"

Narrowing his eyes, Mephisto enhances his vision to its upper limits. He picks out a giant metal ball rushing through the upper atmosphere, its surface alight from burning up on re-entry.

Mephisto blinks.

"Sssomething isssn't right. Why did the flessshbagsss pull away ssso quickly? sssurely, they would have tried firing ssstronger weaponsss. Isss thisss metal sphere... a *bomb*?!"

The Duke of Mist doesn't panic. However, as the burning hot orb begins to rapidly descend toward the planet below, Mephisto's body shudders. "What sssort of weapon iss that?!"

The orb explodes, revealing ten thousand foot-long steel rods, all of them with sharpened tips.

The incoming hailstorm of fifteen-pound rods spreads apart and becomes a deadly shower of arrow-like shrapnel. By the time Mephisto sees the attack coming, he's too late.

Swish! Shik! Shik! Shik!

The steel rods hit the ground at hundreds of miles an hour like thunderbolts, all of them ripping through anything in their paths and embedding tens of feet into Tarus II's soft soil. Instantly, thirty thousand undead perish.

At the same time, Mephisto's Frost Giants don't come out unscathed either. A hundred iron rods strike their bodies and embed a few feet into their organs, causing light damage. Due to lacking pain receptors, the giants don't cry out, but they still slow down noticeably.

"W-what a frightening attack!" Mephisto hisses. "That ssstrange metal ball killed a third of my forcceccsss! It iss a good thing my Frossst Giantsss barely took any damage, or- AH!"

Mephisto shrieks in fright. His eyes bulge as he spots three more fireballs streaking overhead.

"More?! There are more?! No! No! My minionsss! Ssstop killing my children, you filthy flessshbagsss! SSSTOP!"

Ten seconds later, a hailstorm of steel rods three times more intense than the previous one falls from the skies. Fifty thousand undead creatures perish in the blink of an eye.

"Nooooooo!" Mephisto howls in anguish. "Wretched flessshbagsss! Alwayssss with the tricksss! Aaaaargh!"

Mephisto loses enough undead creatures to summon five Brutes, making him wail and beat his ribs.

He glances at his Frost Giants. Due to many hundreds of iron barbs jamming into their bodies, their movements become slower and less responsive than ever. Both of the humongous monsters step over the thirty foot wall and begin lumbering toward the east, but Mephisto's soul fills with dread.

Far away, amidst the blackness of the night, a dozen bright flashes of light reveal the presence of multiple artillery cannons. These weapons of war fire long-range projectiles across the two-mile distance to the warpgate encampment, where Phoebe, still inside Esther, feeds them attack coordinates.

Unable to dodge due to their wounds, Mephisto's Frost Giants can only stand and gape at the fireballs rocketing toward them.

Boom! Boom!

Huge explosions detonate against the giant's chests as the mortar shells bombard them at hundreds of miles an hour.

After just fifty shells finding their marks, the undead creatures topple backward and crash against the encampment's eastern walls, crushing them into rubble. The Giants perish, eliminating one of Mephisto's greatest trump cards.

The Duke of Mist stares, shellshocked, at his greatest loss so far.

He swallows a hundred shallow breaths, exhaling figurative fire from his nostrils as rage engulfs his mind.

"You... you will regret thisss... flesshbagsss. I wasss taking it easssy on you. I wanted to sssteal all the credit for myssself. No more. I sssee now the errorsss of my waysss..."

Silently, Mephisto falls back underground. He rushes toward the warpgate with agony in his eyes.

"It isss time. The Battle Brothersss will finally ssshow thessse flessshbagsss the might of the Hell of Blood! We will rip them limb from limb! SKREEE!!"

Part 244: Darkness

First Day: Second Hour.

Mephisto darts out of the ground and zips through the Tarus II warpgate with hatred burning in his eyes. Thanks to the undead flooding through Tarus II's portal, his disappearance goes unnoticed from the battlefield. His minions continue to flood out of the two Death Gates located inside the Labyrinth, as well as the two located on the planet itself, but Mephisto doesn't care one bit.

"Filthy flesshbagsss! I underessstimated them. I thought I could ssskim by with only the minimal amount of effort... but no more!"

The Duke of Mist darts past the Death Gates inside the Core. He arrives at the entrance to the fallen great doors, where hundreds of thousands of demons lurk in the gigantic hallway outside, their numbers increasing every minute.

Upon exiting the great doors, Mephisto jerks his head to the left. There, he spots the Battle Brothers playing a game of Sticks and Bones with Bael, the latter using his still-functional left arm to toss the playing pieces down. His right arm hangs uselessly at his side, dangling like a dead snake from a tree branch.

The moment Mephisto arrives, Duriel and Zamiel both look away from the game at their master.

"Shit, that you, boss? Didn't expect to see ya so soon," Duriel chuckles. "You look like a mess."

"Ssshut up," Mephisto hisses. "Thossse filthy humanssss desstroyed ssseveral of my besst minionsss. Their power isss much greater than I firsst imagined. I require your ssserviccccsss."

Duriel punches his palm. "Hell yeah! Finally, some action! Me 'n big bro are gonna kick some ass!"

Zamiel bares his teeth in a vicious grin. "I expected you to wait longer before sending us out, boss. How many fleshies are in our way?"

The Duke of Mist shakes his head. "Ksss. Too many. They have all sssortsss of weaponsss... onesss different from thossse I encountered during the Energy Warsss. I am not familiar with their operationsss."

After a moment, Mephisto turns to Bael. "Hm? Bael. What isss wrong with you? Your expresssion isss ssseveral timessss ssstupider than usssual."

The Duke of Pain, still missing his gouged-out right-eye, meets Mephisto's gaze with a look of sheer stupidity. Saliva drips from the side of his mouth as he flashes a goofy smile.

"Oh, hey, Mephy. Long time no see, bub."

Mephisto frowns. "We ssspoke only a few hoursss ago."

"Hehe. Hours. That's a funny word."

The dopey-looking Duke of Pain chuckles to himself as if he said the most hilarious sentence ever. Mephisto turns to the Battle Brothers. "What isss wrong with Bael? He isss acting like a complete

buffoon."

Zamiel shrugs. "Dunno. I think ripping that piece of metal out of his eye messed him up real good. We've told him to go to the Blood Pits, but I don't think the big guy knows what the heck those are."

"Cursssssss... jussst another thing on my plate," Mephisto growls. He turns to a pair of nearby Demon Lords. "You! Ssstop ssstanding around and make yourssselvesss ussseful! Take Bael to the Blood Pitsss. Make sssure to give hisss head a sssolid dunking!"

The two Lords blank out for a moment before nodding at Mephisto in unison. "Err, sure thing, Duke of Mist. We're on it!"

Both of the demons carefully pull Bael to his feet and half-drag him away. The Duke of Pain grins at both of them. "You're pretty."

"Bael. We're guys."

"Hehe. Pretty ladies..."

"We'll get you to the Blood Pits, buddy."

After the Lords drag Bael away, Mephisto floats back into the Core. He motions for the Battle Brothers to follow him, then begins to explain.

"The flessshbagsss have a sssizable army. Their weaponsss are formidable, but ssso far, the mossst dangeroussss one involesss ssseveral iron rodsss falling from the sssky..."

The Duke of Mist brings his Baron-level minions to the edge of the warpgate. All the while, his two Death Gates inside the Core continue to spew out a never-ending stream of undead. He further elaborates on the technology the humans possess as the Battle Brothers listen with rapt attention.

Several minutes later...

"Uh-huh. Big metal machines, you say?" Zamiel asks. The older, more cunning of the brothers, curls his eyebrows in a devious manner. "Haha! Interesting. It sounds like we'll finally get to flex our muscles and show these fleshies our true power. No more holding back! Bael might not be here, but you've got us. We're more than enough to send the humans home crying, boss."

Duriel nods. "Hee! Don'tcha worry, boss. Me 'n Zammy know what we've gotta do. You just support us, and we'll rip through those fleshies with ease. A bunch of metal sticks fallin' out of the sky won't hurt us at all."

"Be careful!" Mephisto snaps. "Thiss isss no joke! Thossse iron rodsss ssslaughtered ssseveral of my ssstrongesst undead! You mussst take care to protect yourssselvesss when they come flying at you."

Zamiel reaches toward his waist, where a pair of razor-sharp gauntlets with bladed fingers rest. After slipping the gloves on, he reaches behind himself and detaches a massive, metal club from his back.

At the same time, Duriel unhooks a two-handed war-axe from his back, as well as a humongous greatsword. He hefts one into each hand, wielding the giant weapons as if they were toothpicks.

"We've got this, boss," Zamiel says with a grin. "Like I said. You can support us. We'll do what we do best."

"Heh, just like with all them crocs," Duriel chuckles. "These fleshies won't know what hit 'em."

Mephisto nods. He slithers backward and fades into the crowd of undead, melting into their ranks.

"Do not disssappoint me. I have invesssted consssiderable resssourcccesss into both of you..."

The Duke of Mist fades away, vanishing through the warpgate to Tarus II as he rejoins the battle.

Zamiel's cocky smile fades away.

"Bro. You know what we've gotta do, right? We've gotta finish what we started. Kill that last little sneaky bastard."

Duriel's expression turns nasty. "Yeah. One little croc got away. But ain't that good for us? He's super strong now. Means we'll get more *juice* once we gut the fucker."

"Hahaha!" Zamiel cackles, his smile returning with a vengeance. "You're right, little bro. You're devil-damned right..."

Both Barons stride toward the warpgate, melting into the flood of undead as they ready themselves to step onto Tarus II's surface.

"No more fleshies. No more *crocs*."

Phoebe Hiro, leader of humanity's resistance forces, flies around above the warpgate encampment inside her spaceship, Esther. She rattles off commands to different squads, using her aerial perspective to keep a solid grasp on the battlefield. Whenever the undead surge to the north, she moves troops around to fence them in. When they slither toward the south, a hailstorm of bullets forces them back.

"SYNTHESIZED EXPLOSIVE CHARGES COMPLETE. PAYLOAD READY TO DROP."

Centurion's voice speaks within the cockpit, notifying Phoebe that her specially created Horizontal Bombard Mines (HBM's) are ready to drop. She glances at her munitions screen and frowns. "Dang. A twenty-minute synthesize time, but I only get two explosives per payload. I'll either need to multiply that amount or cut the synthesizing time by ten if I want to make reusable bombers viable."

The weapons system, a miniaturized version of the Rust Bucket's replicators, allows her to repeatedly create low-yield drop-mines from raw energy. However, their destructive potential isn't powerful enough to do more than slow Mephisto's undead hordes. Still, they give her another tool in her war against the demon invaders.

"Commander Hiro speaking. General Chadwick, give me a status update, over."

Phoebe zips over the heads of the undead below and releases two of her bombs, killing more than sixty monsters with both blasts. She pulls away afterward, just in time to avoid another deadly barrage by the King Cannons. Already, tens of thousands of iron rods sit embedded in the dirt, making it much more difficult for the undead to move forward.

"Chadwick here. My men created a chokepoint, and we've encircled the eastern front. We've holed up in several pillboxes and we're turning anything that steps through the gap in the wall into paper mache. However, for the past five minutes, I've noticed that the undead bodies aren't disappearing into the dirt like before. I'm not sure what's going on, over."

Phoebe frowns.

The bodies aren't disappearing? That's odd. This whole time, Mephisto sucked them underground to clear the way for his other undead. Is he switching things up to throw us off?

"Keep up the good work," Phoebe replies. "I'll try to figure out Mephisto's strategy. Commander Hiro, out."

Frustrated, Phoebe waits until another King Cannon barrage concludes to zip closer to the warpgate for a few moments.

When she does, an alarm suddenly beeps on Esther's viewfinder.

"WARNING! ABNORMAL AMOUNTS OF DEMONIC MANA DETECTED!" Centurion blares.
"BARON-LEVEL DEMONS DISCOVERED!"

Two red dots appear on Esther's viewscreen. Phoebe follows them with her eyes. "Commander Hiro speaking. To all battlefield officers, be aware that two high-level demons have just- what the hell?!"

Phoebe shrieks in surprise as a cloud of dense, black fog explodes underneath Esther, shrouding the entire warpgate encampment in darkness. Her sensors screech in alarm as they fail to penetrate the magical smog.

Hurriedly, Phoebe pulls Esther upward, retreating to more than 300 feet in the air. Before she can go any higher, a series of blood-red lights appear beneath her, and large, arrow-like objects come flying at her ship.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Over and over, heavy impacts smash and batter the medium-sized ship, knocking her around and tearing through several key systems on the underside of Esther's carriage.

"Mayday, mayday! I'm under attack!" Phoebe cries. "I'm pulling back! Watch out, something scary just came out of that warpgate!!"

Smoke pours from Esther's underside. The ship chugs through the air, turning into a burning mass of metal as it loses its engines and glides toward the southern side of the encampment.

Crash!

The Esther hits the ground behind one of the military lines with a thunderous *boom*, making the people stationed nearby leap in fright.

"The Commander's ship crashed!"

"Someone get over there and help her! Make sure she's alive!"

"Yes sir!"

As the humans at the southern wall hurry to help their commander, not far away, inside the encampment, two powerful Barons stand atop the warpgate platform with glowing red eyes.

One minute before.

Zamiel and Duriel stride onto Tarus II's warpgate platform with nasty grins on their faces. The sounds of warfare erupt all around them. Distant gunfire mixes with the eerie cries of mindless undead, along with the booming of cannons and the humming sound of a spacecraft flying above.

Duriel, the taller but younger brother, raises his head skyward. "Huh. Lookit that, bro. A metal birdie."

"I've heard of those," Zamiel sneers. "They're called boats. They fly in the air and shoot tiny metal arrows."

"Boats? Pahaha! What a stupid name! Fleshies are dumber'n I thought!" Duriel guffaws. "Makes you wonder how the fleshies managed to hold out for so long before we demons finally kicked their asses."

Zamiel doesn't respond. Instead, he watches Phoebe's ship fly around overhead. His gaze turns suspicious. "We've gotta knock that thing out of the air."

Right after Zamiel speaks, Mephisto pokes his head out of the ground at their feet. "Kekeke! I agree! I will be much more proactive now that you two are here. Behold! My ssspeccial ability... **Dark Missst!**"

Unseen by the Battle Brothers, Mephisto forms a dozen magical hand signs beneath their feet. His eyes glow blood-red for a moment before he suddenly vomits out a torrent of dark, shadowy energy.

Within seconds, the air around the Battle Brothers and Mephisto's undead army thickens with the stench of death. Mephisto's special power shrouds the battlefield in impenetrable mist, draining his mana reserves considerably while also providing the perfect cover for his minions to move unseen.

"Kekekeke! Go, now, my minionsss! I ssshall ssshare with you the Eyesss of Death! Rampage to your heart'sss content!!"

Mephisto's magic surges through not only his undead, but Duriel and Zamiel as well. Their eyes glow blood-red, just like Mephisto's, allowing them to peer through the dense smog as if it weren't there at all.

"Hahaha! Now that's what I'm talkin' about!" Duriel roars. He clangs his greatsword and greataxe together to activate his Baron abilities, summoning his innermost powers to create a hundred blood-red, aetherial swords, each three-feet in length.

Every one of the weapons oozes demonic energy. They hover in midair, shrouded by the fog and unseen by the humans outside the firing line. With a horrible laugh, Duriel points both of his great-weapons skyward, at Phoebe's hovering spaceship.

"Go, blades! Cut that boat down!"

Like an archer's barrage, the blades aim themselves toward the sky and leap upward at hundreds of miles an hour. Before Phoebe can react, Duriel's weapons slice and gash apart Esther's hull, forcing the human commander to make an emergency crash-landing toward the south.

"Hahaha! Good one, bro!" Zamiel cackles, as Phoebe's ship disappears behind the southern wall. "Now, it's my turn!"

The older brother rushes northward. He raises his mace overhead, clutching its handle with both hands. He arrives at the northern wall within seconds and swings his weapon down like a battering ram.

BOOM!

Zamiel strikes the encampment wall with the power of ten Stinger missiles, blasting its stone exterior outward in a hailstorm of debris. The thousand or so commandos outside the encampment's limits cry out in alarm as the wall's remnants crash forward at alarming speeds, bouncing and skipping across the planet's surface like giant wrecking balls.

"Look out!"

"Duck! Everyone, get down!"

Fifty soldiers perish when the hundreds of tons of stone and metal pound through their ranks with reckless abandon, but most avoid death and serious injury by diving to the ground at the last second.

One soldier, wearing no combat armor, taps an earpiece on the side of her head. "Lieutenant Brunhilda to all forces! We've got a perimeter breach on the northern side, over!"

Before anyone else can reply, another message goes out over the primary station. "Lieutenant Samuel to all forces! We've got perimeter breaches on the south and west sides! Request immediate backup, over!"

Brunhilda grinds her teeth. "Damn! Just who the hell broke through the walls?! Was it Bael?!"

She and the other soldiers jump to their feet. They shiver with fear as they try to gaze through the dense fog lazily creeping over the perimeter walls. Everywhere the fog travels, it blocks the troopers' line-of-sight.

One eagle-eyed Harpie wearing specialized combat armor steps forward. "Chrrrrup! I see something! Over there, at the hole in the wall! There's someone standing there, but I can't make anything out about their appearance!"

* * *

After Zamiel smashes through the wall, he stares through the dark mist at the confused humans outside. His battle lust increases as he savors the looks of fear on several of the unarmored warrior's faces.

"Hehe! Sounds like little bro took down the other walls. Now the boss's undead can spread out and cover more ground. Excellent!"

After a moment, Zamiel frowns. "Huh? What's that noise?"

He glances skyward, where he spots a giant bullet-shaped container rocketing through the atmosphere, its fiery presence brightening up the dark of the night.

"Skarn-droppings! Little bro, watch out! The metal arrows are coming!"

Duriel, having blasted through the southern and western walls alike, rushes over to Zamiel's side. "I saw 'em! Get ready! We're gonna have to block the attack!"

Zamiel and Duriel retreat to the warpgate. They lock their gazes onto the King Cannon's projectile. It explodes in midair and sprays out a thousand foot-long iron rods, all of them traveling in random directions.

"Shit, they're fast!" Duriel yelps. Still, the big guy doesn't relent. He clangs his weapons together and summons three humongous ethereal greatswords, each of them thrice the size of either brother's body.

Likewise, Zamiel twirls his mace above his head. An obsidian-colored ethereal hammer, ten times bigger than either brother's body, materializes overhead and rears back, ready to swing.

Duriel scoffs. "Pah! Showoff!"

"Not my fault mine's bigger than yours!" Zamiel laughs.

The iron rods zip toward the ground. The instant before the ones aimed at the Battle Brothers hit, their magically-summoned weapons fly forward and smash against the rods, batting them out of the air. A hundred of the King Cannon's projectiles *tink* uselessly against the summoned weapons and bounce off to land elsewhere, having caused no damage. Many undead die to the unblocked projectiles, but Duriel and Zamiel pay them no mind.

"Bahaha! And here I thought those arrows might be a little scary!" Duriel guffaws. "I didn't even break a sweat. These humans ain't jack shit."

"You said it, little bro," Zamiel smirks. "At this rate, we'll have these fleshies drinkin' our piss before sunrise!"

Duriel's smile disappears. He frowns at Zamiel. "Bro. Gross."

"Err, sorry." Zamiel says, scratching the back of his head. "I got a little overexcited."

"It's fine. I won't say nothin' if you won't."

"Trust me; I won't."

The Battle Brothers turn their attention toward the eastern front, where Mephisto's forces continuously travel, trying to overwhelm the troopers at that edge of the battlefield.

"Let's go that way," Zamiel says. "I smell lots of fleshies over there. More meat for the picking."

Duriel nods. "If you see any cute guys, I call dibs."

"Screw you! If I see them, I'm taking them first!"

After bickering for a minute, both brothers slip into the fog, traveling amidst its impenetrable darkness like sharks in the open sea. They rush to wherever they sense the most killing potential, serving as Mephisto's mighty vanguard.

* * *

On the northern front, Brunhilda's squad retreats a few hundred feet as the Duke of Mist's undead flood through the fifty-foot gap in the wall, closing the distance to the awaiting human troops expediently.

"Get ready," Brunhilda says, her voice calm. She looks at the fifty fallen troops behind her, their bodies crushed by the destroyed wall's remnants. "Let us take revenge for those the demons have slain!"

Brunhilda grips her metal spear with both hands. While the undying approach and humanity's troops start firing, she inhales deeply, as do her fellow Felorians. Unlike the other humans, the Felorians opt not to wear any T-REX armor. However, none of her T-REX-wearing comrades object, given the Felorians' unique biology.

We are warriors. We are descendants of the Wind Mother.

We need no armor, for our bodies will become like steel.

The tattoos on the Felorian's bodies begin to glow, turning bright white against their chocolate skin.

Our speed will be like lightning! Our power shall sunder mountains!

Chi! The element of wind! Infuse us with the wrath of nature!

Give us the Wind Mother's might!

The Felorians crouch low and rush forward. Their perception opens up to the world around them in a wide radius. Anywhere the grass rattles, and everywhere the wind blows, they detect the movements of their allies and enemies.

Bullets fly toward their backs, but the Felorians duck and dodge, weaving between the shards of metal by predicting their trajectories.

All at once, Brunhilda's people crash upon the undead hordes like a tidal wave. Their spears, swords, and clubs stab, slice, and batter Mephisto's creatures into meat paste, turning them into lambs for the slaughter.

Every Felorian's strength and speed temporarily increases by a factor of fifty. Their endurance rises to the heavens, while their fear plunges into the abyss.

Brunhilda swings her leg toward the head of an undead, kicking it off the creature's neck with ease. As it flops to the ground, she howls angrily. "Perish, servant of damnation!"

* * *

Underground, Mephisto flits around, manipulating his forces just like before. He watches the Battle Brothers advance while continuously spreading his Dark Mist further east, forcing the humans backward.

Grumpily, he flicks his gaze to the north. "Hmph. Felorianssss. I am well acquainted with your ssspeccial abilitiesss. Your 'Wind Mother' iss a falsse prophet, sstupid flessshbagsss. Sstill, you will make for sssuperior undead petsss. Kekeke!"

The fifty wraiths Mephisto summoned earlier hover along behind the Duke of Mist, awaiting his orders. The Duke occasionally adds another wraith or two when they emerge from his Death Gates, but with their limited use against the humans' nano-armor, he waits for the right moment to launch them at his enemies' weak points.

Finally, he points toward the Felorians. "Go, wraithsss. Kill thossse pessssky flessshbagsss. They annoy me."

"Skreeee!"

The wraiths zip off to the north, leaving Mephisto by his lonesome.

As the third hour of the war begins, Mephisto finds himself in a strong position. However, the Duke of Mist wears an anxious expression on his face.

I must eliminate these humans before Ose leaves the Blood Pits. Three days... I only have three days before she returns. The sooner I kill them all, the better.

As Mephisto ponders what to do, a thought occurs to him.

Perhaps... should I call in the rest of the demons?

The Duke of Mist frowns.

That might not be such a bad idea...

Part 245: Prison Break!

"Commander Hiro! Are you alright?"

Phoebe awakens to find a pair of exosuit-wearing soldiers standing over her. One of them props up the back of her head, allowing her to cough out a few words.

"Kah! Ugh... yeah. I don't know. Maybe. What happened?"

"Your ship got shot down, Commander," The soldier on her right says. Unable to see his face, she hasn't a clue regarding his identity. "We were worried you might have... well, you lived, so that's all that matters. I'm going to transport you to the hospital at once!"

The other soldier, a female, nods at him. "Commander Hiro's pulse is stable. Her exosuit activated at the last moment and absorbed most of the damage, but it looks like her leg got pierced by debris."

Phoebe winces. A dull sense of pain rings in her ear as she blinks her eyes to take in the scene around her. No longer inside the Esther, her subordinates dragged her outside, away from its burning wreckage. In the distance, the sound of gunfire from the southern wall reaches her ears.

"*Cough!* How long was I out? What's the battle situation?"

"Only ten minutes, ma'am," The male trooper says. "As for the battle situation... well, the tide is turning, but General Chadwick and the lieutenants have the situation under control."

The trooper wraps one arm under Phoebe's neck and the other beneath the underside of her knees, then easily lifts her with the support of his exosuit.

"Give me more details." Phoebe says, as her head clears up. "What attacked me?"

"A pair of unknown demons," The female trooper says, as she hefts her gun and runs beside the male trooper to protect him.

Both troopers quickly explain the situation to Phoebe, making her grimace.

"Two Barons? That's it? Esther should have had more than enough external armor to tank a few hits from Bael himself, let alone a pair of Barons. These newcomers must have special skills."

Phoebe taps her T-REX's activator button four times, summoning it in helmet-only mode. A series of viewscreens appears before her, allowing her to see through the eyes of a half-dozen field troopers.

"Switch visual, Red Brigade. Switch visual, Blue Brigade. Show me the Northern defenders. Show me an aerial composite. Switch to satellite feed."

Phoebe continually fires off orders to Centurion, while the AI switches scenes one by one as she requests. It doesn't take Phoebe long to discover Mephisto's expanding Dark Mist, as well as the two previously unknown Barons at the eastern front. Already, they've cut through over a hundred exosuit-wearing troopers.

"Heavens. These monsters can't be mere Barons. No Baron I've met ever had this much power. Could they be reinforcements from one of the Hidden Hells?"

Phoebe chews on her lip. While her two subordinates rush her into an awaiting armored personnel carrier to drive her to the backlines, she focuses all of her attention on the battlefield and forcibly ignores the agony ripping through her right leg's broken fibula.

"Commander Hiro speaking," Phoebe says, pulling herself into one of the side seats. She buckles herself in and glances out the armored glass outside. "Rear Hospital, what is General Kar's status? We need backup on the frontlines."

The soldiers who carried Phoebe close the rear entry point for Phoebe's APC, and the vehicle takes off, pulling her with a strong inertial force for a moment.

A few seconds pass before a female voice replies. "Um, Blinker here! Is this thing on? Hello?"

"It's on," Phoebe says. "How is Kar?"

"Samantha's takin' care of him," Blinker says. "He won't be out just yet, but don't worry! I'll fly over to help out."

Phoebe's heart jumps. "Wait, that's dangerous, Blinker. The two demons who just appeared are extremely powerful! If you go out there alone, I worry you'll be needlessly risking your life."

Blinker hesitates. "Two demons? Tell me about them? What do they look like? What are their powers?"

Phoebe transmits several images taken from the frontline troopers, then briefly explains their powers. As she does, Blinker falls eerily silent.

"...I see. Don't worry, Phoebe. I can take them on. You get back to the hospital and fix your leg right up!"

Phoebe blinks. "I just told you, those two demons are a high-level threat-"

"I know," Blinker says, cutting Phoebe off. "Don't worry. I'm not a helpless little tagalong. I'll show those two worthless plum-pickers what happens when they show up on my turf."

After a momentary pause, Blinker adds, "Besides. I owe them a beating."

Her words contain a significant amount of hostility, making Phoebe frown. "Do you know them?"

"I do," Blinker says. "They're the Battle Brothers."

"The Battle Brothers?!"

Phoebe's heart skips a beat. Several recent memories pop up, making her face turn white. "That means... they're the ones who killed...?"

"Yes."

Blinker's voice becomes eerily calm.

"Don't worry, Phoebe. I'll take care of them. Blinker, out."

"Wait, don't just-"

Commander Hiro hears a faint clicking noise as the voice communication cuts off, leaving her grasping at straws.

"Dammit. Don't tell me Blinker's going to fly in there all by herself! If she gets hurt, I'll never forgive myself!"

Phoebe glances around the APC the troopers placed her in. Aside from the driver, nobody else sits in the backseat with her.

"Commander Hiro to Blinker. Please answer. Commander Hiro to Blinker!"

Centurion blares a reply. **"THE RECIPIENT DOES NOT CURRENTLY HAVE A COMLINK CONNECTED TO THE CENTURION DATABASE. WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEAVE A MESSAGE?"**

"No, dammit! Shit! Driver, turn around! Go to the eastern front!"

The vehicle driver glances back at Phoebe. "Commander, isn't your leg injured? I need to get you to the succubus's hospital ASAP."

"My leg will be fine! Drive me to the eastern front, soldier. That's an order."

"Yes, Commander!"

As the driver turns to the left, the distant flashes of muzzles exploding in the night become more and more visible through the APC's armored side-windows.

Phoebe grits her teeth. "Blinker, why must you and Kar both be so bloody stubborn?"

She activates her exosuit, but only materializes it on her right arm. A ruby-red attachment appears on top of her gauntlet, which she promptly taps to summon a holographic image of several items. A moment later, Phoebe selects one, creating a medical nanite syringe.

"...Didn't get to test it yet, but like they say, no time's better than the present."

Phoebe presses the syringe against her upper right thigh and groans as she pushes the plunger, causing a goopy grey liquid to pour into her veins and spread throughout her leg, repairing its broken bones.

"Augh, damn.... damn! That burns like hell!"

Mephisto's undead, shrouded by his Dark Mist, travel to all four sides of the battlefield. Between the zombies, skeletons, ghouls, wraiths, mummies, Dullahans, and countless other undying creatures, his mixed forces prove impossible to suppress. Slowly but surely, they begin expanding outside the warpgate encampment's walls.

Whenever the King Cannons fire a barrage of iron rods, Mephisto uses the cover of the Dark Mist to yank his strongest minions fifteen feet underground, thus preventing them from dying. After the rods impale a few hundred monsters, Mephisto shoves his minions back to the surface to resume their progress.

"Kekeke... my Dark Missst iss too much for thessse flessshbagsss to handle. The Battle Brothersss are annihilating the eastern forccecsss, while I take out the otherssss. Now iss the ideal time to change up my ssstrategy!"

With a glint in his eye, Mephisto departs the battlefield and flies through the portal. He desummons the two Death Gates inside the Labyrinth Core and flies out to where hundreds of thousands of demons and monsters await.

"Come quickly, little onesss! I have the flessshbagsss on the run! Now isss the perfect time to ssstrike!"

Two dozen Demon Lords and a small handful of Barons jump to their feet upon hearing Mephisto's words. "You do?! Wow, Mephisto, you're awesome!"

Orias, Baron of the Stars, strides out of the group of demon elites. "I'm ready to fight, if not eager. Let's get this over with."

Thanks to the dozens of valuable gems stuck inside his skin, Orias appears almost like a divine god, someone from beyond the mortal realm. However, despite his grandiose, majestic appearance, several of the other demons roll their eyes.

"Your heart is never in the right place, Orias."

"Yeah! We've got fleshbags to gut! Why can't you show a little more enthusiasm, eh?"

"Sheesh, all you do is sit around hammering rocks. Can't you step out in the fresh air and have a little fun once in a while?"

Waves of criticism hit Orias's back, but he ignores them. Instead, he strides toward the doorway where Mephisto awaits and cracks his knuckles. "Killing humans isn't fun. Mining jewels *is*. I'm only doing this because I must. The rest of you can shut up, or put up."

Mephisto, seeing Orias and the other demons coming, rubs his boney fingers together. "Kekeke! Ssso long ass you help me kill flessshbagsss, I care not about your persssonal opinionsss. Let'sss go!"

Along with the demon elites, two dozen Warpers follow along, including Ying-Ying.

The young demoness jumps over to Mephisto's side. "What happened to my sister? Where has Mara gone?"

"Ssshe wasss captured by the humanssss," Mephisto says, giving the Warper only a quick glance. Her status matters little to him. "Ssshe, along with Artorias and Beelzebub, ended up behind enemy linesss. We will have to find time to ressscue them, at sssome point."

Without another word, Mephisto flies forward and disappears through the Tarus II warpgate. Ying-Ying breathes a sigh of relief. "Alright! As long as my sister is alive, I'll definitely save her!"

The crowd of demons charges through the portal. They emerge into Mephisto's lingering Dark Mist and receive his blessing, allowing them to peer through the darkness.

* * *

Unseen by the demons, a small gathering of shadows slips through the warpgate, emerging onto Tarus II's surface with the rest.

Shades, agents of Yama, the Emperor of Shadows, flicker to the north and huddle together in a small, empty area, their bodies hidden by the darkness of night.

Malice, the most cunning of Yama's shades, takes the lead.

"We've arrived, sisters. Remember, Master wants his new toys alive and well. We must bring him females of appropriate beauty. The Hero's wife and daughter; those are our most important targets. Anyone else will merely be a bonus."

Demise, the biggest of the Shades, stands behind Malice, using its intimidating presence to back up her words. **"We will follow."**

Vicious, a shade known for her skullduggery, materializes in a half-demon, half-hellhound body wreathed in shadow. Her dog-like face drips drool from the corner of her mouth. "But what about the Wordsmiths?! Master won't be happy! Neither of them are here! Ehehehe!"

"So long as we snatch the wife and daughter," Malice says, "we will have a method to capture the Hero. His family is his weakness."

A fourth shade, a muscular female named Greed, materializes a clenched fist. "The traitorous succubus protects them. Leave her to me. I'll take Demise for backup."

"Heh. Good thinking! You're so smart!" Vicious laughs. "I'll go for the little girl, then! Ehehehe! I like them young, and so does Yama! The little ones always scream the loudest!!"

Demise glances at Vicious. **"Leave the child intact. Should you harm her, I'll break you."**

Malice nods. "That's right. We have to leave the women unblemished for Yama. Alright. Let's go. When we get there, I'll leave with Vicious to grab the girl. We'll seize the Hero's wife if and when we get the chance."

The Shade's leader waves her hand. "Go!"

All four of them disperse like the wind, morphing into their most compact and mobile forms as they slither along the ground like snakes in the grass.

Elsewhere, on the southern side of Hero City, deep underground, within a hidden prison.

Three demons, Mara, Beelzebub, and Artorias, lay inside of separated cells, each one protected by a half-dozen exosuit-wearing guards. In total, eighteen humans and monsters pace back and forth down the hallway, their idle chatter contained inside of their helmets without any leakage. They keep half of their attention on the prisoners, a quarter on their conversations, and the rest on the battle happening at the Warpgate. Thanks to Centurion's network, they get delayed video signals indicating what's happening some twenty miles away.

Inside Mara's cell...

The unconscious Baron of Games rests immobile, her arms bound tightly behind her back, her body encased in nanite-hardening agent, and an oxygen-removing helmet affixed to her head. She lays face-up on a small prison bed, her room only ten by ten feet, big enough for her to stretch out and lay down, but little else.

As Mara lays comatose on her cot, a faint sparkling of golden light ignites on her forehead, its radiance muted by the metallic helmet suppressing her breathing.

The tiny ball of light condenses for a moment before pulling away, forming a second golden sphere that hovers in midair. It travels through the metal helmet without issue and emerges into the prison cell, with a wispy-thin tendril of mana connecting it to Mara's brain.

Inside the ball of light, Mara's soul coalesces, bringing her innermost thoughts into the real world.

Ugh... where am I? What happened?

Mara's soul, now contained within the pebble-sized dot of light, floats in the air while attached to her metal-bound body. Her consciousness grows more aware, allowing her to perceive the room around her.

A... a prison? Damn. That's right! I remember now! I fought the Sphinx, but he defeated me. He must have given me to the humans.

Mara's soul sighs.

At least he didn't kill me. Anyone else would. I bet the humans have something devious planned for me, like some sort of awful interrogation.

The Baron's soul hovers a few feet away from her head. She moves toward the lower half of her body and mentally frowns.

What sort of outlandish outfit is this? What have the humans wrapped my body inside? It reminds me of those full-body latex outfits the succubi sometimes wear, except... it's made of metal! Disgusting. To think the humans would treat their prisoners in such a debauched manner!

After examining herself for a minute, Mara's soul scowls, inwardly.

Since my soul has detached from my body, I must have activated the Soul Encapsulation Firefly when the trap card's criteria were met. I stayed motionless for one hour, nobody moved in the same room as me, and I couldn't move on my own. I should be relatively safe and undisturbed, if that's the case. Unfortunately, the Soul Encapsulation Firefly is a consumable trap card. I don't have any others. Once it activates, if I don't free myself from this ridiculous prisoner outfit, the Firefly will die and I'll end up forever trapped, unconscious, and at the mercy of the humans!

I'd sooner die than suffer such a humiliation.

Mara's soul-orb begins to move around the room, looking for weaknesses she can exploit. All the while, the strand of mana tethering her Soul Firefly to her brain doesn't let her travel more than three feet in any direction.

After a minute or two, Mara's memories recall an important piece of information.

That's right. Ose told me once that human-created nanites are weak to electricity. It's likely my captors bound me with nanites, and that's why this silly outfit looks like someone crafted it from metal. Hmm. Electricity...

The Soul Firefly flies toward Mara's head. It skips past the helmet shrouding her face and enters her brain, intending to access the mana droplets representing her Tarot Cards. Almost two hundred cards

float around in Mara's Mind Realm, and she begins sorting through them one by one.

Hmm. I could use Shadow Tendril to melt out of the suit, but I don't know if the nanites would stick to my shadow-form. Flames won't be much use, so the Golden Fire-Rhino is out of the question. Perhaps one of these Illuminating Death Moths? No, they'll give me great offensive power, but only against the humans. It wouldn't do anything to their nanite-armor.

Mara begins to grow anxious as she flips through her Tarot cards.

I can only activate one card. Once I do that, the Soul Encapsulation Firefly will break apart. I need something that will get me out of here and defeat my captors in one go!

A few lightning-type cards catch Mara's attention, but she crosses them off her list.

Too weak. Too much backfire potential. This one's attacks will only hurt the nanites, not the humans outside. Damn! Why do I have so many useless Tarot cards?

Eventually, Mara's eyes settle on one Silver Aspect card, its face imbued with the image of a howling wolf.

Little Wolf. It's not the strongest card, but it possesses potent lightning power. It has a lot of speed, decent power, and excellent self-regeneration. I'd prefer a Golden or Platinum Aspect card... but this Silver Aspect won't have excessive risks. If I transform into the Little Wolf, my card might immediately break. I think a Summoning is best, here. I can allow my summon to break me free of my bonds, while I assist it from the background.

Mara quickly strategizes with herself, all while keeping an eye on how much longer her Soul Firefly will last. As its life begins to fade, Mara nods internally.

I don't have much time left. This plan will have to do. Even if the humans are heavily armed, I think I can take them out. I just hope the crocodile doesn't show up, or I'll end up right back where I started; totally helpless!

Inhaling hard, Mara's Soul Firefly sucks the essence of the Little Wolf inside itself and begins to glow.

Within the prison cell's confines, Mara's voice speaks from her Soul Firefly.

"Little Wolf, **Summon!**"

A bolt of mana fires out of Mara's body into the air above her head and breaks apart, destroying the remnants of Mara's Soul Firefly. Her soul immediately returns to her comatose body, while the Little Wolf materializes in the air above her cot.

* * *

Alarms blare inside the prison complex. An automated warning sounds above, informing all of the guards inside about an unauthorized use of demonic mana.

Frantic footsteps sound outside Mara's cell. The guards yank open the door just in time to see Mara jump to her feet, electricity crackling off her body. Dust scatters around her face, torso, and limbs; the remains of the nanites which previously encased her.

At Mara's feet, a ferocious white wolf, standing less than three feet tall, chuffs angrily as it spots the half-dozen commandos rushing inside to suppress its master. Lightning crackles off the animal's fur, resembling quick bursts of static electricity.

"Wooooo!!" The wolf howls. It pounces at the troopers while blasting them with energy, giving Mara time to activate another Tarot card.

Mara grits her teeth.

"And now, to make my great escape!"

Part 246: The Wordsmith Returns

Phoebe Hiro, commander of the Tarus II Resistance, jumps out of the back of her APC as it screeches to a halt at the backlines of the Eastern Front. To the east, dozens and dozens of powerful tripod cannons stand with their three legs embedded into the dirt. Their long barrels fire artillery at the warpgate encampment over and over, killing Mephisto's undead by the dozen with each shot, yet still, the undying hordes never seem to end.

To the west, the encampment itself stands, its walls slowly crumbling thanks to the intense, nonstop shelling. Mephisto's Dark Mist appears thinner than before, having spread out half a mile outside of the walls, but under the cover of the waning night, its effectiveness still holds strong.

Two Planet-Walkers, huge quadruped mechs with twin double-barreled cannons, offer firing support from the south-east by targeting the largest clumped-up masses of undead. Each volley of cannon-fire decimates even the most heavily armored monster, leaving huge holes in their ranks. Unfortunately, the reload time for each barrage takes more than a minute, so they aren't able to provide continuous support.

Commander Hiro, now wearing her full black-and-gold T-REX, winces as her feet hit the dirt. Her right leg, freshly healed thanks to a nanite recovery injection, stings noticeably from her recently-mended broken bones.

Under normal circumstances, I'd want to give the nanites a full hour to harden, and I shouldn't move my leg at all, but I don't have a choice! If Blinker flies in there, she might get hurt... or worse! I'll just have to move with caution and stay out of the fighting.

"General Chadwick to Commander Hiro! Are you there? Over."

Phoebe taps the side of her helmet. "Commander Hiro speaking. What's wrong, Chadwick? You sound alarmed. Over."

The Norwegian General groans with exasperation. "Demons have started appearing, mixed in with the undead! First it was just the Battle Brothers, but now other Lords and Barons have joined the fight! Several Burners and Burrowers have popped up too. They've made it past the seismic mines, and now they're targeting our backlines. We're getting massacred out here! I think we need to send in the second and third battalions for backup. Over."

Phoebe, having already told Chadwick about the Battle Brothers and Blinker, nods slowly. "Alright. Permission granted. I'm going to try and intercept Blinker before she does something stupid. Keep on the lookout for- huh?"

The Hero's Wife pauses mid-sentence as a text alert appears in her visor's display.

[WARNING! CONTAINMENT BREACH IN HIGH-SECURITY PRISON! DEMONIC MANA PROFILE DETECTED! MULTIPLE BACKUP REQUESTS RECEIVED!]

Phoebe's breath catches. "Goddamn it! Chadwick-"

"I saw," Chadwick says, interrupting her. "I'll send the fourth battalion to reinforce the prison. Over."

"That won't work!" Phoebe snarls. "The demons must have somehow slipped a Warper behind our lines! Ose is likely behind this. She wouldn't let two Dukes and a Baron get captured that easily. If we send low-level troops there, they'll die!"

Phoebe pauses for half a breath.

"I'll go! You have to try and stop Blinker from doing anything stupid while I'm gone. Understand? I'll do what I can to slow the demons down at the prison."

"That's too dangerous," Chadwick retorts. "We can't afford to risk your life. If we knew Henry was on our side, I'd have him go, but... dammit! He's already in the prison complex, along with Caddis. We can't trust those two."

Phoebe hesitates.

"...You're right. I shouldn't act so recklessly. Sorry, I'm just a little frantic right now from all the chaos. Is Corporal Hurent still at the prisons? Tell Lieutenant Samuel to reinforce her. The two of them together might be able to stop the breakout and suppress the demons. However, if Beelzebub escapes..."

Chadwick's breathing becomes noticeably louder. "Let's not think about that possibility. I'll do what I can. You focus on leading us to victory, Commander. Chadwick, out."

The line cuts off, leaving Phoebe alone again with her thoughts. She turns to look at the eastern front, now only a half-mile away from her current position. With a look of determination, Phoebe orders her APC driver to leave and begins tapping buttons on her exosuit's right gauntlet.

"EXPERIMENTAL UPGRADE MODULES X1, X2, AND X3 ARE NOW BEING DEPLOYED!" Centurion says, as Phoebe finishes inputting her commands. **"THESE MODULES WILL MAKE LANDFALL IN FORTY-THREE SECONDS. FORTY-TWO SECONDS. FORTY-ONE SECONDS..."**

Phoebe raises her gaze skyward, where three square containers begin plummeting toward her current position from the upper atmosphere. The metal crates heat up quickly as they tear through the air, but Phoebe doesn't worry for even one second about their durability.

Half a minute passes.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Each container slams into the planet's soil at twice the speed of sound, sending shockwaves in every direction. The trooper's exosuits protect them from the sonic damage and automatically compensate for the incoming concussive force, leaving nobody injured by Phoebe's dropped pods.

The Wordsmith's wife quickly tears into the metal containers and smiles as she spots three exosuit augments, each one offering a massive upgrade to her speed, defense, and firepower.

The Zeus Strike Cannon, the Mach Boots, and the Demonstone Nanite Armor. All experimental, but there's no better time for a field test than right now!

Phoebe quickly attaches the left-arm-mounted cannon, the nanite-based chest armor, and the heavy boots, increasing her suit's weight by almost ten times. Even so, her overall mobility increases, thanks to the Mach Boots' special features.

Kinetic dampening, and targeted gravitic nullification! I should be able to move twice as fast with these boots!

Satisfied, Phoebe turns to the west, where the eastern battlefield looms. Fifteen thousand humans spread out, their bodies forming a solid wall capable of unloading hailstorms of bullets upon the zombie hordes.

However, what catches Phoebe's eye the most is a flash of light to her left. She jerks back in fright, only to gasp in surprise.

"W-what?! You...?!"

A tall, blond man stands a mere ten feet away from Phoebe, a gentle smile on his face.

"Do not worry, my love. I have returned, just in the nick of time. Stay here, and I will finish off these vile creatures."

Phoebe stares, shock in her eyes, at the figure of her husband, Jason Hiro. His visage appears twice as dominating as before, his face more chiseled and handsome, while his eyes carry a powerful gaze she's never imagined possible.

"Jason? It's... it's really you? You're back?!"

Phoebe takes a step toward the man, her bulky armor somehow still not making her appear as intimidating as her husband's lion-like presence.

Jason smiles. "It is I. Stay here, and I will return momentarily. **Teleport.**"

With a flash of light, Jason disappears, leaving Phoebe's heart in the lurch.

"...W-what the heck? That's it? You're just going to leave me standing here?!"

Phoebe's excitement and happiness mix together with her frustration and annoyance.

"I'm glad you're back, but at least give your wife a quick kiss!"

Phoebe eyes travel toward the human commandos lined up a half-mile to the west, all of them fighting the zombie hordes.

"...Strange. Why did Jason's face appear so different? Did he alter his appearance again?"

The white-haired woman blushes.

"I mean, I'm more than okay with the change. He looks kind of... yummy... hehe."

Not far from Phoebe's position, a quarter-mile outside the warpgate encampment's crumbling eastern wall.

Zamiel and Duriel laugh excitedly as they manifest dozens of demonic blades, hammers, spears, and arrows at a time. With mere waves of their hands, they summon temporary mana gates above themselves, calling upon powers from another dimension.

Duriel summons ethereal, blood-red weapons, while Zamiel's weapons appear the color of obsidian. The bigger, younger brother's weapons usually appear as blades and spears, while his older, shorter brother conjures crushing and bashing weapons, like hammers and maces.

Zamiel smashes soldiers into meat paste with his giant, obsidian hammers, while Duriel cuts through even the thickest armor with ease. His greatswords and javelins prove effective at slicing through the molecular bonds of every T-REX exosuit, stymied only momentarily by a few of the more durable subtypes.

"Come on, fleshies!" Duriel roars. He swings his two-handed greataxe and greatsword down, holding one in each hand. With a single move, he rips two soldiers in half, the sheer force behind his attack also crushing their spines into bonemeal. Sometimes, the dead soldiers teleport away thanks to their rescue beacons, but none have a hope or prayer of returning to the realm of the living.

One soldier sprays a hail of gunfire at Zamiel. The smaller Baron ducks and dodges nimbly, his movements barely keeping ahead of the bullets as he anticipates their firing trajectories. The moment the soldier's clip runs out, Zamiel dashes forward and swings his mace down, crumpling the man's helmet into mush, as well as his brains.

"Haha, that makes one hundred and fourteen, little bro! Can you even keep up?!"

Duriel guffaws. "You know I can't count that high!"

"Keke, fair enough!"

Heavy troopers leap into the fray, their reinforced armor proving strong enough to withstand several blows from even the strongest of the summoned weapons. As Duriel and Zamiel's conjurations rain down upon the soldiers, the armored troopers soak up some of the damage, their triple-layered nanites deflecting and reforming, even as thousands of nanites crumble into dust under every blow.

Boom! Boom!

The elite troopers unload single-fire, heavy ballistic weaponry on Zamiel, trying to pin him down and score a critical hit. Zamiel scowls, summons a giant ethereal hammer, and drops it on them like a cannonball.

The troopers don't even bother dodging. They continue peppering Zamiel with heavy munitions, hoping to take him out before their inevitable deaths.

At the last second, just before the twenty-foot-tall greathammer crushes them into pancakes...

WHAM!

The Sphinx, Kar, King of All Monsters, suddenly appears from seemingly out of nowhere. The reptile exerts an almost godlike strength, catching the giant hammer with his bare hand and saving the trooper's lives.

Stunned, Zamiel and Duriel turn to face this new threat, eying the fifteen-foot-tall reptile with alarm. The troopers, likewise, gasp at their overwhelming luck.

Using his free hand, Kar gives the troopers a thumbs up. "Hurgh! I'm back, pups! Now get everyone outta my way, and lemme take care of these chumps. You've done well until now."

Zamiel stares in disbelief as the reptile-king swings his free hand upward, and with one mighty blow, he shatters the obsidian greathammer into black dust, spraying it into the sky.

Boom!

"What the devil?!" Duriel yells. "The Sphinx is already awake? Well, shrakh! And here I thought he'd be down for the count! Pft. Guess Ose didn't hit him all that hard after all."

Zamiel frowns. "Unbelievable. The Sphinx appears much taller than I remember. More muscular, too! Did he increase his power? He even has a six-pack!"

"Stop hittin' on the slimy critter," Duriel says, groaning aloud. "You've always got your eyes locked on the beefcakes."

Kar, appearing significantly stronger and more handsome than a few days before, dusts himself off. "Haha. Well, now. If it isn't Bastard One and Bastard Two. I've been waiting for this day for a long time. You made a *big* mistake coming here."

The troopers previously firing on the Battle Brothers clear a path, not wanting to get in Kar's way or slow him down. As such, a small twenty-by-twenty foot circle forms around the three combatants as humanity's forces funnel around them, diverting their strength to the newly-arrived mixed demonic and undead hordes.

The Battle Brothers eye Kar warily, only slightly intimidated by his powerful body.

"Strange," Zamiel mutters. "I can't sense a lick of energy out of this croc. How is that possible? Has he learned to conceal his mana?"

"Dunno," Duriel says, a nasty grin on his face. "But it don't matter. The boss wanted us to off the croc, and now... here he is. Hehehe."

Kar crosses his arms. He looks at both of the Battle Brothers with a look of smoldering hatred.

"You killed my wife. My family. Everyone I loved. So, I hope you've enjoyed a nice, fun life... because it ends today."

"Haha," Zamiel laughs. "Arrogant, like all the other crocs. That's your weakness, you slippery little toad. That's how we managed to off all of your *kind*. You think you're a big tough gator... but you ain't nothing!"

Duriel nods. "That's right! Tryin' to face us alone was a big mistake."

Kar tilts his head slightly, and a weird smile appears on his face.

"...You idiots. Who said I was alone?"

Suddenly, with a flash of light, a blond haired human male, standing eight-feet-tall, appears at Kar's side. The handsome man rests his hands on his hips and pumps out his chest, as a huge grin appears on his face.

"Hello, little demons! How are you on this fine evening?" The man asks.

Duriel blinks in surprise. "Huh? Who's this punk?"

Despite the younger brother's confusion, the older sibling appears markedly less perplexed.

"Spawn of a broodmother! Th-that guy... he's... he's the Wordsmith! Blonde hair, blue eyes... it's him!"

"The Wordsmith?" Duriel asks, disbelief in his eyes. "Nuh-uh. The Wordsmith's gone, remember? That's what Ose said."

"She was wrong, little bro! Shrakh! Just our luck! If it were only the croc, this battle would be easy as pie! But... but if the bloody Wordsmith's here too, then..."

A hint of fear appears in Zamiel's eyes. Despite his confidence that he and Duriel could easily overpower the crocodile king, he knows the Wordsmith's powers defy common sense.

Jason, the Wordsmith, shrugs nonchalantly. His smile shifts into a dismissive smirk. "Haha. Are you scared of little old me, good sirs? Indubitably, I've been known to keep to myself over the past six years, but should you strike at my home, I won't go easy on you!"

Suddenly, Jason's eyes begin to glow. "**Teleport!**"

Instantly, the Wordsmith disappears and reappears mere inches from Zamiel's body, his fist raised overhead.

BOOM!

Zamiel doesn't get a moment to react before Jason smashes his face into the dirt, knocking him five feet to the side. Duriel's heart skips a beat, but he reacts quickly and tries to cut the Wordsmith down.

"Return!"

Jason speaks another word of power, yanking himself away from Duriel's massive weapons, making them slash at the ground harmlessly. The unexpected *miss* makes Duriel stumble forward awkwardly and land on his knees.

"Gah! Little prick!"

Zamiel, only slightly stunned by the Wordsmith's sneak-attack, jumps to his feet. A trickle of blood drips from his mouth, but he ignores it. "It's him! He even used Word Magic, just like Ose said!"

Jason, still unruffled, looks up to Kar and chuckles. "Sorry, my good man, but I couldn't stay my hand. I thought these buffoons deserved a beating, wouldn't you agree?"

Kar laughs. "Indeed! What chumps. Ugly little brats, too. How about you fight the small one, and I spank the tall one?"

Zamiel's blood runs cold as the Wordsmith nods. "That's fine by me! I know a ridiculously handsome crocodile like yourself deserves a worthy foe! It would be unbecoming of someone at your level to fight a

tiny little fellow like that shortie. Don't hold back! We have to defeat these craven curs with style!"

The Wordsmith sweeps his hair back. Even in the darkness of the night, his radiant, handsome smile appears excessively bright, making rivers of rage boil in Zamiel's blood.

"Fine, Wordsmith! You want to fight me?! That's a battle you'll regret! I'm actually the strongest Battle Brother, you idiot!"

Jason shrugs. "In my eyes, the strongest demon is only equal to the strongest ant. Now, come, boy. I'd like to make it home before dinner."

"Graaaaugh!"

Zamiel and Duriel roar in rage as they charge at the Wordsmith and Crocodile, but it's Duriel who feels the most scared as he sizes up his smirking opponent.

...When the hell did the Sphinx become so HUGE?!

Duriel and Kar's fists meet with an explosive bang as both warriors swing at one another.

Crack!

Duriel's demonstone armor protects him from the brunt of Kar's strength, but to the Baron's alarm, the Crocodile appears unfazed, as if he didn't even notice the fist-shaped barrier stopping his punch.

"Is that the best you've got?" Kar taunts. "You hit like an imp."

"Screw you!" Duriel howls, as he and Kar begin rapidly trading blows.

Over and over, the two combatants treat one another like punching bags, taking hits to the chest, jaw, and neck that would kill any lesser combatant.

After several exchanges, Kar frowns. He grabs Duriel's fist and throws him to the right. "Hurgh. Strange. You're only a Baron, but your strength... it's easily Duke-level."

Duriel hits the dirt and scowls. "That ain't the only part of me that's Duke-level!"

As the Sphinx and younger Battle Brother combat one another, Jason and Zamiel also exchange attacks.

"Transmit. Punch! Disorient."

Jason fires off words rapid-fire, allowing him to easily keep ahead of the eldest Battle Brother. Zamiel summons obsidian warhammers and shields, but every time he strikes at the Wordsmith, Jason disappears, transmitting to a new spot while summoning ethereal fists to punch and batter Zamiel from left to right.

"Urgh! Ugh! Gah!"

Zamiel gasps. Whenever he tries to summon a weapon, the attack either misses, or Jason interrupts his spellcasting, causing the summoning to fail.

"Grr! I'm not out of this fight yet, Wordsmith! My mana is all but limitless! I can battle you until the break of dawn, no sweat! Argh!"

Zamiel winces as yet another ethereal punch smashes him in the face, sending him sprawling to the ground. Still, his insanely hardy body and demonstone armor allow him to tank even the mightiest of blows.

Eventually, Jason frowns.

"How odd. You *are* quite the durable demon, Mister Goatee. Far beyond the limits of any Baron I know."

Zamiel grimaces, as blood from several broken teeth spills from his mouth. "Haha! A bit of pitying praise for your opponent? Save it for someone who cares!"

The eldest Battle Brother concentrates on evasion, setting aside any thoughts of attacking. To Jason's surprise, his ethereal fists begin to miss, one after the other. Zamiel ducks, spins, and twirls like a ballerina, his lithe and skinny body allowing him to move in ways his younger brother's bulky frame never could.

"Punch! Punch! Hmm... ROCK!"

Jason fires off two more ethereal fists, only to hesitate for a moment before smiling and speaking a different word.

"Huh?" Zamiel grunts. "Rock? What the hell's a-? SHRAKH!"

Too late, Zamiel doesn't see a humongous boulder come falling from the night sky. His heart jolts in shock as three tons of earthen weight crashes upon him at a hundred miles an hour, smashing him face-first into Tarus II's soil.

"Gllmph!!"

With his mouth full of dirt, Zamiel can't do more than grunt in pain as his bones beg for forgiveness.

Moments later, the eldest Battle Brother shoves against the ground with all his strength, flinging the boulder westward, where it sails into the demonic horde, presumably ending their lives in an instant.

"Haah... haah..." Zamiel pants like a dog. His eyes twitch, and his vision wavers, as he stares at the Wordsmith incredulously. "Friggin... friggin bastard. You're one tough spawn of a broodmother."

Jason smiles politely. "And you're quite the ugly rat. I'm surprised you haven't died yet. Tell me, how are you so durable? I should very much like to know, good sir."

The Wordsmith's attitude gives him an air of superiority, yet at the same time, a humble demeanor, infuriating Zamiel further.

"Tch! Blow it out your ass, blond-boy! I screw guys like you for fun! The only one who'll be squealing by the time we're through is me!"

"...You're a real foul-mouth," Jason says, frowning. "It seems you'll need to put a few coins in the swear jar after we finish."

Zamiel coils strength into his legs. However, just before he can pounce at the Wordsmith, a horrifying sight greets his eyes.

Duriel careens toward Zamiel from the side, his beaten and battered body crushed mercilessly by the Sphinx. Like an agile tiger, Zamiel pulls back and snatches his hand forward to grab Duriel's unconscious form before he can hit the ground. Using the momentum from the catch, Zamiel spins in a half-circle on his heel and stumbles slightly, before dropping Duriel to the ground. "W-what the heck?! Little bro! Talk to me!"

All Zamiel gets in response is a feeble grunt. "Guhhh..."

"Shrakh! You filthy crocodile! What did you do to my brother?!"

Zamiel releases his grip on Duriel's armor and whirls around, only to see the Sphinx and Wordsmith standing there, smiling eerily.

"What's it look like, idiot?" Kar asks. "I beat the fat one's behind. I spanked him real good. Hurgh! His screams of pain were pretty funny!"

Jason's smile turns sinister. "You killed Kar's entire family. I'll let him turn you into mincemeat."

Kar cracks his neck. "You just stay out of this one, Turtle. I don't even need the help."

As Kar begins stomping toward Zamiel, a look of terror appears on the Battle Brother's face.

"This... this isn't fair! Wretched crocodile! You were supposed to be down for the count! And the Wordsmith wasn't supposed to be here either! How is any of this possible?!"

Kar rears his fist back. "Hurgh! When you meet the Creator, ask **HIM!**"

Part 247: Jason's Attack!

I open my eyes to a world of dancing spots and sparkles. My vision, blurry and scattered, makes it difficult for me to see anything more than a kaleidoscope of colors and patterns. After what feels like an eternity, my vision and hearing creep back into place, just in time to hear a familiar voice.

"Jason! Jason! Are you okay? Are you awake?"

Phoebe, my mind-wife, waves her hands frantically to get my attention. Only by peering inward, at my Mind Realm, can I fully make out her appearance. She's just as beautiful as when I... when I...

...Wait. What happened? How did I end up passing out?

Curious, I tilt my head to the right and left, observing the bright yellow sky around me, its radiance blinding enough to hurt my eyes. Beneath my head and body, the hardened magisteel outer layer of a familiar floating object jars my brain back into action.

"Ugh," I grunt, as I pull myself to my feet. My entire body somehow aches with pain, yet feels as refreshed as if I'd slept for a week. My head hurts, but somehow my mind feels sharper than it ever has in all my life. "I'm awake. I think."

My mind-wife sighs with relief. "Thank the heavens. Jason, you didn't stop screaming for an entire hour! I thought you were going to die!"

Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael stand nearby her in a large grassy courtyard. The old man nods along to Phoebe's words. "Indeed, young one. I assumed thou wouldn't survive, but combining thy weak body and spirit with an ancient artifact like the Phoenix would pose quite the risk!"

Raphael's words spark my memory. "The Phoenix! That's right... where did it go?"

I quickly look around, finding myself relieved that even after I suffered terrible pain, my specialized space-traversal-bubble didn't weaken at all. However, no matter which direction I look, I don't see the Phoenix.

Just as I'm starting to get concerned that the merging process might have failed, a terrible, burning pain rips through my chest, starting with my heart! I nearly faint from the pain, instead managing to hold on enough to fall to my knees. "Argh!"

Five seconds later, the agony subsides, and a sparkle of light flies out of my right breast. A blood-red marble of energy hovers three feet from my face and rapidly expands in size. It shifts its appearance from a circular orb into a burning, feathery mass, eventually turning into a cockatoo-sized bird with flaming red feathers and a curved yellow beak.

[Kyaa!] The bird yells with glee. [It worked, friend! You did it! I'm not stuck to that mean Container anymore! Big bully! Jerk! Doo-doo head!]

The Phoenix bobs up and down while directing her oddly mild insults toward the Container beneath my feet. As she babbles, I shoot a glance into the distance, where half a dozen of the multi-pointed stars

hover, keeping their distance from the container.

"Damn. Can't believe I was out for a whole hour," I mutter. "We've been here long enough, so I should head back to Tarus II as soon as possible. I don't like the idea of leaving our home entirely in Hope's hands."

I levitate into the air after condensing my magical power around my feet. **"Fly!"**

To my surprise, my flight magic is far, far easier to activate than before I absorbed the Phoenix. I don't even notice my mana reserves drop, indicating they must be vastly greater than before.

"Inspect."

I speak another word of power, causing investigative magic to sweep across my body. A visual appears before me of my current mana reserves, indicated by a vast, bluish ocean. However, unlike my previous reserves, the updated mana ocean contains many fiery undercurrents, as if active underwater volcanoes were continuously erupting.

It finally hits me what merging with the Phoenix did to my body.

My mana reserves have shot up by more than a hundred, if not a thousand times! With this much energy, I should be able to terraform entire planets with a single word!

This stray thought travels into my Mind Realm, allowing Phoebe, the Archangels, Sir Lorent, and Shana to hear my musings.

"Really?" Phoebe asks, incredulous. "How is that possible? I thought the Phoenix was much weaker than during the Primordial Era?"

"Indeed," Raphael answers. "The Phoenix has lost much of its power. However, when compared to the beings who roam the galaxy today, 'tis still a mountain erected before an anthill. I assumed the Wordsmith's might would shoot into the Heavens once he absorbed the Phoenix, though his pain would prove immeasurable. Now that thou hath absorbed its energy, thou should'st manipulate Camael's cube to force it out of the demon's star system. Leaving it here is far too dangerous."

I frown. "The cube is gigantic; far bigger than most rocky worlds. If I take it back with me to Tarus II, won't it throw off the gravity of the entire Tarus star-system?"

Phoebe answers this time with a shake of her head. "Unlikely. We don't know how long it's been at the edge of the Hell Harbor system, but even this far out, if it were here for a mere 100 years, the system would have suffered a gravitic imbalance already. Since the cube appears to exist within a different dimensional plane, it won't exert any influence on celestial bodies in our plane of existence."

As always, my wife's vocabulary never fails to surprise me. "Alright, then. I'll have to find a way to take it back, then. Unfortunately, I don't have any 'waypoints' set in the Tarus star system, so I might just return home by myself, fly to an empty point in space, set a waypoint, then return the cube there."

Phoebe taps her lip. "That probably won't work, Jason. The cube is enormous. Even with your improved mana reserves, teleporting such a massive object over such a great distance could kill you. I

don't think you should risk it. Instead, you should see if you can control the artifact and make it fly there ahead-"

Before Phoebe can finish her sentence, the Phoenix suddenly shrieks in alarm. [Eeeek! Danger, danger! Scary monsters outside! They're looking at me! I don't like them! Make them stop!!]

My heart jumps in my chest. "M-Monsters? What do you mean?!"

The Phoenix darts around erratically from left to right while flapping its wings in a panic. "Big, scary! Ugly! I don't like them! Noooo!!"

The energy inside the cube begins to strengthen, causing a massive amount of mana to tug at my body. Alarmed, I try to calm the Phoenix down, but I'm too late.

FWOOOSH!

A sensation reminiscent of a rope tied around my waist yanks my body violently to the left. Before I can react, the inside of the cube disappears, making me emerge outside Camael's cube into the void many hundreds of miles away. Once again, before I can fully get my bearings, the ancient artifact begins to shimmer and disappear.

"Wait, Phoenix! What are you doing?!"

I can't stop the Phoenix. The magical boundary that once tugged me into the cube's dimension instead shoves me outside into normal space.

Immediately, countless stars appear all around me. The cube disappears, hidden inside its interspatial pocket.

"What happened?" I ask. "Why did the Phoenix kick me out of the cube?"

Gabriel speaks, directing my attention elsewhere. "Jason. Over there! Look to thy left!"

Following the Archangel's instructions, I turn my body to the left, not certain how far I need to rotate. My confusion grows even more tangible as I flick my eyes around the vast, boundless, neverending glare of the Milky Way's starlight. The galaxy shines with all its splendor, making picking out anything specific difficult. Only the Hell Harbor system's primary star stands out as a slightly-bigger ball of light than the other stars lightyears away.

However, as I focus my eyes, a jolt of electricity shoots through my heart.

"W-wait, some of those stars are moving! A whole bunch of them! **Eyesight!**"

With a single word of power, I shift my gaze into an enhanced visual spectrum, allowing me to pick out hundreds of spaceships converging on my position. Their obsidian-colored bodies blend in with the blackness of space, causing only their running lights to stand out from their hulls.

"J-Jason!" Phoebe cries. "Demons don't have spaceships! Those must belong to the Volgrim!"

My blood runs cold.

Volgrim. Shit! Why are they here? Did they follow me to the cube? I don't have time to debate the reason!

"Invisibility! Stealth! Disguise!"

With three words of power, I turn my body immaterial, hopefully making it difficult for the Volgrim to see me. However, remembering what happened the last time Confessor Vulpanix was around, I don't have any notion I can thoroughly hide myself from a high-ranking Psion. Nevertheless, I have to take every precaution! I even disguise my appearance and morph into an ugly-looking gelatinous monster, just in case it will help hide my identity.

After making myself invisible, I search my body for the Phoenix, who tossed me out here in front of the Volgrim fleet. I eventually find it hiding inside its orb, shivering and shaking. No matter how I prod the creature, it only tucks itself into a smaller orb, becoming even more frightened than before. After a moment, my anger dissipates when I realize the artifact is probably terrified for some reason I can't yet comprehend, undoubtedly related to the Volgrim.

"Jason, if the Volgrim have shown up, then we have to assume their appearance isn't a coincidence," Phoebe says. "They must have discovered and trailed you here."

"But how?" I ask. "I never initiated a FTL jump! I thought the Volgrim could only detect abnormal subspace rips!"

A moment later, the answer comes to me.

"...No, that's not it. This system houses the demon's homeworld. I bet the Volgrim have ships littered around Hell Harbor to keep an eye on the demons. Damn! I was careless."

"Nay," Raphael says, his tone apologetic. "'Twas my fault for greedily begging thee to search out Camael's presence."

"None of that matters now," Michael says, his voice cold. "The Volgrim are here, and therefore, we must escape. Wordsmith, thou should'st immediately order Camael's artifact to leave. The Volgrim are dangerous beyond belief. They will likely locate its dimensional coordinates and breach its security. If they should seize my sister's most precious artifact, a calamity will befall the galaxy!"

I groan. "Fine, but how do I control the cube? Not even the Phoenix knows how to manipulate it!"

Raphael's expression turns grave. "Thou art a Wordsmith, and thou possesseth the power of three Archangels. I have an idea."

Raphael quickly outlines a plan to control the Cube, making me frown. "That might work, but the Volgrim are already here! It will take Phoebe an hour to set up a complex control structure of that magnitude!"

"Yes, but 'tis our best option, without Camael's guiding hand," Raphael says. "If thou should flee this area after causing a commotion, the Volgrim may pursue thee and overlook the Cube's existence temporarily!"

Raphael's plan grates on my mind. His idea —trying to take the Archangel souls from my body and placing them into the control matrices of Camael's cube— is not only dangerous to them, but time consuming, and it might ultimately not even work.

With a scowl, I grit my teeth.

"No. There's only one method I can use right now to get the Volgrim to leave the Cube alone. I need to grab their attention in a big way, and then I need to make *them* flee with their tails tucked between their legs. Only then can I return and get the cube out of here."

Phoebe wrings her hands together. "I can try and create another artifact manipulation matrix while you do... whatever it is you're planning to do! I'll make one you can easily control. How about that?"

I nod. "That should work. Do your best, Phoebe. I'll do mine."

Without another word, I aim my mind at the nearest Volgrim ship.

"Inspect. Locate. Teleport!"

Captain Sangin Kordonis, a member of Clan Oblong, similar to Sangin Lidra, leans forward in his captain's chair and gazes silently at a vast number of displays scattered across the VLL Hatoraxia's bridge. Two hundred crew-members, mostly comprised of Technopaths, but also interspersed with the occasional low-ranking Psion or Changeling, move with speed and elegance as they follow their captain's orders.

"Nothing on the Opal Spectrum, Captain," One of the scanning officers, a Technopath, reports.

"Try another frequency," Kordonis says, his voice calm and measured, but his mind erratic. "That anomaly can't have disappeared into nowhere, especially without initiating a FTL jump. If it turns out to be a heroic artifact of some sort, or even a living Hero... we had better not be the fleet which let it slip through our grasp."

"Understood, Captain," The officer says. She returns her attention to her scans, leaving Kordonis to stew in his thoughts.

Kordonis's second in command, Orena Limea, slowly ambles toward him, her upper body balanced on a tripod-like spider-chassis for legs. "Captain. I was unable to find the anomaly's position, however, I did observe an oddity in this sector's subspace gradient."

Orena hands a datapad to her captain and then waits quietly, with her long, nine-fingered hands resting against her abdomen. Kordonis quickly glances over the file and nods.

"Good work. This might explain why the anomaly disappeared, but we did not detect any FTL energy being activated. Perhaps the unknown entity folded itself within subspace, or an adjacent dimension."

"That was my hypothesis as well," Orena says, bowing her head in deference. "I took the liberty to check our fleet's crew complements. We have one hundred and seventeen Psions among our fleet, but none of them are masters in any particular branch, nor do we have anyone capable of comprehending Spatial Psionics at our disposal."

Kordonis snorts, as his tone turns self-critical. "Naturally. A mere *third-rate* captain like myself would never have the authority to order around a Spatial Psion. They're rare enough as-is. We'll have to search for dimensional tears manually. Order all ships to engage spatial scanning formation Zero-One-Mark-Three. We'll spread out across the area and-"

"Captain!" One of the scanning officers shouts, interrupting Kordonis. "The anomaly has reappeared!"

Immediately, Kordonis snaps to attention. He rises from his chair, aided by two metallic and slender bipedal legs. "Location?"

"It's approximately seven thousand, six hundred kilometers from our current position," The scanning officer says. "I've tried to scan it multiple times, but there appears to be an energy field surrounding it that deflects all my attempts! The best I can gather is that it's some sort of biological entity and- hmm?"

The officer's face becomes twisted with shock. Frantically, she taps several buttons, only to turn to Kordonis with a look of disbelief. "The... the anomaly has somehow hidden itself! I can still detect its energy, but the biological mass in its center has vanished!"

Captain Kordonis narrows his eyes to slits. "Show me."

With a few button presses, the scanning officer brings up a series of images on the main monitors, big enough for Kordonis and the other officers to see.

A small, biped-shaped mass of green hovers amidst the void. Its featureless body gives off no distinct origin thanks to the scanning methods used to roughly guess at its shape.

"Could it be?" Kordonis mutters. "One of the ancient Terrans? A *Hero*?"

"Captain," Orena Limea interjects, "We cannot jump to such a conclusion hastily. This anomaly might be a new lifeform borne of the Plague. It may be a scout sent to investigate this system for suitable planets worth taking over. Rather than assume it's a long-dead Terran relic, we must assume it is a trap to ensnare us. If we rush in, it could latch onto one of our ships, penetrate the hull, and infect the crew. A loss of eight inspection teams would severely cripple our war efforts."

Kordonis frowns.

"How might you explain the heroic energy signature?"

"There are several possibilities," Orena replies without hesitation. "But I believe it's possible the Plague may have somehow located a heroic artifact from the Terran's former homeworld and merged with it. Perhaps this entity is a special sub-type capable of space-travel."

The Captain lowers his gaze to the floor. "Space-capable plague-infestors. I... I do not wish to imagine such a possibility."

After a moment, the Captain turns to one of his tactical officers. "Order our smallest, least-crewed ship to advance on the anomaly's position. Since we can sense its energy, it might still be there. If this creature is, indeed, a Plague scout, we'll blast the ship into oblivion at the first sign of infection."

"Yes, Captain," The male Technopath says. He turns to his display and sends out the order, while Kordonis watches the monitors above like a hawk.

"It still isn't moving..." Kordonis mutters. "Founders, guide me. What is this anomaly?"

Suddenly, while Kordonis has his eyes locked on the anomaly's faint energy reading, it vanishes.

"...Huh? What?! Where did it go?"

Kordonis blinks in surprise. The ship he ordered to the anomaly's position hasn't even made its move yet, leaving him shellshocked at this change of events.

[C-Captain!] Invocator Miikil, a low-ranked Psion aboard the bridge says, transmitting her thoughts telepathically. [The anomaly! I can sense it now! It's appeared inside one of our vessels!]

A moment of silence washes across the Hatoraxia's bridge. All of the crew turn deathly pale as they look to one another, then their captain.

"Red alert!" Kordonis roars. "Assume the entity is a Plague-borne infestor! Contact all vessels and order them to battle stations! I want everyone suited up for combat on the double!"

Kordonis's orders go out immediately, transmitting to every ship in the fleet. A minute later, even worse news comes down the pipeline.

"Captain!" The scanning officer says. "The VLL Kildarius has just lost all its internal power! Its systems are down, and the anomaly is suspected to be the cause!"

"Multiple reports of injured personnel aboard the Kildarius!" Comes another report. "The Kildarius's crew have begun engaging the anomaly according to our external scans, but we can't contact anyone aboard the vessel to confirm the situation!"

The Hatoraxia's bridge gets to work ordering the other ships to surround the Kildarius. They prepare to open fire and obliterate the invader, only for even worse news to emerge.

"Captain," Orena says, her voice low. "The anomaly has appeared inside of the VLL Photon. Once again, it has shut down the ship's internal systems and engaged the crew in combat."

Kordonis, prepared to blast the Kildarius to kingdom come, hesitates. He freezes like a deer in the headlights while hundreds of thoughts and emotions run across his face.

"Impossible... short-range transmission? Teleportation capabilities? Are the Plague members we've seen capable of performing such feats?!"

Orena blinks her eyes. "Not that I know of, captain."

Another officer raises her voice. "Captain, shall we continue with the order to destroy the Kildarius?"

"No! Belay that order!" Kordonis yells. "Increase the anomaly's danger classification to level 5! Transmit an emergency broadcast to the Hell Harbor Observation Post! Make sure the Founders learn of this specimen's existence! I want all of our Psions to perform the *Hakúr*. Target the anomaly and restrict its movements! We must capture or kill it at any cost."

Invoker Miikil turns pale. [Captain, the Psions in our fleet are too inexperienced to perform the *Hakúr*. If we attempt such a dangerous psionic technique...]

The lone Psion aboard the Hatoraxia's bridge doesn't get a chance to finish his sentence. Another report emerges of the anomaly's jump to a third vessel, making Kordonis grit his teeth.

"We don't have a choice, Miikil. If we don't stop that entity, it will rip our fleet to *shreds*. You know as well as I do that we all have to make sacrifices for our people. If the worst happens, I will take full responsibility."

Miikil stares at Kordonis with his six blackened, unblinking eyes. [Hmph. At least if we die, my fellow Psions will return to the realm of the living. You had best hope we can perform the *Hakúr* properly, or your tenure as captain will be over.]

The Psion returns to his station, leaving Kordonis to fume.

"Tch. Do you think I do not know that? I have to take this risk for the safety of my fleet."

Kordonis presses his palms together, soothes his nerves, and prepares to capture the frightening entity.

"If I fail, my career, and life, will end. But if I succeed? Those who did not question my orders will enjoy a significant rise in prestige."

Part 248: Wordsmith.exe

"Inspect. Locate. Teleport!"

With three words, I determine the position of the nearest spaceship, scout out its interior, and warp my body to an empty spot inside.

I arrive within the spotless confines of the Volgrim vessel. Its purple-colored walls gleam with an alien vibe I've never witnessed in all my years. Strange inky-black orbs rest in the corners of the walls, where they meet the ceiling and floor. They resemble squid eyes, making me feel as if the damned things are watching me.

The room I arrive in appears so foreign to my mind that it takes me several seconds to comprehend what the hell I'm even looking at. I can only assume I've teleported into a ten-by-ten foot supply closet, but the dim lighting and strange devices hanging on the walls only confuse me further.

I aim my mind at the nearest object, a five-foot-tall canister of some sort with a glowing screen on its front. A digital screen on its top displays many alien characters, none of which I can read. **"Inspect."**

A moment later, information about the object appears in my mind.

Name: ???

Purpose: ???

Origin: Volgarius.

To my astonishment, not even my Wordsmithing can tell me what the strange device is. However, I don't have the time to bother dwelling on it. By now, someone has likely noticed my appearance.

My mind-wife speaks. "Jason. I catalogued the scan for this vessel in your Mind Realm. Exit through that door to your right, walk down the hallway fifty feet, and take a left. You'll arrive inside this ship's engine room."

I follow her instructions, only to find myself stumped at the first step. When I turn to my right, the 'door' she mentioned appears flush with the wall. I can barely make out a seam in the purple-colored interior, bewildering me on how to continue.

"Uh, shit. How do I get out? Is there a button?"

I walk over to the door and try to feel my way around it. When my quick inspection fails, I sigh and aim my mind at the door.

"PUSH!"

A blast of psychic energy fires from my mind, flinging the door outward and sending it careening across a wide hallway with an explosive *crash!*

I step outside and freeze as dozens of Volgrim Technopaths come skittering and running toward me. All of their torsos rest upon different devices, usually spider or bipedal legs, while they wield intimidating weapons of all types and varieties far beyond anything Phoebe or I have ever crafted for Tarus II.

As they yell at each other in their native language, I realize that, due to the spatial barrier protecting my body, I can't hear their words. I jump out in front of them, only to blink in surprise. None of their eyes follow my movements. Instead, they stare with clear nervousness at the room I just left.

"It seems the Volgrim can't see through your invisibility," Phoebe says, confirming my thoughts. "Good. Now get to the engine room! We've got a bunch of ships to rewire, and not a lot of time."

My mind-wife's words make me nod. "Right!"

While the Volgrim train their weapons on the room I just left, I speak another word of power. **"Teleport."**

This time, I materialize a bit down the hallway, past the two dozen soldiers, and next to the entry to their engine room. I slip inside, nearly slamming into a Psion as they try to run outside. I only manage to save my cover by leaping to the side and hovering in the air, using my Wordsmithed telekinesis to hold myself aloft. Luckily, the Psion doesn't notice my presence.

"That one must have been a low-ranker," Phoebe says. "Remember what you told me? Confessor Vulpanix was the only Psion who sensed your invisible soul. These lesser Psions probably can't detect you at all."

"Maybe," I say with a nod. "But we haven't observed enough of them to make that assumption. I'll play it safe and keep my guard up."

I glance around the sizable engine room, completely bewildered by the ridiculous technology on display. A gigantic metal orb with hundreds of wires sticking out of it hovers in the center of the room, humming with tangible power. Even with my barrier up, I can still sense slight vibrations in the air, indicating just how much power the orb must contain. A dozen Technopaths work at various terminals, chattering to one another with words I can neither hear nor understand.

"Investigate. Blueprint. Inspect."

Uttering another three words of power, I perform a detailed scan of the engine room and give the information to my mind-wife. Phoebe quickly begins working on the blueprints to uncover their inner functions. To my surprise, it doesn't even take her two minutes to find what she needs.

"Here. Copy this information with your Wordsmithing, then imprint it upon the computer files. It will upload a trojan capable of hijacking this vessel."

I blink in surprise. "Will that work?"

"Of course. I had access to your Wordsmithing for a good thirty minutes, Jason. While you were investigating Marie, I took some time to understand how your powers worked. I can 'upload' information from your Mind Realm to your consciousness, allowing you to turn it into a Wordsmithed concept."

Her admission surprises me. "...That sounds a lot like how Solomon's Crown worked."

"Yes, because I cheated a little bit and copied his method. It's no big deal, hubby. Now, hurry up! Time's a-wasting!"

I nod. "Alright. **Virus!**"

With one word, I transmit Phoebe's homebrewed code into the Volgrim computer systems. The effect is both instantaneous and destructive. Immediately, the ship's lights flicker and disappear, replaced instead with blood-red warning signs. Every Technopath in the engine room practically jumps out of their skin. They look around in horror, alarmed by whatever the hell just happened. They begin yelling at one another and skittering around to try and solve the problem, but Phoebe appears confident in her work.

"Alright. We have maybe an hour, possibly two if they're incompetent. We have to disable the other ships in this Volgrim fleet, then order all of them to return home. Err, of course, we could destroy them all instead..."

"No," I say, instantly shaking my head. "That's unnecessary. The Volgrim haven't done anything to provoke me. I don't want any casualties unless necessary. Unlike the demons, I think there may be a small chance we could work things out with these aliens, given time. Once we resolve the situation on Tarus II, I can look into contacting the Volgrim leaders and- ARGH!"

A wave of pain suddenly impacts my brain, making me stagger. I jerk my head to the side to see the lightly-armored Psion who passed me earlier looking in my direction. The alien's six-eyes blink in unison as he points in my direction. Suddenly, his words appear in my mind.

[I tanta xuia! Whas a'a xuia, nuntsa'?! Yuia' ru'n ut afthu"ans!]

Unable to understand him, I fall back and flinch. "Shit! He's... he's attacking my mind! Ahh!"

"Jason! A ghost-creature has just appeared in your Mind Realm! Try to fight back! I'll do what I can from my end!" Phoebe yells.

I can only nod weakly at Phoebe's words as I slump to the ground. The Psion's attack increases in intensity as his psionic probing strikes my brain.

Soon, Sir Lorent's voice joins with Phoebe's. [Aunt Berthold. Stay calm. I will help you.]

Immediately, the pressure on my mind begins to lessen. The Psion's intimidating pose weakens as he staggers back, clearly surprised by my mental resistance.

"I shall assist thee as well," Gabriel says.

Raphael follows-up. "Hmph! Do not test my patience, Volgrim brat! Thou art but a child!"

With the four members of my Mind Realm pushing back, they quickly force out the Psion's presence and cause him to stumble backward and fall to the ground. In disbelief, the Psion quickly pushes away from me with his feet, a look of alarm in his eyes.

"Bind! Suppress! Sleep!"

I quickly fire off three words of power as I jump to my feet. A split-second later, the Psion's eyes close as he falls into a deep, unbreakable slumber.

Sadly, his attack gave the other crew members enough time to figure out my position. A dozen Technopaths converge on my position, all of them equipped with alien rifles and energy weapons. They aim their weapons at me and begin firing without restraint, assaulting me from all directions.

...Only for their attacks to prove completely ineffective. Compared to the barrier I enveloped my body in, one that can resist the impact of rocks and space debris traveling at 99% the speed of light, their weapons are less dangerous than a fly landing on my face.

I quickly look around the room. "Phoebe? Are you okay? Are we ready, now?"

When I turn my gaze inward, I see my wife, her nephew, and the two Archangels with solemn, but unruffled expression on their faces. "Yeah, no worries. That Psion wasn't very strong. He didn't hurt us. Let's get to the next ship."

"Finally, some good news," I mutter. "**Locate. Teleport!**"

* * *

One by one, I travel to three other vessels. Their interiors vary, but most of their designs appear similar. One starship, however, appears strikingly different. Unlike the purple-colored walls of the other ships, this one sports perfectly smooth walls and high-tech gadgets sticking out of the ceiling. Its walls gleam with a silvery, metallic shine, nearly blinding me with the unexpected radiance.

"What the hell?" I ask nobody in particular. "This ship seems weird. Did I jump to the commander's vessel?"

"I don't think so," Phoebe says. "This one is only a little bigger than the others. We still have forty-five more ships to go. I noticed one ship in the center of their formation that was three times larger than all the others. It's probably the capital cruiser."

"Ahem," Raphael grunts, clearing his throat. "This ship belongs to Clan Symmetra. The ones from before came from Clan Neutroli. The different Technopath clans have varying methods for constructing their vessels and technology. They often war with one another over the 'superior' technology construction methods. Admittedly, I know very little about their customs, but based upon my memories from the Energy Wars, their differences in design stuck out the most."

"Guess that makes sense," I mutter. "I'll look into it later. **Inspect.**"

Once again, I collect the ship's information into my Mind Realm. It takes Phoebe an extra couple of minutes to create a working virus, which slightly surprises me. She explains that, apparently, Clan Symmetra's security protections are much more advanced than Clan Neutroli's were. Good to know.

After implanting the virus into the system, I start to Wordsmith again, only to feel a wave of disorientation strike me.

My legs turn wobbly. Unsure what the hell is happening, I slump against a nearby computer console in the Symmetra ship's engine room and begin to pant profusely.

"P-Phoebe... something... something's wrong! I'm feeling dizzy... mana exhaustion? No, s-something else!"

Phoebe's voice jumps an octave. "Gods! More ghostly figures have just appeared in your Mind Realm! There must be... must be twenty of them!"

[Damn. Their power is a hundred times stronger than before,] Sir Lorent says, his voice shaking. [Even my brain hurts.]

Raphael turns pale. "This attack is comparable to the power of a high-ranking Psion! Everyone, fight back! If we don't, these Volgrim will destroy all of us!"

Immediately, a counter-resistance forms in my mind. Sir Lorent, Phoebe, Gabriel, Raphael, and even Michael join together to unite their mental strength against the Psions attacking me.

"Th-they're too powerful!" Phoebe cries. She aims her hands at the attackers and squeezes her eyes together, trying desperately to use her willpower against them.

The ghostly apparitions in my Mind Realm slowly begin to solidify.

[Oia' nungt; ianusag. Oia' tuiaftt; thunftunag. Tugasha', gha than annuhftasa xuia' ruftsh. Dua, ta"ans ur sha Pftagiaa.]

The Volgrim attackers speak in unison, their words coming from all of their minds at once. Each consonant strikes my brain like a burning knife. My body clenches up involuntarily, leaving me to roll on the ground, shrieking in pain.

"Aaahhh!! Hurts, it hurts so bad! Suppress! Stop! Seal!"

I try desperately to Wordsmith, but with my brain being attacked, I can't summon even the tiniest drop of mana.

"Tch!" Michael snarls. "Aren't thou taking the might of three Archangels lightly?! Volgrim bastards!"

Gabriel shudders as he tries to fight back. "Brother. Their strength is unfathomable... we can't hold on!"

"We must!" Raphael yells. "If we fall here, our souls will disperse! Fight, my brothers! Give no quarter!"

The citizens of my Mind Realm press back with all their strength, yet still, they continue to lose ground.

Eventually, the Phoenix appears.

The firebird, still trembling with fear from the frightening faces of the Volgrim, bears witness to the faltering wills of the Archangels, Phoebe, and Sir Lorent.

[What's wrong?! How did the monsters get in here?!] The Phoenix chirps. [...Can I help? Hello?!]

My vision turns blurry as the Psionic attack threatens to rip my mind in half. "Aargh! Phoe... Phoenix! Help! We can't... can't beat these Psions... without you!"

The Phoenix flies behind Phoebe and shivers. [Too scary! Too frightening! I don't know what to do! Make the monsters go away!]

Too late, I realize the Phoenix either can't help, or won't. It turns out that even an immortal undying artifact from the Primordial Era has its limits.

My vision fades. I groan in pain as my last sliver of consciousness begins to slip away...

[Bad people!] A voice cries out.

Not the Phoenix, but instead, little Shana.

[Very bad! I not like you! Chirpy, come here!]

A surge of power wells up within my chest. Suddenly, with a start, a powerful burst of energy appears inside my brain, forcing the Psions back several steps.

[Whas?! Thut lugha! Is't unth'aguftfta! Huftg un! Wa niats l'att uia' ag'ansaga! Dun's ftas shut Pftagiaa-ftu'n garaas iat!]

The Psions yell amongst one another, but their powerful onslaught rapidly begins to weaken. I turn my gaze inward, only to see Shana standing in front of the other Mind Realmers, a burning aura surrounding her. The little girl's hair turns blood-red as she begins wielding the Phoenix's power as her own.

[You mean! Very bad! Leave before I get angry!]

Shana shouts defiantly at the Volgrim. With a wave of her hand, she sends million-degree flames roaring at their apparitions.

In the blink of an eye, the Psionic onslaught falls to pieces. Every Psion screams in agony as their ghostly bodies turn to vapor in the wind. [Eeeyaaaaaaa!]

Just like that, the Volgrim attackers disappear, their bodies explode into ash. I leap to my feet, noticing with a pale expression the sweat covering every inch of my body.

"Cough, cough! Shit, is everyone okay? Is anyone injured? Shana, what the heck was that? What did you do?!"

The little girl exhales quietly. She raises her hands over her head, and the Phoenix seemingly melts out of her hair, reverting it to its previous blonde coloration.

[Not me. Chirpy. I used Chirpy to fight the monsters.]

Slowly, I nod, feeling appreciative of whatever method Shana used. "That was... that was incredible! You saved everyone's lives, Shana!"

Raphael walks over to the child and gently pats her head. "Many thanks, young one. Thou mayest not comprehend thy abilities, but I see now thou art an Artifact-Melding Hero! Hehe, what a special ability, indeed! My brothers and I owe thee our eternal gratitude!"

"A true Hero," Michael says, offering a rare compliment. "Thy power mirrors that of Ramses, an ancient Egyptian Emperor who was also a Hero. The sudden comprehension of thy abilities has indeed saved all of our lives."

Phoebe drops to her knees and hugs Shana. "You're awesome! Ooh, I'm definitely adopting you after this, sweetheart!"

While everyone breathes a sigh of relief, a cold chill goes down my back.

Shana saved all of us, including me. However, the fact I nearly died to the Psion's surprise attack is beyond terrifying. Had Shana not been here, humanity's future would have vanished, along with my

existence.

...I never knew until just now the knife's edge I've walked. I've been lax. My mental weakness nearly led to my downfall. After I escape, I'll need to take even more extreme measures to protect my mind.

I quickly shake my anxious thoughts away and clean off my sweat with a quick word of power. "Phoebe, if you're alright, send me the next virus. We can discuss Shana's awesomeness once we escape."

A minute later, I disable the Symmetra vessel and teleport away, continuing my rampage unabated.

* * *

An hour passes.

After disabling the entire fleet, I don't encounter anymore resistance on the scale of the psionic attack. Some of the vessels become capable of detecting my general whereabouts, but none of the Volgrim personnel aboard the ships put up much of a fight. Their most advanced weapons bounce off my Wordsmithed shields without exception.

Eventually, I teleport away from the vessels and arrive amidst the Void.

"Retreat."

With one word, I activate Phoebe's trojans. The Volgrim fleet turns around and ignites their thrusters, zipping away at Warp 7.

Phoebe's expression appears solemn. "I hope that was the right move to make, Jason. Letting those Volgrim go is sure to come back and bite us."

"Maybe," I say, nodding my head. "But now that I have the Phoenix, the situation has changed drastically. A single teleportation used to drain my mana noticeably. But today, after an hour of strenuous Wordsmithing, I'm not even winded. I feel like today marks a qualitative shift in my power. No, in *humanity's* power. We're not helpless anymore. If the Volgrim figure out my identity and attack... I won't hold back."

"We'll see..." Phoebe mutters.

I turn my attention back to the faint fluctuations in subspace, where Camael's Cube resides. "Alright, let's figure out what- hm?"

With the Volgrim gone, I finally have a moment of respite. Only now do I notice the ruby-red bracelet on my right wrist faintly shining with magical energy.

Ah! I almost forgot. It was part of a matching pair I gave to Phoebe so she could contact me no matter where I went. If it's glowing, then she must have sent me a message after I fell unconscious.

I tap the gem in its center, causing a hologram of my wife's face to beam out of it and hover in the air before me.

"Jason, where are you? You said you'd be back within a few days, but it's already been a week. I miss you. Daisy misses you. Reply soon, alright?"

I frown.

A week?

The bracelet glows again, making my frown deepen. There's another message.

Phoebe's face appears again, but this time, she looks much more anxious than before. "Jason? Hello? Does this damned thing even work? It's glowing, so surely that means it's not broken? Argh! Respond, dammit! Tell me you're okay! Did the demons capture you? Did you die? Are you alright? Our scouts have been reporting movement at the Core's outskirts! I think the demons are going to attack soon! Kar has everyone at their battle stations, but I'm worried. Call me as soon as you get this!"

* * *

Another message appears. This time, Phoebe appears stressed, with disheveled hair.

"Oh, god. It's terrible! The demons took us by surprise! They tore apart the Core and killed thousands of soldiers. Hope isn't back, and neither are you. What's going on? Did the demons capture both Wordsmiths? Did they kill you?! Answer me, goddammit! Tell me you're alive, please! I have to go. Kar's in critical condition. Ose nearly killed him."

Alarmed, my heart skips a beat. "Kar's injured?!"

My mind-wife wrings her hands together. "The situation is bad, Jason. We need to get back there at once."

However, I tap the crystal again upon seeing it glowing once more.

"Fuck..." Phoebe's hologram says, her face smudged with blood. "They've broken through. A god-damned traitor activated the warpgate. They're on Tarus II! So many demons... so many undead. I swear to god, Jason, if you died without telling me... I'll find your soul and kick your ass! Daisy's safe... so is Sam. We stabilized Kar... ah, hell! I have to go. I can't lead an army and talk to this stupid, worthless, broken crystal at the same time."

Tears well up in my wife's eyes.

"Please be alive. Oh, god, if you've died... if I didn't even get to say goodbye... what do I have to live for? You're my everything, Jason. Come back to me. Please."

Her hologram disappears, leaving me staring into space blankly.

The crystal's light fades away, indicating the messages have stopped.

A pit forms in my stomach. I don't have any clue how long ago Phoebe's last message was, nor how much time passed between the messages.

"...I was only unconscious for an hour, right? Isn't that what you guys said?"

My mind-wife shakes her head helplessly. "That's how much time it felt like. Maybe more time passed. I don't know. Hell, maybe the Phoenix's power dilated time around us."

Slowly, I nod. "Maybe. No more hesitation. We have to ditch the Cube and return to Tarus II pronto."

"No!" Phoebe shouts. "That's a terrible idea! Instead, why don't you leave the Cube to me? We'll go inside, you can use 'Locate' to find Tarus II and scout out the situation, and I'll use your body to build the

Cube's control matrix. I won't need more than an hour or two."

"What good will going there in my soul-form do?" I ask, irritated. "I have to teleport back right now! Everyone is counting on me!"

"I know," My mind-wife replies, lowering her gaze. "But if we leave the Cube here, it's likely to fall into the Volgrim's hands. We can't allow that. It's the key to your newfound power."

"Arthur's Knight is correct," Raphael chimes in. "Jason, thy improved mana reserves are not thine alone. They belong to Camael's Cube. Didn't thou not sense it? Thy power weakened, ever so slightly, when thou traveled away from it to the Volgrim ships. The greater the distance, the less of its power thou shalt be capable of tapping into! If thou returneth home now, thou shalt be nearly the same as before merging with the Phoenix."

I frown. "But I thought the mana came from the Phoenix, not from the Cube. Are you telling me the Phoenix itself has almost no mana to give?"

"In the past, that statement would have been false," Raphael answers. "However, after spending so much time merged with the Cube, the Phoenix has had its power sapped by Camael's mightiest artifact. There is not much we can do, but given the Cube's size and its ability to absorb mana from the nearby star systems, I think it shall prove a most effective 'battery.'"

Despite my body urging me to rush home, I force myself to calm down. "Alright. Fine. I can scout Tarus II's situation and return once I figure out the situation. Hopefully, you can have the Cube ready and moving, Phoebe. I'll check your main body and make sure she's... in good health."

My mind-wife nods. "You don't have to say it twice, Jason. Leave it to me. And before you go, I'll empower your soul-form. After you detach, stick around so I can ensure you won't run into the same situation you did with Confessor Vulpanix."

"Good idea. That's why I love you; you're so unbelievably smart."

Phoebe blushes. "I do enjoy compliments!"

Without wasting any more time, I utter a word of power. "**Locate!**"

My soul detaches from my body and begins to tug toward my physical wife's location, making me breathe a sigh of relief. After all, 'Locate' can't detect dead things. She's still alive!

I hang around in the area, while my Mind-Wife takes over my body. Her eyes glow white for a moment before returning to normal.

"There. Alright, let's do this! **Empower! Protect! Imbue! Speed!**"

Hearing my voice speaking from my body feels odd, but I ignore the weird vibes and immediately zip toward Tarus II after my mind-wife finishes her incantation.

In my mind, one thought rings out.

I'm coming, everyone! Stay alive!

Part 249: Mara's Great Escape!

Mara, the Baron of Games, motions with her hands to 'draw' a magical Tarot card out of thin air by flourishing her fingers. Her electricity-imbued wolf rampages before her, frying the nanites off every troopers' body. Each time the wolf howls, multiple bolts of lightning fire from its mouth and arc off its tail to jump at the nearest metal or electric sources; usually the prison guards and their exosuits.

"Aargh!"

"That damned mutt! Kill it!"

Despite the summoned creature's incredible offensive power, it proves to have laughably weak defenses. A few stray bullets unloaded by the exosuit-wearing troopers shred the animal's head to a bloody pulp. The wolf explodes into particles of light, dispersing forevermore into the aether.

"You filthy humans!" Mara screeches, as she activates another Tarot card. "You'll pay for that!! Three-Eyed-Gecko, **Imbue!**"

Tears well up in Mara's eyes as she screams internally. *They killed my summon! Now the Little Wolf is dead forever! I'll need another one crafted, and the Devil only knows how much time and effort that'll take!*

A third eye materializes on Mara's forehead, manifesting the same ability it did when she used it on Laharl. The world shifts in color as she uses the Gecko to its fullest extent, while keeping in mind the ten-minute time limit for Tarot card imbuelement.

"Shoot to kill!" One of the guards barks. "Fire at will!"

As the humans unload bullets down the narrow corridor, Mara's Gecko eye twitches violently, looking left, right, up and down all at once. Before the Gecko's gaze, all illusions become material, and all things which ordinary eyes could never follow slow to a crawl. Mara instantly becomes capable of predicting the humans' aim, and thus dodging their bullets whenever they squeeze the trigger.

The Baron rushes forward, bending and twisting her body unnaturally to evade any attack capable of killing her. However, in the narrow corridor, she can't dodge the entire hail of gunfire, so she allows dozens of grazing shots and flesh wounds to bloom upon her arms, legs, and even her cheeks.

Wham!

Using her Baron-level strength, Mara smashes her fist against the nearest guard's chest, knocking him on his ass and making him slide a few feet across the ground. However, her strength isn't nearly enough to injure the man, thanks to his exosuit's stalwart defenses.

The instant Mara lands her blow, she ducks down and sweeps the leg of a second commando before palm-striking and sending him flying. With four other commandos turning their gun barrels toward her, Mara flicks out another card.

"Aqua Banshee, **EVOKE!**"

A terrific explosion of sonic energy, like a thousand women screaming in agony simultaneously, blasts out of Mara's body and flings the remaining troopers away. They crash against the far walls and hit the ground a moment later, their heads reeling. It turns out that not only did the Banshee's scream contain sonic energy, but psionic force as well, causing the soldier's brains to rattle in their skulls. Waves of disorientation strike them, and they fall flat on their faces.

However, Mara hesitates. Three seconds pass as she realizes she can't break through their armor to kill them, not with her physical body alone.

Seven more seconds! I can only draw a card every ten seconds without suffering a terrible mana backlash. Come on, destiny! Give me something useful!

By the time the soldiers regain their senses, Mara manages to flourish her fingers and draw another card. Her expression turns unsightly.

"What rotten luck! No, wait, I can work with this. Gelatinous Blob, **Summon!**"

A nine-foot-tall, cylindrically-shaped slime-monster materializes before Mara, its body vaguely the same consistency as Jello. The eyeless, earless, faceless green blob quivers slightly as it waits for Mara's command.

The Baron of Games ducks back into the hallway. "Block this corridor! Let nobody through!"

The slime-creature follows her orders and dutifully stretches itself to envelop the hallway entrance, forming a barrier of goopy, sticky material.

Mara grits her teeth. "That'll buy me a minute! Now... what next?"

Her Gecko eye continues to pivot around. Eventually, she looks upward, making the Gecko peer through several hundred feet of topsoil to reveal multiple trooper contingents converging on the area from a mile away.

"They called for backup already? *Just my luck.*"

Mara's heart trembles as she spots the previously downed commandos outside running toward the Gelatinous Blob. The prison guards fire dozens, possibly hundreds of bullets at the summoned monster, but the projectiles don't pierce more than an inch of its several-feet-thick green, mostly-transparent body. The bullets get swallowed by Mara's summon as it trembles happily and consumes their metal shells to feed itself.

The moment the humans try using fire or electricity on the Blob, it will perish. I can't rely on it forever, Mara thinks.

Mara glances around herself and eventually looks backward, toward the other prison cells. There, her Gecko eye spots multiple other prisoners through the walls, two of whom catch her attention.

What the...?! That's Beelzebub! And over there, it's Artorias! I remember Beelzebub getting captured by the humans, but I didn't know he ended up here, too! And what about Artorias? Did the Sphinx beat him after he trounced me?!

Mara shakes her head. *Who cares?! I have to free both Dukes! With our powers combined, escaping will be a cinch!*

Not hesitating for even a second, Mara turns on her heel and rushes back toward the prison cells forty feet down the corridor. She arrives at the first one and slides its barrel-bolt lock aside.

Click!

The door opens without issue, allowing Mara to enter the chamber. She finds Beelzebub trapped with an identical harnessing setup, his arms bound tightly behind his back, and a suit of nanite-metal encasing him from head to toe.

"Shit!" Mara hisses. "I don't have Little Wolf to zap Beelzebub out of this weird getup. Here's to hoping I draw something useful."

She motions with her hands and draws another card from her Mind Realm, wincing as she readies herself for her disappointment. However, to her shock, it turns out to be exactly what she needs.

"Nice! Ancient Electric Eel, **Enchant!**"

The card disappears, and a burst of mana rushes toward Mara's right arm and fist. Rather than imbuing her entire body with the eel's power, she enchants just one arm, allowing her to use the effect as long as necessary, even though it proves weaker than an imbue.

Once her arm becomes charged with electrical energy, Mara gets to work ripping apart the nanites binding Beelzebub's body. Everywhere she touches, the molecular bonds break apart, turning the ultra-hardened metal into dusty ash.

By the time she's freed Beelzebub's head and some of his body, the Duke of Inferno's eyes have already begun fluttering open. Beelzebub coughs weakly and shakes the fog from his head. "...Where?"

"The humans caught you," Mara says. "Remember? You got the shit beaten out of you by the Sphinx. He tricked and captured you."

"Guh!" Beelzebub gasps. "That's right! That damned reptile..."

Mara turns Beelzebub on his side. After she zaps apart the nanites binding his arms behind his back, Beelzebub shoves her aside.

"Out of my way! I'll handle the rest!"

Despite Beelzebub's rudeness, Mara doesn't even flinch. She retreats a few steps and shields her eyes as the Duke blasts the rest of the nanites with superheated flames, burning off all his clothes in the process.

The Duke of Inferno jumps to his feet and cracks his neck. He scowls at Mara. "What are you staring at? Like you've never seen a male naked before."

Mara chuckles. "Sorry. You're bigger than I expected. Now, don't I get a thank you?"

"Sure. *Thanks*," Beelzebub snaps. He pushes past Mara, only to frown as he hears gunfire outside. "What's the situation?"

"We're inside an underground prison," Mara replies. I have the humans blocked off, but they'll break through my barrier soon. I want you to fight them while I free Artorias."

"Artorias?!" Beelzebub echoes, turning to look at Mara with shock. "They captured not only me, but the Duke of Steel as well?"

"That's right," Mara replies. "And me, but I broke free."

She smirks.

"Guess I'm just more talented than the mighty *Dukes*."

"Oh, shut it," Beelzebub groans. He rolls his eyes and steps through the doorway. "Remove your creature. Or don't, but I *will*."

He gestures toward the blob at the end of the corridor, and Mara nods. She steps out behind Beelzebub and uses him as a shield. "Gelatinous Blob, **Recall!** Watch out, Beelzebub, there are more humans on the way."

"So long as it isn't the Sphinx, I don't give a damn, " Beelzebub replies with absolute confidence. "These fleshbags are going to *pay* for humiliating me!"

Without another word, Beelzebub dashes forward right as the blob disappears. The humans behind it jump in alarm at they spot the Duke of Inferno rushing toward them.

"Shit! We're too late! The demoness-!"

BOOM!

Beelzebub rips off and flings his hand forward, detonating it like a grenade to blast away everyone in his path. He exhales superheated flames on one group of troopers while swinging his arms wildly to fling fireballs in every direction. This time, the nanite suits melt to slag, unable to protect their pilots, who end up turning to charcoal.

While the Duke rampages, Mara darts across the hall to the other cell. She opens it to reveal Artorias's giant, armored form, also covered with a layer of nanites.

"Damned fleshbags," Mara hisses. "To humiliate such a dignified demonic warrior like this... unforgivable!"

Unlike her mild feelings of disgust toward the haughty, arrogant Beelzebub, Mara's heart softens as she gets to work freeing Artorias.

Every demon knows the story of Artorias. He gave up his life to save his little brother. Even after losing his real body, he fought back the spirit of an Archangel for a hundred thousand years. He's done everything in his power to allow Barbatos to continue living, yet now he's treated as nothing more than a decrepit prisoner. I hate fleshbags! I hate all of them so damn much!!

It doesn't take Mara more than a minute to completely free Artorias. However, unlike Beelzebub, the Duke of Steel lays with his eyes closed. He doesn't jump to his feet, nor does he do much more than suck in a few weak, shallow breaths.

Eventually, Artorias coughs.

"Kuh... hnn... b-body... body aches..."

Mara frowns. She examines Artorias more closely and quickly discovers severe damage to his chest, neck, and internal organs.

"Devils! Artorias, what happened?! You're in terrible shape!"

Artorias struggles to open his eyes, then closes them. "Th-the... the reptile... tricked Bael. Beat me... senseless. *Cough...* Bael is such... a bloody... idiot... *whoze...*"

"You've got that right," Mara growls. She stares at Artorias for several seconds, then shakes her head. "I don't have any healing magic; I'm neither Belial or Hellga. I do have one Tarot card that can reverse the status of someone's body if they suffered severe injuries, but yours happened too long ago for it to work. We need to get you to the Blood Pits!"

Artorias swallows several shallow breaths. "No... give me a moment. I'll, I'll heal... myself."

Mara blinks. "What? You have healing magic?"

"No," Artorias says, his voice shaky. "But Uriel does. *Cough...* never thought I'd... I'd have to use *her* power."

"Is that safe?" Mara asks. "Tapping into an Archangel's magic, I mean."

"Won't know... won't know unless I try. Probably dangerous, but what other options do I have?"

Artorias rests his body and mind for half a minute while Beelzebub rampages outside. After Beelzebub finishes and saunters down the corridor, Artorias re-opens his eyes.

"Alright. Can you give me... give me some water? A small basin-full will do. Uriel's healing magic uses water as its base."

Mara nods. "Sure. Let me find the right card."

She spends the next minute sifting through five Tarot cards, before finally finding one with water-element powers. Mara stomps her foot into the ground, blasting concrete everywhere. A small depression appears in the floor as she activates the card. "Sea Urchin, **Evoke!**"

Mara controls the card's power, using very little mana to merely conjure water from thin air. She fills the depression with liquid, while also leaving some to overflow around the floor.

At that moment, Beelzebub walks around the corner, still buck-naked. "Are you done yet? I've finished turning those worthless humans to- huh? Artorias? What happened to you? You look like crap."

Beelzebub drops his initial statements and instead walks over to Artorias, frowning as his feet *splash* in the half-inch of water coating the floor.

Artorias barely has enough strength to use magic, so he doesn't answer Beelzebub's question. Instead, he shakily raises one hand and forces himself to cast a weak spell. A thin tendril of liquid begins levitating off the floor, its appearance resembling an octopus's tentacle. It slowly touches Artorias's armor and seeps

inside, then slowly but surely sucks some of the water off the floor, bit by bit, and siphons the enchanted liquid into the Duke's injured form.

Every second of healing noticeably improves the Duke's condition. After ten seconds, his speed of regeneration doubles, allowing him to put more mana into the healing efforts.

Within minutes, Artorias's body fully heals, allowing him to breathe a sigh of relief. He pulls himself into a sitting position and shakes the fog from his brain.

"Ugh. Devils... the next time I see Bael, I'm going to beat that thick-headed nimrod senseless."

Beelzebub smirks. "You and me both. I've a bone to pick with that fat bastard."

Mara reaches out to help Artorias to his feet, but the Duke of Steel shakes his head. "I'm fine, now. Thank you for rescuing me. I won't forget this."

"Don't think you owe me a debt," Mara says, smiling demurely. "You've done plenty to help demonkind. I wouldn't exist if it weren't for legends like you forging our history."

"Legends are legends, and this is this," Artorias says, as he stands up and gently squeezes Mara's shoulder. "Don't deny my courtesy, please. I always repay a favor. Considering you saved my life, I-GUHK!"

Artorias suddenly doubles over and grabs his stomach. A look of pure agony flashes through his smoldering, blood-red eyes. He gasps for breath, making Beelzebub and Mara glance at one another in alarm.

"Are you alright?" Beelzebub asks.

Artorias carefully stands up again, his legs noticeably shakier than before. "S-sorry. I... that was unexpected. Damn. I didn't realize there would be such an after-effect from using the Archangel's magic."

After a momentary pause, Artorias continues with an ominous edge to his voice. "By tapping into Uriel's magic... I may have accidentally... no, I hope that's not true. Let's hurry and get out of here, before anything worse happens. I'll create a tunnel for our escape so we don't have to face the humans outside."

Mara glances toward the ceiling again, as the time limit for her Gecko imbuelement nears its limit. "The humans aren't coming down. They're waiting for us."

"We should go out there and finish the little creepy-crawlies off," Beelzebub says, a look of pure rage on his face. "Don't tell me you've grown soft, Duke of Steel. *Surely* you want to pay back the humans for what they *did to us*."

Artorias hesitates.

"...I do. However, something isn't right. My mana... tapping into the Archangel's power was extremely dangerous, moreso than I expected."

"Fine!" Beelzebub huffs. "You take Mara and go. I'm going to have a little fun with the bastards who put me here!"

"Beelzebub," Mara says, her tone more annoyed than sympathetic, "if you get caught again, I won't be here to bail you out."

"Shut your trap, woman!" Beelzebub snarls. He whips his head toward the doorway while grinding his teeth. "Nothing worse than a female flapping her lips to piss me off! You don't need to worry about me; I'm a big boy!"

The Duke of Inferno angrily stomps toward the doorway, his feet making comical slapping sounds as they hit the still-damp floor, until he rounds the corner and leaves.

Once he disappears, Mara shakes her head and sighs. "That hothead... he's too arrogant, too full of himself."

Artorias nods, a distant look in his eyes. "Much like my brother... before the merge. Barbatos was quite the annoying little ankle-biter until Uriel... until she *broke* him."

While shaking his head, Artorias turns to the wall. He assumes a power-stance, then rears his fist back.

CRACK!

The Duke of Steel punches through the two-feet of hardened concrete with ease, sending shards of rock and ash flying outward. He pounds the wall a few more times to expose the earthen surface behind it, then nods with satisfaction.

"Stay close. I'm going to move full-speed toward the battlefield. We can only hope Beelzebub is capable of defeating the humans. At the least, he'll cover for our escape."

Artorias begins digging at the dirt like a mole, using wide, sweeping arm-movements to rip out hundreds of pounds of dirt onto the cell floor, all while Mara stands back and watches.

"If only the *new* demons were comparable to the old ones. I'd rather have a dozen lazy Diablos than one more Beelzebub."

Artorias continues tunneling, while a faint smile plays across his face. "Beelzebub isn't that bad, Mara. He's still young. He hasn't seen what you and I have. He doesn't remember the major upheavals from Hell's history. Once he suffers a bit, he'll mature. Just give him time."

Mara rolls her eyes.

"*Sure*. If you insist."

A minute later, both demons step into the bowels of the planet, sealing off the path to follow them.

The prison complex falls silent.

Part 250: The Battle Brothers' Resurgence!

Tarus II, the Eastern Front.

Zamiel, the older but shorter of the Battle Brothers, raises his fists and grits his teeth. His opponent, Kar, the Sphinx, casually strolls toward him with a huge smile on his gator-face. Behind Kar, the Wordsmith stands casually, his arms crossed and a relaxed expression on his face. The Wordsmith appears uninterested in taking away Kar's shot at ripping Zamiel apart.

As Kar begins stomping toward Zamiel, a look of terror appears on the Battle Brother's face.

"This... this isn't fair! Wretched crocodile! You were supposed to be down for the count! And the Wordsmith wasn't supposed to be here either! How is any of this possible?!"

Kar rears his fist back. "Hurgh! When you meet the Creator, ask **HIM!**"

Zamiel summons a massive warhammer and tries to crush Kar into a pancake before the Sphinx can land his punch.

He fails.

The Sphinx blasts Zamiel in his face, spinning the Battle Brother through the air. He careens helplessly to the side and crashes into the dirt, spraying soil out and away from the impact zone.

"Aargh!" Zamiel crows. "You... you fucking- ACK!"

The goatee'd demon's pupils shrink to pinpricks as he spots the Sphinx leaping toward him from the sky. He feebly raises an arm to shield himself from the blow, but it does little to stop Kar's savage assault.

Wham! Bam! Boom!

Over and over, Kar grabs Zamiel and thrashes him from side to side, beats him black and blue, and flings him into the dirt. The Sphinx pulverizes the Baron with ease, showing his prowess as the unmatched champion of Tarus II.

"Kahuck! Gah! Aaah!"

Zamiel shrieks and cries, but the Sphinx doesn't let up. Eventually, after breaking Zamiel's arms and legs, Kar slows his onslaught and drops Zamiel to the ground beside his fallen brother, Duriel. Both demons lie motionless in the dirt, with Zamiel's eyes fluttering weakly, while Duriel's appear permanently closed.

"Cough... cough... damn... can't win... the fucking Wordsmith hasn't... hasn't even made a move... little bro, help me... get up, man..."

Kar stands with his arms crossed. He towers over Zamiel's broken form and smirks. "Hurgh. For my revenge to come this easily, you were never my opponent. A weakling though and through."

Zamiel doesn't answer.

His eyes flick around erratically, the result of severe brain hemorrhages ravaging his mind.

Damn. Can't feel my arms or legs. Whole body feels like it's on fire. Is this the end?

As Zamiel lies helpless on the ground, his head lolls to the side, allowing him to get a better look at his unconscious, beaten and defeated brother.

"D-Duriel... bro... come on, don't be a little... *cough*... a little bitch..."

Zamiel's eyes refocus. He tries to wake his brother up, only for his gaze to fall not on Duriel, but on the blood-soaked ground where he landed.

Huh? Blood?

The Baron blinks slowly. His thoughts come, slowly and groggily.

That's not Duriel's blood. It's human blood. We killed a bunch of fleshies before the Croc and Wordsmith came. What the hell? How come Duriel hasn't healed, yet? He's lying in a goddamn bucket of fleshbag blood! That lazy bastard...

A creeping realization crawls into the back of Zamiel's mind, all while the Sphinx stands over and continues to taunt him.

That makes no sense! I don't even need to think to heal when touching human blood. The same is true for Duriel! Why hasn't little bro fixed himself up?!

Zamiel closes his eyes. He ignores Kar's words, even as Kar starts to lean forward and grab him.

Something ain't right. My little bro might be dense, but not even his stupidity would stop him from healing! That can only mean... the bastard on the ground ain't Duriel at all!

...He's a fake! An illusion!

Zamiel's eyes bolt open. Multiple realizations rush into his mind as the crocodile grabs him by the neck and lifts his broken, defeated body into the air.

"Hurgh! Nothing to say? After all the pain you've caused? You're trash! Today, your life ends here!"

A glint appears in Zamiel's eyes. "Krrgh! The hell it does!"

The older Battle Brother flicks his finger, activating a special power from within his body. All of a sudden, the pools of human blood on the ground leap toward his back and seep into his armor, making Kar blink in surprise.

"Huh?"

Zamiel gnashes his teeth with rage. As the human blood enters his body, his bones rapidly repair themselves, while his other life-threatening injuries quickly disappear as well.

"Stinking crocodile! Die like the rest!"

BOOM!

Before Kar can react, Zamiel kicks him in the chest, allowing him to break free of the reptile's grip and fling himself to the ground. Zamiel lands on his back and skids for a second before agilely pushing himself to his feet with a thrust of his hands.

"I knew something was off!" Zamiel snarls. "You... you ain't the ding-damn croc! And that fucker over there ain't the Wordsmith! Spawn of a Broodmother, you almost got me!"

The Battle Brother cackles maniacally. "Hahaha! Show yourself, you fairy bitch! Do you think you can fool me with these little tricks?! You're wrong! I saw how you dealt with Bael and Artorias, using your illusory projections! Stop hiding in the shadows like a coward!"

Several seconds pass, while Zamiel pants like crazy.

Slowly, Kar's smile disappears, and a solemn look replaces it.

"Hmph. So *what* if you figured it out? Are you an idiot? Do you think that just because you called me out, I'll appear? Imbecile. Now that I know you've seen through my illusions, I won't have to hold back anymore."

Jason, the Wordsmith, vanishes. He reappears next to Zamiel, startling the Baron. His fist crashes upon Zamiel's face, sending the demon sprawling to the side.

"What a fool. You should have stayed quiet," 'Jason' says. "If you hadn't announced your genius discovery, you might have caught me offguard. Now, you won't."

Zamiel, sprawled in a puddle of blood, absorbs it into his body. A wicked grin spreads across his face as he feels his body not only repair itself, but also strengthen ever so slightly.

"Foolish fairy. I don't need to cheat or play dirty to beat the likes of you. If the Wordsmith were actually here, I'd probably lose... but he isn't! All you are is a hack! An imitator! You can summon projections to attack me, but you can't pull off the fearsome feats he has! You're not even a tenth as frightening!!"

Feeling emboldened, Zamiel's morale skyrockets! He jumps to his feet and pounds his fists together, summoning a wall of hammers above himself. Fifty weapons hover above his head, conjured by the Baron's magic.

"Where the hell is my little brother, you witch?! Let me guess! You separated him from me with an illusory wall! I can't see or hear Duriel, but he's still here somewhere, nearby! Isn't that right? Hahaha! I've fought your kind before! I know all your tricks!"

Kar and Jason's expressions harden, and they speak in unison.

"We will see."

* * *

A fearsome battle, ten times scarier than before, explodes inside Blinker's illusory space. No longer does Zamiel hold back. Instead, as Blinker summons several other copies of Kar to attack the Battle Brother, Zamiel's eyes glow with ravenous energy.

I have to give it to this bitch. She nearly got me! I let my guard down, all because I believed the Wordsmith had actually shown up! But he didn't. Now that I understand the reality of my situation, I know the fairy queen only beat me because my will was lacking! However... no more. I'll grab that little maggot and squeeze her into bloody pulp!

Blinker and Zamiel trade hundreds of blows. The explosive detonations of her projected phantoms meeting his fists and weapons rings out across the entire battlefield. Sometimes, Blinker one-ups Zamiel and sends him flying, but no matter where he lands, there's always blood nearby, allowing him to heal.

Blinker watches from afar. Her expression distorts as she keeps her true body hidden with an illusory barrier.

"Damn... how does he keep getting back up? Is he a freaking vampire or something? I know demons love blood, but this is ridiculous."

Zamiel doesn't hear her whispered words. Instead, he slashes down with his weapon and cuts through one of the illusory Wordsmiths, causing a terrible backlash to shoot into Blinker's body.

"Augh!"

The fairy's illusions shimmer and lose focus for a second before returning to normal. Zamiel doesn't miss this detail.

"Hehe... as expected! You're weakening, aren't you, little woman?! How many phantoms have you sent to fight me? Twenty? Haha!! Each one will require more of your attention! You're sure to slip up somewhere--"

"Shut up!" An illusory Kar roars. He bashes the back of Zamiel's head, catching the Baron by surprise. However, as Zamiel stumbles to his knees, he flicks his finger and calls down a hammer from above.

Boom!

The summoned weapon crashes against the phantom Kar's skull, exploding the reptile into particles of light. Blinker howls in pain as another mana backlash hits her body, making her legs weaken and her wings lose some of their strength.

The pressure on the Fairy Queen increases noticeably. She wipes a few tiny drops of sweat from her forehead with a trembling hand. "Damn! Trying to fight two monstrous Barons at once isn't as easy as I expected! These jip-japping-jerks are both stronger than Dukes! What the heck is their secret?!"

Blinker's eyes flick away from Zamiel, toward a second illusory space sealed off by a false wall. Inside it, Duriel battles another copy of Kar and Jason, but unlike Zamiel, the fool has yet to figure out their identities.

"I'd rather kill myself than lose to you, Wordsmith!" Duriel yells. He swings his fist at the Wordsmith's projection, but Jason dodges with a Word of Power.

"Teleport."

Once again, the Wordsmith easily evades Duriel's attack, causing the younger Battle Brother to hit nothing but air. Enraged, he calls down a hailstorm of swords from the sky and sends them flying at Blinker's projections. The illusory combatants disappear for a moment, then reappear after his attack misses, making Duriel curse again.

"Shrakh! How do you dodge every time?!"

Jason shrugs. "Magic, my good fellow."

"Magic, my ass! You're a slippery little dick! Why don't you stand still for a second and accept my attack like a real man?!"

Jason smirks. "That's because I'm *not* a real man, you addle-brained simpleton. You wouldn't understand."

"Ha! At least you admit it!"

The incredibly handsome Jason, his projection far more incredible-looking than the real one, flips his hair to the side with a flick of his head. "Every minute you fight me is a minute you're not helping your troops. The longer this battle lasts, the better it is for me."

"Like I care," Duriel grunts. "You think I give a damn about these dipshits? The other demons can burn! I'm only here for me, myself, and my big bro. Kill the others if you want, idiot!"

The Wordsmith, Sphinx, and younger Battle Brother resume their combat, but Blinker's heart grows heavier.

The great thing about projections is that they can injure and kill physical beings. I also don't have to focus too hard to control them, because they have their own egos. The problem is that they still consume a lot of freaking mana! Not only that, but when they get killed, it's ME who gets badly hurt! If these Battle Brothers continue ripping my projected boys to pieces, I'll almost certainly die.

Blinker's eyes flicker around as she starts to worry and fret.

What should I do? I could just leave. I came here thinking I could kill Kar's worst enemies with ease, but the frigging doodoo-heads hid their real strength! If I leave, they'll kill more of my friends... and I can't allow that to happen!

Zamiel's attacks multiply in strength and ferocity. While Blinker frets over what action to take, the older Battle Brother grabs the massive warhammer off his back, rushes toward a Wordsmith's projection, and swings it upward, blasting the phantom Jason's chin with all his strength. The projected being explodes into particles of light, sending agony into Blinker's body a moment later.

"Eeyahh!!"

The fairy loses control of her magic for a moment, causing all of the illusions and the illusory wall separating Zamiel and Duriel to flicker. For a brief instant, Zamiel and Duriel catch sight of one another before the projections repair themselves.

Duriel blinks. "Huh? Wait, was that my big bro?"

He glances behind himself, at the body of his 'big bro' laying on the ground, beaten and broken. Just like how Zamiel say his little brother get 'defeated' earlier, so too did Duriel see Zamiel's crushing loss to the Wordsmith.

The younger Battle Brother stares in shock as several gears slowly turn inside his mostly-empty head.

"Sh... shit! That punk ain't Zammy-boy! It's a fake! Don't tell me I ain't been fighting the ding-damn Wordsmith and Sphinx this whole time, but some posers?!"

As Blinker regains her bearings, she notices Duriel's words, causing a chill to build inside her heart.

Damn! They both figured it out! This isn't good! Zamiel already knows the weakness of my projections. If Duriel realizes it too, then...

Boom!

Blinker's head explodes with pain mid-thought as Duriel lunges forward and attacks Kar's projection, blasting it with his fist. The projected Sphinx doesn't immediately break apart, but its pain still transmits to Blinker and nearly makes her faint.

"Gah! I... I can't take it... much longer!"

Too weary to continue, Blinker desummons all of her projections, causing the illusory space to disappear. Both Battle Brothers spot one another as the invisible barriers separating them fade away, but Blinker still keeps herself hidden within a concealed barrier.

"Bro! You're alive!" Duriel yells. "Haha! Lemme guess, it was that Fairy Queen, wasn't it? I knew she was behind it the whole time!"

Zamiel struts over to Duriel while flicking his eyes around to look for the invisible fairy. "Tch. Don't lie to me, you big galunk. You only just figured out that bitch was pulling your strings. Admit it!"

"Heh, you got me! Now where's that tiny little bird go, eh?" Duriel says, as his menacing gaze sweeps around the area.

"She's still here, but don't bother wasting your time. If we had a big area-attack, we could blast the world to pieces and catch her in the crossfire, but that ain't our specialty. You hear that, little fairy?! You're getting off easy! Next time you show up, I won't be so nice! Bahaha!"

Blinker shivers. She lowers her head and flies away, deep shame etched into her face.

Dang it. I'm so stupid! I shouldn't have come here alone! I couldn't even stop two measly Barons by myself...

As she leaves, the Battle Brothers turn toward the humans, all of whom have spotted them and quickly surrounded the Barons.

"Targets sighted! Where are Commanders Kar and Hiro?"

"I saw them fighting the Barons! Did they lose? Is that possible?"

"I don't know, but it doesn't matter. Open fire! Kill them while they're distracted!"

Just as the troops level their weapons toward the Battle Brothers, a female voice takes over the intercom.

"Commander Hiro speaking. All troops, hold your fire. I'll fight the Battle Brothers myself."

Phoebe Hiro, leader of the Tarus II resistance, orders her troops to fall back. A blip appears on the Eastern Front's radar as they spot a massive, heavily armored exosuit-wearing trooper jump into the sky and fall toward the Battle Brother's positions.

"Mother of- what the heck is that exosuit?! Is that the Commander?!"

"It's gigantic! It must be fifteen feet tall!"

The soldiers transmit to one another, their voices inaudible outside of their helmets. The Battle Brothers suddenly raise their eyes skyward and turn slightly pale as they spot the bipedal machine falling toward them.

"Shrakh! Look out!"

Zamiel and Duriel jump apart just in the nick of time, right as Phoebe Hiro's experimental exosuit *crashes* where they stood only moments before.

BOOM!

An explosion of dirt and dust erupts from the impact zone, spraying both Barons with filth. From the center of the small crater, a ten-ton metallic biped rises to its feet, towering over the Barons with a menacing presence. Its blood-red coloration, mixed with black outlines and a golden helmet, makes it resemble a dark blood-god, one that has come to reap demonic souls.

A triple-barreled minigun sits inside the massive biped's grip, held by its left hand. The other hand holds a tremendous kite-shield, one half as big as the machine's entire body. Atop its head, two 'small' revolver-sized gun barrels aim wherever the pilot gazes, allowing them to fire smaller, more precise shots at enemies.

Finally, attached to the gigantic exosuit's back, two jet-thrusters rest, making it capable of leaping skyward and traveling great distances in a single bound.

The pilot, Phoebe Hiro, speaks. "Looks like I got here just in the nick of time. You pipsqueaks must think you're hot stuff. Unfortunately for you, you won't kill another human today, or *ever* again."

Her voice booms across the nearby battlefield, amplified by her exosuit's auditory systems. The nearby troopers cheer in their hearts, excited by their Commander's strong words.

However, a few of them worry about her condition. *Didn't she get shot out of the sky by these same two demons? Is she alright? Did Belial heal her?*

Zamiel smiles. "Hah! The Hero's Wife! Great. Now we don't have to go looking for you. Dumb bitch! A bit of metal won't protect your soft, squishy body from the likes of the Battle Brothers!"

Duriel pounds his chest. "Yeah! What big bro said!"

Not far away from the three combatants, Blinker, still hidden within an illusory space, flies behind Phoebe.

Ack! Phoebe, what are you doing?! I can't leave if you show up! Grr!! I'll just have to help you from the shadows, then. Silly woman!

Blinker examines the massive exosuit from behind and frowns.

What the heck IS that thing anyway? It's gigantic! I've seen lots of Phoebe's exosuits, but this thing is crazy! It's way scarier looking than anything she's revealed before. Has she been hiding this thing the whole time?

Suddenly, Phoebe swings her triple-barreled minigun toward Zamiel.

"Think fast, *little Baron*."

BRRRRRT!

A hailstorm of bullets blasts out of the weapon, startling Zamiel. He jumps aside an instant before the weapon fires, only for his eyes to bulge out of his head as he spots huge clouds of dirt and mud rocketing into the atmosphere from the bullet impacts.

Shrakh! If that weapon hits me, I'm a GONER!

Part 251: Swift Soul Searching

Mind, body, and soul. These are the three components that make up a living body; a being with intelligence, self-awareness, and the ability to contemplate their existence.

And as of now, I am only two of those things: A soul with the will of a mind guiding it.

The universe flashes past me as I rush toward my destination, guided by my overriding command to 'Locate Phoebe Hiro.' Light-speed, warp-speed, and other such technical measures of velocity don't even begin to comprehend the blinding pace of a Wordsmithed flight. The power of magic surpasses reality, allowing me to race across the galaxy within seconds, traveling a ludicrous distance faster than any other non-magical method could ever allow.

All of a sudden, the stars whizzing past me at blistering speeds disappear. My soul-form lurches to an abrupt stop before a ball of blue and green hovering amidst the blackness of the void.

Tarus II.

I stare at the planet for a moment, deliberately halting my advance to gaze at its splendor. Oceans cover some 80% of the planet's surface, with wild badlands far beyond the reach of Hero City, and another continent to the west, just at the edge of my vision. Humanity has yet to explore 5% of the world we reside upon, and someday, we will cover it with our population and turn it into a second Earth.

That notion assumes we will first survive whatever attack the demons have foisted upon us.

I resume my course and rush at the planet's surface, heading toward the blinking pulse of mana indicating my wife's position.

The moment I break through the cloud cover, I slow my descent. The darkened night-time surface of Tarus's surface might normally be impossible for a pair of physical eyes to envision, but when I sweep my soul-vision around, I easily make out tens of thousands of pinpricks of light.

To the west, an undead army floods out of two colossal teleportation gates, while not far from them, countless demons surge from the Tarus II Warpgate as well. These enemies spread to the north, west, south, and east in droves, forcing the resistance fighters to envelop them to prevent leakage.

However, what truly catches my attention are the 'soul glimmers' under the soil, deep beneath Tarus II's surface. Thousands of demons and undead swarm under the feet of the humans and monsters, my friends, all headed behind the back lines of the battlefield. Based on their positioning, it won't take the demons long before they can catch my friends in a pincer attack and prevent their escape!

My gaze hardens as I comprehend the devious plot of the bastards attacking my world.

I gave Ose a choice. I extended a welcoming hand and offered her a chance to coexist with humanity. She replied with a backstab when I wasn't here to fight back.

And why would she do such a thing?

Because she's a coward. She doesn't dare fight me head-on. Only by resorting to tricks and deceptions can she hope to brutalize humanity.

I tried to play nice, but she repaid me with a slap to my face.

Unforgivable.

With rage clouding my vision, I zip over to Phoebe's position, only to come to a halt some distance away. To my shock, I find my wife battling alone against two insanely powerful magic users! Their mana burns a thousand times hotter than any other source nearby, making them appear to my soul-vision as twin suns irradiating the battlefield.

After more than ten seconds of squinting, I finally recognize them.

The Battle Brothers! Kar's worst enemies, the bastards who murdered all of the crocodiles!

Yet what shocks me the most isn't that they've shown up, but that Kar isn't anywhere in the vicinity! Could it be? When Phoebe left a message, didn't she imply that the Battle Brothers somehow defeated Kar?!

Impossible. Kar is extremely powerful, while the Battle Brothers are only Barons! Something else must have happened.

As I examine the battlefield, it occurs to me that, even without a real frame of reference, the Battle Brothers seem far stronger than any Barons I've seen before. Phoebe's armor, a heavily augmented exosuit Solomon helped her design several months ago, shreds the ground around both of the Battle Brothers with a triple-barreled minigun. The weapon fires countless bullets without cessation, its power stemming from the fact that its energy source is magical, not electrical. The bullets, comprised almost entirely from densely packed mana, get generated on the fly by a powerpack attached to the exosuit's back. This allows Phoebe to fire tens of thousands of bullets without so much as warming up the gun's barrel!

I stay in the air and observe for a minute as the Battle Brothers dodge Phoebe's hailstorm of death and fury. They leap from left to right, backflip, and jump into the air, all while summoning ethereal weapons from an unknown dimension. Swords, axes, hammers, and maces smash and crash against Phoebe's armor, but not even so much as a scratch appears on the demonstone-infused nanites.

"You'll have to do better than that," Phoebe yells, taunting the Barons. "Don't think you can leave here alive, you filthy mutts! All of you who attacked my world will die!"

"Stop running your yap!" Zamiel, the older Battle Brother, yells. He grabs a one-ton warhammer from his back and rushes at Phoebe, intending to bash her armor with all his strength.

Suddenly, right before Zamiel can land his attack...

Foop!

The Baron disappears and reappears half a foot backward, throwing off his aim. The Battle Brother misses and stumbles awkwardly, the weight of his swing sending him stumbling forward.

"Gahk! Shit! Fucking fairy! She's still here!"

I blink in surprise.

Does he mean... Blinker? Did she teleport him?

The moment the question pops into my head, I notice a flicker of mana not far behind Phoebe. A tiny but bright ball of mana hovers behind her back, the majority of its light concealed behind an illusory barrier.

Zamiel disappears. He teleports right into the path of Phoebe's minigun and gets blasted fifteen times in the blink of an eye, sending him screaming backwards, where he crashes into a massive puddle of drying blood. "Aaargh!"

"Bro? Bro!" Duriel yells, shocked by this new development.

I breathe a sigh of relief. With one Baron down, and beaten so easily, at that, it seems Phoebe won't have much issue dealing with the other one.

My wife seems to have the same idea. She turns to fight Duriel, only for Blinker's voice to speak from all around her. "No! That Baron isn't dead, Phoebe! These Battle Brothers are weird! They can instantly heal any wound if they touch someone else's blood! I've never seen anything like it!"

Too late, by the time Blinker explains, Zamiel has already jumped back to his feet. The older Battle Brother breathes hard and glances at Duriel.

"We can't win, little bro! If it was just the human, this would be a piece of cake, but she has the Fairy Queen helping her! Let's get outta here!"

"What? No! We can't run away, Zammy!" Duriel guffaws. "What'll the other demons say?!"

"Screw the other demons!" Zamiel howls. "I don't give a shrakh what they say! Besides, we ain't running away! We're, uhh... we're executing a tactical retreat to return with reinforcements!"

Phoebe aims her minigun at Duriel and squeezes the trigger, but Duriel sees her attack coming and leaps straight into the air, narrowly avoiding death. With a quick flick of his fingers, he summons a gigantic flying greatsword beneath his feet and rides it like a surfboard.

"Shit! You almost got me! Alright bro, I'm gonna, uh, attack in the other direction! Yeah! You coming?"

Zamiel replies by leaping onto the head of a massive flying hammer. He soars up to his brother and nods. "Let's go!"

Before the two of them can bail, a formless pressure suddenly grabs hold of Duriel.

Foop!

The giant younger brother once again teleports into Phoebe's range, with his back directly in front of her minigun.

"Shrakh!"

Before Duriel can react, Phoebe squeezes the trigger. A hail of bullets rips through his body, sending him staggering forward to collapse into the dirt.

Zamiel, still flying above, screams in rage. "You bitch, that's cheating!"

I can almost hear Phoebe's smile through her voice. "Haha. I told you... I won't let either of you leave alive. I always keep my promises!"

She aims the barrel of the gun at the back of Duriel's head and squeezes the trigger.

BRRRRRT!

Right before the bullets burst his brain like a water balloon, Duriel's body turns into a shadow, as does Zamiel's.

Both Battle Brothers disappear, making Phoebe's bullets rip up the ground where Duriel laid only a moment before.

"What?! He vanished? How?!"

"Stinky demon magic!" Blinker chirps. She flies in front of Phoebe and sweeps her gaze around the area, but doesn't see anything.

"Who did that?" Blinker mutters. "Was it the Battle Brothers? A different demon? I don't know! Come on, Phoebe, we can't let them get away!"

Blinker, ready and raring to go, starts to fly toward the horde of undead being kept at bay by the human commandos a few hundred feet to the west. However, Phoebe holds up her palm.

"No. Let them go for now, Blinker. I'm still injured and in a lot of pain."

Blinker turns to look at Phoebe's giant, menacing exosuit. "You are?"

Phoebe nods. "After the Battle Brothers shot down my plane, I injured my leg pretty badly. I've temporarily patched it up with a nanite injection, but it still hurts like hell."

While Phoebe and Blinker chat, I float a little lower to hear their conversation better. At that moment, Blinker suddenly flinches in fright and jerks her head upwards. She looks directly at me.

"Aaahh! A ghost! What the heck is that thing?!"

My heart skips a beat. "You can see me?! Blinker! It's me, Jason!"

Blinker starts to conjure magic, but she pauses mid-movement. "Huh? Jason? What the heck! How can that be you? You're just a blob of light!"

I nod my head, only to feel strange about the motion, given I apparently don't have one.

"It's complicated. More importantly, I'm surprised you can see me in the first place. That's great, though, it helps me a lot. Can you tell Phoebe that I'm here? I want to get an update on what happened while I was... away."

Blinker nods slowly, as a sparkle of light appears in her eyes. She turns to Phoebe and quickly relays everything I've said, making Phoebe raise her head to look in my general direction.

"What? Jason's here? Did you hit your head, Blinker? I don't see anything."

"He's in a soul-form for some reason," Blinker says, shrugging. "I didn't even know I could see something like that!"

"I, err, cast some extra magic on my soul before I left my body behind," I explain. "It's complicated."

I spend a few minutes catching up with Blinker while Phoebe stands guard, swiveling her minigun around to look for enemies. She continues guiding the allied army while I get the lowdown on the current situation, just so she isn't wasting any time or effort.

Eventually, Blinker nods.

"Wow, that's incredible. An artifact from the Primordial Era, and you even fought the Volgrim! What the heck, Jason? We thought you might have died, but instead, you were off having fun adventures! Meanie! You should have taken me along!"

I sigh. "Sorry, uh, maybe next time. Look, I'm going to teleport back here in an hour or two. My body is currently constructing a device that will allow me to control Camael's Cube. Once it finishes, I can send it on its way and teleport back here to help. Until then, I'm just going to perform a little reconnaissance."

Blinker nods, but her gaze darkens. "You have to be careful, Jason. If I can see you, then it's possible someone among our enemies could, too. You can't Wordsmith in your soul-form, right? Don't risk your life all willy-nilly!"

I nod. "Don't worry, I won't. Tell Phoebe everything I've told you. If Belial can't heal her, I will. I have more than enough mana to completely overwhelm the demons, now."

I gnash my teeth together. "I'll make those bastards *pay* for coming here. They've killed too many of my friends! Once I show up, they'll rue the day they crossed me."

"Yeah!" Blinker yells, while pumping her fist. "That's the spirit! Alright, I have to help Phoebe manage the situation. Kar's still being healed by Sammy, so if you could check on him for me, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure," I say. "Oh, and one more thing..."

Blinker listens intently as I tell her about the demons burrowing beneath our feet.

"Thanks for the heads-up, but we know! Phoebe has a bunch of mines buried around the battlefield. Whenever one goes off, it usually kills a Burrower, but more importantly, it tells us where those poopy-doops are digging! We've been able to follow their movements pretty well up to now."

"Great, glad to hear it," I say. I start to float upward, only to pause. "Uh, can you, erm, tell Phoebe I love her and I'm sorry I didn't call for... however long it's been?"

"Haha! You're so awkward!" Blinker teases. "Little lovebird wants me to tell his wifey that he loves her! Hahaha!"

"Oh, shut up," I reply, blushing hard enough for my whole soul to turn red. "Just tell her! Geez."

I levitate skyward, leaving Blinker behind, all while her cackling laughter embarrasses me to no end.

When I get back, I'm gonna give that bratty little fairy a 'noogie.'

Minutes later, I begin darting around the battlefield at high speeds. With my Wordsmithed goal of 'locating Phoebe Hiro' complete, I regain full control of my soul's movements. To my astonishment, the

speed of my soul is unbelievably fast. Unlike a physical body, with its biological limitations, my soul can travel across the galaxy in an instant, let alone any distance involving a mere planetary scale.

I jump to the southern battlefield, where the undead flood against Lieutenant Samuel's force of 30,000 soldiers. The first thing I discover is that, unlike living demons, Mephisto's undead don't show up in my soul vision at all. A very small number do; the elites among elites, but the vast majority of them appear to be soulless, puppeteered bodies running on pure instinct. It makes me realize that Mephisto's forces are probably only a tenth as strong as when they were alive. Without a mind and soul to guide them, the river of undead are little more than drooling, angry bodies hellbent on killing and eating.

After examining the stability of the southern situation, I jump to the west, where Mephisto's undead-summoning warpgates stand. Countless creatures swarm out, their type and strength a mixture from weak to strong. The western wall, now collapsed from god-only-knows what attacks, is little more than a pile of pulverized stone and steel. Demons and undead swarm over it to attack 20,000 exosuit-wearing soldiers, all of them firing ceaselessly with rapid-fire weapons into the fray.

Finally, I flit over to the northern front. Here, a surprisingly firm defense of more than 50,000 soldiers, featuring a huge mixture of monsters as well as humans, hold firm against the demonic onslaught. Remembering the King Cannons atop the northern mountain range, it doesn't surprise me that Phoebe would put so much effort into defending the north compared to the south and west. Among the troopers, what catches my eye is Brunhilda's contingent of Felorians, all of them practitioners of a secret magical power known as *Chi*.

Brunhilda's warriors rip through the demons and undead as if they were lava golems rampaging in the arctic. Her spear stabs, smashes, and pulverizes the heads of any undead that dare wander into her range.

As I fly overhead, for a brief moment, Brunhilda flicks her vision upward to look directly at me, making my heart jump. She lowers her gaze a moment later, making me wonder if it was simply a coincidence.

Afterward, I disappear from the battlefield, my thoughts churning like crazy.

Not only a high-ranking Volgrim, but a fairy and possibly a human can see my soul-form. That realization makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I'm not a purely ethereal being, but instead, something with tangibility that certain other beings can perceive. That means I have to be extra cautious in the future.

With merely a thought, I zip to the east, toward Hero City. Luckily, I don't spot any Burrowers underneath the city's limits.

In less than a second, I arrive at Hero City's western side, where the hospital stands, built at the edge of a two-hundred-foot cliff. When I fly inside, I spot hundreds of injured humans and monsters, some of them badly wounded and in critical condition. Almost mechanically, I try to Wordsmith and heal them, only to realize my efforts are futile.

While flitting about, I spot one particular hospital room where the most critically wounded appear to be lined up outside. I slip inside to find Samantha pouring healing energy into a female soldier's body. The woman chokes out blood and coughs weakly, then offers Samantha a faint smile.

"Don't... don't blame yourself... you did the best... you..."

Her words cease, and her head lolls to the side. The woman passes away, and Samantha stops her healing magic.

The succubus stares silently at the dead soldier, a look of emptiness in her eyes. "Rest in peace."

Exhaling deeply, Samantha nods at a morbidly obese demoness next to her. "Rosalia. Bring in the next one."

"Yes, Emperor."

I hover in the air and slowly wave my hand to try and get Samantha's attention, but she gazes stonily at the far wall and doesn't see me.

Suddenly, a voice speaks up from the corner of the room behind me.

"Huh? Daddy?"

My heart nearly jumps in fright! I turn to the side and spot Daisy sitting on a chair, looking directly at me with stars in her eyes.

"Daddy! It's daddy! He's here!"

Daisy jumps out of the chair and points at me excitedly. Her words shake Samantha out of her stupor. She looks at Daisy, then follows her finger to my general position. "Huh? Daddy? Do you mean... Jason?"

"Uh-huh!" Daisy says, excitedly hopping up and down. "He's right there, aunt S'matha! Can't you see him?!"

Samantha looks in my general direction, but her eyes pass through me. "No, sweetheart. Maybe you need to get some sleep. You've been awake for almost two days."

I'm not entirely sure why the heck my daughter can see me, but I'm still glad. I float down to her level and try to touch her face, only for my hand to pass through her cheek. "Hey, sweetie. How are you holding up? Are you doing okay?"

Daisy nods excitedly. "Yeah! Yeah! Me and aunt S'matha are healing all the hurt people! We just wave our hands and *WHOOSH* all the boo-boos go away!"

Suddenly, Daisy hesitates. A look of horror appears in her eyes. "W-why are you a ghost, daddy? Did... did you die?!"

"No, no," I say quickly waving my hands. "Daddy has magic, remember? I used my magic to make a ghost-body, just so I could say hi to my little girl. Right now I'm really far away, but I'll come back very soon, okay?"

Samantha watches with a puzzled expression while Daisy babbles at the air, but her only response is to slowly shake her head. It's clear from just one look that she thinks Daisy must be hallucinating my existence.

After I finish reassuring Daisy that her daddy *definitely* isn't dead, I say, "Oh, and tell aunt Samantha that daddy says hi, okay? Uh, tell her that mommy is fine, too. She got hurt a little bit, but daddy will

definitely take care of her."

Daisy nods furiously. "Okay! I love you, daddy! Come back soon!"

"I love you too, sweetheart."

I try to kiss Daisy's head, but my face awkwardly melts through her skull, allowing me to see her brains. *Ew!*

With a shudder, I fly into the sky and disappear through the roof, leaving Daisy and Samantha behind.

* * *

Another few minutes later, I zip around the eastern side of Hero City. After scouting the area, I ready myself to return to Blinker to let her know about the situation outside the battlefield, only for my stomach to flip-flop in alarm!

Only a mile away from Hero City, several 'blips' of soul energy show up within my vision range. I fly closer and gasp as I spot three glowing beacons of demonic mana standing around, talking to one another. The moment I get close enough, I listen intently to make out their conversation.

A demoness clothed in long, gray robes, growls at a male nearby. "-the signal. I think we should summon the gates now. We've already got the city surrounded. Once we build up our forces, we can rush the barrier all at once."

"Ose's orders are absolute," The male says, his garb a green-colored bunch of robes. "We're only Warpers. We don't have the authority to override Emperor Ose. Do you think you're smarter than her?"

The female's expression crumples. "...No."

"Then shut your trap and wait for the signal."

My heart skips several beats as I gather that these three demons must have somehow skirted around the battlefield and slipped into our backlines! They're waiting to open portals so they can attack us!

While I listen, my gaze falls on the third mana signature belonging to the demon who hasn't spoken yet. To my surprise, not only is their mana signal far brighter than the other two, but the Warpers don't look at the other demon for even a moment, as if that demon's presence were invisible.

I draw a little closer and blink in surprise.

The third demon stands with their back to me. However, what surprises me the most is that my gaze pierces through part of their body!

With a start, I suddenly realize the other demon isn't really there! Whoever they are, their presence is almost holographic and immaterial in nature, like me! They might be a fellow errant soul!

The moment I have this epiphany, the third demon suddenly stiffens. They turn around to look at me, revealing the face of a very familiar woman.

Ose!

The Emperor of Infiltration stares at me for a moment and blanks out. "Hm? Another Astral Body? Who the Devil are you?"

In the blink of an eye, she rushes toward me, a look of venomous murder on her face. She soars into the sky and balls her hands into fists, aiming to pummel me into a bloody pulp. The instant before Ose arrives, she suddenly stops and reverses direction, her angry expression turning to shock and horror.

"What?! The Wordsmith?!"

My heart explodes with hatred and rage. I've suddenly stumbled upon a prime opportunity I never expected! Ose, now in a soul-body like mine, hovers mere feet away, clearly alarmed by my presence.

"Hello, *Ose*. Seems you've been up to no good."

Ose gnashes her teeth. "Tch! How dare you step within my domain, the Astral Realm! Now that you've seen my Astral Body, you've sealed your fate, Wordsmith!"

I shake my head.

"Oh, I don't think so."

Part 252: Astral Soul-Eater

Ose and I hover some two hundred feet above Tarus II's surface, like hot air balloons tethered to the ground below. The night-time gloom only serves to make our glowing, ethereal bodies stand out even more from the blackness surrounding us. However, the fact only a few beings on Tarus II can even see us shows how odd our existences are.

The Demon Emperor's enraged face contorts into a nasty grin. She nods slowly at me while baring her teeth. "For you to show up in the Astral Plane before me, you have a death wish, Wordsmith. Even when I was a Baron, there were no other beings capable of confronting me in this body. Stalking me in my strongest form is the most foolish of moves you could possibly dream up! How do you imagine this confrontation will end, other than with your life fading to the nether?"

I smirk. "That's where you're wrong. I didn't stalk you here. I just happened to come across your scheming skulduggery while I was sightseeing. But hey, if it's a fight you want, and if you think you can defeat the Wordsmith in a one-on-one battle, then come at me."

Ose hesitates. My words have the desired effect of making her momentarily reconsider a direct offensive. "Hmm. Yes, indeed. Of all the opponents I've faced, your abilities are certainly the most unpredictable and dangerous... however..."

Before finishing her sentence, Ose's eyes suddenly crackle with electrical power. Two bolts of lightning materialize in her hands as she 'jumps' a hundred feet upward in the blink of an eye.

"...we'll see if you can back up that arrogance, Wordsmith!"

BOOM!

A lightning bolt darts directly toward me! My body blurs to the side as I dodge right, then zip forward to dodge a second bolt.

Over and over, Ose hurls electrical orbs, lightning bolts, and currents of energy in my direction, each one containing thunderous might! Below me, the planet explodes with terrific power as her supposedly formless, ethereal lightning crashes against the dirt and detonates like grenades!

While dodging, I happen to notice the two demons from earlier jerking their heads in the direction of the explosions.

"What the hell? Did someone discover us? Are the humans attacking?"

"I don't know! Take cover!"

They activate portals, jump through, and close the gates behind them.

I set aside the Warpers for now, while knowing that since they've come here once, they can open portals on Tarus II any time they wish. Now that they've appeared behind our backlines, there's no telling when other portals might open up! I'll have to deal with them after my fight with Ose.

Again and again, Ose flings lightning at me from above. After the 20th consecutive attack, my body blurs again, and I arrive a foot away from Ose with my fist raised.

Ose's eyes widen. "What!"

Crack!

I plow my fist into Ose's smug little face and send her flying to the planet's surface below! However, she doesn't crash into the soil, but instead passes through it harmlessly, making me slowly nod. As expected, our bodies can phase through solid matter. Yet, somehow, her lightning can still interact with the physical world! How utterly terrifying! With that knowledge, it occurs to me she's always been capable of assassinating me, Phoebe, or even Daisy without us seeing her attack coming! The fact she hasn't hints that she must have bigger plans for me than a mere execution! Perhaps stealing my body for her own purposes wasn't out of the question after all.

A faint sensation of danger appears behind me. I flicker to the side out of pure instinct, just in time to avoid Ose's lightning infused fist! The Emperor of Infiltration swings at the back of my head but misses, while at the same time slightly increasing my knowledge of my soul's capabilities. Having never fought in my soul-form, I learn valuable new things every second of the fight.

Ose and I begin trading blows rapid-fire. Our bodies move faster than the speed of sound, while our fists clash with the strength of thunderous typhoons. Over and over, she or I flicker away and dodge attacks, or deflect with careful precision, but rarely do either of us take a truly dangerous hit to a vital area.

After a minute of intense combat, we jump apart while keeping our fists raised. Ose's long white hair flutters in the breeze, confusing me even further as I realize that despite her 'Astral Form' being completely invisible, she's still capable of interacting with the physical world in ways I can't.

Ose, too, seems to have similar thoughts about me, but in reverse.

"Haha... Wordsmith. You scared me before, popping up in my domain out of nowhere. But, in the end, it seems I had nothing to fear! What little hesitation I felt toward you has all but disappeared."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh? You were scared of little old me? You hid it well."

"Slick words from he who hath a glib tongue," Ose comments dryly. She lowers her hands to her side and flashes a sinister smile. "But only words, nonetheless. Did you think I wouldn't notice? During our battle, I thought of at least five hundred ways you could defeat me in the blink of an eye. Since I'm still standing here, that means either you're far stupider than me, which is a *given*, but also... *you can't use your Wordsmithing.*"

My heart sinks slightly. "...I don't need Wordsmithing to defeat the likes of you."

"Don't you? Hahaha! That's not all I figured out, you imbecile. I was blind before, and my heart fell into turmoil when you first appeared. I assumed, foolishly, that you had assumed an Astral Form, like me! But who knew the great Wordsmith would actually separate his entire soul from his body?! Hahaha!! Oh, it makes my stomach ache with laughter! I bet you don't even know the difference between the two!"

I shrug. "Nope. Don't suppose you'd let this simpleton in on the difference?"

"Of course not," Ose replies, her voice turning to ice. "Only a moron would tell her opponent their strengths and weaknesses. Better to let you figure it out when our fists collide!"

Fwish!

Ose lunges toward me, and our battle begins anew, but ten times more intense than before. This time, when our fists collide, Ose spits lightning from her mouth and strikes my face, making agony drench my soul. "Argh!"

An instant later, before I can blink away the pain, her fist hits my head hard enough for me to see stars. The ground rushes at me, and I fall inside of it, plunging myself into a darkness blacker than the void!

I quickly shake off the pain and slow my descent, only to lose my bearings. With the inability to contact and touch my surroundings, and with my soul unaffected by gravity... I literally can't tell up from down.

A premonition of danger rushes at the right side of my body. I turn just in time to see the brightness of Ose's soul rushing me through the planet's crust. Once again, we resume combat, but this time, Ose doesn't use any of her electrical powers.

Wham! Pow! Wham!

Our fists collide. I land a lucky blow on Ose's collarbone, but she barely grunts in response. She plow her fist into my nose, making sparks dance in my vision. The longer we fight, the more quickly I come to understand just how dangerous this Emperor is!

Never in all my life have I felt as passive as during this fight! Without my Wordsmithing, I can do little more than rely on my hand-to-hand combat skills, which, while excellent compared to other people, especially given my years of training with Solomon and Phoebe... are barely anything compared to Ose! Her melee capabilities leave me speechless. For every lucky punch I land on her face or chest, she hammers me three times more!

Even worse, the more attacks I take, the lower my strength drops!

Ose laughs evilly. "Hahaha! If you were in an Astral Form, I would certainly be quite afraid of battling you, Wordsmith! Sadly for you, I've fought countless Heroes, demons, angels, and Titans in my Astral Body! Appearing before me in a soul-body was the greatest mistake of your life!"

Boom!

Ose blasts me in the face again, sending me flying even further into the planet's depths.

Suddenly, the blackness of the void instantly reverses to become the brightness of the sun! A noticeable amount of heat assails my soul form, making me wince in surprise. It only takes me two seconds to realize I've arrived inside the planet's upper mantle!

With the intense, unending brightness assailing my vision, I can't even see Ose's soul-form anymore. I quickly raise my fists to protect myself and look around with strained eyes, but no matter how I try to focus my vision, I can't locate my enemy!

Anxious and worried, I glance around, looking for the Emperor of Annihilation. However, after more than ten seconds, she still doesn't attack me.

A thought appears in the back of my head. *Is it possible that if I can't see Ose, then she, too, can't see me?*

The concept makes sense. Inside the planet's crust, we could still make out each other's locations because of the pitch-blackness surrounding us. However, against the brightness of lava, our bodies become indistinct, like a splatter of white paint on a white wall.

My mind rapidly spins with possibilities. After another ten seconds, Ose still doesn't attack, basically confirming my hypothesis.

If I'm correct, then it's likely Ose, with all her years of astral combat, already knows about this flaw. She must be waiting for me to emerge from the lava to sneak-attack me.

A flicker of cold light passes through my eyes.

If it's an ambush you want...

Instead of flying in the direction Ose punched me from, I turn my body and rush toward the innermost core of Tarus II at full speed. Compared to interstellar distances, traveling toward the inside of a planet doesn't take even one second. Immediately afterward, I keep going, rushing full speed toward the opposite side of the world. Then, suddenly, darkness hits me! I arrive inside Tarus II's crust, fly through it, and emerge at the bottom of an incomprehensibly vast ocean!

After the ocean, I break out into the light of day on the sunny side of Tarus II. I fly above the boundless sea into outer space, circle around, and arrive back at my starting location from an hour ago, directly above Hero City.

For a brief moment, I pause.

Ose might not be in the same spot anymore. But, if she is, perhaps I can see her from here.

I narrow my eyes and focus carefully. My vision enhances, allowing me to 'zoom in' as I learn something about my soul-self that my flesh-self might never have comprehended otherwise: My senses are far sharper as a soul, unburdened by the limitations of a flesh-and-blood body.

Eventually, I locate the mass of writhing lights on Tarus II representing the human and demon armies. I look past them, at the outer borders of Hero City, and eventually spot an especially bright dot of light.

Without hesitation, I rear back my fist and lunge.

Like a meteor descending from Heaven, I barrel toward what I hope is Ose's Emperor-level soul, a brightness far above both Battle Brothers combined.

An instant later, I race through the planet's crust and swing my fist at the insanely bright soul below me.

Ose turns her head at the last moment, but doesn't get even a moment to react.

BOOOM!!

I strike the Emperor of Infiltration with the force of a bomb, not only exploding her head into particles of light, but the rest of her body as well! In the blink of an eye, I scatter Ose's particles across the entirety of Tarus II's underground world, sending her consciousness plummeting into the Great Beyond, where it belongs.

Having learned about all the horrible things she's done to my friends and family, the final look of terror on her face gives me a sadistic sense of pleasure.

After staring at the spot where Ose floated only a moment before, I quickly raise my eyes 'skyward' to spot the denizens of Hero City far in the distance, many miles away. This time, I make out Samantha's Emperor soul, marking her as the brightest light on the horizon. I quickly fly upward, out into the open air, and breathe a sigh of relief.

"I won."

The words come involuntarily from my lips.

However, a strange sense of darkness washes over my soul. The realization that I just murdered someone, even if it meant protecting my friends and family, makes me feel...

...uneasy.

Killing Ose wasn't difficult. Our battle was a little nerve-wracking, but in the end, I prevailed through superior tactics and turning my opponent's arrogance against her.

Still, striking Ose with such a brutal blow felt... *different* from when I slew Samson.

Unlike Samson, who was a fellow Hero, Ose was an enemy of a different species. Her goals were to genocide or enslave humanity, including myself and my family. Samson, though... he didn't actually hate me or Phoebe. He only wanted to release his anger and finally get revenge for an ancient, long-dead grudge. I had other ways I could have dealt with him.

Slowly, I nod my head.

Killing Ose wasn't pleasant, but perhaps it was necessary. I didn't murder her. She attacked me, and that was after launching an invasion against my world. Perhaps, with her death, the enemy forces will crumble into chaos. Maybe the fall of one enemy can spare countless others.

* * *

All my life, I've believed that ending just one person's life would make my next kill easier, and the next one after that, as well. Now, after actually putting those beliefs into action... it seems I was right.

I'm not sure what to think about my new feelings. Even if murder turns out to be simpler than I expected, and even if my enemy was a demon hell-bent on my destruction, I should still have some internal resistance! I shouldn't be able to justify it this easily!

With a sigh, I float toward the Warpgate Encampment, where humans, monsters, and demons continue to battle one another.

My goal now: To find Blinker and inform her of Ose's death. Once she tells Phoebe, my wife will be sure to look for cracks in our enemies' formations. I've always admired Phoebe. Not only was she one of

Arthur's Knights of the Round, but she carries a profound strength and will far beyond mine.

When Phoebe was younger, she was somewhat afraid of drawing blood. She was a gentle and kind person, someone who would hesitate to kill a rampaging lion even if it was hell-bent on taking her life. But after 100,000 years trapped within Bahamut's control, she became a peerless sword, unhesitating and decisive. She carries the same compassion as she did in her youth, but losing everyone she once cared about to the annals of time has made her convictions firmer. No longer will she waver when shedding blood if it means protecting those she loves.

Yes. I admire my wife. I sometimes wonder if, given time, I too will become more like her.

* * *

My eyes flick across the battlefield. Blinker's tiny but bright soul-signal proves difficult to fight among all the dull lights of the demons clashing with humans.

For several minutes, during my search, I witness demons being ripped to pieces by exosuit-wearing troopers, their guns lighting up the darkness with muzzle flashes. Some troopers wield massive, heavy weapons, and smash the demons and undead into bloody mounds of flesh. Others flicker around, using their stealth-type suits to ambush some of the stronger demons and one-hit-kill them.

Eventually, I arrive at the northern side of the battlefield and frown.

"Where the heck did Phoebe go?"

After a moment of contemplation, I slap my forehead.

Idiot! She said she needed medical attention! I bet she retreated to Samantha's side. Blinker probably went with her.

I turn toward Hero City in the distance. Instantly, I arrive above the hospital, my soul-form moving at the speed of thought.

However, the moment I arrive, a jolt of fright rips through my heart!

Before me, hovering in midair, stands Ose, her Astral Body not injured even the slightest!!

The Emperor of Infiltration cackles maniacally. "Hahahaha!!! Oh, that precious look on your face! You greatly amuse me, Wordsmith! Did you think you could *kill me* with that attack?! You still don't know the difference between an Astral Body and a Soul-Form! Bahaha!! Truly, you have made my day this time, stupid boy!"

"You're alive?!" I yell, bewildered.

Ose's eyes crackle with electricity as she tenses up her body to attack. "Alive and well, you thick-headed nimrod!"

BOOM!

The Emperor crashes into my chest with enough speed that my eyes can't follow her movements. The entire world transforms into a spinning menagerie of lights and colors as I tumble end over end backward, only to arrive inside the planet's crust yet again!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Ose chases me like a pack of angry wasps. Her fists move ten times faster than before, striking my body from head to toe countless times every second. Waves of agony erupt across my soul, making me scream my voice hoarse. "Aaargh! You fucking- shit! Gahhh!!!"

In the depths of my mind, humiliation emerges; the product of falling for Ose's deception! The fact I assumed she had died enrages me! How could I be so stupid?!

Another emotion follows-up; the feeling of hatred! Ose's brutal attacks leave me no recourse, no way to counter-attack! Her attacks hit with such strength that I can't possibly keep up, making me hate my weakness! How could I ever hope to catch up to the speed of a woman who embodies the element of lightning, a speedster far beyond my comprehension?!

Finally, the torment of failure stings my mind! Each of her punches, each kick, a reminder that I gave her far too much leeway! I underestimated her threat and caused the deaths of my fellow humans! My friends! My loved ones!

"GET THE FUCK OFF ME!"

My humiliation, hatred, and shame combine into an explosive burst of rage, exploding from the core of my soul! All at once, I swing my fist without thinking. It inexplicably crashes against Ose's face, blasting her away from my helpless body!

Stunned, a slight stupor seizes my brain, making me gaze at her astral form flying away!

H-how the hell did I hit her?!

That question proves not only unanswerable, but inconsequential. Instantly, Ose reverses direction and rushes back at me, her fists cocked for another attack.

"You can't win, Wordsmith!!"

My rage doubles!

"The hell I can't!"

BOOM!

I meet Ose's fists with an oppressive strength far beyond the attacks I put out earlier! Even when I rushed at Ose from miles above, the blow I dealt wasn't a tenth as mighty as this one!

"Aaaargh!"

Ose's body explodes into particles of light, blown away by the power behind my attack.

My heart jolts in shock, while many thoughts and questions race in my mind. How did I release such an overbearing strength? How did I manage to accurately sock Ose in the face when I couldn't even follow her movements? Why can Ose return after I destroy her Astral Form? Does it relate to the differences between an Astral and Soul Body?

With no answers in sight, I shove the questions aside, aim my gaze upward, and arrive above Tarus II's surface.

Any second now...

I flick my eyes around, looking everywhere for the bright flash of movement I know will surely come.

"Surprise!"

Bang!

Ose's fist batters the side of my head and sends me hurtling to the right. My heart skips several beats as I curse inwardly. I barely sensed her approach at the very last millisecond, but never saw her coming with my eyes!

Again and again, Ose and I exchange blows, but to my despair, her speed becomes more dominating the more we fight. Only after she hits me hundreds of times do I manage to burst out with rage and detonate her body with a single punch. My normal attacks never hit otherwise, and even if they could, they wouldn't cause her much pain.

After she revives more than ten times, always catching me offguard, I defeat Ose once again, only to clutch my chest and wince in pain. My 'heart' pounds like a drum and squeezes the inside of my chest, making me feel as if I've injected lava into my veins.

Suddenly, Ose's aura rushes at me, but instead of striking me, she stops a short distance away and places her hands on her hips.

"Hahaha! Do you feel it, Wordsmith? Do you finally understand what I said earlier? You, a mere soul-body, dares to combat the master of the Astral Arts on her home turf! What a gas-brained dullard! No matter how many times you kill me, I can simply reform my body and return within seconds!"

I manage to steady the aching in my chest, but she continues taunting me without end.

"That's the sad truth, Wordsmith. Astral Bodies are far superior to Soul Bodies! Since I summon and control my Astral Form remotely, I can continue to use my magic while never putting my soul at risk. But you! If you die even once, you will perish forever! Your soul will dissipate and scatter to the corners of the universe! Unfair, isn't it! Bahaha! You can only cry and despair, Wordsmith; you cannot hope to defeat me!"

I pull my hand away from my chest and swallow heavily. "So... killing your main body will destroy your Astral Body as well, then?"

"Naturally," Ose says, her smile expanding even further. "But the same is true of you. I can kill your main body and your soul will vanish as well. It's just, I have the option to extinguish your soul separately! While unfair, I cannot deny the reality suits this humble Emperor greatly."

"*Humble*," I grunt, spitting the word out like a curse. "Such a description doesn't fit you at all. I thought you were smart, yet you keep giving me information. Seems you're as dumb as a rock."

"Not at all," Ose says, her smile fading away. Her expression turns tranquil, revealing a cold, calculating confidence in her abilities. "Now that you've seen my Astral Body and learned of its existence, I can't let you live. Few know of my unique ability, and far fewer understand how it works. You have no

choice but to battle me here until the bitter end. Naturally, the conclusion of our fight will result in your death; of that, you can be certain."

"You can't make me stay here," I say, glaring at her hotly. "Unless you have some ability to tether my soul to this world."

"I don't," Ose admits, surprising me. "But I don't need it, either. All I can say is, if you run away with your tail tucked between your legs, then..."

Suddenly, Ose conjures a ball of lightning in her hands! I raise my guard, ready to dodge, only to stare in bewilderment as she flings it behind herself, toward a platoon of troopers on the southern battlefield.

CRACKLE!

The Emperor-level magic detonates with explosive power, blasting away the nanite armor of ten troopers and stunning their senses. To my horror, two dozen undead charge forward and kill the troopers, ending their lives before they can retaliate.

"You monster!" I scream! "This is between you and me!"

Ose bats her eyes. "I'm only giving you a warning. You should understand the meaning behind what I just did if you put that pea-brain to work. Think about it."

A hundred thoughts flash through my mind. However, one stands above all the others!

Ose doesn't need to appear on the battlefield to kill my people! She... she can do it remotely, without ever risking a hair on her head! Even after Kar badly injured her, she can become an invisible specter of death; a grim reaper capable of exterminating humanity from the shadows! Those poor souls can't defend against an attack they never see coming!

My heart trembles.

But... but if that's the case, why would she need to invade my planet? Why risk the lives of other demons when she, alone, can solve the situation? Assassinating Hope and I in our sleep should prove as effortless as pinching an ant. Even taking over our bodies shouldn't be terribly difficult for someone of Ose's power.

Does she not care about the lives of her people? Is this about her pride? Does she simply not wish to dirty her hands with work she deems 'beneath her?' Is her power more limited than she's implying? If she can kill people without showing her face... why... why would she need to invade my planet?! I don't understand!

Ose chuckles. "You've fallen silent. Got a lot on your mind? Don't try to understand me. You'll never succeed. You, a mere mortal who has only enjoyed the gift of consciousness for twenty-something years, can never comprehend the ambitions of I, a demoness who has lived for one hundred thousand. My goals, for you, are unfathomable. My thoughts, my calculations, they would break your mind."

I gnash my teeth. "Try me."

After cocking her head for a moment, Ose shrugs. "No. I don't think I will."

My eyes twitch. I continue trying to comprehend the hints Ose has given me, but everything about her demeanour suggests she isn't after one or two small or large goals... but something more holistic... more all-encompassing. Not mere conquest, nor control, pacification, genocide, or some other single-minded purpose. But rather...

...All of them at once?

I frown.

Is it possible? Does Ose wish to seize control of the entire universe? Could her greed be that all-encompassing?

Ose bobs her head from left to right while crossing her arms. After ten repetitions of the same movement, she smiles. "Ah, that look in your eyes. You might be onto something. Well, no matter what you imagine, you'll never be quite right, so it doesn't matter. I'm going to kill you now."

Ose flickers toward me. Her body moves like lightning as she swings a fist at my face.

This time, my instincts scream in warning. Every inch of my soul tenses up for a thousandth of a second.

BANG!!

I react without thinking and fire a rage-empowered fist right into Ose's smug little face. Her Astral Body explodes into particles of light, leaving me to stare dumbly at her scattering remnants.

The instant Ose vanishes, my mind jolts with understanding! Not about Ose's ambitions, but about the differences between Soul and Astral Bodies.

Every time Ose attacks me, her attacks only inflict small, but cumulative amounts of damage. Despite having the power to kill humans with a wave of her hands, even her most dangerous elemental and physical attacks barely injure my Soul Body.

She tried to deceive me! She wanted me to think her Astral Body was superior to a Soul Body in every way, but in fact I might just have a few advantages I have yet to comprehend.

My eyes flick around erratically while my thoughts turn chaotic.

Advantages, disadvantages...

Ose's perception of speed is top-notch, especially given her affinity toward electricity. Despite that, I've landed countless blows since we began fighting. Lucky strikes, or... something else?

Every time I become angry, I explode with power! The moment my rage builds, my strength intensifies! Doesn't that imply my emotions are the key to increasing my soul's power?

And finally, my soul form... isn't it actually much stronger than Ose's Astral Body?

A sense of danger rushes at me from behind. Instantly, my eyes flicker with insight.

My body reacts on its own, making me spin around and hold up my arms to protect my chest.

Bang!

Ose lands a punishing blow on what should have been my spine. Instead, my arms take the brunt of the attack, making me only sail backward a few dozen feet.

The Emperor of Infiltration pauses. She cocks her head. "Oh? Nice reflexes. Something in your eyes looks..."

Without finishing her sentence, she rushes at me again! Another torrent of blows rains upon my body. Over and over, Ose's fists strike with lethal intent at my vital areas.

However, unlike before, I focus my emotions and dwell deeply upon how much I *hate* this disgusting Emperor and her filthy Astral Body. The angrier I become, the more adept I grow at blocking her attacks.

After five minutes of attacking me with all her strength, Ose suddenly flickers backward. She appears a hundred feet away with her right hand resting on her hip.

"You learn fast. I don't praise people lightly, so you had better appreciate the compliment."

My ears ring from the residual sounds of Ose's thunder-clapping fists. After shaking away my dizziness, I scoff.

"Gee, thanks. It seems Soul Bodies aren't as useless as you made them out to be."

"Hahaha!" Ose laughs. "No, Wordsmith. They are. Don't get me wrong; your Soul Body is much tougher than my Astral Form. You can take a lot of abuse and hit much harder than me. However, you also have to put much more on the line. My Astral Bodies cost me a trifling amount of Mana, but each blow I deal to your soul costs you more than you know."

Despite her confident words, Ose hesitates. "I will admit... I expected you to die a long time ago. Your soul is surprisingly resilient."

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away. I eat lots of vitamins."

"Hilarious," Ose says, rolling her eyes. "Perhaps if you return to your physical body, you might be able to survive. Oh, but if you do that, I may 'accidentally' kill your wife and daughter. You'd better stick around to the bitter end."

My eyes narrow.

"Don't threaten my family. You don't want to piss me off."

"Is that so?" Ose asks. She purses her lips and glances to the side, toward the southern battlefield. "Alas, I'm such a clumsy demoness. I've always been known for my quirks, like how I sometimes casually drop lightning orbs when I'm not paying attention."

Accentuating her veiled threat, Ose suddenly raises her hand and conjures an explosive blast of energy. "Since you've so good at predicting my moves... oopsie!"

My heart jumps in alarm as Ose hurls the orb with frightening strength toward a cluster of one hundred commandos.

"You cheating bitch!"

My body flickers, allowing me to outspeed Ose's lightning orb. I appear before the troopers and hold up my hand.

"Shit!!"

The instant before Ose's orb strikes me, my hand begins to change its shape. However, the change happens too late.

BANG!!

My body gets thrown into chaos as Ose's orb knocks me underground. Despite its formidable power, the damage I take seems like nothing compared to the lives of the troopers I saved. It's what comes next that hurts even more.

Ose zips in front of me and attacks again, battering me from head to toe. We trade blows in the underground layer beneath the Warpgate Encampment, each attack no different from the hundreds we've shared before. I manage to deflect most, but not all of Ose's punches and kicks.

Right as my ability to deflect catches up with Ose's initial pressure, she suddenly zips away.

"Time for more humans to die!"

"Stop!" I yell. "You're supposed to be fighting me!"

Knowing full-well my exosuit-wearing friends can't protect themselves, I appear on the surface in an instant, ready to take Ose's attack. To my horror, she conjures lightning orbs in both hands while cackling evilly.

"You can't be in two places at once, Wordsmith!"

She flings one orb to her right and the other to her left. For a split second, my heart stops.

"That's not fair!"

With a cry of despair, I jump in front of the orb she sent to her right while holding my hands up.

At that moment, my right arm rapidly reshapes itself once again, as a single thought appears in my mind.

I have to protect them!

BOOM!

Ose's lightning orb crashes against me, but unlike before... I don't end up flying backward.

Astonishingly, my right arm transforms into a gigantic tower shield, one as big as my entire soul. My eyes bulge in shock.

"What the hell?!"

The shield hums with spiritual energy. On its surface, a black scorch-mark rests, the only sign of Ose's orb.

When I look at the Emperor of Infiltration, her expression turns ugly.

"...Tch. You really do learn too fast. Oh well! It does you no good, Wordsmith! Look over there! I killed another fifteen of your 'friends,' hahaha!"

She points to her left, where the other lightning orb detonated. Only a bloody mess remains where twenty-something troopers stood seconds before.

I gnash my teeth together. "God DAMN you!"

Unfortunately, my anger doesn't slow Ose down. She ignites two more lightning orbs in her hands.

"Here, Wordsmith! Be a good little mutt and **fetch**!"

Ose flings the orbs to her left and right. However, this time, a thought appears in my head.

I flicker only millimeters ahead of the first orb and swing my newly-formed arm-shield at it.

Bang!

Like a ping-pong ball, I smack the deadly orb into the air, then flicker toward the other one.

Bang!

In the blink of an eye, my body moves at unthinkable speeds, sending both lightning orbs careening into the skies. They explode seconds later without hurting anyone!

Panting slightly, I turn to glare at my enemy.

"No more tricks, Ose! Now, I go on the offense."

I rush toward the Emperor of Infiltration, using my shield as a battering ram. Moving at the speed of thought, I aim for my enemy with deadly intent!

An evil grin appears on Ose's face.

"You're right, Wordsmith. No more tricks. I've already won."

Before I can react, my soul freezes in midair! An unthinkable powerful force grabs hold of my legs, then the rest of me!

A suction force, like that of a black hole dragging a spaceship into its maw, seizes me and begins rapidly dragging me away from Ose.

Horried, I jerk my head backward... only to see Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, having appeared a hundred feet behind me when I least expected!

"Kekeke!!! Ssstupid Wordssmith, today marksss your demissse!!!"

My eyes flick from Mephisto's face to the object held in his grasp, a divine artifact I saw several times in Solomon's visions.

"...Valac's Lantern?!"

The Grim Reaper's personal artifact, a device refined for him at the moment he obtained Leviathan's power, grabs me with unspeakable might. Terrified, I struggle with all my strength, but the power in my body rapidly begins to weaken, while my soul condenses and becomes smaller and smaller!

"No! Stop, you fucking- aaaargh!!!"

I unleash all of my anger and struggle like a tiger caught in a bear-trap, but my efforts accomplish nothing! Mephisto waves his hands and summons powerful currents of mana, dragging me closer and closer.

"The moment isss at hand! The Wordsssmith'sss sssoul will be mine!! Kekekeke!!"

Ose's taunting voice reaches my ears. "Hahaha! An errant soul falling into a soul-manipulator's grasp; it's pure poetry! You've lost, Wordsmith!"

"Nooooo!!!"

Five feet from Valac's Lantern, my body shrinks to a cockroach's size. My stamina runs out, and my vision fades to black.

* * *

And then.

"Hmm? No! It'sss not possssible!"

A tremendous suction force, incalculably mightier than Valac's Lantern, grabs hold of my body. However, this one yanks me away from Mephisto with the strength of a Titan!

Mephisto lunges toward me. He swings his skinless hand at my face and tries to seize hold of me.

"No! Ssstop him, Ossse! What isss happening?! How could he-?!"

A second later, my body tears away from Mephisto, Ose, and the entirety of Tarus II at a speed so blindingly fast my mind fails to comprehend it.

Stars fly past me.

The galaxy, the cosmos, becomes a blur.

Three seconds later, I open my eyes.

"Uh?"

My flesh and blood body, the proof of my physical existence, jolts awake. I find myself standing atop a gigantic golden... contraption, suspended within the familiar space of Camael's Cube. The hum of unparalleled mana reserves throbs in my ear, making me doubt reality.

"...I'm alive?!"

Inside my Mind Realm, my mind-wife, Phoebe, sits in a garden chair and yawns.

"Nnngh! All done, Jason! Hoo, was that *tiring* or what?"

The Phoenix's orb bobs along next to my head. [Yay! Person-friend is back! Did you have fun? Did you find someone to play with?]

I turn my head from left to right, still shocked by my near-death experience.

"Phoebe. Did... did you recall me?"

My mind-wife finishes stretching. "Mhm. Oh, shoot! Did I catch you at a bad time? I figured I'd bring you back as soon as I finished. That's what I was supposed to do, right?"

My heart palpitates, forcing me to my knees.

"...Yeah. Yeah, you did the right thing."

Phoebe's smile fades. "Jason? Is something wrong? Did something happen?! Oh, gods, did I screw up?!"

I shake my head slowly, while tears bubble in my eyes.

"No. You... you saved your idiot husband's life... once again. Haha..."

Phoebe's complexion turns becomes a ghastly grey.

"J-Jason..."

Part 253: Lazarus Tower

After resting my mind and body for half an hour, I finally manage to calm down from my near-death experience and settle my tumultuous emotions. I sit atop a hovering platform inside Camael's Cube, one which Phoebe built to control the great artifact. It magically links to the Cube's control systems, allowing me to pilot the Cube around the cosmos. A few miles away, the multi-pointed metal stars hover in the sky, staring at me with their central red irises.

Inside my Mind Realm, Phoebe sits on the edge of a pretty bubbling fountain, one that continuously recycles water through the statue of a cherub boy mounted on its top. The little angel pours a small but steady stream of water from a granite teacup, allowing the liquid to splash into the pool beneath him. Raphael and Gabriel stand a short distance away, while Michael remains inside his ring. As for Shana, Sir Lorent, and the Phoenix, they hang out elsewhere, leaving the 'important people' to discuss important matters.

After taking the time to explain what happened during my short jaunt on Tarus II, my mind-wife and the Archangels fall silent.

"So much happened in so little time," Phoebe says. "But with Tarus II under attack, we can't delay any longer. You need to return as soon as possible. My main body, our daughter, Samantha, and everyone else are all in grave danger."

I nod. "Yeah, but Camael's Cube will give me the firepower necessary to defuse the situation. With it currently flying through space thousands of lightyears from Tarus II, my mana will end up severely limited if I return home without it. I can't rip through the demon army like I did with the Volgrim."

Raphael clears his throat. "Ahem. Jason, if I may... art thou planning to kill any demons? Or, even with them currently murdering their way across thy world, shalt thou continue with thy soft-handed tactics?"

"I don't know Ose very well," I say, "but from what I've gathered, she's a highly intelligent strategist. She probably attacked knowing Hope and I weren't there, but given the preparation she's put into this assault, it isn't something she cooked up over a few hours. She's been planning it for six years. That means she's probably developed contingencies for my return. I can't assume my appearance there will immediately win humanity this battle."

"I agree," Phoebe says. "Ose already nearly took over your mind once. Back then, Solomon saved your behind. It's entirely possible she's come up with a new device or spell to take you out once you appear. You'll have to exercise extreme caution, especially now that she's personally fought you."

I frown. "Speaking of which. *Raphael*. You have some explaining to do."

The Archangel of Wisdom sighs. "With regards to Valac's Lantern, I presume?"

"That's right. The last time I saw it was during Solomon's visions. Catherine slew Valac by immolating herself, leaving only the lantern behind. What happened? Why didn't you destroy the damned thing?! It was an artifact left behind by one of the most evil soul manipulators among demonkind!"

Raphael winces. He and Gabriel share a meaningful look. After a moment, the old man rubs his forehead.

"'Twas my sister, Camael's, decision. After Catherine slew the Reaper, and after our people's resounding defeat in Heaven, a great many events occurred. Jephthath arrived in Heaven to extort us. He demanded artifacts from us, and we came to an agreement regarding an equivalent trade."

"What *sort* of agreement?" I ask.

The Archangel of Wisdom spends a few minutes explaining to me the events regarding Jephthath's rise, as well as his appearance in Heaven. Shockingly, he even reveals his deception toward the first human Hero, a betrayal of sorts which ultimately created the Heroic Aura.

"You used the Dominion Rod to subtly alter Hercules' leftover power?! That's beyond twisted, Raphael!" I exclaim. "What the hell, man? Jephthath might have been a little heavy handed, but you were completely in the wrong! You created not only dragons, Titans, and demons, but humans as well, and all of them eventually turned against you! Every time you tell me about your past, I just get more and more disappointed with you! If you hadn't pulled a fast one on Jephthath, then his son, Aaron, would have retained Hercules' power. The boy could have eventually stamped out the demon menace, but because of your shortsightedness, we ended up with the current era's situation! Truly a genius tactical maneuver!"

Raphael lowers his head. "I know. I have... erred... too many times to count. Shame is all I feel."

"Well, that's just great. Maybe your shame can pop out sometime and help us win this war, eh?"

I grumble to myself for a moment before returning to the conversation at hand.

"Never mind all that. What happened to Valac's Lantern? What did you do with it? I assume the angels were the ones who eventually recovered it, right?"

"We did," Raphael says. "At the time, we had lost the War in Heaven and only ten thousand of my brothers and sisters remained. 'Twas not more than a week before Jephthath showed up in Heaven with his demands. After he left, I remembered Catherine's sacrifice and proceeded toward her last known location, along with Camael and Michael. We only intended to confirm the Reaper's death and recover Catherine's body, but when we arrived, we discovered there was nothing left of our beloved sister but ashes. Catherine detonated her fiery powers to annihilate Valac, and in doing so, immolated every last bit of her existence."

The Archangel continues. "However, when we arrived, we found Valac's Lantern sitting upon a small pedestal in the center of the room. Michael and I became immediately shocked, fearing our enemy had survived. However, after some probing, we learned that the Reaper's aura had dissipated into the nether. I spoke to Camael about destroying his artifact, but as someone who lived and breathed for the sake of creating magical devices... my sister had a different idea."

"She wanted to use the Lantern to rebuild Heaven," Michael says. The Archangel of Courage suddenly materializes between the other two Archangels and Phoebe, jumping into the conversation rudely and without warning. "Verily, I spake to my sister with heated breath, warning her that we should immediately destroy the Reaper's soul-manipulation tool. However, she said that its power to absorb

souls might be beneficial to us. Perhaps, by using it, we might have a way to rebuild Heaven's armies. Otherwise, in time, the humans, demons, or Titans would surely extinguish us."

"That sure sounds like a great idea, using the Grim Reaper's artifact to further your own goals," I say, trying not to sound too sarcastic. "How did that work out for you?"

"Well..." Raphael says, before pausing for a moment. "...We did not use the Lantern at all for many thousands of years. Camael determined how it functioned, but the plan she came up with had a cost we could not bear to pay."

"Our plan was to create more angels by using the souls of fallen humans," Gabriel says, speaking up for the first time since my return. "However, the problem was, we were unable to transform the souls of humans into pureblooded angels. Camael realized she required a 'transference medium' to connect humankind to angelkind. In this way, we could convert human souls into half-blooded angels. They would not possess most of our formidable might, but we could still bolster our ranks."

Phoebe's expression becomes crestfallen. She stares at Gabriel with her mouth agape. "You... you were going to use soul manipulation to save your hides?! Of all the hypocritical... no, never mind. What does it matter, anyway? You angels were all soul manipulators from the beginning anyway! I suppose all your posturing about the evils of soul manipulation were nothing more than a means to ease your guilty consciences."

Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel all fall silent.

Slowly, the eldest Archangel nods.

"Thy words cause my heart to ache with grief. Nevertheless, thou art correct. I am a soul manipulator, as are all of the other Archangels. Even if I erased their memories, it does not take away from the fact they once stole the souls of their brothers and sisters to bolster their own power. Still, my caution towards soul manipulation is far from invalid. What I have said regarding its dangers are neither incorrect nor the mere ravings of a stark mad hypocrite. Those who manipulate souls inevitably suffer terrible fates. All of the angels perished, along with those demons and Titans who followed in our footsteps. Satan died, as well as Valac, Hercules, and countless others. Those who do not immediately fall into damnation will often doom the ones they love. Such is the great karmic cycle of the Creator's will."

"Yeah, yeah, save the self-pity for someone who cares," I hiss. "Did you end up using the Lantern or not?"

"We did," Raphael answers. "But as I said... unleashing its power came at a great cost. Michael's life, to be exact."

Michael snorts. "'Twas a price I was willing to pay. In hindsight, my sacrifice was one which only delayed my people's demise. Even so, I would repeat that choice if offered it again."

"Camael created a vast spell array," Raphael explains, "one which encircled the entire Earth. This array required thousands of years of preparation. In order to bind humanity's fate to that of my people, we needed a method to craft angelic bodies for fallen souls, to place those souls inside of the bodies, and to

gift them the power of Heaven. Valac's Lantern and Camael's array only satisfied two of those condition. Michael's sacrifice fulfilled the final requirement."

"Michael gave up his life, and so, his sacrifice enabled the final piece of the Lazarus project. We bound together humanity's destiny with our own, and in doing so, created a new class of angelic warriors, ones we named the Lazarites."

It takes me a moment to comprehend Raphael's deeper meaning.

"Hold on. Lazarites? Does this have anything to do with the Lazarus Tower? The one you and Solomon mentioned previously?"

"That very same tower, aye," Raphael says, nodding. "We built a grand obelisk in the center of Heaven. At the top of this structure, there was a beacon of pure mana, one which we ignited with the fires of Michael's body. Beneath the tower, deep within Heaven's Soil, we placed Valac's Lantern. When a human perished, their soul would not dissipate and travel to the Great Beyond. Instead, the soul would drift toward Heaven's dimension, adjacent to Earth. Upon entering, their soul would fall into Valac's Lantern, then get drawn upward, through the Lazarus Tower. After traveling through hundreds of magical arrays, that soul would be reborn inside an angelic body, a half-blood nearly identical to the rest of the angels. Then, they would become far mightier than they ever were in life. In this way, the Lazarites formed the core fighting force of angelkind's army. The stronger humanity became, the more my people grew."

"Other than the soul manipulation and using a cursed demonic artifact, that wasn't actually a bad idea," I say, trying not to roll my eyes. "But given how Mephisto has Valac's Lantern now... I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume the demons recovered it from your 'Lazarus Tower.'"

"They did," Gabriel says, his expression neutral. "Thou may thanketh Mephisto for that feat. My first encounter with the Duke of Mist came earlier in his life, when he was known among the demons as the Baron of the Aether. Mephisto stole into Heaven through a manner most conniving. He traveled underground, using his ghostly, ethereal form to slip beneath the Lazarus Tower. Before we could react, he stole away Valac's Lantern, destroying the Lazarite resurrection process as well. Later, he and Satan worked together to create what you now call the 'Labyrinth.'"

Phoebe sucks in a breath. "Gah! Wait, does that not mean... the River Styx, is it somehow connected to Valac's Lantern?!"

"Aye," Gabriel answers. "Thy guess is correct. The reason human souls fall into the River Styx is because the river itself comes from Valac's Lantern. The demon who controls that wretched river is none other than Mephisto, the Necromancer who succeeded Valac in spirit. While the demons do not refine human souls into new forms, as my people did, they also do not have any use for such an effect. Demons merely stockpile the souls of deceased humans and feed upon those souls to empower themselves."

I slowly rub my face while contemplating these new revelations. "Why didn't any of you mention this sooner? Destroying Valac's Lantern should be my highest priority!"

Raphael shakes his head. "While doing so might help you in some small way, it will not make much of a difference in annihilating demonkind. Even if the River Styx were to disappear tomorrow, the demons

would still have countless other ways to rip the souls out of humans. Valac's Lantern is merely the most convenient method Mephisto uses to stockpile and divvy out souls to the lower-ranked demons."

"Even if destroying Valac's Lantern won't cripple the demons, I should still do it on principle," I say. "Right now, anyone who dies will end up as food for some damned demon! That's not something I can allow. The only thing worse than my wife or friends dying would be if their souls ended up inside a demon, tortured for the rest of eternity! At least the Great Beyond is a place where they won't suffer!"

"Presumably," Phoebe says, her voice soft as a feather. "But don't say such things. Right now, I'm terribly worried about Daisy. I have this... this bad feeling in my heart. I don't want to sit here and blabber all day with her safety in the air."

The realization that my mind-wife is the same as ever, still caring about our daughter, warms my heart. At the same time, her words worry me. I spoke to Daisy not even an hour ago, but a lot could change in that hour. I don't know how the situation has progressed on Tarus II.

"You're right," I say, standing up. I glance at the control panel for Camael's Cube, a simple magic device Phoebe crafted via my Wordsmithing. It takes the shape of a magical orb hovering above a bowl-shaped container, one which I can place my hands on and manipulate with my thoughts. "We can't just sit around yapping all day. We need a plan. What is my quickest and most efficient way to defeat the demons? Preferably without spilling blood."

"Once the Cube arrives, you'll have enough mana to backhand the demons to oblivion," Phoebe says. "But that will take several more days. I'm not entirely sure how fast the Cube is moving, nor how far we are from Tarus II, but I *think* we'll have a week before it reaches the system's outskirts. Until then, if you return to Tarus II, you'll have to rely on your normal reserves."

"That will have to work!" I say, sighing to myself. "I still have a couple dozen mana beads stockpiled. Each one will refill my mana to full. I am the Wordsmith, the Hero, the savior of humanity. I must return, no matter what! Everyone is depending on me."

"Alright. So, to take care of the demons... you could try immobilizing their entire army," Phoebe suggests. "Maybe you could return them to the Labyrinth and seal off Tarus II from the Warpers. Hero City's Environmental Shield will only prevent spatial teleportation inside the city, not the rest of the world."

"I can't blanket the entire planet with an anti-spatial field," I say. "Not for long, anyway. Only an hour at most. It would require the power of all my mana beads, too."

Michael crosses his arms. He leans against a statue of some human philosopher and chuckles. "Perhaps thou should'st set aside thy morality and look at the bigger picture, Wordsmith. Thy desire to avoid bloodshed may seem kind on the surface, but for every demon thou dost not slayeth, they will go on to butcher at least another three humans. By refusing to kill demons, thou art instead murdering thy own people! Instead of trying to save every life, thou must mature and realize that sometimes, bloodshed is inevitable. Think of Samson. He became a fallen Hero, someone hellbent on revenge toward an innocent

person; thy beloved wife! Should'st thou have allowed that man to murder thy mate, or dost thou understand that thy actions were just?"

Michael digs into my heart, his every word making me deeply uncomfortable. I don't immediately reply, because deep down, I feel as if he might be right.

I killed Samson. He wasn't a demon, but a human like me. My actions were made in defense of my mind-wife, but I was also protecting myself. Should I offer my neck to those who wish to lop off my head? No! Of course not.

Therefore, it stands to reason that I can't keep going on forever not killing demons. Already, countless humans and demons have fallen since our enemies attacked Tarus II. Whether I kill demons or someone else does, blood will flow.

By failing to take action action, am I not establishing myself as a coward?!

* * *

After debating internally, I slowly nod.

"...Yeah. I think you're right, Michael."

The Archangel of Courage blinks in surprise. "Hm? Thou... dost believeth my words?"

"I do. For too long, I've stood on the sidelines and tried to be a Mister Nice Guy. I've tried mediating, compromising, and reconciling. No matter what I've done, the demons never gave, and always took. I'm sick and tired of playing nice with them."

Slowly, I raise my eyes upward, toward the golden void within Camael's Cube. The skies above me appear as clear as a placid lake, yet even so, I can't see the distant walls, countless hundreds and thousands of miles away.

"I don't even know why I've always tried to avoid bloodshed. Maybe it's because of how I grew up. I lived in a world seemingly devoid of real conflict. Wars were always distant affairs fought against countries with names I could barely pronounce. My life was never at risk. The only threat to my existence came from sheer boredom. However, all of that changed when I entered the cryopod. Ever since I awoke inside the Labyrinth, I have suffered immeasurable pain. I've had my body shattered, my spirit crushed, and my heart broken. I've lost many friends to the demons. I've even suffered a few betrayals. Despite those twists of fate, I always tried to 'turn the other cheek,' as if I were still living in my birth era."

"Perhaps I was naive. Perhaps I was misguided."

"Looking back, I could have avoided a lot of trouble by acting a bit more ruthlessly. There's no way for me to change the past, so I can only reform my views for the future."

I sigh.

"From now on... if I must kill, then I will do so. I've already slain Samson. My hands are stained with blood. There's no point trying to play the role of a saint, not anymore."

Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel all nod in unison.

"Well said," Raphael mutters.

"Aye," Gabriel says. "I am not one who loves war. However, I will never stay my blade if it means protecting my family. Violence may seem to be a barbaric, evil way of resolving enmity, but in the end, sometimes violence is thy only choice."

"It's kill or be killed," Michael adds. "Either thy people will destroy the demons, or the demons shall annihilate thy resistance and enslave thy comrades forever. Do not hold back any longer, Hero. Play the role destiny has made for thee."

Phoebe nods. "You already know my position, Jason. I was once like you. I used to think violence was, in itself, an act of evil. However, after living 100,000 years as Bahamut's puppet, my opinions shifted. Now, I believe differently. I would rather die a fighter striving for freedom than live forever as someone else's toy. I just hope you don't have to suffer for 100,000 years like I did to learn that same lesson."

My wife's words tinge my mind with guilt. There are so many times when we've spoken that I never thought about her past, or what it meant to live as a mindless, monstrous being for one hundred millennia. It's only at times like this, when she specifically mentions that painful history, that I think about how much she's suffered.

"I won't let you down, Phoebe."

She smiles. "Good. Then get ready. We'll check the star coordinates, ensure the Cube is headed in the right direction, and ready ourselves to return to Tarus II. The sooner, the better."

"Let's get back to Daisy," I reply. "We've got some demon butt to kick."

Part 254: Shady Skulduggery

Just outside of Hero City, on its western border.

Four Shades, agents of the Devil Emperor, Yama, crawl through the darkness of the night toward the humans' most precious and heavily defended territory. As they zip past the forest on Hero City's western border, they arrive at the three-hundred-foot-high cliffs that lead to the buildings on the city's limits.

Malice, Demise, Vicious, and Greed all move as one, their bodies blending together in the night-time gloom.

"Let's start at the southern edge," the leader, Malice, says. She rubs her shadowy hands together and licks her lips. "I haven't been here before, but our intelligence says there are a bunch of humans holed up under Bahamut's pyramids. I bet we can find many pretty little girls for Master Yama."

Demise, the most powerful of the Shades, nods gruffly. **"The Hero's daughter. We must find her first."**

"Don't be a spoilsport!" Vicious yells. The most bizarre of the four Shades shifts her shape into a skinny little goblin with melting flesh. "I'm here to have fun. Fun, dammit! Don't think you can push me around! I'm gonna cut apart some men; make 'em scream!! Ehehehe!!"

"No," Greed says, her keen eyes sweeping the cliffs above. "We have to look for the child first. Once we find her, you can fool around all you want. I'll go with Demise. Vicious, you follow Malice and do as she says. Don't screw around, for once. You know what Master Yama will do to us if you mess things up like last time."

Vicious hesitates. She morphs back into her shadow body and slithers toward Greed to poke her shadowy forehead. "Tch! You're a boring sack of potatoes! That's why Master Yama likes me better! I'm a lot more fun in the sack, you dopey-brained bimbo! Nyahahaha!!"

Whap!

Greed backhands Vicious, smacking the cackling Shade into the darkness. The attack doesn't even faze Vicious, as she immediately explodes into smoke and reforms her body. "Hahaha! Did I touch a nerve?!"

"Shut your mouth, idiot," Greed snarls. "I don't have time for your stupidity. Demise! Let's go!"

Without another word, Greed and Demise zip away, their bodies traveling through the darkness like fish in the sea.

Malice grabs Vicious by the ear. "You'd better pay attention, idiot! I don't like Master Yama's younger toys. You're all too damned hyper and eager to please! Run your mouth around me, and I'll show you how nasty I can be! Got it?!"

Malice's grip somehow holds Vicious taut, preventing her from transforming into dark smoke and escaping. Faced with this cruel punishment, Vicious calms down and whimpers. "I-I'm sorry, Malice! Really sorry! I'll be good, I promise!"

"Damn right, you will," Malice growls. She throws Vicious to the ground like a sack of rocks. "Now, follow me. We're going to pick off as many cute little girls for Master Yama as we can. Do not leave even one scar on their bodies, understand?! Master Yama likes his harem young, pristine, and tight! Don't make me repeat myself."

Vicious ducks her head under the ruthlessness in Vicious' voice. "W-what if all we find are men and old women?"

"I don't care," Malice answers. "Kill them, torture them, whatever you want. A few measly fleshbag lives won't mean anything to me. But like Greed said, we're not here to have fun. We're here to nab the Hero's wife and daughter!"

Greed's excitement increases at the thought of torture being on the table. "I see! But how will we know what those two look like?"

"I've seen a few pictures of the Hero's wife," Malice casually answers. "As for the little girl, look for blond hair and blue eyes. She'll be about six years old. If you see a child fitting that description, just grab her! Better to be safe than sorry!"

"Is that why we're going to the Pyramids?" Vicious asks.

"That's right. A few demon scouts mentioned the humans built a shelter for the women, children, and the elderly there. I'll bet the kid we're looking for is inside."

"Ooooh! Well, let's go, then! We have to make Master Yama happy! Ehehehe!!"

Malice nods. A moment later, she and Vicious flicker away, traveling toward the southern section of the city.

Little do the four Shades know, but not far from where they just stood, the Hero's daughter is hard at work helping her aunt Samantha heal injured soldiers inside the Hero City General Hospital. The building rests at the Western edge of the city, not far above the Shades' meeting location.

Having inadvertently skipped past their quarry, the Shades travel toward the heavily fortified safe zone at the southern end of Hero City. There, deep beneath the Pyramids, inside several gigantic, hollowed out chambers, more than five hundred thousand women, children, and elderly humans and monsters sit at tables and on the floor. They wring their hands together while watching various screens around the underground interior that display the scenes of battle some ten or so miles from Hero City's borders.

The walls, ceiling, and floors of the underground chambers appear as a golden-brown hue, the room's color formed due to the rocks and sand reinforcing the interior. Along with the ancient Egyptian engravings on the walls, hundreds of electrical lights and television monitors give the hideaway an odd mixture of ancient and advanced technology, mixing modern decor with classical designs.

Amidst the huddling citizens, hundreds of T-REX-wearing guards patrol back and forth, keeping their eyes peeled for any disturbances. They focus on the entrances and exits, making sure to have their guns ready at a moment's notice in case any demons come bursting into the safe zones. With Burrowers and Warpers having already made planetfall, the guards can't help but feel nervous. For all they know, at any moment, the ground might explode and demons could start pouring in.

Unseen by the humans, Malice and Vicious silently and stealthily slip into the bunker, keeping as far from the bright lights as possible. The two of them skulk around the much darker interior edges, behind random obstructions that provide cover. The Shades frown in dismay as they realize the overwhelming majority of their prey have chosen to sit in the light-blanketed areas while waiting for the results of the war on the surface.

As beings comprised of darkness, neither of the Shades can step into even the most dimly-lit area without feeling their bodies start to decay. Let alone the scorchingly-lit sections directly below or adjacent to lamps and ceiling bulbs, even the places where the light barely illuminates anything still causes the two invaders to shrink back reflexively.

[Damn,] Vicious hisses, her voice transmitting to Malice telepathically. [These fleshbags aren't as stupid as we thought! Only a few of them are close enough for us to grab, and they're all old and ugly. Sheesh. We won't be able to get any good toys for Master Yama at this rate!]

[For now,] Malice answers, her tone neutral. [That could change, though. Let's hide behind those barrels over there, next to that doorway. It leads to a woman's bathroom. That's where the females go to piss and shit.]

[Ooooh, smart!] Vicious says, her eyes lighting up with delight. [If we wait a while, we'll surely nab a few stragglers!]

[Perhaps, but we can't just faff about. We're on a time limit. We need to find the Hero's daughter before daylight arrives, or else getting back to the warpgate will prove quite tricky...]

Malice glances around the room. Her eyes fall on the many different lights preventing her advances.

Hmm. If I could smash those bulbs and engulf this lair in darkness... hehe... these humans wouldn't stand a chance. Too bad, it'll take me a bit of effort to shatter more than five hundred lights, even if I throw a bunch of rocks at the speed of sound. Such a move would definitely alert the guards, too. Hmm... perhaps I can cut the power...

While the leader of the Shades muses over possible strategies, Vicious keeps her eyes peeled. Suddenly, she grabs Malice. [Kss! Look, sister! A little girl! She's heading for the bathroom!]

Hearing the younger Shades' cry of excitement, Malice nods. [Yes, good. Grab the girl and place her in your 'shadow world.' The more you can nab, the better. Now, be quiet, so I can think.]

Malice returns to her ruminations, while Vicious rubs her claws together with glee. A small child, perhaps six years old, toddles toward the bathroom, all by her lonesome. Her brown hair and pigtails sway up and down as she runs quickly.

"Nnn! Can't hold it any longer! Gotta go, really bad!"

As the child moves away from the bright light of the main room toward the bathroom illuminated in the distance, she crosses through a small in-between area where the light is so faint that it almost disappears. In those twenty or so feet, a strange, creepy, crawling sensation washes over her back.

Before the little girl can react, a pair of shadowy arms leaps out of the darkness from behind her, swings around her front, and grabs her by the mouth.

"Huh? Eugh?! Mmmph!"

The little girl barely lets out a squeak of fright. She tries to tug at the horribly scary hand grabbing her mouth, but before she can react, Vicious drags her back into the darkness and taps the side of her head. The little girl loses consciousness and slumps in Vicious's grasp, entering a deep sleep she can never hope to wake from.

[Ehehehe!] Vicious laughs. [The stupid little brat wet herself! Oh, this is such great fun! I can't believe you're letting me do this all by myself! I hope more babies come bumbling over!]

[Quiet!] Malice snaps. [Can't you see I'm trying to think? Bloody hell. You 'freshies' are all the same, always eager to do what our master says. That's just great, but don't get in my way! Just keep grabbing young meat for Master Yama.]

Vicious snorts. [Tch. Fine! Your breath smells like poop anyway.]

Without another word, Vicious summons shadow bindings onto the helpless child's arms and legs, then opens a small wormhole of shadow energy and stuffs her into a miniature storage dimension. This rift is one all Shades can access, a small, independent realm where they can place people and objects for safe-keeping, a hellish world of darkness that nobody can escape unless the Shades release them intentionally.

[Hee-hee! Ooh, what a delight! Master Yama probably won't like it if I catch him some little boys, but I bet they'd be fun to torture, too! Ehehe! I'll just grab any kid I see! A lady's gotta have her hobbies, after all!]

Fifteen minutes pass.

Vicious nabs several women, with the vast majority of them exceeding ten years of age, and the oldest being thirty-something. After half a dozen women go missing, including a teenage kobold, some of the other people in the bunker start to notice something is amiss. Whispered conversations go around the room, making a few T-REX-wearing soldiers come trotting over, their weapons held at the ready.

"Yes, my daughter went to the bathroom about fifteen minutes ago," A young mother says, as she follows the soldiers. "Her name is Emily. I started looking for her when she didn't come back after five minutes, but I couldn't find her! I'm sorry to be a bother, but I can't let my little girl run around down here. It's not safe!"

"Don't worry, ma'am," One of the soldiers, a woman, answers. "I'm a mother, too. I'll find your little girl."

The other soldier, a male, turns to the mother. "What does Emily look like? I can transmit her information to the other soldiers in this area. Maybe they've seen her."

The mother meets the faceless soldier's gaze. "Um, she's six years old, brown hair, Citizen ID 2A-11754. You might have her in your records."

"Let me check," The man answers. After a few moments, he tilts his head toward the ceiling ever so slightly. "Yeah. I've got her school ID right here. Cute kid. I'll transmit her photo to the other squads."

The mother and two soldiers stop not far from the barrels Vicious and Malice are hiding behind. However, the Shades don't worry about being spotted. Their ability to blend into the shadows makes them impossible to spot.

[Tch. The humans caught on pretty quickly,] Vicious mutters. [Hey, Malice! What should we do now? Wanna find another spot to nab some brats?]

Malice frowns. [No. I want to take out the lights. If we do that, these humans will be like sheep to the slaughter. Grabbing a few random females isn't worth my time, not one bit. I need to get closer to the middle to see if the Hero's daughter is in here. Oh! I just thought of something! I bet there's a control panel hidden somewhere. I used to be a human before Master Yama 'converted' me, so I know all sorts of things a freshy like you never will.]

Vicious tilts her head toward Malice. [You used to be a stinking fleshbag?! Eww, gross! Haha, no wonder you're such a softie! Kekeke! I used to be a pureblooded demon girl, which is why Master Yama likes me more than you!]

[Idiot,] Malice mutters. [You're young now, but you won't always be. Master Yama will get tired of you eventually and move on to juicier morsels. Don't think you're special just because your face is cute!]

[Speaking from experience, grandma?] Vicious taunts. [Kekeke! All old and dried up! No wonder Master Yama doesn't touch you!]

[Tch. Master Yama likes me just fine. He values my brains over my looks. That's why he made me the leader! Unlike you, I'll always be useful to him. Now, shut up, and follow me! We're going to flip a few switches down here and start attacking the humans while they're distracted!]

Vicious laughs uproariously. [Oh, yes, 'great leader,' nyahahaha! Do lead the way, big-brain-lady!]

The two soldiers standing nearby happen to turn away from the doors just in time for their T-REX's to pick up an anomaly. The sensors in their suits detect a flash of movement in the darkness, making both of the guards swivel on their heels toward the Shades.

"Who's there?! Halt!"

The moment the human commandos turn their heads, their helmet-mounted lights activate, flooding the darkness with scorching brightness. Malice and Vicious get caught unawares, screaming in agony as the unexpected luminous radiance blasts their shadow-imbued bodies. They dart away as quickly as possible, screeching at the top of their lungs. "Aaargh!!!"

The two commandos jump in alarm. The female guard immediately activates her internal suit transmitters. "Shit! Shadow-walkers! All teams, this is Private Emma Schmidt; we have hostiles within the evacuation zone! I repeat, multiple hostiles detected! I have confirmed multiple Shadow-Walkers inside the southern end of the Third Pyramid Bunker! In pursuit now!"

Emma and her companion quickly dart forward, intending to chase after Vicious and Malice. However, the two Shades zip away at incredible speeds and slip into a dark enclave, vanishing from sight. By the time both commandos catch up, their enemies have already made a clean getaway.

"Patrol, this is Commander Skarde," A voice says, transmitting over their intercoms. "I'm dispatching five hundred trackers to your position. Follow the hostiles. Confirm their numbers and fighting capability. Do not let them escape."

Emma curses. "Shit. I lost them! David, did you see where they went?"

The male commando beside her scowls angrily behind his mask. "No. I didn't think shadow-walkers could move that fast! By the time I saw them, they'd already disappeared. If it wasn't for Centurion detecting their movements, I'd never have seen them in the first place."

"Shadow-walkers are weak to light," Emma says. "That's why they were skulking around in the shadows. HQ, this is Private Schmidt again. I lost the targets. Last I saw, they traveled somewhere north of my current position."

"Acknowledged," comes the reply from HQ. Elder Skarde pauses for a moment before switching to a wide-range frequency. "Attention, all city defense troopers. We've detected the presence of an unknown quantity of shadow-walkers within the Environmental Shield's borders. Order every citizen to turn on as many lights as they can and flood the city. Don't let anyone leave the well-lit areas until we've exterminated these invaders. I want tripled patrols around the clock for the next eight hours. Gold and Silver squads one through seven, I want you traveling in pairs to execute a three-step spiral search pattern. Encircle the city and work your way inwards. Do not allow these demonic invaders to escape our grasp! Commander Skarde out."

* * *

Half a mile from the Third Pyramid, Vicious and Malice emerge into the darkness of the night and hide in some bushes, only to fall to the ground, writhing in pain.

"Aaargh!" Vicious groans. "Burns! The light burns like fire! Ah, those damned fleshbags! How dare they hurt my beautiful body?!"

Malice controls her pain with practiced experience. Having suffered damage from light countless times during her 100,000+ years alive, she has long since learned to grit her teeth and swallow the pain. "Tch! It's all your fault, you... you damned imbecile! You got too grabby with those girls and drew attention to us! Damn! Now we can't go back. The humans are sure to have locked the bunker down."

Vicious pulls herself to her feet and meekly assumes a shadowy, demonic figure, with two long horns sticking out of her head. "D-don't point the finger at me! How was I supposed to know those metal-wearing fleshies would spot us?! Nobody ever has before!"

"Human armor is always special," Malice explains. "Back during the Energy Wars, the humans had all kinds of crazy gadgets. I even used a few before Master Yama took me in. I don't know how these new armor systems work, but it's clear the soldiers can somehow see us, even in the dark. Now that we've

alerted them, finding the little girl is going to be that much harder! Let's keep looking for an hour or two, then return to the meeting location. Maybe Greed and Demise had better luck."

"Yeah, *maybe*."

Vicious grumbles inaudibly under her breath about how unfairly Malice always treats her, but Malice just ignores her grumbling. After absorbing enough darkness to heal themselves, the two Shades dart away once again, traveling around to search the city, all while avoiding the increased human patrols.

* * *

Two hours later, both Shades return to the meeting location at the base of the cliff, just off Hero City's west side. When they arrive, they find Greed and Demise waiting for them.

"Cripes! What took you so long?" Greed asks. "We found the girl!"

"You did?!" Malice gasps. "Where? Did you nab the little brat? What about her mother?"

"We don't have her, not yet," Greed says. "I thought about going in with just me and Demise, but we didn't dare. The little girl isn't with her mother. Phoebe Hiro is still somewhere at the battlefield. But her daughter is right here! She's in the hospital just above us!"

Greed points her finger toward the cliff a few hundred feet above their heads. Malice follows her finger and scowls. "What?! The hospital? And we wasted all that time, too! You should have just grabbed the kid and scrambled!"

"We couldn't," Greed says. "Because the girl has a protector. She's not alone! You won't believe who's with her!"

Malice scowls. "Who? Just tell me! Stop wasting time!"

"It's Belial! The former Second Emperor! She's in the hospital healing humans! We sensed her aura when we got close. That's how we found the girl. If we try to grab her, Belial will detect us. We all have to work together to overpower the succubus!"

Malice's anger and annoyance subsides. She falls silent for more than a minute, contemplating Greed's words.

"Belial. The Second Emperor. Damn. Of all the rotten luck, for her to be here and not at the battlefield. Nobody's seen the demon who took over the First Emperor's position after Satan's death, so that technically means Belial is the strongest demon in the First Hell. We mere Shades aren't nearly strong enough to take her on. Only Master Yama himself could ever be her opponent."

Vicious frowns. "Huh? What do you mean? We're Shades! Belial can't touch us! She's a physical fighter! Beelzebub is way more dangerous than her, what with his flames and all!"

Malice glances at Vicious, then at Greed. "You're too young, Vicious. You haven't seen Belial fight before. She's scary when she's angry. In terms of physical strength, not even Bael or Barbatos is her equal. She's stronger than all of the Hidden Emperors too. Most demons don't know this, but Belial can project low-level energy fields. They aren't versatile, but because of her vast mana reserves, they're insanely

strong. If we get too close, she can rip us right out of the darkness and crush our Dark Cores to bits. We'll have to keep away from her and try to slow her down if we want to grab the Hero's daughter."

Demise, having kept silent the whole time, pounds her chest. **"I will fight Belial. Malice, you join me and Greed. Vicious will capture the girl."**

"Hmm," Malice grunts. "You're definitely the strongest Shade, but you're no match for Belial. You only have the strength of an Ascended Orc. That's not nearly enough to contend with the Second Emperor."

"That does not matter," Demise replies. **"I will fight. You shall slow Belial down. We must follow Master Yama's orders. He wants the child. We must give him the child."**

"Fine, we'll do it your way," Malice says. After considering her options, she realizes she doesn't have much of a choice. "Vicious. I'll have to rely on you. If I work together with Greed and Demise, the three of us might be able to stall Belial for a bit. You will have to grab the child and run. We'll follow you right afterward."

"Assuming Belial doesn't kill us, that is," Greed adds, annoyance in her voice. "Damn. Never thought I'd have to face death at the hands of an Emperor. This is not how I wanted to go out!"

"We will prevail because we must," Demise says, her intimidating voice somehow reassuring Greed. **"Do not lose heart. Belial is strong, but so am I. If I must die, then I shall do so in battle."**

Greed sighs. "Most of us just want to pick off the juicy parts of the steak, not choke on the bone. In comparison, you're a damned battle-freak."

"Many thanks for the compliment," Demise says, turning to look at the cliffs above. **"Daylight approaches. We must hurry."**

Greed doesn't point out that her words weren't complimentary. She merely groans and falls into position behind Demise. "Vicious, Malice, just follow us. We took a peek at the hospital's halls. There are plenty of rooms with the lights off. We'll sneak in through a window and make our way toward the Second Emperor. If we're lucky, the child will wander away at an opportune moment."

"If we don't have to risk our necks, that would be for the best," Malice says with a nod. "I'll die for Master Yama if he gives the command... but that's only 'if.' No reason to throw myself away for one of his casual whims."

Vicious cracks a sinister smile. "Hehehe! This is getting interesting! I hope the little girl is as Grade-A as Master Yama likes! It'd be a shame if she was some ugly, buck-toothed brat."

"Yeah, that would be a shame indeed," Greed mutters.

"Alright, let's go!" Malice hisses. "Keep low, and watch out for patrolling humans!"

All of the other Shades nod in unison. "Yes!"

Part 255: Two Mommies!

Hero City General Hospital, inside its western wing.

Belial gently squeezes Phoebe Hiro's leg, having just finished healing it with her magic. Both women sit together on the edge of a small hospital bed, while Daisy Hiro stands beside her mother and hugs her waist. Blinker sits on Phoebe's shoulder, while the rotund demoness, Rosalia, hangs off a bit more to the side of the room, away from the others. She's not nearly as close to them as they are to each other, and with the Second Emperor there, she makes sure to give these companions plenty of space.

"All better!" Belial says, smiling prettily at Phoebe. "But you should be more careful. If something happened to you, I'd have to go out there and make those demons suffer."

Phoebe blushes. "It's only an injured leg. My T-REX activated at the last second and protected me from the crash. You don't need to worry so much."

"I do," Belial says, shaking her head. "Jason isn't here, so I'm the only one who can protect you."

"Oh, Jason!" Phoebe says, her eyes lighting up. "Blinker saw him on the battlefield! He appeared in a soul-form and chatted with her for a bit!"

Belial's eyes widen. "Err, what? He did?"

"Yeah! Just like I said!" Daisy yells, puffing out her chest. "See? I told you I saw my daddy! I saw his ghost flying around!"

"...I suppose you did," Belial replies, shaking her head in disbelief. "Jason even said you'd gotten hurt, Phoebe."

"That must be why you didn't look too surprised when I showed up!" Phoebe laughs. She and Belial share a moment of tenderness, before their happiness melts away. After exchanging words for a few minutes, their faces turn grim.

"How is the war going?" Belial asks. "I've been getting a steady stream of injured people, but their numbers seem to be dwindling. I can only hope we're performing better on the battlefield than the demons..."

Phoebe shakes her head. "If you're getting fewer patients, it's not because we're performing amazingly out there; just the opposite. The demons are killing our people before they can teleport away. Their methods are becoming more brutal over time."

Blinker, still sitting on Phoebe's shoulder, nods. "Yeah. I had to fight the Battle Brothers. Before I showed up, they were cutting our friends down like orcs stomping puppies. It was awful! Those monsters loved it, too! They really enjoyed killing! What a giant pair of buttheads!"

"I've seen the worst of humankind, but also demonkind, too," Belial says, shaking her head. "The more violent a war becomes, the more crazed my people will become. You shouldn't stay here any longer,

Phoebe. Take Blinker and get back out there. Everyone needs you. Even if Jason returns, there's no guarantee he alone can end the war. You're our best hope for stabilizing the situation."

"I know," Phoebe says. She turns to smile at Daisy. "You've been a good girl for Aunt Samantha, right?"

"Yeah-huh!" Daisy chirps. "I've been helping a whole bunch, mommy! Me and aunt S'matha can make all the boo-boos go bye-bye!"

"Haha, I'm sure you can," Phoebe says. She leans down and kisses Daisy's forehead, then steps off the bed. When she turns to Belial, she pauses, noticing how the Second Emperor's gaze toward her daughter has changed.

"...Samantha? Is something the matter?"

Belial blinks. "Hm? Oh, no, not really. It's just... well, your little girl is pretty incredible. Assuming we survive this war, I'll explain then."

"Of course we will," Phoebe replies, her confidence unshakable. "Now that I know Jason is alive and well, surveying the situation, I have nothing to fear. He'll show up eventually. When he does, he'll completely overturn all of that wretched Ose's plans!"

Belial rises to her feet as well. Her skinny little succubus tail squirms around behind her as she notices the dazzling adoration in Phoebe's eyes. Feeling just a little bit shy, the Second Emperor suddenly leans forward and pecks Phoebe on the cheek, then pulls away, blushing like a teenager.

"Hm?" Phoebe grunts, surprised by the succubi's actions. "W-what was that for?"

"Just... just a good-luck kiss!" Belial stammers. "Nothing more! Now, go, already! Go save some lives! I have patients I need to heal!"

Blinker smirks, while Phoebe smiles. Before Belial can say another word, Phoebe pulls toward her and kisses her cheek as well.

"There. That's *my* good-luck charm. I'll definitely return in the future, don't you worry. You just stay here and bring my soldiers back from the brink of death. There's no place safer than the hospital right now, so you and Daisy will be just fine."

Belial, having experienced her first reciprocated kiss from Phoebe, stands and stares dumbly at her.

"...Uh huh. Okay. We'll be fine. You too."

Phoebe exits the room, along with Blinker, leaving Belial, Rosalia, and Daisy behind.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Belial turns to Rosalia. "Erm, ahem! Send in the next patient!"

Rosalia rolls her eyes. "Yes, Emperor Belial."

After she walks out to fetch another wounded soldier, Belial glances at Daisy, who now wears a solemn look on her face.

"Daddy says when two people kiss each other, it means they can get married. Will aunt S'matha become my second mommy?"

Belial's expression becomes equally serious. "I sure hope so."

Daisy's smile radiates sunshine. "Yay! Two mommies!"

A few hours later.

Belial and Rosalia continue their unending workload. Over and over, they shuttle in one patient after another. Unlike before, however, Belial divides the work with Daisy. Daisy uses her magical abilities to heal troops, startling the Second Emperor repeatedly.

Incredible, Belial thinks. No matter how many people Daisy heals, she never seems to get tired. Is her mana source inexhaustible? Her healing speed is significantly slower than mine, but in return, she can even heal brain injuries! It must have been Daisy who healed me a few months back.

Belial watches as, for the hundredth time, Daisy touches an injured soldier, a man missing his right arm. Dozens of horrific cuts, bruises, and broken bones reside within his body, but within minutes, his expression begins to clear up. Slowly, he opens his eyes and coughs.

"Ugh... where...?"

"You're fine, soldier," Belial says. "Your suit returned you to the hospital. We've just finished healing you. Take some time to rest while your body regenerates."

The man blinks several times. Eventually he comprehends the succubi's words. "Ohh... thank you, miss... ugh... my head hurts."

Daisy glances at the man's face. "Mmm. there's a really bad boo-boo there. One sec!"

She reaches toward his face and pokes his cheek. A minute later, his complexion improves, and he blinks his eyes. He looks at the little girl and scrunches his face together. "...Huh? Aren't you the Hero's daughter?"

"Mhm! That's me, Daisy!"

"Wow. I... I must sincerely thank you, little girl. You saved my life."

"I sure did! Daddy said good girls always help others!"

The man lifts his hand and strokes Daisy's head. "Haha... yeah. You're a good girl, indeed."

Despite Daisy's incredible healing magic, the man's missing arm doesn't regenerate. For some reason, the child's recovery abilities don't extend to regrowing lost limbs, but Belial easily takes care of that herself. The soldier weeps grateful tears to both of his saviors, then hobbles out of the room, wincing as his body puts itself back together.

Belial purses her lips. *It seems I was wrong. It's not that Daisy has an inexhaustible amount of mana, but rather... she isn't healing people with her own power. Her abilities merely hyper-stimulate the person's cells, allowing them to recover on their own. That must be why they can't regrow their limbs. Perhaps, if Daisy stimulated their cells for several days, they would eventually regenerate their whole body, but for now, I'll have to help in that area.*

What a strange ability. I haven't met many healers in my life, Belial ponders further, as she waits for Rosalia to bring in the next patient. Those I have were usually much less talented than me. Uzziel, the Archangel of Creation, was probably the only other being who could match me in terms of healing powers. Even then, she couldn't clear Agares' poison from Michael's arm, all those years ago. Because of that, she could never heal her brother's most grievous injury. It seems every healer has a weakness in some field; nobody is completely comprehensive in their abilities.

As she waits, Belial sighs.

Agares. He was one of the few demons I admired. He wasn't as strong as me or any of the other Emperors, but he was open-minded and had a broad outlook on life. Losing him was a tragedy. How many more must die before demonkind abandons their violent ways? Or... are we doomed to perish forever because of our hubris?

A minute passes, and Rosalia guides another injured soldier into the room, this time a woman clutching several bloody rags to her stomach. She lays on a rolling hospital bed, moaning incomprehensibly under her breath. "Ohh... uhh..."

"Significant internal bleeding," Rosalia says, as she reads the chart at the end of the bed. "Multiple claw slashes to her abdomen. She's also inhaled some magical fire, so there are severe burns inside her throat and lungs."

"Daisy, this one is yours," Belial says, smiling gently. "If you're too tired-"

"Nope! I'm fine!" Daisy says. She walks toward the woman, eyeballs her for a moment, and rests her hand on the soldier's heart. After holding her palm there for about ten seconds, Daisy pulls away. "Okay. This big sister isn't hurt too bad! Her pain-spots are tiny."

Belial inspects the woman with her demonic senses. "Mmm. Yes, she'll be fine now, thanks to you. Rosalia?"

Rosalia nods. "I'll take her to an empty ward, then bring in the next-"

Suddenly, at that moment, all of the lights in the hospital go out!

Amidst the darkness of the night, a pure and encompassing blackness swallows the room, making Belial, Daisy, and Rosalia jump in alarm.

"What happened to the lights?" Rosalia asks.

"I don't know," Belial says. "The backup generators should turn on soon, though."

As she speaks, Belial's skin begins to crawl. A foreboding sensation slithers up her back and squeezes her heart, making her eyes dart around. Even with the instant darkness swallowing the room, she and Rosalia both possess demonic eyes capable of piercing the gloom. Unlike humans, with their feeble pupils that require tens of minutes to adjust to a rapid change in light, the Emperor and Demon Grunt both can easily pick out all of the furniture in the room, along with the window, the walls, and each other.

As Belial narrows her eyes, her heart practically jumps out of her chest! In the darkness, she spots the movement of an unknown creature, one comprised entirely of shadow. It barely moves a fraction of an

inch, its actions so minor that nobody would ever assume anything was actually there, but with her rich years of experience, the Second Emperor immediately identifies it.

Belial roars. "You! Servant of Yama! Show yourself! I'll rip you to pieces if you don't!!"

The shadow freezes. After a moment, it moves again, splitting into three separate, but distinct, demonic entities. One of them morphs into a demon female, with two small horns sticking out of her head. Another resembles an orc woman, with a gigantic body and powerful muscles. The last one shapeshifts into a human woman with indistinct features. All of the shadows appear ethereal and indistinct, making them difficult to pick out in the darkness.

"We suppressed our auras, yet you still saw us," The human-shaped shadow says. "I guess it's true what they say about you; Nobody sneaks up on the Second Emperor."

"*Malice*," Belial says, biting off the name. Her tone contains more than a hint of venom. "For you to cut off the lights and then suddenly show up here... you've got guts. Do you think I can't slaughter the three of you like lambs, just because you have the absolute domain of darkness at your beck and call?"

Malice hesitates for a moment before chuckling. "...Hehe. Master Yama gave us a mission. We have no way to refuse, so here we are. Step aside and let us take what we want. We'll leave here without any unnecessary... *casualties*."

"You're threatening me?" Belial asks. "I always knew Yama's whores would follow that disgusting lecher's orders at all costs, but I didn't think you were suicidal maniacs!"

"We can't kill you, or injure you grievously," Malice says, flashing an evil grin. "But what about the other humans here? It seems you care a great deal about these feeble fleshbags. You're exhausting yourself, all to heal a bunch of worthless meatshields! It would be a shame if I crushed their heads into mulch!"

Belial's ferocious anger subsides slightly. She pulls Daisy behind her, as if realizing something. "...Why have you come here?"

"Why ask a question when you already know the answer?" Malice retorts. "Give us that child! We want the Hero's daughter!"

"So, you're here for Daisy," Belial says, gnashing her teeth. "You idiots! Did you think you could pressure me so easily?! Ten thousand of you couldn't harm me, let alone three! As long as Daisy stays near me, my ambient mana will be more than enough to keep her away from the likes of you!"

Malice appears unmoved. The leader of the trio glances at her sisters, then back to Belial. "You've been stuck here healing humans for a full day now. Your mana reserves are much *lower* than usual. We might not be able to defeat you under normal circumstances, but this time... who can say what will happen?"

Belial's expression doesn't change, but her heart jumps in alarm.

They know? No! They must be guessing! I've had Daisy helping me heal for the past half-day, so I've recovered somewhat from overdrawing my mana... but I'm certainly much weaker than usual!

The Second Emperor glances at Rosalia.

She's only a Demon Grunt. Even a Demon Baron would struggle to deal with Shades, let alone a mere Grunt! But what choice do I have? I can't fight these Shades and protect Daisy at the same time!

Belial stalls for time. "Why do you want Daisy?"

"Isn't that obvious?" One of the other Shades, the demoness-shaped one, answers. "Master Yama wants a new toy. He's going to violate that little brat and turn her into our new little sister. If you weren't so dried-up and used, you could have become his as well, you nasty succubus skank. Too bad, now you're nothing but a worn-out old hag."

Belial scowls.

That certainly sounds like Yama's modus operandi, but... it's not quite right. Daisy only just unlocked her magical abilities a few hours ago. There's no way Yama could have found out in such a short time! Why would he be so interested in a random little girl? The answer is obvious! It's because she's Jason's daughter! Damn! His real target isn't Daisy, he just wants to use her so he can capture the Wordsmith!

Malice rolls her eyes at the demon-shaped Shade, Greed. "Sigh. Just because someone asks a question, you don't have to answer! Never mind the chit-chat. Let's work together and grab the child!"

Daisy squeezes Belial's leg. "A-aunt S'matha!"

"Don't worry! I'll protect you!" Belial yells.

Greed and the giant-orc-type Shade, Demise, jump to the corners of the room opposite Belial and Rosalia, while Malice stays in place and begins weaving a powerful spell symbol.

"Protect the brat if you want, Belial! Too bad, I don't think you're at your peak! How long can you last against Yama's strongest, I wonder?!"

Part 256: Belial's Demise

With two Shades at the far corner of Belial's makeshift operation room, and one in between them, the Emperor of Passion can only suck in a breath and grit her teeth as her shadowy enemies begin conjuring mystical spell patterns in the darkness. Dreadful killing intent falls upon Belial's figure as the three female Shades square off against their three female opponents.

"Get behind me!" Belial yells, speaking not only to Daisy, but Rosalia too. "Physical attacks won't hurt a Shade!"

"That's right," Greed says, her smile turning sinister. "They won't. You'll have to use your raw mana against us! What a pity. You've been wasting it on useless humans!"

A barrage of shadow-lances fires from both corners of the room. Greed and Malice work together to attack Belial from her left and right, forcing the Second Emperor to summon makeshift mana shields around Rosalia and Daisy. She uses her left hand to form the hand signs necessary for protecting her friends, while her right hand and arm turn into razor-sharp blades capable of batting aside the shadows aimed at herself.

Ting-ting-ting!

Belial's bladed arm becomes a whirl of movement. She bats aside the hardened shadows aimed at her body, then moves to attack the lances stabbing into her clumsily thrown-together mana barriers. She slices through a half-dozen aimed at Daisy, then chops apart another half-dozen targeting Rosalia.

Belial's eyes narrow. *The physical body of a Shade is immaterial and ghostly, much like Mephisto. However, when they manifest their powers into reality, I have a small window where I can physically deflect them! Even so... I still can't hurt any of these Shades' physical bodies, only the parts they manifest!*

Belial continues battling with the two Shades, their rapid-fire back-and-forth happening in the span of mere seconds. While Belial has her mind focused on one of Greed's probing attacks, Demise roars violently, transforming her Orc-shaped figure into an eight-foot-tall behemoth! Her body absorbs the darkness around her, and her strength erupts with explosive might!

"Belial! I am the mightiest Shade! Now, I shall fulfill my Master's will!"

Belial's heart leaps into her throat. Her eyes become pinpricks as the gigantic shadow-creature charges at her, clearing the ten-foot gap instantly. The Shade smashes aside the hospital bed in the center of the room, blasting it through the wall to the side and clearing a path. Demise summons a tremendous great-axe, one as tall as her entire body, and swings it at Belial's head.

"Shit!"

Belial curses and raises her right blade-arm, stopping Demise's shadow-axe mere inches from her head. The *clang* of Demise's mighty attack versus Belial's stalwart defense causes a shockwave to erupt, blasting apart the window behind where Demise started. Over and over, Demise raises her weapon and

begins hammering on Belial, forcing Belial back against the wall. Her concentration falters, and she howls in pain as Yama's strongest Shade strikes her over and over. All Belial can do is block Demise's attacks to the best of her ability while maintaining her dual mana-barriers to protect Rosalia and Daisy.

However, with both arms occupied, Belial reveals an opening, allowing Greed and Malice to target her weak points. Unable to protect herself, Belial screams in pain as a dozen shadow lances impale her from the right and left, weaving around Demise's giant body like vipers to bite into the Second Emperor's flesh and bone.

"Kaahk!"

Belial nearly bites off her tongue as she desperately holds back the Orc-Shade, while the twelve shadow-lances begin rapidly absorbing her strength, sucking her mana away to empower Greed and Malice's bodies instead.

"Haha! How juicy!" Greed yells, taunting the succubus. "An Emperor's mana tastes incredible! I could suck you dry and I still wouldn't feel full!"

"Aunt S'matha!" Daisy cries in alarm. The child stares at her aunt in horror as she witnesses the awful barbs biting into Belial's right and left sides. "Nooo!!"

Belial's complexion loses some of its color. However, at the same time, a deep rage boils in her eyes, and her fighting spirit soars to the heavens.

"Tch. You want to play dirty?! So be it!"

Suddenly, from Belial's sides, underneath both of her existing arms, two additional arms burst out! Thanks to her body-transformation powers, the Second Emperor sprouts a third and fourth arm, then transforms them into blades and hacks apart the four-foot-long javelins impaling her ribs. Before the Shades can react, she double-palm-strikes Demise and blasts the strongest Shade backward, sending Demise flying out the broken window!

"Aaargh!"

Demise howls in surprise, but not pain. Her sturdy body barely takes any damage from Belial's hasty counter-attack. The moment she flies out the window, she explodes into smoke and reforms her body, then charges back inside.

A vicious melee ensues. With one arm conjuring mana to protect Daisy and Rosalia, Belial uses her other three arms to fend off the Shades. However, she quickly realizes she can't use her superior agility in tandem with her strength, causing her actual fighting power to fall!

If Daisy weren't here, these three Shades would be nothing to me! Belial thinks. But the cowardly bastards know I can't let Phoebe's daughter get hurt, so they're turning Daisy into my weakness! What's my next move?

Five minutes pass. The furious battle intensifies further as Demise switches between her greataxe, a greatsword, and even a deadly shadow-halberd. Not only do Greed and Malice summon shadow-lances to

attack Belial from afar, but they continuously hammer the force-fields around Daisy and Rosalia, weakening Belial's mana reserves.

Belial's forehead runs slick with sweat. The sounds of her battle echoes throughout the darkened halls of the Hospital, yet not once do the lights turn on, nor do any soldiers show up for backup.

Where the hell is everyone?! Belial screams internally. I thought if I held out, at least a few soldiers would arrive to back me up! Don't tell me these shadow-bastards have already killed everyone else in the hospital?!

The succubus's thoughts churn rapidly. She grabs Demise by the neck and tries to smash the Shade against a wall, but Demise turns immaterial in her grasp and flits to the side, frustrating Belial further.

No! It's not likely the Shades killed everyone else in the hospital, Belial thinks. They can't move freely in the light! The lights barely went out for ten seconds before they showed up here! More likely, they placed some enchantment around this room so nobody can hear our battle! Yama has likely prepared for this moment for a while now, so he'd be sure to grasp onto any advantages he could!

While Belial's mind works rapid-fire, Daisy shrinks down, frightened of the scary shadow-monsters attacking her aunt. Never in her life has the child seen such horrible, vicious violence.

Not in reality, at least.

However, these awful creatures and their bloodthirsty auras do cause Daisy's complexion to turn white as she remembers something similar from only a month before. Back when she flew with her father to Tarus II's moon, on the trip back, she suffered horrible nightmares, terrible visions of demons and angels fighting one another, ripping themselves to pieces.

Those horrible memories come rushing back, making her shiver in fright.

"Daddy... daddy... I'm scared..."

The little girl shivers and covers her eyes, unable to watch. Even so, the sounds of the Shades taunting her aunt, as well as their weapons clashing, reaches her ears.

The longer the battle rages, the more disheartened Belial becomes.

Damn. Damn! I'm running low on mana! Shades can maintain their energy by swallowing the darkness around them, but I can't! I'm wiped out from days of hospital work! Even with Daisy helping me, I still didn't have much mana to start!

What should I do?!

The blood continues to drain from Belial's face, but she stubbornly holds on, fighting the Shades with all she's got.

Suddenly, after once again grabbing and hurling Demise aside, Belial's eyes flash with determination! She drops the force-fields around Daisy and Rosalia, grabs the little girl, and thrusts her into Rosalia's arms.

"Take the girl! Go to Kar's room! Find any soldiers you can and tell them the Shades are attacking! GO!"

Belial leaves no room for debate. In the split-second she lowers her defenses, she switches from defense to offense. Before Rosalia can react, Belial explodes with rage and releases a massive force-field around the room, caging herself in, along with the Shades. She stops the force-field mere inches from Rosalia's face, causing the tubby demoness to jump back in alarm.

"What? Kar? But-"

"I told you to LEAVE!"

Belial shouts back her order one more time before launching herself at Demise.

BOOM!

The succubus no longer holds anything back. She smashes her fist into Demise's body, startling the newly-reformed Shade, and smashing her backwards, against the force-field. This time, Demise doesn't turn into smoke, but instead falls to the ground heavily. She tries to pick herself back up, but Belial jumps on her before she can react!

Boom, boom, boom!

Belial punches Demise with all her strength, battering her against the floor over and over. Not once does the strongest Shade turn into smoke to evade her, because as she quickly finds out... she can't!

Greed's sinister smile vanishes. She quickly realizes something has changed, and it likely involves Belial's mana force-field. "Dammit! The succubus trapped us in here!"

"Fight with all you've got!" Malice orders.

As both Shades descend on Belial to try and pull her away from Demise, Rosalia's widened eyes quickly become focused. She clutches Daisy to her chest and runs out of the room.

Finally sensing Rosalia leaving, Belial roars out one last order. "Don't look back! Just run!"

* * *

Rosalia dashes away from the operating room. Her heart tumbles in her chest as she makes a mad dash down the corridor. However, hardly has she made it twenty feet before her eyes turn as wide as saucers. All around her, countless human bodies lie around the corridors, their insides ripped to pieces, as if by a wild, mad dog.

"Oh devils, oh devils..."

Without hesitation, Rosalia keeps running. She moves from the west wing of the hospital, the one closest to the battlefield and Hero City's limits, toward the eastern wing, where Kar lays.

"Gotta move, gotta move!"

As Rosalia runs, she continues holding Daisy in her arms. The little girl opens her eyes, looks around, and sees all the dead bodies.

"Ahh! They're hurt! Fat lady, stop! We have to help them!"

Rosalia's eyes erupt with rage. Even as she continues running, she gnashes her teeth. "Shut up, brat! This is all your fault! If it weren't for you, the Second Emperor wouldn't be in this state!"

Daisy pales. "M-my fault?"

"That's right!" Rosalia screeches, as she jumps over a headless corpse laying in the hall. "Those shadow-walkers are here for you! Just great!"

The pudgy demoness grinds her molars together, as ugly thoughts swirl in her head.

Tch! Why am I protecting this stupid little girl anyway?! The only person I should protect is Mister Beelzebub! Not the Hero's spawn! I should throw her to the ground and leave her to die! Yeah!

In the midst of her anger, Rosalia momentarily forgets Daisy's uncanny ability to read minds. Unseen by Rosalia, who has her eyes set on the darkened hallway ahead, the little girl squints at her face and frowns.

Rosalia's thoughts continue to race. *I'd be doing all the demons a favor. Mister Beelzebub would probably love me again if he knew I did something as awesome as killing the Hero's brat! Yeah! Mister Beelzebub has only forgotten how much he loves me! If I just stop for a moment and wrap my hands around her little throat...*

Before Rosalia's thoughts can go any further, a female voice speaks in her mind, one she's heard before.

Unacceptable. Murdering the child won't bring you any closer to your goals. More importantly... Master Gressil wouldn't like it if you killed this girl.

Rosalia's face turns ashen. *Desire? Why are you popping up at a time like this?! I'm busy!*

Why have I appeared? Is that not obvious? Desire asks, a note of taunting in her voice. **I'm here to stop you from unleashing a moment of stupidity. Master Gressil doesn't want this girl dead. She's... special. To him, you might even say she's irreplaceable.**

Rosalia scowls. She leaves the west wing and arrives at the central hub, only to find even more dead bodies lying in the corridor. A shiver goes down the plump demoness's back as she continues running toward the eastern wing.

Why should I care?! My only goal is to return to Mister Beelzebub! I'm here spying for Master Gressil. That's as far as I'll go for the likes of him!

Haha. How shallow-minded, Desire says, her voice seductive. **Master Gressil is not like other demons. He sees things their eyes cannot comprehend. He observes from a distance, watching, waiting. He knows how the lines of fate intersect. If he tells you to keep the child alive, then that is what you must do. Otherwise... you will never see your precious Beelzebub again.**

Hearing Desire's firm, unyielding words, Rosalia shoots a disgusted glance at Daisy, only to notice Daisy silently staring back at her.

"What?" Rosalia asks, annoyed. "What are you looking at, brat?!"

Daisy turns away. Her eyes fall into the darkness behind Rosalia, at the corpses left in her wake. "...Nothing."

Rosalia doesn't notice the odd glint in Daisy's eyes, nor does she realize that the child may have seen through her thoughts. Instead, she replies to Desire inside her head. *Fine! I won't kill her! Are you happy? Sheesh! What use does this brat have to Mister Gressil, anyway? Does he have a boo-boo he needs healed?*

Hahaha... not quite. The girl is special... and that is all you need to know. Mmm. I should warn you... her eyes can observe phenomena yours never will. For example, the shadow following in your wake.

Rosalia's heart skips a beat. *A shadow?!*

She continues running, but pauses half a step to glance behind her. All she sees in the darkened hallway behind her is the same pitch-blackness as always, with countless bodies fallen throughout the wards.

Before Rosalia can give voice to her incredulity, Daisy speaks.

"Bad person. There's a bad person following us!"

Rosalia's blood turns ice-cold. She runs even faster, huffing and puffing as her lack of exercise starts to catch up to her. "I don't like this, not one bit! Brat, you'd better not be lying!!"

The end of the eastern wing comes into view. At the end of the hallway, Kar's room shows up, countless dead bodies lined up outside of it.

Tch! Don't tell me the croc is dead too! If I ran here just to come to a dead end, I'm going to be so angrrrry!!

Rosalia's thoughts flick not only to all the dead bodies she's encountered, but Daisy's words.

The lights only went out for a few seconds before those shadow-walkers showed up. How could they have killed all these soldiers in such a short time? Wouldn't someone have raised the alarm? Everyone has those armor-suit chest-gadgets, yet they weren't able to protect themselves! How could three shadow-walkers have possibly...?

The moment Rosalia follows that train of thought, a terrible realization befalls her.

No! Oh, devils! What if there weren't only three shadow-walkers?! What if there were more?!

Remembering Daisy's words from mere moments before, Rosalia quickly glances backward. Still, she doesn't see anyone following them.

I have a bad feeling about this!

Just before arriving at Kar's room, Daisy jerks in fright. She suddenly points at the crocodile's ward.

"Bad person! Very bad person!"

"What?!"

Rosalia screeches to a halt. She nearly slips on a puddle of blood left by a decapitated Kobold commando, but manages to catch herself from falling.

Her eyes sweep into Kar's room.

There, she sees something utterly horrifying.

A demonic hound, blood dripping from its jowls, hovers over Kar's bed. The crocodile sleeps peacefully, while a shroud of darkness covers his body.

The Shade, Vicious, stares at the intruders meaningfully. Her mouth curls up into a beastly grin. She chuckles quietly.

"Ehehe... shh! Don't wake the baby...!"

Rosalia shivers in terror. She locks eyes with the horrifying demonic fiend, while it releases an evil aura that nearly makes her legs give out. It's only due to spending a few months with the Second Emperor's even stronger demonic aura that she manages to stay standing.

Daisy squeezes Rosalia's shirt.

"Bad person... bad person..."

Part 257: Daisy's Fate

Belial finds herself alone in the operating room with all three Shades. She keeps her back to the exit, not allowing them to pass. Even so, she knows that if they really wanted to snatch Phoebe's daughter, they could leave through the window and zip around the hospital's outer wall to attack from three different directions. With Rosalia having taken Daisy away, Belial tries to comfort herself knowing she can fight unhindered now, but the Shade's lack of interest in leaving immediately raises her suspicions. Rather than pursuing Daisy at all costs, they simply watch her leave, then eyeball Belial with sadistic intentions.

What's going on? Belial thinks. *I thought Daisy was their target. Could it be? Was all of this a ruse to get me alone? Is that blasted Shadow Emperor trying to turn me into one of his Shades again? Was I his true target after all?*

Despite Belial's worries, her mouth curls into a confident smirk, and she straightens her posture. "There. Now that I've lessened my burden, the rest of you will be child's play. What's the matter? Won't you attack? Or are Yama's whores afraid that this sad, weakened Emperor will be too much for them to handle?"

"Taunt us all you like," The leader, Malice, sneers. "It makes no difference. We'll get that brat one way or another. But just think of how greatly Master Yama will reward us if we give you to him, all bound and gagged for his... *pleasure*."

Greed claps her shadowy hands together and laughs wickedly. "That's right! All those times you rebuffed his generous advances, insulted and mocked him... Master Yama will get his revenge! Once he has you in his clutches, he'll perform the 'Master's Rites' and turn you into part of his harem! And then, stupid bitch, you'll know what it means to feel true, undeserved pleasure! Master Yama is so generous that even in spite of your lies about him, he'll still turn you into a real woman!"

Belial's expression doesn't change in the slightest. "There was only one demon I ever loved. He's dead, now. I have no interest in Yama's lascivious desires. As a fellow Emperor... if he tries to sully my mind, I'll teach him a lesson he won't ever forget!"

The Second Emperor doesn't hold back. Immediately after speaking, she charges at the Shades, her bloodlust igniting like never before. Normally, she wouldn't feel such an intense desire to fight, but the attack on Daisy touched her reverse scale, pissing her off in a way that few have previously achieved.

She closes the gap instantly, and three of her four arms transform into hammers, looking to club the Shades into shadow-pulp. At the same time, Belial uses her fourth arm to cast a basic mana wave, momentarily trapping Malice in place.

"Shit!" Malice curses, as she tries to block the hammer. Greed and Demise both scatter into smoke, easily evading the Second Emperor's onslaught, but due to her multi-pronged assault, they can't determine her true target until it's too late.

Boom!

Belial smashes her hammer-fist into Malice's head, sending the Shade flying backward, where she crashes against the wall and explodes into smoke. She reforms herself a moment later, taking the vague form of a long-haired human woman. She lays on the ground while clutching her head and moaning.

"S-sneaky little... aaaoo..."

Greed spots her injured leader. "Ah! Belial, you scummy cunt! So she was your target!"

Belial lunges at Malice a second time, once again conjuring another mana field around the Shade to hold her in place. "Hahaha! Revenge is best served cold!"

Just before Belial can batter Malice's already badly-injured body, Demise rushes at her from behind. The huge shadow-orc roars in rage and raises her fists overhead.

"DIE!"

Belial, sensing the enraged orc, cancels her attack and dives to the side, narrowly evading Demise's downward-smash. The strongest Shade misses by mere inches, mostly due to Belial's speed and dexterity. However, thanks to her shadow-bending abilities, Demise doesn't even stagger for a moment before changing her trajectory and lunging toward Belial again.

Five times, Belial and Demise trade blows. Each one results in Demise's loss, frustrating the shadow-orc more and more. She howls at Belial and enters a berserk rage, then lunges forward. When Belial dodges, the orc punches the wall behind her, blasting it to smithereens and scattering the concrete wall as if it were made of fiberboard. The concrete sprays outward, revealing the adjacent hospital room to Belial and the other Shades.

"Damn!" Belial grunts, glancing at Demise for a split-second before looking into the room she just revealed. The succubus's worst fears, that these blasted Shades might draw innocent bystanders into their assault, finally comes true.

The Second Emperor instantly surveys the revealed room, expecting to see a few startled soldiers meeting her gaze with curiosity and alarm. Instead, her pupils shrink as she instead observes a bloodbath. Inside the adjacent room, two dead soldiers lie in their beds while blood coats the walls. Their ripped-apart chests tell a tale of a sudden, violent attack, as if they had died without knowing what hit them.

"D-devils!" Belial shouts. Her heart lurches into her throat as a horrifying realization strikes her.

Why did I assume only three Shades came here?! There must have been others! While I've been fighting Malice and her cronies, more Shades attacked the hospital! That means...

The succubus's expression turns to one of icy rage.

...Daisy is in danger!

On the other side of the room, Malice shakily climbs to her feet, aided by Greed. The Shade's leader grins evilly. "Haha. Look at her face. It seems little-miss-Belial figured something out."

Belial turns her head toward the doorway. In the blink of an eye, she dashes toward it, while the Shades spring into action.

"Haha, oh no, you don't!" Greed cackles. "You're not going anywhere! That little brat is ours!"

Six shadow-arms zip out of the darkness, their intent clear: slow down Belial and stop her escape at all costs. Belial barely makes it to the hallway before the Shades grab the back of her neck, her shirt, and all four of her arms. Even so, she manages to glimpse the blood-filled corridor, where bodies of countless dead soldiers and hospital employees lay in pieces, all of them felled by one or more skilled assassins. Not a single person managed to sound the alarm, resulting in their collective extinction.

Belial turns livid. For the past several days, she's worked her fingers to the bone healing the injured, taking care of their needs, and providing them the assistance they need. Now, their cold, vacant eyes stare at the ceiling. Their unwillingness to go out quietly, even in the face of absolute power, burns Belial's blood to the limit.

"Get your fucking hands off me!" Belial screams, whipping around to face the Shades. Her hammer-fists transform into swords, while her eyes turn bright red. She wildly slashes at the Shades, turning their fingers and wrists into smoke-sashimi. Even so, their limbs simply explode into smoke and reform an instant later, while the Shades rush at Belial with greater determination.

"You can't flee!" Malice laughs.

"The child is ours!" Demise roars.

A furious melee ensues. Belial struggles with all her strength, only managing to take a few steps down the hall every few seconds, all while hacking the shadow-hands to pieces whenever they grab her. Each advancement comes at the cost of her stamina and endurance. She continuously uses her already-overdrawn mana, tapping into her life force to shove the Shades back.

It takes more than two minutes before Belial suddenly obtains a lucky opportunity! During one unified attack, she staggers all three Shades with a mana-blast. At that moment, the succubus stomps her foot against the floor and bolts away.

"Don't let her escape!" Malice yells, roaring in rage. "Grab Belial! Stop her!"

The Shades chase the Second Emperor, their superior speed in the darkness allowing them to close the gap. Still, as a Demon Emperor, Belial isn't some nameless chump. She makes it to the central hallway, where the southern side opens into the hospital's entrance, while the west, north, and east hallways all branch off into different wings for specialized treatment.

Belial grits her teeth. She can't help but feel despair engulfing her heart as she spots even more bodies piled atop one another, the lifeless heaps of death and slaughter echoing the atmosphere of ancient-Earth mass graves.

As soon as Belial reaches the central corridor, she hears a woman's scream in the distance, down the eastern corridor. Her heart stops.

"Rosalia?! No, no, no!!"

Before she can reach the eastern branch's entrance, the Shades catch up. They grab Belial again, frustrating her efforts to reach Daisy.

"Get off me! I'll fucking kill you all!"

Belial whirls to face her pursuers. Her eyes turn bloodshot. Without hesitation, she burns even more of her life force. Her head shifts its form as she transforms herself into a Banshee. Mimicking that monster's biology, her throat's structure changes. She sucks in a massive breath of air, then screams at the Shades.

"SCREEEEEE!!"

A sound-wave with the power of a ten-ton cannonball erupts toward the western corridor, catching all of the Shades off-guard. Knowing that everyone in the west wing has already perished, Belial doesn't see any reason to hold back. She ruthlessly turns that entire side of the hospital to rubble, blasting it apart at its foundations and flinging the Shades backward with the ruthlessness of a true Demon Emperor.

"Aaaaargh!" Malice, Greed, and Demise all scream in unison. They lose their grip on Belial and fly backward, while hundreds of tons of concrete and steel crash onto them from every direction. The hospital's western wing collapses into a pile of rubble, momentarily burying the Shades alive.

Once again, another scream of pain reaches Belial's ears from the eastern wing. She quickly turns to face it, then dashes forward, reverting her body to its original form.

"Daisy, Rosalia! Hold on! I'm coming!!"

Belial crashes through the eastern entry-doors. She rushes down the hallway, toward the furthest end, where Kar's room sits tucked off in a distant corner. As another scream reaches her ears, Belial's heart shakes.

I'll kill them all! Every last Shade! No mercy!!

Suddenly, while Belial is only a few hundred feet from the final room, a shadowy figure bolts out of the room. It hits the ground and rolls, then rushes toward Belial. Its figure resembles a hellhound wreathed in shadow, one with a mouth full of razor-sharp fangs.

Belial gnashes her teeth. "Get out of my way, shadow-bitch! You won't stop me!"

Before the succubus can finish her sentence, something incredible happens. The hellhound-Shade freezes mid-movement, as if held back by an invisible chain.

Before Belial can register what just happened, a second bizarre event occurs. The Hellhound, frozen in mid-jump, falls toward the ground heavily, as if pushed down by a giant, invisible hand.

Once again, a scream of pain erupts in the corridor. This time, Belial pauses and blinks in surprise. The scream she heard earlier came not from Rosalia... but from the hellhound-Shade before her.

"Eeeyah! Help... help me! Please! Please!! She's- eeyahh!!"

The Hellhound shade looks up at Belial, terror in its eyes. The monster digs its claws into the tile, while an invisible force begins to pull it backward against its will. The monster's claws rip up the hospital's white tiling, smearing the blood of dead soldiers across the floor, mixing their essence with the powder used to create the hospital's flooring.

"No! No-no-noooo!!!"

The hellhound-Shade screams in fright, trying desperately to hold onto the floor and pull itself forward.

Its efforts prove futile.

Belial's blood runs cold. She stops and watches as something unseen drags the Shade back into Kar's room. The Shade grabs onto the door's sides for dear life, only for the pulling force to strengthen further, ripping her claws off the side-panels with violent force.

A little girl laughs from within the room. "Haha! You nasty, bad person! Where do you think you're going?! Daddy says bad people need to be punished!"

Stupefied, uncertain, and confused, Belial gazes blankly at the entrance to Kar's room. Inside, the sound of several crisp slaps resound. She finally shakes the fog from her head, runs to the doorway, and peers into the room's interior.

There, she sees the shadow-hellhound pinned to the floor, its limbs splayed out in an X-shape. Daisy towers over the monster and raises her hand, summoning magical power into her palm.

WHAP! WHAP!

Daisy spanks the monster's ass, beating it with such savage brutality that Belial can even hear the unmistakable sound of bones breaking.

"Eeeyaah! No, stop, it hurts! I don't like it! I DON'T LIKE IT!!"

The hellhound pitifully screams, begs, and cries, but Daisy doesn't stop her assault. She continues spanking the Shade's rump with enthusiastic gusto, clearly enjoying herself.

"This one is for all the people you've killed! This one is for trying to hurt the fat lady! And this one is for trying to run away from your spanking! You are a very, very bad person!"

Belial gazes vacantly at Daisy. Her thoughts swirl like a typhoon, but nothing she imagined in the minutes following up to this moment could have prepared her for such a drastic shift in circumstances.

"D... Daisy? You're okay?"

The little girl pauses her spanking to glance at Belial. "Oh, Aunt S'matha! You won't believe it! Me and fat lady were coming in here, right? And then this scary shadow-monster tried to eat us! But when I got scared, I pushed out my hands... and boom! It felt really good- the 'boom,' I mean- and then I was like, *whap, whap!* It turns out going 'boom' is lots of fun!"

Belial nods dumbly.

"Going... going 'boom.' Yeah. I guess so."

Belial's vision falls on Rosalia, now standing beside Kar's bed. She, too, gazes at Daisy with vacant eyes.

Rosalia mutters to herself. "This kid... she's a monster. An absolute monster. Didn't know human spawnlings could be so scary... so scary..."

Belial shakes her head helplessly and forces a smile.

Looks like in the end, she's still daddy's little girl. I used to think the children of Heroes couldn't gain magical powers... but clearly I was wrong. If we make it through this war, I'll have to talk to Phoebe

about investigating Daisy's abilities more thoroughly.

With the crisp sounds of a magically-imbued palm meeting a screaming shadow-hellhound's hindquarter echoing through the air, Belial almost doesn't notice the rapid approach of the other three Shades. Luckily, just before they arrive at the entrance, Belial senses their demonic energies and whirls to face them.

Malice, Greed, and Demise stop outside the doorway and look inside, expecting the pain-filled screams to be coming from Belial, Rosalia, or even Daisy. Instead, the glee-filled expressions on their faces freeze as they spot their comrade getting spanked by a child one-third her size.

"What... what the hell?! Vicious! What are you- what's going on?!" Malice shrieks.

"Help me! Please!" Vicious cries, shadowy tears dripping from her eyes. "It hurts so bad, I can't stand it, eeeyah!!"

Whap! Whap!

Daisy spans Vicious two more times, then pauses to look at the other three Shades.

"Ah! The other bad people!"

As the child turns to look at them, all three Shades grow mortified, realizing they greatly underestimated the difficulty of this mission. Malice's jaw drops as she senses a buildup of mana forming behind the child.

"D-drop everything! Scatter! That little brat is a Hero- GUWAAK!"

Malice's words catch in her throat as Daisy stretches out her hand, sending a pulse of telekinetic energy rushing toward her. Before the Shade's leader can react, a powerful force grabs hold of her body and yanks her into the room, its might too great for her to resist.

"No, no, nooo!"

Like an ant trapped in a tornado, Malice can't offer the slightest resistance to Daisy's magic. The child laughs innocently as she throws Malice across Vicious's back, leaving her butt exposed for an equally brutal round of spanking.

Demise, unafraid, raises her fist and charges into the room. **"You can't stop us all!"**

What follows is a pitiful display by the strongest Shade. She, too, ends up thrown on the same pile as Malice and Vicious. Not even the might of the orc-Shade can resist Daisy's unmatched telekinesis.

Daisy turns to grab the last Shade, only to frown.

"...Aww. She got away."

Greed, having seen more than enough of this terrifying child, stays true to her name and flees the scene, abandoning the other three Shades to save her own skin. By the time Daisy realizes, she's too late to capture her.

The child shrugs, then gets to work violently spanking her two newest victims, making them scream and beg for mercy. Each strike contains not only the concentrated anima of telekinesis, but some

unknown magical element that ravages the Shades, tearing apart their bodies at the molecular level.

After several minutes, all three Shades faint from the torment, falling comatose as they prove unable to resist Daisy's might.

Already, Belial finds herself growing numb to Daisy's shocking displays of power.

"...Good work, Daisy. Good work. Your uh... your mommy will be proud of you when she finds out what happened."

Daisy plants her foot on Demise's back while striking the pose of a conqueror. She beams a smile filled with sunshine at her aunt and nods.

"Yup! I'm super cool!"

* * *

Once the euphoria of a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat fades away, Belial, Rosalia, and Daisy all glance outside, at the hallway filled with bodies and blood.

Their high-spirits dampen. A somberness takes over, making them sigh in defeat.

"We won..." Belial mutters. "But can we call this a victory? Everyone is... they're all dead."

Rosalia lowers her eyes in shame. "I was powerless. I couldn't do a thing to help."

"It wasn't your fault," Belial says, sighing. "Many of these soldiers had exosuits that could have protected them. Even so, they died like lambs, ripped apart by wolves."

A sense of bitterness engulfs Belial's heart. The succubus turns her head slightly to look back inside Kar's room at the three comatose Shades.

Her expression hardens.

"...There can only be one punishment for those who commit such an atrocity."

The succubus's right arm transforms into a long, slender bone-blade.

"Daisy. Look away."

The Second Emperor strides toward the fallen Shades. Without any fanfare, she swings her arm thrice.

The sounds of three heads hitting the floor startles Rosalia. She quickly covers Daisy's eyes.

"S-Second Emperor... you..."

Belial gazes at the dead Shades. Her eyes don't contain a hint of regret, nor a wisp of indecisiveness.

"I hate killing. I hate death. I hate violence. But if it means protecting those I love, then even I have a limit to what I'll endure."

"These Shades *crossed that line*."

Belial lifts her head. She gazes at the ceiling as countless thoughts tumble inside her mind.

Sister. I'm sorry. I have to break our promise.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 258: War Recap

Across Tarus II's darkened surface, multiple battles erupt on several fronts. Humans, monsters, and even a few allied demons clash against the enemy undead, demons, and monsters. On humanity's side, Harpies and Minotaurs join forces with more than a few Kobolds and Salamanders. On the demons' side, Orcs and Goblins work together with an even greater number of Harpies and Minotaurs. In addition, more than a dozen gigantic Trolls and Ogres storm onto the battlefield, their massive bodies drawing eyeballs and gunfire.

Inside the Warpgate Encampment, chaos ensues as reinforcements from the Labyrinth Core spill out of the portal onto Tarus II. These new combatants replace the weakened and exhausted original forces, allowing those demons and monsters to retreat and take a breather. Alongside these newcomers, countless undead creatures of all shapes and sizes emerge from Mephisto's dual Death Gates beside the western wall.

These towering monoliths, far bigger than the portal to Hell, enable truly titanic and terrifying battle-changers to spew forth onto the battlefield. Not only Skeleton Knights and Wraiths, but Death Knights, Dullahans, and even Frost Giants. Mephisto's undead continue to amass over time, adding to the diversity of demonkind's forces.

On the Northern Front, Brunhilda and the Felorians unleash their hidden powers. Their bodies surge with Chi, enhancing their strength, agility, and durability far beyond the limits of a normal human. Even without Exosuits, they possess potent powers capable of equally combating demons below the Lord rank.

On the Western Front, thirty thousand brave soldiers face off against the demonic hordes. Their leader, Yamir, Hero City's head chef, a Minotaur who cooks for the Hiro family, wears a set of radiant golden battle armor. Not an exosuit, but an heirloom passed down from his family over the years. Unlike many of the Minotaurs living amongst humankind, Yamir is actually a son of nobility, a lower-class heir to a decently-sized Minotaur kingdom. However, he cares little for such frivolities, and instead lives only to spread the joys of his cooking amongst his compatriots.

Yamir takes over for Lieutenant Samuel, who leaves the Western Front to head off to the prisons, along with Corporal Hurent. Having received a distress call, these two veteran commanders both decide to assist the prison guards with caging in Beelzebub, Artorias, and Mara. Sadly, they will arrive too late, with all three having broken free of their restraints.

On the Southern Front, General Chadwick reinforces his troops, trying desperately to contain the demons within the crumbling walls of the Warpgate Encampment. However, with Frost Giants, trolls, ogres, and countless undead ravaging the battlefield, he begins to lose his footing and slowly retreat.

And finally, on the Eastern Front, the largest contingent of humanity's forces, almost eighty-thousand strong, amasses between the Warpgate Encampment and Hero City. With only a few miles separating their home and families from the voracious demons, they have no choice but to dig their heels in and fight

for their lives. Phoebe Hiro leads her bravest, strongest soldiers in defending their homeland. With Blinker providing protection, Phoebe guides her troops like a seasoned veteran. Her years of training as a Knight of the Round, in addition to the last six years of prepping for this war, gives her the tactical eye she needs to take on her enemies.

Fists and claws crash against swords and guns. Soldiers on the frontlines wear the heaviest armor and wield powerful nanoblades capable of slicing through flesh and bone. Soldiers immediately behind them unload thousands of bullets every second, while soldiers in the rear provide suppressive fire. A dozen of Phoebe's Planetwalkers roam the battlefield, unleashing salvos of cannonfire amidst the enemy ranks. Harpies perch atop the mechanoids and snipe from afar, taking out high-value tactical threats, including Demon Lords, Ogres and the strongest orcs. Sadly, even the most powerful sniper bullet fails to do much against demons above the Baron rank. Their bodies are simply too durable for low-caliber gunfire to land a killing blow.

As the battle unfolds, Phoebe rides inside her eight-legged Spider Mech. Having lost her husband's ship, the Esther, Phoebe has no choice but to use the hundred-foot-tall surveillance mech as an observation platform. Even so, the slender-legged robot is anything but weak. Multiple times, a dangerous enemy capable of bypassing the human's front lines will appear, but Phoebe merely impales it with one of her mech's needle-shaped legs, killing it without any resistance.

Phoebe manipulates a three-dimensional holographic map of the battlefield. Her right hand dances over its imagery, allowing her to visualize the enemy's movements, while her left hand controls the mecha's legs and guns. Even one-handed, Phoebe has no trouble performing both of these intricate and precise tasks with little issue.

Blinker sits on Phoebe's shoulder, frowning as she looks at the battlefield. "I should be out there, kicking butt!"

"Right now, you need to save your energy," Phoebe says, her voice as calm as a still pool of water. "There's no use swatting flies with nukes. You can kill a lot of demons on your own, but so can my troops. We have to prepare ourselves for when Ose and the Dukes arrive. Mephisto is dangerous enough, but those Battle Brothers really gave me a fright. You weren't enough to beat them alone. Even both of us combined could only drive them away. At this point, even if Jason returns, with Kar down for the count, I'm worried..."

Phoebe falls silent. Her icy eyes flick between the displays as she shakes her head.

"...I'm worried we still won't win. Jason said he obtained a huge powerup, but in the end, he's still Jason. I know my husband. He hates violence. His morals are too important to him to bend or compromise, even in the face of such a terrifying demonic assault. If the moment of truth arrives... it will have to be me who finishes this fight."

Blinker's frown eases. "Gal, is that resentment I hear?"

"No. It's just the truth. I love Jason to death. I'd die for him. But, at the same time, I can't help but feel frustrated by his... his inflexibility."

Phoebe grits her teeth. "This isn't easy for me either, you know. I never wanted to become a killer. I never wanted to become someone who spills blood without changing my expression. Yet here we are. I changed, because I had to. And now, I can't help but worry that Jason won't be able to do the same."

Blinker sighs.

"Yeah. I think I get it. You're in a tough spot, ain'tcha?"

Phoebe's eyes darken. "I've spent my whole life fighting. I failed Arthur once, but I won't fail anyone else. Even if Jason refuses to bend, I won't fault him. In the end... he's still young. He hasn't seen what I've seen. He hasn't witnessed how far humanity can fall, nor the heights it could reach."

The Hero's wife pauses for a moment. Her eyes turn foggy.

"...But I have."

Gazing absentmindedly at the displays, several seconds pass before a beeping sound catches Phoebe's attention. She glances to her right, where the communications display lights up with a message.

Phoebe taps the console. "Commander Hiro speaking. Give me good news, Lieutenant Samuel. Over."

Lieutenant Samuel's voice comes back strained and weak. "Cough... cough... shit. It was a... a massacre. Fuck. I'm sorry, Commander. We couldn't stop him. Beelzebub... he's too powerful. Thirty thousand soldiers... my friends... all dead. Cough. I failed you, Commander. I failed you..."

Samuel's voice weakens. Phoebe's eyebrows jump up as she listens intently. Without hesitation, she reaches out her hand and presses a button on the mech's console. "Don't blame yourself, Lieutenant. You're still alive; your bio-signs are intact. I'm recalling all of your surviving troops to the hospital. Commander Hiro, out."

She ends the transmission, then falls silent for several seconds.

"...Fuck!"

The sudden expletive makes Blinker's expression fall. "Beelzebub escaped?"

"It won't only be him," Phoebe growls, bunching her hands into fists. "Artorias and Mara probably did, too. Two Dukes and a Baron. This battle just became ten times fiercer. It won't take them long to arrive. Beelzebub could arrive in seconds if he flies. Goddamn it!"

Phoebe taps on the communicator to contact the Tarus II hospital.

"Medical Ward 001, this is Commander Hiro speaking. I've just lost close to thirty thousand troops. According to their exosuit readings, the survivors have sustained heavy injuries, particularly burns and internal wounds. Please prioritize the most heavily wounded, over."

Phoebe waits for a few seconds.

She frowns.

"Medical Ward 001, this is Commander Hiro speaking. Do you read me? Over."

Phoebe turns her head slightly. She and Blinker both share a look of alarm.

"Medical Ward 001! Do you copy? What's going on over there?!"

Phoebe rotates her Spider-Mech's cockpit to the east, making it face the Tarus II general hospital. With only a couple of miles separating them, her scanners easily cross that distance, giving her a detailed topographical map of the area, along with bio-signs and thermal readings.

Her face turns as white as a ghost's.

"Wh-what...? Oh my god. This isn't possible. A sneak attack?! Half of the hospital was blown up! I'm barely getting half a dozen vital readings, if that!"

Panicking, she forcefully stabs her finger against the communication panel.

"Elder Skarde, this is Commander Hiro! What the hell is going on? Are you in danger? What happened to the hospital?! Over!"

This time, Phoebe gets a reply. Elder Skarde speaks, surprise in his voice. "Commander Hiro? We had a group of Shades attack the city. We're not certain how many, but they struck the reinforced shelters under the pyramids. Luckily, we suffered very few casualties. I've had my troops combing the streets ever since. I... I wasn't aware of any danger at the hospital. I will send troops there at once, over."

"You're goddamn-well right you will!" Phoebe roars. "My daughter is there, and Samantha, too! Not to mention thousands of our wounded soldiers! How can you not know what happened?! All those troopers had exosuits on their bodies! Don't tell me you didn't detect multiple deaths within the city's borders! Over!"

Elder Skarde takes several seconds to reply. When he does, he sounds even more confused than before. "I... I'm looking at their bio-scanners right now, Commander Hiro. Their vital signs appear the same as they did six hours ago. No changes. Are you certain something happened? Over."

"I'm looking at a hologram of the hospital as we speak!" Phoebe shouts. "Of course I'm sure! Get men in there on the double and report back to me! Commander Hiro, out!"

Phoebe turns off the communication panel. She presses both fists against the sides of her head and grits her teeth. "Fuck, fuck, fuck! Shades! They must have slipped past our defenses! In the dark of night, there's no enemy more dangerous than a Shade or a Shadow-walker! If anything happened to Daisy or Sam... I swear... I'll wipe the demons out!"

Blinker cocks her head. "But... I don't get it. Why would those hospitalized troops still show perfectly fine bio-signs if they're dead? Doesn't that seem a bit weird to you?"

Hearing Blinker's words, Phoebe forces herself to calm down. She lowers her fists and rests them in her lap. Then, she gazes outside, at the dawn's light slowly beginning to brighten Tarus II's surface.

"No. It's not weird. It's *sinister*. A technical glitch at a time like this? Too coincidental. This has Ose's fingerprints all over it."

Phoebe nibbles her lip.

"Ose is an enigma. She never showed herself to humanity even once in the last six years. Her rise to power has been silent and benign, as if she was content to let us do our own thing. After you and Kar told me that Hope had spent the last six years launching attacks on the Labyrinth, I began to understand why

we hadn't heard about our escalating tensions with the demons. Jason and I assumed they might try and attack humanity someday, but we didn't realize Ose's plans had been so meticulous."

"So, you think Ose tampered with the exosuits?" Blinker asks.

"Possibly," Phoebe mutters. "After all, she did capture Neil. She might have forced out the command codes from him. Even if she didn't, she might be able to hack them herself. There's a reason the demons call her 'Ghost,' because she's their most adept infiltrator. Who knows how many traps she might spring on us the longer this war continues?"

The white-haired woman sends out a transmission via Centurion, ordering Neil's command codes get erased. Having already done so on the day he disappeared, she does it again, just in case she somehow messed up the first time.

After that, Phoebe takes a moment to pause and reflect. Her thoughts turn complicated as she observes the battlefield. Hundreds of soldiers die every minute, while still managing to kill an even greater number of demons. Even so, the human forces number less than ten thousandth their demonic adversaries. In a battle of attrition, they can't possibly win the war.

"What should we do...?" Phoebe mutters.

Beep beep.

Another communications ping catches Phoebe's attention. She activates the console.

"Commander Hiro speaking, over."

"Commander, it's me," Lieutenant Samuel says, his voice noticeably more energetic than before. "I... I don't know what happened. One moment, I was laying on the ground, dying. The next, it was as if holy water appeared from the void and coated my soul. All of my injuries disappeared, just like that! I've got a bitch of a headache, but otherwise, I'm fine! Over."

Phoebe nods. "I activated your exosuits' teleportation transponders. Belial must have healed you when you arrived in the hospital, over."

"No, that's the thing!" Samuel says. "None of us returned to the hospital! We just... fully recovered! Right where we sat! It was unlike anything I've ever experienced in my life! Over."

Phoebe frowns. "Err, I don't understand. Belial is our only healer. Did she show up at the prisons and heal you? Over."

Before Samuel can respond, a different voice speaks, one Phoebe has grown intimately familiar with over the past few years.

"No, it was me. I healed those men."

The voice speaks from all around Phoebe, as if magically transmitted from a great distance. Phoebe's eyes light up with excitement. "Jason! Is that you? Where have you been?"

Samuel falls silent. He hears the Hero's voice, as well as his Commander's surprise, and realizes that Phoebe must not have known what Jason was doing.

"It's a long story," Jason says, his voice becoming clearer. "I can't yet return to Tarus II. Instead, I'll support you from a distance. I'm several thousand light-years away, and it could take me a while to arrive. However, now that I have a 'battery,' my Wordsmithing has become far more powerful. We won't lose this war. I promise."

Phoebe blinks. "A 'battery'? What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you later. For now, focus on yourself. Oh, and don't worry about Daisy and Sam. They're alive and well."

"They are? That's great! Wait... how did you know I was thinking about them? Were you listening to me, earlier?"

Jason coughs in embarrassment. "Ahem! Err, uh, gotta go! Line's cutting out! Can't hear you very well- bzzt, brrrt! Love you, bye!"

His voice fades away, leaving Phoebe grasping at straws.

Blinker facepalms. "...Your man is a big, silly idiot."

"No, he's a lovable goof," Phoebe laughs. "There's a difference!"

"Whatever you say!" Blinker chirps. "Let's hope Jason isn't screwing around. We need all the help we can get, sister."

Phoebe smiles. "For some reason, Jason's words always fill me with confidence. If he says we'll win... then I wholeheartedly believe him. I'll always trust Jason's judgment at times like these."

Blinker smiles back. "Jason might be an idiot, but you're a good wife. He's lucky to have you."

"No. We're all lucky to have *him*," Phoebe murmurs.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 259: Beelzebub's Prison Break

Inside the dungeons at the southern border of Hero City, an odd sight unfolds as Beelzebub, the Duke of Inferno, strides down the hallways of the underground complex butt-naked. More than two hundred prison guards ambush or attack him in groups of six to twelve, but Beelzebub casually kills them with the ease of a lifelong farmer reaping his wheat.

The young Duke trots forward at a snail's pace. His movements are very casual, as if he couldn't give a damn about the war happening outside the prison. With Mara having hastily explained the situation to him, he barely gives Ose's plans a second thought.

"Blasted wench," Beelzebub grumbles. "I bet she planned for me to get captured. How else could someone as incredible as me fall to that stupid crocodile's surprise attack? Surely, Ose would have seen that little trick of his coming from a mile away. She probably got a good laugh out of my predicament."

"Well, *hah-hah*, laugh it up. I'll just take my sweet time getting back. How about *that*? That'll teach you to pull pranks on me. Bloody hellspawn."

A heavily armored Rhino-trooper charges at Beelzebub from behind. With an advanced suit capable of ripping Barons apart, the man raises a massive hammer overhead, intending to smash the Duke of Inferno's bones into gravy.

Instead, Beelzebub summons a scorching disk of fire in his hands. It spins like a Frisbee, heating to over fifteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Without even turning his head, Beelzebub casually tosses the fire-disc behind himself. It crashes against the Rhino-trooper's chest, cuts through him without any resistance, and severs the man's body in half. He perishes instantly, unable to offer the feeblest of resistance.

After the soldier's body hits the ground, Beelzebub pauses. He turns around and frowns at the dead man.

"You humans are so strange. Has anyone ever told you that? What kind of moron thinks he can take on a Demon Duke all by himself? What, do you think your fancy technology can defeat me? You're not the Monster King. You're not the Second Emperor. You're *certainly* not the Hero. You're just a human. An ordinary, worthless fleshbag. What possesses your people to fling themselves at me like idiotic lemmings? Do you all have death wishes?"

Beelzebub's question goes unanswered, on the account of his victim being dead. After shaking his head, the Duke continues walking, his demonhood *slapping* against his legs one step at a time.

"Seven Hells. Why'd I have to go and burn my suit to ash? Gah. How embarrassing. Now the humans are going to see me naked. They don't deserve the honor."

After ten minutes of walking up and down multiple corridors, Beelzebub arrives at the top of the underground complex. His peerless heat-based vision allows him to make out the blips of several humans

aboveground. More than thirty thousand elite troopers surround the facility's exit, waiting for the Demon Duke to emerge.

Once Beelzebub reaches the foot of the stairs, he slows to a stop and rubs the bridge of his nose.

"Don't these peasants realize that I can see them? Only an idiot would stroll through that door into their trap. Devils. Humans are truly imbecilic. If they didn't have a Hero assisting them, they'd have fallen two days after rising up in their pathetic little insurrection."

A sense of fatigue fills Beelzebub's mind. Boredom fills his gaze, along with a deep sense of despair.

"I'm only a Demon Duke, but already, I'm an unkillable monster. If I should attain the rank of Emperor, who knows how powerful I'll become? The Monster King couldn't defeat me in a fair fight, and he certainly couldn't kill me. He could only trap me in that suffocating metal armor. As for the pawns waiting for me outside, they aren't worth a speck of dirt. I could simply blast the ceiling into the stratosphere and fly away, but they actually think they have some brilliant method of capturing me."

"Well, think again, fools! I'm Beelzebub, soon to be the mightiest demon of all time! Not even the oh-so-great Satan himself would be able to defeat me once I reach my pinnacle. What can mere gnats do when facing a mountain?"

For some unknown reason, Beelzebub babbles to himself, likely due to enjoying the sound of his own voice. Despite everything he's just said, the Duke of Inferno brazenly begins walking up the stairs. He strolls out through the prison's exit as if he hasn't anything better to do with his time. Once outside, he stares up at the night sky and takes a deep breath.

"Mmm. Smells nice out here. Like daffodils."

The Duke's complete lack of preparation for the enemies awaiting him makes several human soldiers sweat bullets. They hide behind nearby trees, with the nearest soldiers donning stealth-type Spectre exosuits. These camouflaged soldiers, invisible to the naked eye, somehow feel exposed. Even though their brains tell them there's no way the Duke of Inferno can see them, their instincts scream in alarm.

Still, as good soldiers, they take aim at the Duke and await their orders. Several high-powered sniper rifles, each one capable of piercing tank armor, fixate on different areas of Beelzebub's body. Behind the nearest Spectre soldiers, other elite troopers wearing color-shifted standard-issue T-REX's lay on their bellies in the tall grass. Unlike the snipers, these soldiers wield specially-designed grenade launchers. Instead of explosive munitions, their grenades contain dense and heavy electrical nets, designed to explode just before striking a target, then wrapping them in a stunning embrace.

Countless other soldiers stand in reserve behind the hill where the prison exit emerges. They hide just out of sight, their purpose being only to come in with guns blazing if the first two teams fail to capture Beelzebub.

However, to all of the humans' alarm, Beelzebub doesn't move a muscle. He stands silently, unmoving, at the exit to the prison. The Duke of Inferno places both hands on his hips and stretches his back, all while gazing up at the starry night sky.

"Mmm. Bacon. Nice, crispy bacon," Beelzebub mutters, his words easily picked up by the trooper's exosuits. "Rosalia always used to make the most delicious bacon. I never ate it, of course, because I have no need to consume sustenance. Still, the smell always did stir my heart. I wonder what that fat ogre is up to these days, hmm?"

While Beelzebub mutters to himself, one of the troopers quietly whispers into his helmet's microphone, despite the perfect sound-dampening capabilities of his exosuit. He doesn't dare speak too loudly, lest the Duke somehow hear him.

"Corporal Hurent. We have eyes on the target. Awaiting your orders."

The man's voice transmits to his commanding officer, half a mile away. Corporal Hurent and Lieutenant Samuel kneel behind a large rock atop a small hill, their eyes locked on Beelzebub's figure. They peep out from behind the boulder and use their exosuit's telescopic vision enhancements to observe the Duke with the same clarity as if they were only a hundred feet away.

"Something's wrong..." Corporal Hurent mutters, her eyes narrowed. "Why is Beelzebub just standing there? I thought he'd immediately take off once he exited the prison facility. His reaction is... suspicious."

The Lieutenant stays silent for five seconds.

Suddenly, he curses. "Shit. He knows! The motherfucker knows! All units, this is Lieutenant Samuel! Beelzebub is aware of your presences! Fire at will! Don't hold back!"

Samuel jumps to his feet. His heavily armored Rhino suit releases steam from its back as it vents its excess thermal energy. Corporal Hurent doesn't argue with him, instead opting to immediately accept his judgment. She pilots a dark green-colored Hummer-class T-REX, one designed for short bursts of flight, or long-term hovering maneuvers. As the night-time lights up with a hail of gunfire, Samuel dashes forward, his feet stomping against the dirt. Corporal Hurent takes to the skies, activating her rear wing struts to launch herself skyward.

All hell breaks loose. Beelzebub, standing as calmly as ever, doesn't move a muscle as the lightly forested woodlands surrounding him explode with activity. Hundreds of bullets, guided by inhumanly precise exosuit aim-assistance systems, fire at the Duke in unison.

All of them miss.

Right before the humans unload their weapons on the Duke, he vanishes. A slight *puff* of flames is all they see as Beelzebub fireports away, jumping to a tiny patch of burning flames he ignited moments before.

When Beelzebub arrives at his new position, he does so in an eerily quiet manner. The shrubbery around him erupts into flames as he materializes only five feet from a pair of Spectre-wearing troopers. Both troopers continue firing at his previous position. It takes them a split-second to realize Beelzebub has disappeared, and another split-second to notice a newcomer in their presence.

The soldiers jerk their heads to the left, where they spot the Duke standing silently next to them, a bland look of boredom on his face.

"Shi-!" One of the troopers shouts. Before he can finish the expletive, his voice cuts off. An explosion of two thousand degree flames strikes him and his companion, a woman, charring both of them to ashes. They don't get even a single moment to contemplate their existences.

The instant Beelzebub fries the soldiers where they stand, countless other troopers nearby pause their gunfire to train on his new position. Too bad for them, the Duke raises his thumbs, extends his pointer fingers, and curls the other three fingers on both hands together, turning his hands into finger-guns.

Boom-boom-boom!

The Duke launches a dozen miniature fireballs at high velocities, blasting apart twelve other random troopers. Flames spread out to illuminate the landscape, as well as the bodies of the humans. They perish without knowing what hit them.

By the time Lieutenant Samuel and Corporal Hurent arrive on scene, only twenty seconds have passed. Still, they're too late.

With fire and flames engulfing the lightly wooded area, Beelzebub becomes capable of fireporting anywhere he pleases. The naked Duke flits from one spot to another, shooting anyone he sees with fire-bullets, blowing up clusters of troops with concentrated fire-bombs, and otherwise wreaking absolute havoc among humanity's forces.

One man screams in fright as the Duke suddenly appears in front of him. "Aaaaiee-"

His body explodes, spraying boiling hot blood backwards into the faces of his comrades behind him. Moments later, those soldiers perish as well.

"Sweet mother of god!" Samuel roars, as he storms onto the scene. "I'll fucking kill you, you bloodskin bastard!"

If Beelzebub hears Samuel's warcry, he doesn't pay it any heed. He continues fireporting around, easily evading all of the humans' intricate traps as if the battle were nothing more than a weekend stroll along the beach.

The more humans Beelzebub kills, the more vacant his eyes become.

This isn't fun at all. Beelzebub thinks. It's not enjoyable in the slightest. It barely even passes the time. I might as well go and stomp Hellhound puppies in their dens. These humans are even more pathetic than I thought.

During a momentary lapse in concentration, Beelzebub yawns. The slight break in his battle momentum makes him close his eyes reflexively, making him fail to notice the huge, towering metal beast charging at him.

BOOM!!

Lieutenant Samuel punches Beelzebub in the face, battering him with the strength of a lion slapping a rabbit. Beelzebub, momentarily caught off-guard, goes flying backward. He crashes into the dirt some thirty feet away. His spine grinds against the burning grass, leaving a trail of ash in his wake. When he

opens his eyes, he frowns. Half his vision fails him, indicating that whoever just punched him must have destroyed half his face.

"...Dick."

The Duke of Inferno growls in annoyance, then fireports backward, putting some distance between himself and the Rhino-wearing human. By the time Samuel's follow-up attack reaches Beelzebub's previous position, he's already started regenerating his shattered skull, face, and jaw.

"Nice sucker-punch," Beelzebub says, the disdain in his voice evident. A barrage of gunfire tears toward him, but he flickers away, dodging it reflexively. "Too bad it accomplished nothing."

"Fuck you and your smug bullshit!" Samuel bellows. He charges at the Duke once more, but Beelzebub merely fireports again, dodging the slow and bulky Rhino suit with ease. Its massive armor serves to hamper it against agile foes, so Beelzebub doesn't pay it much mind.

The Duke continues casually killing humans, but this time, he keeps his eye on the Rhino. For some reason unknown to the humans, he doesn't immediately attack the Lieutenant, nor does he kill him. Instead, the Duke goes to great lengths to avoid the humans' commander, killing more and more soldiers on the periphery as they arrive.

The Rhino-wearing commander chases after Beelzebub, trying to grab the Duke or land a decisive punch, but every time, he comes up short. As Beelzebub casually slaughters the worthless insects trying to cause him harm, he strikes up a conversation with Samuel.

"Pardon me, human," Beelzebub says. "I've got this question on my mind, and it's really burning in my chaw. Perhaps you can satisfy my curiosity regarding the matter."

"Fuck off and die!" Samuel screams, as he swings another fist at Beelzebub. The Duke fireports away, leaving Samuel standing in a puddle of recently-melted soldiers.

"Yes, yes, you've said that several times now," Beelzebub groans, rolling his eyes. "But, look. I have to ask: Why do you humans keep fighting my people when you know you can't win? Look at this mess. I'm slaughtering your men without any resistance. I'm only a Duke, you know? I'm not even a blasted Emperor. Even with all your fancy metal toys and armor and guns, you're still no match for me. Doesn't all this seem rather pointless? Your only shot at beating me is if the Sphinx, the Second Emperor, or one of the Heroes shows up. Even if they do, they can't kill me. Even if they can, there are countless other demons ready to replace me."

Beelzebub continues. "This is all such a bother. Why don't you humans just give up already? It's pointless to resist. You'll all end up dying like dogs. Surely that's not what you want, am I right? Give up, and I'll ensure Ose only wipes your memories. We won't kill you. It's better for you to be slaves living in bliss than soldiers dying inevitable deaths, don't you think?"

The Duke speaks with the absolute conviction of a conqueror, as if his words are directed not at trained soldiers, but a group of rowdy children. Even so, his speech has a hypnotic quality to it, calling out to the weak-minded and making them consider his offer a little more seriously than they might otherwise.

What use is there in fighting the demons when humans can't win?

Why die pointless deaths by fighting in a useless war?

More than a few soldiers, seeing the approach of death at Beelzebub's flames, feel their knees buckle.

Aside from those who lived for a hundred thousand years due to Bahamut's curse of immortality, the vast majority of soldiers present at Beelzebub's slaughter are younger humans from liberated worlds. Remembering how simple their lives used to be before they joined the Hero's resistance, a few of them weep at how ghastly their situation has become.

One soldier shudders violently, his will to fight draining from his body. He falls to his knees and sobs as he witnesses the deaths of countless friends he's made over the past six years. Unable to pick himself up, he offers no resistance as Beelzebub appears and blasts his body to atoms.

However, one soldier doesn't flinch even in the slightest. Lieutenant Samuel continues doggedly pursuing Beelzebub, chasing him no matter where he appears, even though his actions appear completely futile.

"Shut your mouth, bloodskin!" Samuel roars. "I've heard enough from the likes of you!"

The Lieutenant stops his fruitless pursuit of Beelzebub, realizing his feet won't bring him any closer to the Duke of Inferno. He stabs a finger at Beelzebub and laughs hollowly.

"Hah! Your words are poison! What makes you think you're superior to us? Is it because you possess magic?! So did the Dragons! The Titans! The Angels! And now look at them. They're all dead! Soon, your species will join them!"

"Stupid bastard!" Samuel continues, his eyes turning bloodshot. "We are humans! Just because you're stronger than us now, that doesn't mean you will be forever! Just because you stomp on us and seek to enslave us doesn't mean you'll succeed! Even if I fall here today, the Hero will continue our fight!"

Samuel's words spread around the battlefield. Beelzebub continues killing humans, but his pace slows noticeably as he pauses every so often to listen to Samuel's speech.

"Even if this planet falls," Samuel continues, "humanity will live on! You demons are so high and mighty- so proud of yourselves! You defeated us once, but foolishly kept us alive, thinking we'd never revolt. You thought we'd never pose a threat to you. But look at us now, you ugly bastard! This invasion. This war. You attacked us because you're **afraid**! You're terrified of what humanity could become! We may be weak now... but someday... we'll surpass you! Totally! Completely! In every meaning of the word!"

Samuel's speech enters the ears of every man and woman present. Even a few of the exosuit-wearing monster-soldiers perk their ears up, feeling a surge of pride in a species different from theirs.

Beelzebub turns to face Samuel. He pauses his onslaught and laughs. "Haha. Is that so? You humans will someday surpass the demons? What a gas. Even if you had a million years, that would never happen. These weapons you take so much pride in mean nothing in the face of absolute power."

The Duke sneers. "Face it. You're living in denial, human. You're holding onto hope of a nebulous future, one in which you rise up and slay your oppressors. Too bad for you, that future is an impossibility.

Even your precious Heroes are far too afraid to show their faces today. Where is Hope, hmm? Jason? Nowhere! They fled. They left you to rot and die."

"That's a damned lie, and you know it," Samuel counters, pointing his fist at Beelzebub. "Everyone knows our King loves his wife and daughter. He'd never leave them to die. The fact they're here means he will return. I know it. I believe it! I have faith in my King, as do we all! Even if you kill everyone here, the Hero will return and pay you back in kind for your sins!"

Samuel's voice turns deadly cold.

"But... before that. I dare you to face me, demon. I dare you to meet my fist. I've a debt I must extract from your corpse, as well as those of all your fellow bloodskins. My brother... my brother! He died because of your evils! You bloodskins flayed him alive and hung him up to dry! You left him to rot in the sun for five days until he succumbed to his wounds! A miserable death! A sad fate for a loving and kind boy!"

"Demonic filth!" Samuel continues. "Do you dare face me?! Or will you keep running away like a coward?!"

Beelzebub sighs.

"...Seven hells. I was going to save you for last, but if you're so desperate to visit the Great Beyond... well, I suppose I can offer you this last courtesy. You've given me a small bit of insight into the feeble thoughts possessing your species. Now I can understand why you fight with such desperate bravado."

The Duke rolls his eyes. "It's because you're all delusional. Every last one of you. You place all your hopes on some Hero. Some possible future which will never occur. Humanity will never defeat the demons. It's impossible. And, in the short-term, you will personally suffer the consequences for daring to attack me. After all, what sort of master allows his pet to bite him? Mutts should be slapped and beaten like the dogs they are."

Instead of fireporting toward Samuel, Beelzebub lowers his hands to his sides. The naked Duke strides toward Samuel with the grace of a deer, a faint smile appearing on his lips.

"How about this, human? Let's trade blows. Your fancy armor certainly looks impressive, but we both know it can't match up to my full power. If you can survive three strikes from me, I'll consider this my loss and leave. I won't kill any more of your men. How about it, chum? Isn't that a nice offer? Aren't I simply a swell guy for showing a pest like you such grace?"

Samuel shakes his head and begins stomping toward Beelzebub. "I have a better idea! Instead, I'll beat the shit out of you, and you can fuck off to the Great Beyond!"

As the Rhino-wearing commander suicidally charges toward the Duke, Beelzebub sighs with regret. "I remember when I used to think Rosalia and Bael were the dumbest people I'd ever meet. Ah, so young was I. So ignorant. Those were the good old days."

Beelzebub doesn't avoid Samuel's charge. Likewise, with their commander recklessly rushing in to face off against the Duke alone, the humans pause their attacks, unsure of what to do.

One hundred feet. Fifty. Twenty-five.

Despite his bulky armor, Samuel clears the gap in under two seconds. In terms of agility, the Rhino suit performs at a sub-par level. However, in terms of straight-distance running speed, it doesn't lag behind the other exosuits in the slightest.

Samuel raises his fist. He swings at Beelzebub, but still, the Duke doesn't dodge.

Suddenly, Beelzebub's left hand moves.

BOOM!!

The Duke backhands the heavily armored commander, sending him hurtling to the left. Beelzebub's unfathomable power renders all of the Rhino's technological superiority useless. Samuel slams into the dirt head-first, bounces, rolls, and crashes into a boulder, spreading spiderweb-cracks all along its front. The Lieutenant comes to a stop with the front of his helmet cracked and broken. He lays against the rock, unmoving.

Beelzebub laughs. "Haha. Was that it? Was that the full extent of your strength? I thought you might be able to take *one* light little slap, but really, your idiocy- hmm?"

The Duke's expression changes. Even without the sensation of touch, he senses something amiss. Beelzebub jerks his eyes downward, where he spots a fragment of the exosuit's faceplate stabbed into his hand. The nanites spring to life and seep into Beelzebub's skin, making his eyebrows jump in alarm.

"What is this? You tricky little insect! Hoho, was this your big plan?!"

Without hesitation, Beelzebub ignites the power of fire in his blood. He boils himself alive, intending to roast the nanites inside him to ash.

However, with his mind fully concentrated on Samuel's deception, the Duke fails to notice a single human flying half a mile directly above him, her sniper barrel aimed at the top of his head.

"Target in sight," Corporal Hurent says, her voice even. "I'm taking the shot."

Piff!

A faint hissing of air is the only warning Beelzebub gets before his vision turns black.

A bullet traveling at ten times the speed of sound tears through the top of his skull, rips through his chest and body, and blasts apart his spine with sheer concussive force.

The Duke doesn't even get a chance to react. His legs turn to pudding as he stumbles forward, collapsing face-first in the burning grass.

Samuel jumps to his feet. Blood drips from his eyes and mouth, the result of taking a single slap from the Duke of Inferno. "All units! Subdue him. Don't give that bastard even a second to regenerate."

Dozens of electric nets fly at Beelzebub, stabbing into various areas of his body and transmitting terrifying doses of electrical energy to his neurons. By the time the Duke's regeneration kicks in, a hellish rain of agony starts streaming into his mind.

"Aaah... ahhh... ahhhhh!!!"

Beelzebub screams in pain. With electricity being the only conduit that can bring back his pain receptors, the numbness pervading his life for the past six years falls away, replaced instead with a hellish, fiery torment.

"Gaahhh! H-humans- you filthy, ahhh!!"

Hundreds of soldiers charge Beelzebub. Each time he regenerates, they bury bullets in his brain and spine, making it impossible for him to get up. At the same time, they retrieve a containment nanosuit identical to the one that Kar used to capture him previously. Beelzebub awakens after his twentieth regeneration to the fresh hell of nanites crawling across his body. The same suffocating feeling of terror takes him as he realizes that, even without the Sphinx, the blasted humans tricked him and caught him off-guard.

No! Not like this! Beelzebub's internal voice screams. How dare these insects press their boots against my back?! If they want a fight, then that's what I'll give them!

The Duke instantly detonates half of the mana in his body, turning his arms and legs into living bombs. The resulting explosions catch his human captors unaware, killing five hundred of the closest soldiers in a two hundred meter radius. Even Samuel, with his heavily armored Rhino suit, barely survives by the skin of his teeth. Beelzebub's unexpected detonation tears through Samuel's commandos with reckless abandon, killing them like pigs to the slaughter.

A minute later, Beelzebub regenerates again. This time, the remaining humans are too far away to reach him in time. He jumps to his feet, hellfire and fury burning in his eyes.

"Filthy fleshbags! Wretched little deceivers! I was taking it easy on you, but you just had to go and piss me off! Now you all will DIE!!"

What follows is a massacre of genocidal proportions. Beelzebub doesn't hold back. He fireports around at unbelievable speeds, leaving afterimages in his wake. Everywhere he appears, the Reaper follows. Countless soldiers perish in flames, screaming and crying with their last breaths. Two thousand soldiers die in the first five minutes. Another two thousand follow shortly after.

Samuel lays on the ground. Terrible burn marks line his face and chest. Blood-filled tears drip from his eyes as he watches Beelzebub slaughter entire platoons wholesale.

When Phoebe messages him, asking about his progress, all he can do is apologize.

"Cough... cough... shit. It was a... a massacre. Fuck. I'm sorry, Commander. We couldn't stop him. Beelzebub... he's too powerful. Thirty thousand soldiers... my friends... all dead. Cough. I failed you, Commander. I failed you..."

Few soldiers remain. Those who do, roll around in the grass, clutching gruesome wounds while shrieking in pain.

Beelzebub spares nobody. Even Corporal Hurent, high above, isn't safe from his wrath. He blasts off the ground and flies at her with clenched fists.

"So *you're* the gnat who hit me from my blind spot! Perish in flames, you worthless human!"

Hurent's heart turns to ice. She watches as the Duke flies toward her, his speed far beyond hers. Even with her flight enabled exosuit, she can't outrun him. She can't hide, she can't flee, and she certainly can't protect herself.

A tear slides down her face as she takes aim with her rifle.

Piff!

The bullet misses. Beelzebub dodges it from several hundred feet away, grinning evilly as he approaches.

With her death imminent, Hurent turns inconsolable. At only thirty years old, she's still young, with her whole life ahead of her.

Sadly, facing Beelzebub's wrath, her existence has met its end.

She closes her eyes and grits her teeth, hoping Beelzebub will at least grant her a quick, painless death.

* * *

Seconds pass.

Still shaking with terror, the Corporal opens her eyes.

She flicks her gaze in multiple directions, but doesn't see Beelzebub anywhere.

What's going on? Is... is he toying with me?

She spins around in midair, looking up, down, left and right. Still, she can't locate his position.

Hurriedly, Hurent pulls up Centurion's video footage. What she sees leaves her puzzled.

Beelzebub rears back his fist, swings at her head... and disappears.

She stares at the footage, finding herself more and more confused every second.

Did he fireport away? But why wasn't there a burst of flame like before? I don't understand. Where did the Duke go?

And then, as her confusion reaches its apex, a male voice speaks inside her mind.

[Corporal Hurent. It's me, Jason Hiro. I'm healing the wounded. Don't worry about Beelzebub. I've 'taken care' of him for now.]

The Corporal's jaw slackens. She stares ahead blankly at nothing in particular, her mind in a daze.

"H-hero? Sir? Is that really you?"

Jason replies, his voice filled with sadness. [Um. Yeah. Sorry it took me so long. I didn't realize the situation- well, I didn't know it had gotten this bad. I'm deeply ashamed of myself. But, don't worry. This war is over now. The demons will lose. I promise.]

"They will? You have a plan?"

[...Something like that. No time to talk. I have a lot of work ahead of me. Report to Lieutenant Samuel, tally the losses. You know what to do.]

The woman nods dumbly. "Yes, sir. I understand. Thank you... for returning."

[You're welcome. I'll make sure nobody else suffers the way you have, from here on out.]

Jason's voice fades away, leaving Hurent feeling not only dazed, but more than a little giddy.

The Hero has returned! Even better, he has a solution to end the war! As expected, the King is amazing!

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 260: Battlefield Interference

Tarus II, the Northern Front.

The Felorians stave off waves of demons, using the power of Chi to enhance their bodies. Brunhilda, their leader, becomes a Valkyrie of death among the attacking demonic forces. She wields a hundred-pound exosteel halberd as if it were a weightless stick, cleaving the heads of demons and smashing the bones of skeletons with reckless abandon. The butt of her spear becomes a blunted weapon, while its bladed head proves more than capable of ripping through flesh and bone.

Ten Burners rush at Hilda, identifying her as the Felorians' leader. Through a stroke of luck, they manage to isolate her for a few moments while bombarding her with fireballs and scorching flames. Brunhilda counters by sweeping her halberd in a wide arc while infusing Chi into its shaft. Magical energy fires out in a wave, blasting away the hellfire before it can so much as graze her skin.

The Burners don't suffer any injuries from their own flames, but the unexpected shockwave of Chi knocks them off their feet and flings them backward. Before they can react, Brunhilda rushes forward and lops off their heads, moving at close to the speed of a cheetah.

"Hold the line!" Brunhilda shouts, using Chi to project her voice in a wide radius. "Do not let the demons through!"

She barks several orders, directing the Felorians left and right to surround the demons in a pincer attack, while a wide array of monster-troopers wearing T-REX's fire off volleys of bullets down the center line. Unable to flee this combined attack, hundreds of demons and Mephisto's undead end up mowed down by the hail of bullets.

"You won't last forever!" A random Scyther demon shrieks, as it swings its bladed arm toward a Felorian, lopping off the woman's arm. She screams in pain and falls to the ground, while the demon cackles evilly. "We'll overwhelm you eventually, filthy fleshbags!"

Brunhilda's eyes widen. "Sister Sariah! No!"

She starts to run toward her sister, but her heart leaps into her throat as the Scyther swings its sword down. With two hundred feet separating Brunhilda and her Felorian sister, she can't possibly reach Sariah in time.

At that moment, a barrier of light envelops Sariah. The Scyther's blade-arm bounces off it like a rubber ball against a wall, making the demon lose its footing. Before it can react to the unexpected force-field, Brunhilda closes the gap.

Swish!

Her halberd swings instantly, decapitating the little bastard. Brunhilda turns aside and reaches toward her sister, passing through the barrier with surprising ease.

"Hm? Sariah! Are you alright? What happened, just now? How did you create that shield of light?"

The other Felorian clutches her severed arm with gritted teeth. "Ahh, sss! It wasn't me... I don't... I don't know who did it. I've never heard of such a technique bef- what?!"

Brunhilda and Sariah, both surrounded by chaos in every direction, freeze and gawk as Sariah's missing arm rapidly regenerates. Within seconds, a brand new limb appears, taking the place of the old one.

"What... what happened?" Brunhilda asks, her eyes as wide as dinner plates. "How did you do that?"

"Me? I did nothing!" Sariah says, glancing around. She smiles and shrugs, wondering what could have regrown her arm in such a short time. "Perhaps 'twas the Wind Mother's doing. She watches over us!"

Brunhilda nods. "Mmm, yes, sister. I believe you may be right. Now, come! Give no quarter to these damned bloodskins!"

"Right!"

Brunhilda and Sariah jump back into the fray, returning to the bloody war engulfing them from all sides. Any thoughts they might have regarding what happened to Sariah's arm fade away, replaced instead with faith in the 'Wind Mother.'

* * *

Meanwhile, at the Western Front.

Yamir, the head cook for the Hiro household, stomps around inside a standard-issue battle exosuit. However, due to his Minotaur body, his combat level outstrips that of the humans who don Rhinos and Thundercats. The default T-REX amplifies his strength, speed, and durability by a factor of ten, turning the noble Ironhorn into a force of destruction.

The bull-headed monster stomps around slowly but efficiently, using his human torso to wield a gigantic half-ton greathammer. He picks out the strongest enemies and leaves the small-fry to his allies. Most notably, he aims for Brutes; the biggest, baddest Demon grunts. Ten foot walls of fat and muscle, each one capable of smashing their way through concrete barricades and crushing exosuit-wearing troopers with their meaty fists.

One such Brute, a big fellow with dark, crimson skin, grins evilly as he spots the exosuit-wearing minotaur charging at him.

"Hah! Traitor monster! Ugly Minoturd! You big loser, stupid fleshbag-lover! Die like dog!"

The monster's lack of eloquence doesn't faze Yamir. The 'simple chef' grins inside his helmet, a move the Brute can't see. "Silly knave! How dare you tread upon my liege's lands with your sullen feet! The Hero will punish all of you! But sadly, you won't live long enough for His Majesty to stain his hands with your blood!"

The hoof-footed Minotaur bellows a vicious warcry as he engages in battle with the Brute. His greathammer crashes against the Brute's fists and body, both of them knocking one another around like pinballs.

Blow after blow, Yamir gives no ground against his hulking opponent. Despite standing a foot shorter than the Brute, the Minotaur simply laughs off his enemy's punches, even when they successfully connect.

"Haha! Is that all you've got? If your rotten flesh wasn't so putrid, I'd cook your corpse for my master! Too bad, you aren't even fit for the begging mutts!"

The Brute roars at Yamir. "You make big talk for tiny short-horn! Eat fist, you cow!"

Just as Yamir is preparing to charge the Brute, his danger instincts kick in. He glances to his right, where he spots two more Brutes and a Demon Baron running toward him.

"There, that's the one," The Baron says, pulling back his hood to expose his face. "He's leading the humans on this side. Ose wants him dead."

Yamir, sensing the situation change, flares his nostrils. "Hmph. Orias! Baron of the Stars. It seems you, too, are following Ose's bidding."

"Oh? Yamir? Is that you?" Orias asks. The Baron of the Stars scratches his facial hair and chuckles. "You used to work for Bahamut. Now, you fight for the humans. What a sad fate for the Ironhorn Clan's firstborn."

The two Brutes spread out to encircle Yamir, while Orias stands his ground, a sad look on his face. Yamir snorts again and stomps his hoof, dragging it across the dirt aggressively.

"I serve the master of this world. I cook for him and take care of his family. There is no greater calling in my life than to prepare delicacies for my king!"

"Your 'king'," Orias repeats. "He's a Hero. Demonkind's enemy, and thus, yours. I'll be sure to deliver your head to your father. He'll thank me for executing a traitor."

"I've not spoken to my father in a thousand years!" Yamir bellows. "And not once have I regretted that choice! So long as my ancestors smile upon me, my life was worth living. Not that a demon like you would know anything of family ties!"

Orias nods. "Indeed, I wouldn't. Now, die."

The Baron of the Stars plucks a shiny red gem out of his arm. As the three Brutes stomp toward Yamir with their fists at the ready, Orias clutches the ruby in his hand and snaps his fingers.

Fwoosh!

Fire engulfs Orias for a few minutes as his control over flames leaps into the stratosphere. In the waning darkness, while dawn approaches, Orias's conflagration draws countless eyeballs. He leaps into the air and hurls fire at the area around Yamir, coordinating with the Brutes to keep away any reinforcements capable of saving the Minotaur's life.

The Hiro family's chef battles his opponents with a crazed fervor. The previous battle against one Brute may have tilted slightly in his favor, but three Brutes are far too many for him to overcome. Repeatedly, the Brutes punch and kick him, knocking him from one to the other like a trio of cats slapping a mouse.

Eventually, Yamir has no choice but to drop his greathammer and switch to his fists. He changes his combat-style to one reminiscent of boxing, holding up his arms to protect his face and chest, while

bobbing and weaving to avoid certain death. He starts landing punches, striking one of the Brutes across his face repeatedly, but the Brute merely reveals a masochistic grin and laughs.

"You hit like girl! Me not feel any pain, heh-heh!"

Orias blasts away a small squad of troopers before they can reach Yamir, preventing them from rescuing their commander.

"Yamir! Break out of the formation! We can't get in there; this Baron is too powerful!"

Yamir grits his teeth. The bull comes out swinging. He tries to charge through a gap in the Brutes' defenses, only for a giant fist to sledgehammer his face and send him toppling backward into the dirt. Yamir crashes against a poorly-placed rock and nearly cracks his skull, saved only by his exosuit's defenses.

"Aargh!"

The chef cries out in pain. He tries to get up, but a hail of Brute fists rains down on him, forcing him to curl into the fetal position and tank their blows as best as he can.

"Stupid bull!"

"You die now, soforthorn!"

The nanites protecting Yamir begin to lose their integrity. His exosuit blares multiple warnings, all indicating a system-side failure that will result in the destabilization of the T-REX's molecular bonds.

However, Yamir can't escape. No matter how he tries to roll or escape the savage beatings, the Brutes repeatedly dog him, ensuring his swift demise.

From above, Orias sighs. "I never wanted it to come to this, Yamir! You defied demonkind's rule, and thus, you've sealed your fate! Accept your death with grace, or with your typical bullheadedness. Your choice!"

But still, even with the Baron taunting him, Yamir doesn't give up. The Minotaur throws all his weight into one final, desperate move. He shoves himself off the ground, jumps to his feet, and forcibly storms toward a narrow gap between the Brutes' bodies.

At that moment, a fist strikes the back of his skull.

Thunk!

Yamir's vision goes blurry. He loses focus and stumbles forward, crashing into the dirt like a sack of potatoes.

"Commander Yamir!" An armored Harpie cries. "Nooo!"

The world around Yamir turns foggy. His brain turns to Jello as his suit's bonds break apart, scattering the nanites into a gray mist. They explode off his body and turn to ash, leaving him exposed to the Brutes' savage attacks.

As his vision fades, Yamir knows... he will perish.

His last memory is that of the Little Miss, the Hero's child, Daisy. Her cheerful eagerness to sample his food never failed to bring a smile to his face.

The firstborn of the Ironhorn clan sighs in his heart.

As long as she grows up in peace... my life will have been worth it.

* * *

Suddenly, a white force-field envelops Yamir!

Yamir's foggy thoughts become as clear as glass. He awakens to find that not only have his injuries disappeared, but his suit has restored itself! Once again, a T-REX envelops his body, protecting him from harm.

Around Yamir, the three Brutes hammer futilely on the transparent forcefield protecting their prey. Clearly aggravated, they scream in rage. "Hey! What gives?! Why bubble show up? Why we can't pop bubble?"

With his thoughts clearer than ever, Yamir jumps to his feet. A river-like vitality flows through his veins, making him feel as if he's no longer several thousand years old, but young again and back in his prime. The energetic bull breaks through the forcefield and stomps his feet, startling the Brutes.

"What? Bull is okay! But how?!"

Before the other two Brutes can reply, Yamir swings his fist upward.

Boom!

The Minotaur bashes the first Brute's chin and uppercuts him backward, where he trips on a rock and falls to the ground.

"Gah!"

The Brute cries out in pain, then looks at Yamir in disbelief. The Minotaur's punch felt far, far mightier than his previous ones.

Yamir grins excitedly as the sensation of **power** gushes through his body. Somehow, not only have his injuries healed, but his strength has increased tenfold, while his body has become noticeably more youthful.

"Haha! Now, you simpletons are about to meet your maker!"

Orias, still flying above, watches in shock as the Minotaur who was previously losing in the merciless melee mounts a massive comeback, mashing the monstrous minions into meaty mush. He grabs the fallen Brute's leg and turns the demon into a living club, swinging him overhead with gusto.

Boom! Boom!

Yamir uses the Brute's whole body as a makeshift weapon, clubbing his two companions repeatedly. He smashes the one-ton blob of muscled meat against the others, making all three of them cry out in pain as their bones snap and twist under the Minotaur's savage strength.

Two minutes later, Yamir releases his victims, leaving their corpses on the ground to serve as a warning to anyone who dares challenge him. Yamir bellows again, then turns to look for Orias.

However, when he looks into the sky, Orias isn't there anymore. He disappears, leaving Yamir with a hollow victory.

"Pah! You coward! Come and face this bull, if you dare!" Yamir roars, issuing his challenge to the heavens.

Sadly for him, his opponent doesn't show. With an angry shrug, Yamir returns to the battlefield, opting to assist his fellow soldiers once more in their defensive battle.

* * *

Elsewhere, inside the Warpgate Encampment.

Ose's Astral Body hovers a few inches off the ground. She collects information about the battle and issues orders every so often, targeting weaknesses inside the human's defensive formations. Her pointed commands lead to the slow but steady advancement of demonkind's forces, allowing them to push further and further into the humans' battle lines.

"We're making headway," A Demon Lord reports. "I just received word that the Felorians are starting to run out of stamina. Mephisto's undead should break through in the next three hours. Additionally, Orias is on his way to take out the Minotaur on the Western Front. With him dead, the humans will have one less figurehead leading them."

"Excellent," Ose says, her voice astrally projecting into the Lord's mind. "I'll take it from here. Return to the Eastern Front, on the double."

"Yes, Emperor Ose."

The Lord leaves. Moments later, Mephisto melts out of the ground and hesitantly floats into the air. His appearance sours Ose's expression.

"Tch. *You*. Give me good news, you pathetic excuse for a Duke."

Ose injects venom into her words, making Mephisto bow his head in shame. Having failed to capture the Hero's soul via Valac's lantern, he hasn't the courage to look Ose in her eyes.

"Ksss. I've recceived word that Beelzebub hasss ssstarted combating the flessshbag'sss forcccesss. Mara and Artoriasss are on their way here ass we speak."

"Great. Is that all?"

Ose flicks her eyes away, barely able to suppress her rage at the Duke of Mist's earlier failure. Her attitude toward him, barely one of toleration before, has now become one of outright hostility.

"The Battle Brothersss are in possition. We are only waiting on the Ssshadesss to report their sssuccesss. Oncce the Hero'sss daughter and wife are in our clutchesss, we will assault the human'sss cccity."

Mephisto rubs his boney fingers together to try and appear confident, but Ose's angry eyes make him feel five inches tall.

"What, do you want a medal? You're only doing your job, *insect!*" Ose snaps. "I'm recuperating as quickly as I can, but for now, I have to rely on failures like you! Argh! Bael nearly got his head taken off by the humans, Beelzebub and Artorias both got captured, I broke my bloody arms, and you couldn't even capture one measly errant soul! This war would be ours, Mephisto! We'd have won already if you hadn't screwed up!"

Mephisto bows his head even lower. "...Yesss. I know."

"Do you?! Bah! All of you- every last one of the Dukes is a damned failure. If Agares were here, that old bastard would have probably disappointed me, too! My mother was right. I can't depend on mere cretins if I hope to reach the pinnacle of demonkind. After this war concludes, I'll need to take a good long look at whether you and the other Dukes truly deserve such prestigious-"

In the middle of Ose's ranting, a Demon Baron comes flying over. "Ose! Ose! Bad news!"

Ose halts her raving to stare coldly in the newcomer's direction. "Orias? What are you doing here? I told you to kill that Minotaur! Don't tell me that even *you* can't get one devil-damned thing done without mucking it up!"

Orias ignores her anger. Having spoken to Ose on many occasions since his youth, he treats her like he would literally any other demon; without a drop of fear or reverence.

"I didn't kill the Minotaur; I couldn't. After I found him, this happened..."

The Baron of the Stars quickly recounts his battle with Yamir. Despite Ose's anger that Orias didn't personally execute the Minotaur, she falls silent at the mention of the 'white forcefield' and rubs her chin.

"Hmm. How strange. For that monster to recover from his wounds, seemingly out of nowhere, that might mean..."

She trails off as her brain whirls at a million miles a second. For once, her anger shifts into confusion, and even a hint of worry.

Before she can come to a conclusion, a second Demon comes running toward her. This one turns out to be a female Demon Lord.

"Emperor Ose! At the Northern Front, something incredible just happened!"

She details the account of the Felorian warrior who recovered from her wounds. At the mention of an identical 'white forcefield,' Ose's expression turns solemn.

"...I see. So, I was right. The Wordsmith isn't standing by idly. The little bastard must be influencing the battle from a distance, tricky little rat that he is."

Ose's astral body hovers back and forth as she 'paces' through the air. She chews on her lip, her mood pensive.

"I predicted countless possibilities for this war," Ose mutters. "I took into account the Wordsmith's personality, his temperament, what could happen if both Wordsmiths joined hands and fought like hell,

and even the possibility they might both give up without a fight. Still, this war has fallen somewhat outside of my expectations."

She continues. "Not once has anyone seen Jason's clone. The last I heard, Hope was entering the Labyrinth to go on the hunt for something. According to what I've interrogated out of Neil, Hope left no further details. The Oracles can't find him inside the Labyrinth, either. I haven't a damn clue where he went. Jason left for a long time, too, and only now has he just come back. Both of their absences were a great boon to us. We made headway much faster than I anticipated, allowing me to expedite my plans."

"Still," She adds, "why do I feel as if I've overlooked something? After Jason left my manor, he didn't return to humanity's base of operations. He didn't even return to the Labyrinth. He simply disappeared, as if flitting off into the wind with nary a sound. Where might he have gone, I wonder?"

Ose speaks to herself rhetorically, not involving anyone else in her solo conversation. Mephisto, Orias, and the female Demon Lord stand silently, waiting for their Emperor's orders.

"I don't like unknown variables..." Ose mutters. "Mephisto, enter the city. Find out what's taking the Shades so long! I need that child as insurance against the Wordsmith. His daughter is his weakness; I know it. His wife, too, but she's also quite dangerous and hard to handle. The Hero's child is my primary target. Only she can guarantee the Wordsmith will fall into my clutches."

Mephisto nods. "Yesss... but what about the Battle Brothersss?"

"You can join them later. The child comes first!" Ose snaps. "Once we put the girl inside the 'cage,' Jason won't be able to sense her anymore. My trials with Neil have proven that much. Wordsmithing is a mighty power, but it is neither all-seeing, nor all-knowing. Its might depends heavily on its user's knowledge and wisdom. I can use my familiarity with the Wordsmith to our advantage."

"Ksss. I will do ass you ssay," Mephisto hisses, slowly slinking away.

"Good. Get out of my sight. Begone. Now that the Wordsmith has showed his hand, I'll need to keep an eye on his movements to avoid- hm?"

Ose whirls around to look at the Warpgate leading to the Labyrinth's core. To Mephisto and Orias's shock, the giant gate begins to sputter and hiss with loud, violent noises. Shortly after, its portal pathway collapses! Several demons in the vicinity scream in fright as a powerful suction force grabs hold of them and pulls them toward the collapsing gate. One second later, like flies sucked into a blender, their bodies explode into meat-chunks and fly into the swirling vortex, disappearing into an unknown place in time and space.

The Warpgate dissipates, leaving only its metal struts sticking into the air.

Immediately afterward, Mephisto raises his head in alarm. "Ksss! My Death Gatesss! They're... they're disssappearing too!"

Ose flickers away, moving at the speed of thought. She arrives in front of Mephisto's Death Gates and watches as they fade into oblivion, leaving only the undead that have passed through on Tarus II while preventing others from emerging.

"Hahaha..." Ose laughs. "As expected. You are more predictable than you think... *Wordsmith*. But this won't stop me."

She continues. "Operation Stormbringer is not a single-step plan. It's something I've meticulously developed for the past six years. You won't win, not even with your Wordsmithing."

The Emperor of Infiltration zips back to Mephisto's position in the blink of an eye.

"The Wordsmith is taking action. He closed the portals to this world. Now, enact the third phase of my plan. We'll need to move a step early, but nothing has changed."

Mephisto raises his head. His eyes gleam with hunger.

"Heh heh heh. Yesss. Finally. I will move ssswiftly, ass you command."

The Duke disappears underground, leaving Ose alone with Orias and the female Demon Lord.

"You're dismissed," Ose says, shoos away the junior. "Orias, forget the Minotaur. I have a new mission for you."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 261: Tactical Wordsmithing

A gargantuan metal pad rests beneath my feet, circular in shape and three hundred feet in diameter. Hovering amidst the vast inner space of Camael's Cube, the magically summoned platform sports a complex holographic imaging interface, one which I'm currently using to render a chunk of Tarus II's surface in extreme detail.

The holographic emitter, a combination of technology and magic, is something my mind-wife, Phoebe, crafted. She designed it so I could visualize the situation on our world, all so I wouldn't have to return to the planet ahead of time. Instead, I can devote my energy to guiding the Cube to Tarus II, where, once it arrives, its vast and all-but-limitless mana will enable me to pull off planet-shaking feats of magic.

However, were I to return to Tarus II without the Cube, I wouldn't be able to tap into its power over such a great distance. Given the size and scope of demonkind's assault on my world, I'd end up like a kitten before a pack of ravenous wolves. No matter how desperately I wish to return to my friends and family, I must maintain a rational mind and do what's best for humanity's survival.

I hover in the air, using my innate levitation powers to suspend myself above the holographic imagery of Tarus II's surface. Innumerable red, green, yellow, and purple dots strike against one another, the different colors representing various factions on the battlefield. Green dots indicate my fellow humans, while yellow dots reference the various monsters and demons on our side. Red dots mark the enemy demon forces, while purple ones indicate enemy monsters. Finally, black dots signify the enemy undead, allowing me to contrast their harsh coloration with the brighter colors of the living.

My hands dance around before me, manipulating the planetary hologram with Phoebe's assistance.

"You teleported Beelzebub away," Phoebe says, a ghostly version of her body hovering in the air beside me. "But he'll return soon enough. You should take this opportunity to kill him."

I nod. "You're right. However, that's easier said than done. Beelzebub's regenerative abilities are far greater than any other demon, except for possibly Satan. Even if I rip him apart multiple times, he'll still come back to life."

"Why not try nullifying his powers?" Phoebe asks.

"Power nullification only lasts a short while," I reply. "Even if I erase his regenerative powers and kill him, his cells will eventually regain their self-healing abilities. Instead, I'll restrain him and deal with him later. Burying him a few thousand feet underground, suffocating him in a restraining suit, and making sure nobody can find him; that should work for now."

After making my decision, I speak several words of power.

"Capture. Envelop. Suffocate. Bury."

A single red blip amongst a horde of green ones vanishes, jumping to another spot elsewhere on Tarus II, thousands of miles from the battlefield.

This single dot of red, Beelzebub, dives deep into the planet's crust, where nobody will find him. After I evaluate his condition and ensure he's fallen completely comatose, I return my gaze to the battlefield.

"Next, I'll heal the soldiers Beelzebub attacked."

I spend the next few minutes communicating with and regenerating the wounds Beelzebub etched into the bodies of my troops. My heart aches when I see all the dead the Duke of Inferno left in his wake.

"There will be a reckoning," Phoebe says, reading my thoughts. "Even if, for whatever reason, you can't kill Beelzebub, you can certainly punish him to the extent he'll wish he was dead."

I nod. "Let's hope that will be the case."

Thanks to Phoebe's brilliant mind, a telepathic link connects my brain to the holographic projector atop the platform. This allows not only Phoebe, but Sir Lorent, Shana, and the Archangels to assume ghost-like holographic forms. All of them hover in space within the platform's confines, smiling as they examine the 'real world' they haven't seen for over a hundred thousand years.

Shana and Sir Lorent stick together, with the little girl riding piggyback on his shoulders. The man formerly known as Mordred's Butcher strolls around, gazing at the holographic representation of Tarus II's surface with wide-eyed interest. He and Shana talk about various things, while the Phoenix bounces along beside them, just wanting to be a part of the fun.

Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael, all stare with focused eyes at the Tarus II battlefield. They scrutinize the demon's movements, muttering to one another about their predictions for the battle. Their innumerable years of experience battling demons give them a keen eye for how their blood enemies might act during a brutal melee.

However, Phoebe stays off to the side with me. My mind-wife, as real to me as her flesh and blood counterpart, smiles as she looks into my eyes.

"You don't really want to kill Beelzebub, do you?"

I shake my head. "I don't want to kill anyone. But if I have to, then I will."

"You say that," Phoebe says, leaning her head against my arm, "but accidentally killing Samson isn't the same as deliberately ending someone else's life. You're still inexperienced, Jason."

A bitter taste fills my mouth. "Unlike Hope. He's been killing for a long time."

"You and him aren't all that different," Phoebe cautions. "You could just as easily have walked down the path of violence, all the same as he did."

I frown. "Speaking of which, where the hell is Hope? You'd think he'd have shown up by now, but I can't even detect him with my Wordsmithing. Is it possible he died? Did the demons somehow kill him?"

My mind-wife pulls away from me. A contemplative look appears on her face. "Hmm. I'm not certain. From what we've learned, Hope has been killing demons for quite a long time. The odds of him running into the Labyrinth and dying now of all times seems too coincidental for my liking."

"After we wrap up this war, I'll need to immediately set out and find him," I say. "If he died, that would be tragic enough, but with soul manipulators around, it could be worse than a minor tragedy for humanity

if the demons get their claws on him."

After putting aside Hope's matter for the moment, I turn my attention back to the battlefield. Phoebe hovers after me while I start flying around, altering the battlefield to humanity's benefit.

A legion of troopers, attacked from behind by Scythers. I summon force-fields to protect my side's injured while healing the wounded.

Felorians, injured and under the threat of imminent death at the Northern Front. I jump in and save several lives, reviving dozens of warriors from the brink of death.

Yamir, my personal chef. He combats the Baron of Stars and several Brutes all by himself, nearly falling during their pincer attack. I save him, too.

"Shield. Protect. Push! Regenerate. Heal."

Like some sort of God watching over humanity, I act as a tactical barrier against the demons, greatly increasing my people's strengths while diminishing their weaknesses.

All the while, Phoebe says nothing. However, after the tenth straight minute of watching me interfere, she sighs.

"Jason. Whether you kill the demons or assist our troops in doing so, the result is the same. Many enemy demons will perish as a result of your actions. Using such a roundabout method is..."

"Cowardly?" I ask.

"...Impractical." Phoebe replies, her tone solemn. "Everyone is out there fighting for their lives, while you get to sit back and ease your conscience by playing the role of a long-distance support unit."

Slowly, I nod. "I know what you're saying. But, think of it this way. There are already medics out there who don't engage in combat. Belial, for example. Don't you think Belial would be far more effective on the frontlines than sitting inside the Hospital, healing our injured?"

"Maybe, but your situations are different," Phoebe says. "Belial isn't the same as you. She is incredibly powerful, with a body that can bend, stretch, and change its shape as she requires. Her strength can sunder mountains. But that's all she can do. Your Wordsmithing is at a tier far beyond hers. With Camael's Cube assisting you... you could end this war in minutes."

"By killing all of the demons," I say, turning to my wife. "That's what you mean."

Phoebe lowers her gaze. "Yes. This is not the time for compassion. That moment has long since passed. Every second you delay, more of our friends, more of *my* friends will perish. It's kill or be killed. Why must you continue hesitating?"

This time, it takes me several seconds before I can elucidate my thoughts.

"Phoebe. Killing the demons, for me, would be easy. Too easy. I need only speak a few words, and they will perish. For countless millennia, the demons, humans, angels, Titans, and all the other species have gored one another to death relentlessly, leaving mountains of dead bodies in the wake of their wars. If I walk the path of genocide, this war will turn out like all the others. Humanity will achieve a win, but not a victory. I can't bring myself to cast aside potential peace in the future. I want to change the status quo. I

want to right the wrongs of my ancestors, and of the demons'. I may fail, but even if I do, at least I'll have tried."

"The definition of stupidity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result," I say, continuing my line of thought. "If the angels and their bloodthirstiness only caused more hatred among the demons, and if humanity only managed to incense the demons with our violence, then perhaps violence isn't the answer. Instead, I should try a new tactic. I should try to become a beacon of light, a shining example of goodness capable of turning both sides away from the path of hatred."

"But how will you achieve that?" Phoebe counters. "You're not the first person to seek out peace with the demons. Remember Solomon? Remember how they betrayed him?"

I nod. "Yes. But I'm not Solomon. I'm me. I need to demonstrate to the demons that my might far exceeds theirs, but that in spite of possessing absolute power, I don't seek their annihilation. I need to show them a different path forward."

Phoebe sighs. She crosses her arms and gazes vacantly at the holographic display of Tarus II. "I love you to death, Jason, and I won't ever pressure you to commit an act as heinous as genocide. You're a good person. Better than me. That being said, I wish you'd be more decisive. People are dying as we speak. Now is the worst possible time to act with reservations."

"I know. Trust me; I have a plan. That's why I was so excited when you completed this holographic projector."

Turning my attention back to the Tarus II display, I fly toward Raphael and the Archangels.

"I need everyone's help for this next part," I say. "I'm going to seal the portals to the Labyrinth and eject all of the demons from Tarus II. Once I start, you guys will point out clusters of demons wherever they appear. As for Mephisto's minions... well, they're already dead. I'll simply kill them again, permanently."

Phoebe looks at me. "Killing the undead just isn't a problem for you, huh?"

"I think of it as doing them a favor," I reply.

Raphael, listening to our exchange, chuckles. "Well, thou mayest do as thou please. We shall assist thee in thy pursuit of defeating demonkind. Our goals align here, after all."

Michael struts around, poking the holographic dots with a look of interest. "If my people had such a useful device during our battles against the demons, I doubt we would have perished. Knowledge is power, and this battlefield-viewing-tool is far beyond anything I've seen in all my years. Thou art lucky to possess it; Thy victory is all but assured."

"Let's not count our chickens before they hatch," I say. "Pay attention. I'm going to begin, now."

After focusing my mind, I take aim at the portal to the Labyrinth, as well as Mephisto's Death Gates.

"Seal. Seal. Seal."

Twenty seconds later, the portals shut down and disappear, preventing any other demons from traveling to Tarus II.

"That's step one," I say. "Now for step two."

The holographic display changes visibly as the demon's forces momentarily 'stutter,' their movements turning hesitant. By tapping into the spiritual energy within the projector, I can summon a crystal-clear image of any position on the battlefield in my head. I scan the faces of dozens of demons, taking a minute or two to observe the looks of surprise and panic on their faces.

"Return. Return! RETURN!"

I tap into the Cube's power, grabbing hold of demons in groups of fifty to a hundred with wide-area magic. Various Scythers, Brutes, Burners, and other grunts vanish from the battlefield, leaving visible gaps in the enemy ranks. These sudden disappearances cause clear signs of alarm to ripple throughout demonkind's forces, making them much less steady on their feet, and causing their morale to plummet.

Phoebe watches me, nodding as she, too, observes their reactions.

"You're doing well," My mind-wife says. "The demons are starting to fall into chaos and disorder. Our troops are pressing the advantage. On the Southern Front, many demons disappeared right when the undead pressed forward, leaving them vulnerable to a pincer attack. If this keeps up- hm?"

Phoebe frowns. She glances to the east, on the opposite side of Hero City.

"Jason! Over there! Look! A portal just opened up!"

I pause my Wordsmithing to follow her gaze. "What? Ah, I see. A Warper summoned that one. No matter. **Seal. Return.**"

I utter two words of power, close the portal, and return the Warper to the Labyrinth. Then, I return my attention to the main demon army. **"RETURN! RETURN! RET-"**

"Jason! Another portal, this time, just north of Hero City!"

I follow my wife's finger. Just like she said, a second blip of energy reveals itself, allowing a flood of demons to tear onto Tarus II's surface from the Labyrinth.

At that moment, I remember a crucial detail. When I first saw Ose while flying around, she was chatting with a small group of Warkers on Hero City's eastern outskirts, far from the battlefield. Now, it occurs to me that she may have planted Warkers in multiple locations, all so she could encircle the city and imprison humanity in an inescapable death trap.

Chills go down my spine. It occurs to me just how far ahead she planned. If I hadn't sealed off the Warpgate's portal, she wouldn't have had to accelerate her plans. Luckily, I caught her in time.

"Seal. Phoebe, keep an eye out for other portals. There are sure to be many Warkers lingering around Hero City's outskirts. Your Environmental Shield will prevent them from opening portals within the city's limits, but outside of that invisible bubble, they will have free reign."

I explain my thoughts to Phoebe, and she nods. "That sounds plausible. However, I think you might be underestimating Ose. You say that closing the Warpgate forced her to take action, but I'm not so sure about that. She might have been waiting for you to do this all along."

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"Ose already had all these Warpers in place," Phoebe explains. "But she didn't order them to open any portals. Why not? Surely, she could have surrounded Hero City hours ago in the dead of the night. Once Warpers acquire a triangulation point on a planet, they can open portals there repeatedly for many months afterward. Something tells me... Ose is counting on your disinclination toward violence. She knows you're a kind soul, so she's going to use these Warpers as pieces to confuse you."

"That... sounds a bit outlandish," I reply. "Why wouldn't she just have them open up portals to attack immediately? Once all those portals open, she could quickly overrun our defenses. What's the point of playing these stupid mindgames?"

Phoebe shakes her head. "You don't understand, Jason. You've never fought in a war. Psychological warfare is just as important as putting bodies in graves. Ose isn't stupid enough to reveal her hand in full to you. She's waiting to catch you offguard. She has other plans beyond merely killing humanity. Hell, I doubt she wants to kill our people. She needs humans for their souls. Souls give demons the power to evolve. As long as that's true, they can never truly eliminate us. More likely, her ultimate plan is to capture as many of us as possible, wipe our minds, and turn us into obedient slaves."

My mind-wife's explanation unsettles me. I fall silent for a minute, opting to massage the roof of my mouth with my tongue.

"Slaves. Christ, sometimes I forget how evil the elites of demonkind can act. Right, so if exterminating us isn't Ose's primary goal, then her reasons are probably more intricate than we can immediately determine. Keep thinking, let me know if you can come up with anything."

After returning my attention to the holographic map, I frown. Four more portals have already opened up during the time I spent chatting with Phoebe.

"Shit. It's like I'm playing whack-a-mole. **Seal. Seal. Seal. Seal.** Oh, goddammit, another one. **Seal!**"

Over the next ten minutes, I close off dozens of portals and teleport the Warpers who summoned them back to the Labyrinth. Eventually, when those Warpers simply return again, I resort to capturing and burying them all over the planet, hiding them in restraint suits so they can't escape.

Even so, the damned bastards just keep coming back! After sealing twenty more portals and placing the Warpers in makeshift underground prison cells, where they'll sleep for eternity, or until I grab them in the future, I still can't slow down the flow of portal creation whatsoever. The speed actually increases, pissing me off.

"Motherf- how many Warpers does Ose have?! Every time I seal a portal and bury its summoner, another one opens up!"

Phoebe chews her lip. "Warpers are quite rare among demons. Only one in a hundred thousand might have the bloodline necessary to evolve into one. That being said, there are trillions of demons living within the Labyrinth. Ose will have more than a hundred thousand at her disposal on any given day."

"A hundred thousand?!" I shriek, becoming more enraged by the second. "You've got to be kidding me! With that many Warpers, Ose could capture Tarus II in an hour! What the hell is she thinking? What's her plan? It's like she's just trying to distract me, like her real plan is..."

I trail off, bringing my words to a halt. After a moment, I frown.

"A distraction? But why would Ose need that? Is she trying to confuse me? To make me unable to direct my gaze toward a specific location?"

"You're a Wordsmith, Jason," Phoebe answers. "Technically speaking, your power and versatility, even without the Cube, far exceeds Ose. However, you're neither omniscient nor omnipotent. You're a human, suffering from human weaknesses. Ose prepared for this war expecting to face you and Hope at the same time, but she got a lucky break when, for the first few days, she could attack humanity without either Wordsmith interfering."

Phoebe continues. "If Ose's goal is to conquer humanity, she wouldn't need to go to all this trouble. Killing us would be even easier. I think you're her real goal. She wants you and Hope, both Wordsmiths, to bow to her might. If she can take your power for herself, then she can completely take over the Labyrinth. We don't yet know about the power dynamic between demonkind and the Volgrim, either. It's likely Ose has her eyes set beyond Hell's borders..."

"The Volgrim," I mutter. "I haven't even started to wrap my mind around those guys. We can only hope they don't figure out who I am. The last thing I want is a super-advanced alien civilization pointing its guns at me."

"They already destroyed humanity once," Phoebe says. "They can do it again. I'm honestly more scared of the Volgrim than I am anything Ose might pull."

"Agreed."

I return to sealing and suppressing any Warpers who open portals to Tarus II. After half an hour of flitting between the portals, teleporting demons back into the Labyrinth and healing any fallen troops, my head starts to hurt.

"This is harder than I expected," I groan. "I'm starting to go cross-eyed. I've never had to continuously Wordsmith this much since I first awakened my power."

Phoebe sighs helplessly. "You'll have to keep at it, Jason. Until we know Ose's true goal, we can only try to suppress her. Unless, of course, you just kill her."

"Not gonna happen. If I must, I will. For now, though, I'll keep playing hands-off."

Suddenly, Raphael cries out in alarm. "Jason! Over here, to the west! Just south of the Warpgate Encampment. Look! Two powerful mana blips have emerged!"

I follow Raphael's gaze.

"Fuck. Barbatos and... Mara? Right, yeah. Mara. I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see her here, but... still."

The Duke of Steel climbs out of the dirt, having recently escaped the Tarus II prison system. Mara, the Baron of Games, trots out right behind him, eager to get her blood pumping and join the fray.

My expression becomes complicated as I debate how to deal with these newcomers.

I don't feel any animosity toward either of them. Barbatos saved Phoebe when I fought Satan six years ago. He returned her safely to the Core. Mara, too, didn't seem like a terrible, irredeemable demoness. She and Ying-Ying seemed like decent people, for the most part.

"What are you thinking?" Phoebe asks.

"I don't know what to do," I immediately reply. "It would be so simple... I could just kill them all. Speak a few words and end the war. But should I? It doesn't feel right."

"Barbatos and Mara are likely to wreak havoc," Phoebe says, her voice low. "Many of our friends will die if you do nothing."

"I know. For now, let's just... keep an eye on things. We'll see how this all plays out."

Phoebe shrugs. "You're the Wordsmith."

I nod. "Sadly."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 262: Wordsmith's Omnipresence

[I wrote a refresher for Cryopod, which will get you from Parts 225-261, just in case you guys forgot any story beats!](#)

First Day: Sixteenth Hour.

Sunlight shines upon Tarus II's surface. At 4 PM, the midday sun beats down overhead, but its rays barely warm the planet's surface, given the early springtime chill.

Ying-Ying, one of Hell's countless Warpers, breathes heavily as she motions with her hands. She hides behind a tree at the edge of the Horned Forest, to the west of Hero City and the east of the Warpgate Encampment. With only half a mile or so separating her from humanity's backline troops, she grits her teeth and perspires.

"Okay... here goes."

Her entire body a bundle of nerves, Ying-Ying finishes her casting motion, then nods toward two other Warpers nearby, both of them also keeping themselves concealed. In unison, they open three portals to the Labyrinth, causing ten-foot-tall shimmering rips in space to materialize. During the dead of night, these gates would draw countless eyes, but with a sunny sky overhead, it takes the nearby human troops half a minute to notice the flood of enemies rushing toward their flank.

That half-minute is all the Warpers need for their ambush to succeed and a wall of demons to crash against the humans, killing dozens of troopers before they even realize what happened.

After summoning their portal, Ying-Ying and the other two Warpers dash deeper into the forest, making sure to get out of the line of fire and escape with their lives.

"Run, run!" Ying-Ying shouts, while fleeing as swiftly as her grunt-body can manage. Lacking the speed and strength mutations of Lords, Barons, Dukes, and Emperors, mere grunts like herself can barely run any faster than humans. Still, with a flood of Mephisto's undead, Scythors, Brutes, and Orcs pouring out of the three portals they left behind, Ying-Ying and her two comrades manage to make a clean getaway before the shooting starts.

After two minutes of running, all three of the Warpers suddenly stumble over their feet and fall to the ground in unison.

"Aaargh!" One of Ying-Ying's companions shouts. The young male Warper, a good-looking fellow with a buzzed head of hair, clutches his heart while writhing on the ground. "H-hurts! It hurts! What's happening?!"

Ying-Ying grits her teeth and closes her eyes. As a senior Warper, she's already summoned dozens of portals during the Stormbringer War today.

"It's... ahh... it's normal! Just give it a minute! Back... backlash! The Wordsmith sealed our spatial powers!"

Ying-Ying swallows several breaths, forcing her heart to calm down. Pins and needles wrack her body as she tries to calm the agonizing pain of having her powers sealed mid-cast. Even so, she manages to pull herself to her feet well before the other two.

"We won't... won't be able to use our powers for a while," Ying-Ying explains, as she helps the other two to their feet. "The Wordsmith's sealing abilities only last a little while, and then they wear off. Not only that, but any second now-"

Before Ying-Ying can finish her sentence, a sensation like rushing air grabs her body and yanks her backward.

Foop!

Ying-Ying teleports into the Labyrinth, followed by the other two Warpers. They appear inside some random pitch-black corridor, completely alone, with no other demons nearby. A split-second later, the demons and monsters who made it through their three portals only minutes earlier pop into existence around them, teleported into the Labyrinth via the Wordsmith's power. It's only thanks to their demonic heritage that they can see through the gloom surrounding each other without a need for light.

The good-looking male Warper continues clutching his chest. "W-wait... that's it? We're back inside the Labyrinth... after all of that trouble! It took us an hour to get to that forest!"

"Yeah!" The other Warper complains. "What the hell?! This sucks! All those goons we summoned ended up here, too! That was a total waste of time!"

Ying-Ying shakes her head. "It isn't. I don't understand Ose's plans, but once we recover our powers, we're going right back to Tarus II. You all memorized the forest's position, right?"

The first Warper nods, a weary expression plastered across his face. "Yeah! I'm not some amateur, okay?"

"Right," Ying-Ying says, ignoring his annoyed tone. "Now that you two have visited that spot, your job will be to keep opening portals there. It'll take about an hour for your powers to recover, but keep trying. Once you can open a portal again, send these guys through. Keep summoning, and don't stop."

"What's the point of that?!" The second Warper asks. "Seriously, if that stinking Wordsmith is going to just keep teleporting us away-"

"No complaints!" Ying-Ying snaps. "You have your job, and I have mine! I need to find the next group and lead them to their designated position. The more advantageous spots where we can summon portals, the more our forces can spread out and surround the fleshbags' city! Capturing that city is our goal, and that's all you need to worry about. Now, are you done whining?"

The other two Warpers lower their heads. "Yes, elder sister."

"Great! I'm leaving."

Ying-Ying pauses for a moment to address the other demons and creatures nearby. "You guys, stay here. Wait for these two to open their portals, then jump through. Kill any fleshbags you see. When the Wordsmith sends you back, you keep waiting and return again. Got it?!"

The other demons nod dumbly, shrugging as if they haven't a care in the world.

Satisfied, Ying-Ying nods her head, then breaks into a brisk run as she uses her intuitive demonic understanding of the Labyrinth to plot a course through its vast, interlinked hallways.

After leaving the others behind, Ying-Ying starts weaving left, right, going up and down various slopes and stairways, slowly making her way toward a distant destination.

As the Warper runs, one of her crystal earrings pulses with mana. Ying-Ying pauses midstride and slows to a stop. A look of elation flits across her face as she touches the crystal, opening up a spiritual connection.

"Mara! How are things?"

Mara, possessing a soul crystal of her own, communicates with her sister telepathically.

"Hey, sis. I'm with Artorias still; we're near the city's southern side. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Ying-Ying nods. "I'm great! Just set up two more portal summoners! I'm on my way to the Return Station now."

"Excellent," Mara replies. "I'm glad things are going well for you. I got word from Ose a few minutes ago; It seems the number of portals closing have started to slow. She thinks we've finally started tiring out the Wordsmith. I have to say, his commitment to not killing any demons is bordering on the ludicrous. He keeps teleporting huge batches of our troops back to the Labyrinth, but I'm starting to wonder how in the devil he has so much mana avail- ah! One sec!"

Mara's line goes quiet, but Ying-Ying doesn't worry. She resumes running toward the Return Station, a place where she can jump back to Tarus II, even with her powers sealed.

After two minutes, Mara reconnects. "Sorry. A group of fleshbag soldiers ambushed me."

"You okay?" Ying-Ying asks.

"Yup, just dandy. Ripped them to pieces, no problem. Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. Ose says the Wordsmith's sealing activity seems to be slowing. I'm surprised it took this bloody long, but at least it finally happened. I was starting to think he'd tapped into some sort of unlimited power source, but I guess he was just a bit more resilient than we expected."

"So, maybe soon, he won't be able to seal my powers again?" Asks Ying-Ying.

"I don't know. Perhaps. There's something funny going on, but I can't figure out what it is. Ose's keeping oddly tight-lipped. Stinking bitch. *Devils*, I can't stand her. The fact Bael chose her as the Third Emperor grinds my gears so much..."

Mara curses a few more times, then returns her focus to the current situation.

"*Ahem.* I managed to piece together one tidbit, something Artorias mentioned in passing. It seems Ose gave Orias a secret ace in the hole. I don't know what it is, but Orias might be the key to everything. I expect some big moves to start soon."

"Noted," Ying-Ying replies, her face filled with determination. "Orias is super reliable. We can count on him!"

"Indeed," Mara confirms. "I've spoken with him many times. Bit of a recluse, but he's got a good head on his shoulders. Any plan hinging on him is practically foolproof. Anyway, I've talked enough. Gotta go. Artorias is ready to move out."

"Okay. Love you, sis! Stay safe!" Ying-Ying says.

"Love you too," Mara concludes.

Ying-Ying's earring fades in color as its mana signature dies off.

As she runs, Ying-Ying's thoughts turn complex.

This whole war is so strange! First, Ose and most of the Dukes got their butts beat by the Monster King, then Bael lost an eye to those crafty fleshbags... now we all need to rely on a Baron for some reason.

I wonder what the heck Ose's plan is with Orias? He's not the strongest Baron, but his powers are pretty versatile, kind of like Mara's. Maybe it has something to do with his gems? I bet he's going to capture the Hero's wife and daughter! Yeah, and then the Wordsmith will have to concede!

Ying-Ying nods to herself, uncertain if she's right, but confident *something* must be up.

After running for another twenty minutes, she slows down before a seemingly nondescript wall at a random spot in the Labyrinth. She glances at it for all of two seconds before putting her hand on a barely visible ink blotch splattered on the Labyrinth's earthen surface.

Suddenly, a flash of light engulfs her.

Fwish!

Ying-Ying disappears from that corridor and travel several hundred miles across the Labyrinth, instantly arriving inside one of the Warpers' many secret dwellings, far from the general demonic population. She trots down the well-illuminated tunnel, one with torch sconces stuck to the walls, all while passing goblins along the way.

These goblins chitter at her while keeping out of her way. She flashes a cute smile at them, ignoring their repulsive green skin and mottled faces. "Hi Jun-Jun! Koopi! Slapster!"

The goblins wave back and mumble their own greetings.

Soon, Ying-Ying arrives in a wide open area, one illuminated with magical purple flames, each fire belched from the mouths of lion statues placed around the room's edges. Dozens of Warpers stand in a circle around one demoness at the center, an ancient-looking Baron with sagging skin and long, grey hair.

The crowd parts for Ying-Ying as she approaches the old woman from behind. "Grandma Ahriman! I'm back!"

Ying-Ying slows to a stop, and the old woman turns around, revealing her still-functioning right eye, as well as her clawed-out left eye, lost during the Energy Wars, 100,000 years ago.

"Oh, Ying-Ying," The old woman says, her voice gravelly and cracked. "*Cough, cough*. You're back. I've been waiting."

"Sorry!" Ying-Ying says, sticking her tongue out cutely. She smiles bashfully at the crowd of Warpers around her, making some of the hot-blooded males and females flare up with lust. "I set up those two juniors at the forest. What next?"

Ahriman uses her long, pointy nails to scratch behind her ear. "Mmm. The return speed has slowed considerably. It appears that the Wordsmith is either running out of mana, or running out of stamina. Either way, it's our good fortune. We've already set up seven hundred and twelve warp points around the humans' main city, but Ose wants at least two thousand before we go all-in on the final assault."

"Sounds like we've got a ways to go," Ying-Ying says, her tone pensive. "I can't tap into my powers yet, but it's only been about thirty minutes. They should return soon."

"I've just received an interesting bit of information from Emperor Yama..." Ahriman says, pausing to emphasize her following words. "He hatched a plan to capture the Hero's daughter. The plan failed. It turns out the little brat possesses Heroic abilities, much like her father, the Wordsmith. I'm sure you can understand the significance of this finding."

Several Warpers nearby gasp in shock, some of them leaning more toward surprise, while others shudder in horror.

"...So, a third Hero, then..." Ying-Ying mutters. "Jason, Hope, and Jason's daughter. I thought the ancient records said there could only ever be one Hero at a time?"

Ahriman nods slowly. "Never, in all my years, have I seen two Heroes at once. However, since we know Jason cloned himself to create Hope, the Council has decided to consider the possibility that one or both Wordsmiths might be using their Wordsmithing to grant Heroic abilities to non-Hero humans. If that is the case, then there could be others we've overlooked; not just Jason's daughter."

"...Frightening..." Ying-Ying mutters, shivering slightly. "What does that mean for us? Are we changing the plan?"

"No. Ose's orders remain unchanged," Ahriman answers. "I'm merely informing you of this new discovery, given your position among the Warpers. When I transport you back to Tarus II, please spread this information among our forces."

"I'm on it," Ying-Ying says with a nod. "And I'm ready for action!"

"Good. I'll send you, Cypher, and Jerald. I'm sure you know where to take them next."

Ying-Ying smiles. "Yes!"

"Great. Alright, you two, join hands with Ying-Ying, circle around me, and allow me a brief moment to cast my spatial magic."

The other two Warpers, Cypher and Jerald, nod politely at their clan sister, then interlock their hands to form a triangle around Grandma Ahriman.

After a minute of weaving magical signs, Ahriman finishes mumbling demonic words under her breath, then raises both of her palms in the air.

"Go!"

Ying-Ying, Jerald, and Cypher shimmer out of reality, traveling through a wormhole to Tarus II and leaving the other Warpers behind.

After they disappear, Ahriman shudders visibly, causing two nearby Warpers to run over and grab her by the arms. "Grandmother! You're exhausted! Take a break, we beg of you!"

Ahriman sags into their grips, sweating heavily. "I'm just... just a little tired, that's all. How can I take it easy when so many of my children are risking their lives out there? Grab me a fresh cup of virgin blood. I just need to wet my tongue a bit; then I can continue."

"Yes, grandmother."

As the two men help ease Ahriman into a wooden chair, the old demoness sighs.

"Ahh, to live long enough to finally see the complete eradication of humanity's Heroes. I thought I'd succeeded already, but it seems the Creator played a trick on me. At least now I can see that day a second time... haha."

Tarus II, Hero City's General Hospital.

Belial walks into Kar's hospital room at the furthest part of the Eastern Wing, a haggard look etched onto her face. She arrives to find Daisy and Rosalia sitting beside the comatose Monster King's bed, with the rotund demoness looking somewhat tired from having spent the last forty-something hours awake, while Daisy appears noticeably chipper in comparison.

Rosalia turns her head to look at Belial. "...Find anyone?"

Belial groans. "No. They're all dead. Every single devil-damned soldier."

She plops onto the visitor's sofa and rubs her eyes.

"I'm way past running on fumes. I feel worse than I did at any other point in my whole life. I've drained my mana past absolute zero, I haven't slept a wink in five days, and to make matters worse, it feels like there's a bloody turtle expanding inside my chest. It seems like something's going to burst out of my chest."

"That doesn't sound good," Rosalia says. She stands up and walks over to the Second Emperor to examine her condition. "Here, look into my eyes. Let me feel your back. Does it hurt when I press here?"

Belial starts to push Rosalia away, but finds herself too tired to resist. Wearily, she submits to the impromptu examination, bending any which way Rosalia asks.

"Ahh! Hurts... right there. Where you touched."

Rosalia kneels down and squints to look at Belial's skin. "Devils! Look at this discoloration! There's a black mark on your ribcage, and it looks like it's moving around."

"There is?" Belial asks. Her words carry a hint of alarm, but with her energy drained, she can barely pay attention. "...Damn. Probably those Shades. They... they must have hit me with a... with a shadow infection... or something."

"I'm not familiar with this condition at all," Rosalia says, shrugging helplessly. She turns to look at Daisy. "Hey, bra- err, kid! Hero's daughter! Come over here and work your magic on Aunt Belial, will ya?"

Reflexively, Rosalia corrects herself, having realized that antagonizing the child with unknown magical abilities and a penchant for torturing mean people with spankings probably isn't the brightest idea.

Daisy smiles sweetly. "Okay! But only because it's Aunt S'matha! If it was the fat lady in pain, I wouldn't help at all!"

Rosalia scowls. "Shut up. It's not like I'd want your help anyway, you... you *sweet little darling*."

The chubby demoness grumbles under her breath, while Daisy hops off her chair and toddles over to Belial. Daisy walks around Belial several times, gingerly touches the wound, and frowns.

"Can't do nothin'," Daisy proclaims. "It's not an ouchie. It's a... thingy. A mean thingy. Doesn't want me to get close. Says it'll hurt Aunt S'matha if I try to make it cry."

Rosalia's mouth lolls open. "...Huh? What are you babbling about? Are you saying you can heal all kinds of crazy injuries, just like the Second Emperor can, but now you're bloody useless?!"

Daisy ignores Rosalia's taunts. "Dunno. I can't do nothin', and that's that. Not very dope of me, I know..."

Several seconds of awkward silence follow.

Rosalia lowers her head and sighs. "I'm sorry, Second Emperor. If she can't do anything, and I certainly can't, then..."

"Don't worry," Belial says. "I just need to rest my eyes for a bit. Once I recover some of my mana, I'll rip this parasite out myself."

The Second Emperor's eyes open and close heavily as she struggles to stay awake. While she maintains her delicate balancing act, Daisy shrugs and wanders over to Kar's side.

"Since Grandpa Gator is sleeping, would it be bad if I woke him up?"

Rosalia barely pays any attention to the child. "Huh? You can't wake Kar up, silly. He's comatose, like Belial was not long ago, Kar can't wake up because he suffered a bad head injury... wait..."

Hardly has Rosalia said those words before she whips her head in Daisy's direction, just in time to see the child climb on a stepstool next to Kar's hospital bed. Daisy reaches over to the crocodile's face and

pokes him several times.

"Grandpa Gator! Helloooo! Wakey, wakey! Are you still sleepy? Grandpaaaa!"

Stunned into silence, Rosalia watches as Daisy does to Kar the exact same thing she did to Samantha many days before, injecting healing magic directly into his brain. The girl uses her magic with such ease that she doesn't even seem to realize what she's doing, reviving Kar bit by bit, until finally...

"...Hurgh."

Kar croaks out a single word, then slowly blinks his eyes.

"Noisy. Why is it so loud in here all of a sudden?"

The crocodile tilts his head slightly to the side, where he spots Daisy.

"Hurgh. Turtledove? Nnn, my chest hurts. Why are you here? What happened to Thundertongue?"

"You're awake!" Daisy says, beaming a smile full of sunshine. "You were hurt pretty bad, but no worries! I healed you right up! No more head-ouchies!"

She pauses for a moment before poking a few other spots on the crocodile's body. "Hmm, but there's an ouchie here, and one there... and one here, too! Ooh, this boo-boo looks bad..."

With each poke, Kar's vitality returns more and more, putting a spark of light in his eyes. Eventually, he sits up in the bed and curls the sides of his mouth into a thankful croco-grin.

"Hurgh! Turtledove! I did not know you could heal people! And look, Big Boobs is here too, along with Sugar! Where is Butterfly, though?"

"You mean Grandma Fairy?" Daisy asks.

"Yes, hurgh. Have you seen her?"

"Not since last night," Daisy replies. "A bunch of stuff happened. Lots of people got boo-boos. Lots of people... died."

As if suddenly remembering the war's existence, a look of alarm appears in Kar's eyes. "Ah! Big Boobs! Tell me what happened! Did Thundertongue make it past the Core? Is she on our world, now?"

Belial, her eyes half-closed, barely manages a nod. "...Yeah. Um... a lot happened. So... Rosalia... you tell him."

Rosalia sits next to Belial, hesitantly deciding to allow the Second Emperor to lean her head against her shoulder. Belial practically melts against Rosalia's arm as waves of exhaustion hit her one by one.

Odd, Rosalia thinks. Running out of Mana would certainly tire any demon out, as would going without five days of sleep, but that shouldn't be the case for an Emperor. There must be something more to her shadow-infection.

She ignores those thoughts and turns her attention to Kar.

"Well, uh, mister Monster King, sir, it's like this, you see... after Ose knocked you out, the demons attacked the Core. I wasn't there personally, but some of the soldiers who came back told me about Bael's transformation..."

She spends twenty minutes explaining to Kar the events of the day, mostly pulling from secondhand accounts she heard in passing. The more Rosalia speaks, the more alarmed Kar becomes.

"Hurgh! The demons captured Ox-arms? They took over the Core, and now they're surrounding the city with portals? This is bad! Terrible!"

He climbs out of bed, shakes a bit of numbness out of his legs, and flexes his arms.

"Filthy hellspawn! Hurgh! To think the only way they could make it here was after they defeated me! Well, too bad! I survived, and now I'm as good as new, all because of Turtledove's magic! I won't stand here any longer and let those scheming bastards kill even one more of my friends! This king has never felt as angry as he does right at this moment! HURGH!!"

Kar pauses for a moment, then frowns.

"...Hurgh. Well, I suppose that's not entirely true. There was *one* other instance where I was angrier than now."

With a shake of his head, Kar strides toward the doorway, pausing only to pat Rosalia's head. "Thank you for the information, Sugar. Your assistance was greatly appreciated."

Rosalia blushes. "M-my name, though. It's... it's Rosalia."

"Hurgh. I know. That is what I said, silly Sugar."

With a chuckle, Kar continues on his way and strides out of the room, pausing only to grimace at the horrific scenes of bloody carnage in the hallway outside. Seeing many of his pet humans dead causes the Sphinx to ball his claws into fists and roar in rage.

"Demon scum! You will all PAY!"

A moment later, Kar rushes away, leaving Rosalia and the other two alone.

Daisy plops her butt on Kar's hospital bed and hangs her tiny legs over the side, kicking them back and forth nonchalantly.

Rosalia sighs. "What now? Should we make for the shelters?"

Daisy shrugs. "Nah! We should wait here. Daddy's gonna call soon."

"Daddy?" Rosalia asks, clearly skeptical. "You mean the Wordsmith, Jason?"

"Duh! Jeez, you're not very smart!" Daisy cackles, taunting the demon nurse with a smug grin. "My daddy is the bestest daddy ever! He can do anything! He's awesome; totally dope!"

"...I'm sure he is." Rosalia replies, glowering at the precocious child.

Like clockwork, a minute later, Daisy tilts her head upward. "Daddy!"

Jason's voice speaks within the room, projected magically from a distant location. "Daisy! Err, how... how did you know I was going to call? Never mind, that's not important. Rosalia, did Samantha find any survivors?"

Rosalia shakes her head. "She didn't, Mister Wordsmith, sir. Everyone in the hospital has died."

"Damn..." Jason replies, his voice tinged with regret. "I'm trying to project my powers everywhere at once, but it's taking a toll on me. My head hurts, my eyes are going fuzzy, and I can barely even think. I've got mana to spare, but my brain has a hard limit."

While Jason speaks, a spark appears in Rosalia's eyes. "Oh! Uh, I don't mean to interrupt, Mister Wordsmith, Hero-man, sir... but um... the Second Emperor! I think the Shades infected her with something! She's way more tired than any Emperor ought to be, even under the current circumstances. Can you help her?"

"What, seriously?" Jason asks. "Goddamn, these demons are so... err, sorry."

"It's fine," Rosalia replies, lowering her head. "I'm... I'm sure you didn't mean *me*."

"Yeah, but still. It's not good to generalize," Jason explains. "Good demons exist. Personally, I believe that demons and humans could coexist, given the right incentives. We just need to stop ripping each other apart. Better said than done, though. Anyway, let me just... **Inspect.**"

A Word of Power travels instantly across time and space, pressing itself invisibly against Belial's body.

Not long after, Jason speaks again. "Creepy. It's some sort of... magical nutrient-parasite. It's feeding on Samantha's demonic mana. Don't worry, though. This little jerk won't hurt her any longer! **Sever! Expel. Heal!**"

Instantly, the parasite loses its hold on Belial's internal organs, teleports out of her body, and fizzles to ash under the daylight streaming into the room from outside. Belial's wounds heal, restoring her body to near-perfect working condition.

The Second Emperor stirs, looking noticeably less lethargic. "...Huh? Strange. I suddenly feel a bit better than before."

"Let's improve your situation even further," Jason says, startling Belial. "My mana is limitless! **Energize!**"

A flood of magical energy fires from Jason's position, tears across the fabric of reality, and floods into Belial's heart. Any remaining lethargy vanishes from her face, making her jump to her feet, as if compelled by the God of Vitality himself.

"I'm awake! Whoa! What the heck- what did you do, Jason?"

"Nothing much," Jason says, trying not to sound smug. "I gave you, like, one and a half drops of primordial energy. No big deal."

"Wow!" Daisy chirps. "That's so dope, daddy! You're wicked cool!"

"Eh... yeah. Thanks, sweetheart," Jason laughs. "Belial, I can't waste any more time. There's no reason for you to stay at the hospital. You're a Demon Emperor; we could use your strength on the frontlines. I'll keep healing people and sealing the demons inside the Labyrinth... but I need you to take out the big threats among our enemies. If you can't bring yourself to kill them, then at least slow them down."

Belial snorts. "No problem, I can handle that. But what about you? Are you going to get your hands dirty?"

Jason hesitates.

"...If I must."

"Good," Belial replies, puffing out her chest. "I think you should know something, Jason, but please don't tell Phoebe. I've already killed once today. I slew three of Yama's Shades. Given how I've broken the vow I made to my deceased sister, I hope that will convince you of how dire our situation is."

"It does, and I know," Jason says. "Take care. Daisy, you and Rosalia should go to the shelters, okay? It will be safe there."

"Okay, daddy! Bye-bye!"

Daisy waves at the air cheerfully, then lowers her hand. As Jason's voice fades away, Daisy's smile disappears, and a look of sadness replaces it.

"Daddy was really scared. He's tired, too. There are bad people everywhere, Aunt S'matha..."

"I know," Belial says, as she trots over, picks Daisy up, and hugs her gently. "But don't worry. Now that your auntie and grandpa are about to join the battle, we're sure to win! You just go to the shelter with Rosalia, okay? Be good, and don't cause her any trouble."

Daisy digs Belial back. "Okay. Stay safe, Aunt S'matha. It wouldn't be very dope if a bad guy hurt you."

"Haha. No, it wouldn't."

A minute later, Belial punches the wall, using her incredible strength to blast open a path to the outside world for Rosalia and Daisy. As they leave, Belial perks her ears up, but even with her Emperor-level hearing, she doesn't detect any distant gunfire.

"Hmm. The demons have already surrounded Hero City, but they haven't yet broken our perimeter. Daisy and Rosalia are going south, to the underground pyramid shelters... but I should head west. That's where the strongest demons are sure to appear. They'll want to reinforce their main forces to form a bulwark, and thus, force their way past our defenses."

Swiveling on her heel, Belial heads back into the hospital. She steps into the main corridor and stomps westward, avoiding the bodies of her fallen friends and comrades.

"*Tch*. Damn! Never have I felt so worthless as I do right now. I saved all of these soldiers' lives, but failed to protect them from that filthy Shade. *Yama*. This time, you've royally pissed me off. Your whores killed my friends. They butchered these helpless humans mercilessly, all for a chance to boost your harem. You disgusting, wretched little *insect*. If I make it out of this war, and trust me, *I will*... I'm coming for you. Your so-called Hidden Hell means nothing to me. I'll rip it stone from stone. I'll pay you back tenfold for your atrocities!"

Belial gnashes her teeth. Her blood-red eyes turn pitch-black for a moment as a sense of humiliation and regret burns inside her heart like a roaring inferno. Her Demon Emperor aura surges into the heavens, and she lets out a bloodthirsty roar!

"Gaaaah!! I hate you! I hate you more than life itself! I'm sick of standing by, watching while the people I love die! My sister, my husband, and all the others, too! They died, while I survived, and for what

reason?! None! Their deaths were senseless, a sacrifice to spare me!"

"I never wanted their mercy! Why couldn't I have perished along with Satan? Why must I suffer and languish in loneliness?! If you want to fight me, then so be it! I'll give you a devil-damned fight! I'll make you all regret initiating this war! I'll show you why I'm the Second Emperor of demonkind!"

Without another word, Belial storms forward, the sheer magnitude of her demonic aura forcing the walls away from her, crumbling the hospital's foundations to powder.

As she walks, her hatred becomes a smoldering furnace, one fueled by her shame and former sense of helplessness.

However.

Once Belial arrives at the central corridor, just before the crumbled remains of the hospital's eastern wing, she pauses and flicks her head to the left.

"Who goes there? Show yourself!"

A tiny figure half-buried under the rubble flinches. After hearing her voice, the figure lifts up its head, revealing the face of Grima, the hospital's receptionist goblin. Still dressed in his suit, Grima appears to be in surprisingly good condition, despite all of the dust and crumbled powder covering him. He stands inside the reception area and blinks twice while gazing at Belial.

"Oh, Second Emperor. You're alive? I just returned and found the hospital in shambles. What happened? Why is everyone dead?"

Belial gazes at the goblin in confusion. "*I'm* alive? I thought you perished, Grima! I finished a full walkabout not fifteen minutes ago and couldn't find anyone still breathing! Where have you been?"

The goblin dusts himself off. He reaches into the pile of rubble he just climbed out of, fishes around inside it for a moment, then extracts an electronic datapad.

"My apologies. I left last night to deal with some errands, and only just now came back. I never expected the hospital to end up in ruins, but oddly, the rest of the city seems fine."

"...That's my fault," Belial mutters, looking away. Her rage fades somewhat as she releases a sigh. "Yama's Shades attacked us. They tried to capture Jason's daughter, but she surprised everyone when she revealed she had Heroic powers, just like her father. She beat the tar out of her attacker, but it was too little, too late. The Shades had already butchered all of our patients. Only Daisy, Rosalia, and myself survived, along with the Monster King, Kar."

"Goodness!" Grima exclaims. He hastily starts tapping on his datapad while shaking his head. "That doesn't sound good at all, not one bit. With all of our patients dead, what are we to do? The teleportation array has broken down, so the Rescue Modules won't save any other troopers' lives..."

"I know," Belial says, shrugging helplessly. "I'm going to go and fight on the frontlines. Jason is assisting our forces remotely by healing our troops and teleporting the demons back to the Labyrinth. You should go to the shelters, Grima. If you see any other hospital workers on the way... tell them what happened."

Grima nods. "Yes. Thank you, Second Emperor. I will do that."

"Great. I'm off, then," Belial says. She gives a quick goodbye wave, then exits through the hospital's main doors, leaving the goblin behind.

After Belial disappears, Grima stares at her afterimage for several minutes, then raises his datapad and continues tapping its surface, typing out a string of notes.

"Interesting. I did not anticipate the Shadow Emperor would make such a bold move. And the Hero's daughter possessing magical abilities? This is high-priority information. My value continues to increase. If humanity survives Stormbringer, this report will boost my prestige considerably."

The little goblin falls silent and continues tapping out a message on his datapad. After concluding, he saves the file for later, then slides the datapad into one of his suit's inner pockets.

"Hm. With this hospital destroyed, where can I gather additional intelligence? Now is not the time for caution. Perhaps the western front? No. If I am seen, it may expose my identity. Should I try scouting the eastern edge of Hero City? Negative. I cannot risk the demons seeing me, either. They seem to be encircling the city from all angles. Escape is impossible."

Grima steps out of the rubble and exits the hospital. After pausing for a few seconds, he starts off toward the northern side of the city.

"Perhaps in the event of a total societal collapse, my best course of action would be to remain in a position close to the Covenant Ships. Then, if an evacuation proves necessary, I will ensure my survival to deliver this report."

"Yes. I believe preserving my life is the most important feat I can perform at this time."

Slowly, the goblin shambles away from the hospital, off toward the camouflaged spaceships at Hero City's northern edge.

All the while, the Stormbringer war continues to rage, unabated.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 263: Jason's Brain Drain

First Day, Sixteenth Hour. Inside Camael's Cube.

My skull throbs and pulses with pain. Every time I use my Wordsmithing, some of my brain cells die, making my vision go spotty for a moment.

"Seal! Seal! Seal! Return! Haaah... haaah..."

I pause my ceaseless magic-casting to sink to the ground, positioning myself at the center of the platform I built inside Camael's Cube. It hovers amidst the glowing void, floating aimlessly, while holographic images of Tarus II's surface play out around me.

My vision blurs for a moment, making me lower my head. "Cough, cough... **Restore.**"

I mumble a Word of Power, causing a bit of vitality to flow into my mind, waking me up once again. However, given how many times I've already revitalized myself, my magic barely has much of an effect. I only obtain a momentary surge of clarity before the world dulls again.

"Jason," Phoebe says, as her holographic body kneels next to mine. "You're exhausted. You can't keep this up."

"Yeah, I know," I say, forcing a smile in my mind-wife's direction. "But what choice do I have? Do you think I can stop and take a nap while humanity faces extinction?"

"You have to," Phoebe replies, her tone grim. "Don't forget what happened to you six years ago! You ran yourself ragged and nearly ended up in a coma from overusing your powers!"

"That... that was different," I cough. "I ran out of mana, back then. Now, my mana is practically unlimited. Camael's Cube can keep me at maximum capacity for as long as I need."

"Your mana supply isn't the problem here," Phoebe says. She turns to look across the platform at Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, their winged holo-forms standing some distance away. "Archangels! Back me up on this!"

Raphael nods. The old man flickers over to my side, momentarily followed by his two brothers.

"Thy wife speaks the truth," Raphael says. "No being, not even myself, can continuously cast magic without pause. In thy case, thy magic is especially strenuous on the brain, given Wordsmithing's need for imagination and intellect. Verily, to speak a Word of Power, thou must first visualize its effect in thy mind's eye; something which ordinary magicians need not do. Therefore, thy mental drain is many times greater than mine, as an example."

"You see?" Phoebe asks, turning back to me. "If you keep going, you'll pass out anyway, and who knows how long you'll be down? Taking a five-hour nap now would be a far superior choice to spending several days in a coma! By then, humanity may have completely fallen!"

Hearing Phoebe's determination, I falter. My body drips with sweat, not from physical exertion, but from the continuous draining and replenishing of my inner mana supply. Her words, like sweet honey,

caress my ears, making my brain ache for the sensation of a soft pillow pressing against my face.

Even so, I force my eyes open. "I can't. You've seen what's happening. Ose keeps bombarding Tarus II with Warpurs. No matter how many I teleport away, she'll only send more! Even if I seal their powers, the effect only lasts an hour before they return. If I stop now, they'll explosively increase their gate-opening speed!"

Phoebe stands up. She turns her head toward the far edge of the platform, where a huge machine I Wordsmithed some eight hours before continuously churns out a series of small, UFO-shaped objects, each one with a long stake sticking out of their bottom so I can plant them in the dirt.

"The Molecular Assembler has constructed almost twelve thousand Subspace Interference Relays," Phoebe says. "If you act now, you can plant them all across Tarus II's primary landmass. That will stop the Warpurs from opening any more portals."

I shake my head. "That isn't enough, Phoebe, and you know it. As you said earlier, we'll need at least fifty thousand relays to block off the whole planet at once. If I only create a subspace barrier around the main continent, Ose will instantly discover its presence, move her Warpurs outside of the anti-teleportation zone, and simply open portals further away. Then she'll send in her minions to destroy the relays one by one, eventually opening up holes in the relay net. We'll buy a few hours, maybe even a day, but we'll lose the element of surprise."

"At this rate, we'll need two more days before we can create enough relays to engulf the entire planet in an anti-teleportation net," Phoebe retorts. "You won't last that long! If you put down the relays now, you can get a few hours of sleep, reset your brain, and resume your sealing activities!"

"Wordsmith, there is something I don't understand," Michael interjects. "Why go through all of this trouble to protect Tarus II? My sister's Cube is more than suitable for a fallback point! Teleport thy human friends here, where the wretched bloodskins won't be able to touch them! If thou dost not intendeth to slay thy enemies with Wordsmithing, then trying to protect thy world from their wrath is an equally pointless endeavor!"

The momentary lull in my Wordsmithing returns a bit of clarity to my thoughts, causing my headaches to ebb. I glance at Michael and shake my head.

"I refuse. Call me stubborn if you want, but I cannot stand the idea of giving up the last six years of humanity's victories to the demons in one fell swoop, not when I have the power of Camael's Cube in my grasp! If humanity loses Tarus II, then we will also lose our hope. Think about Heaven, Michael. When the Archdemon attacked, your people did everything in their power to preserve Heaven, even when fleeing to the stars was a perfectly viable option. Had you left from the onset, you wouldn't have suffered so many losses, and we both know your people could have survived in the Void without issue."

"I am aware," Michael says, his expression stony. "But I offer a retort; thy logic is flawed. By choosing to stay and protect Heaven, my people suffered a catastrophic loss! Thou often speaketh of learning from the mistakes of thy ancestors. Would not such a line of thought imply that leaving Tarus II should be thy first course of action?!"

Gabriel nods. "I concur. Michael is right. Abandon the planet. With thy Wordsmithing, building another home should prove a trivial task for thee. Even Camael's Cube itself; is this not a planet-sized interstellar battlestation? Thou shalt gain a highly defensible fortress the demons will find all but impossible to crack."

Both Archangels pick their words carefully, making me pause.

"You make a good point, but even so... I hate the idea of leaving our world behind. This isn't like when the demons attacked Heaven! Humans are versatile; we have weapons capable of turning the tides of war. Once we have fifty thousand Subspace Interference Relays, it will become impossible for the demons and Warpers to ever invade us again! We're so close to winning... why give up now?"

"Heaven was our home for tens of millions of years," Michael explains. "Tarus II has only been thine for six! I do not understand thy odd fixation on this one planet, specifically."

"Tarus II is a beautiful, lush world," Phoebe says, surprisingly siding with me on this issue. "More importantly, it has a Volgrim warpgate, something the Cube lacks. We've already abandoned all of our other worlds because of Stormbringer. If we lose Tarus II, we'll also lose all the rest, forever. On this point, I agree with Jason. I don't want my daughter to lose the only planet she's ever called home. That being said, I'd give it up in a heartbeat if I knew it would ensure humanity's survival."

I smile at my mind-wife, and she smiles back.

"That's my point," I say. "I have Camael's Cube in my possession. I refuse to believe our battle is one we'll lose! Ose may be highly intelligent, but I'll bet she hasn't anticipated the Cube falling into my hands. How could she? Not even Raphael, the eldest Archangel with direct knowledge of its existence, managed to anticipate its appearance. I think the Cube is our ticket to winning the Tarus II war, as well as the war against demonkind itself."

With a shake of my head, I blink my eyes open, forcing my mind into a more alert state.

"Phoebe, I want you to ensure the Molecular Assembler keeps functioning properly. The moment we have... oh, say, forty thousand Subspace Interference Relays... let me know."

Phoebe frowns. "Forty thousand? But we'll need fifty to wrap the whole planet in an anti-teleportation net."

"I know. I'll think of something. For now, I'm going to change my strategy a bit. I'll start manually creating neutralization bubbles around Hero City. Warpers have to summon portals to specific coordinates, right? I've been going about this the wrong way. Instead of merely closing their portals, I should have created vacuum points where their portals stood, making it impossible for them to open more portals in the vicinity. These points would last for many hours and require far less energy, to boot. I've just been so damn busy that I didn't think of that first."

My mind-wife pulls away from me and nods. "That is a good idea, yes. But aren't you already exhausted and drained? You're barely able to keep yourself awake. How many vacuum points can you possibly create before you collapse?"

"Not many," I mutter. "I'll take a short break first. While I rest, let's work on our next plan. Have any of you obtained any valuable intel, yet?"

The three Archangels spread out and return to a few designated spots amidst the holographic map matrix. Raphael speaks first, taking a moment to point at a position to the south of Hero City. "Not long ago, I noticed a large clumping of demons here. Verily, I have attempted to ascertain their intentions via their movements, and my best guess is that they shall soon charge the southern reinforcements."

"The Battle Brothers have gone missing," Michael adds. "I have done as thou requested and attempted to keep tabs on all of the Baron-rank bloodskins and above. Given their numbers, I have had some difficulty. My best guess is that the Battle Brothers must have retreated to the Labyrinth."

"That's probably the case..." I mutter, only half-listening. My eyes droop from weariness, so I close them to try and ease some of my fatigue. "Hard to say for certain."

"Jason," Phoebe says. "There is one thing I wanted to mention, but it's not related to Tarus II. Um, see, you're not familiar with quantum mechanics, so this will be a bit tricky to explain."

I raise my eyebrows, even while keeping my eyes closed. "Does this have something to do with the Warpners?"

"No. Camael's Cube," Phoebe replies. "I've investigated the Cube over the past ten hours, whenever there was a lull in the action on Tarus II. To my surprise, I discovered something shocking. Jason... the Cube is not traveling faster than light. In fact, it isn't even traveling *at* light speed. Its speed is exactly .99c."

I crack my eyes open a tad. "What do you mean? Ninety-nine percent the speed of light? But you said we were hundreds of lightyears from the Tarus system. If we're moving at sub-light-speed... then... it will take us centuries to return home."

Phoebe smiles. "No, see, that's the incredible thing, Jason. This Cube... it operates on a fundamentally different principle of dimensional travel than Esther's Trifrancium drive. Simply put, the Cube does not travel through normal space, but through a secondary place of existence; one where space itself compresses a thousandfold, drastically shortening the distance between celestial bodies."

My mind-wife waves her hand, causing the entire Tarus II hologram to disappear, replaced instead with an image of the Milky Way galaxy.

"See this star? This is the Kaldova system. This other one is its nearest neighbor, LL-14. A scant fifteen lightyears separates them, practically nothing in celestial terms, but still a considerable distance if we were to travel between them at exactly the speed of light. However, what if you could shrink the distance between the systems to the point that only a tenth of a lightyear separated them? Effectively, you would also improve the 'efficiency' of lightspeed, meaning it would only take you a few months to travel between them."

"And that's exactly what the Cube does," Phoebe continues. "It doesn't actually shrink the gap. Rather, the Cube flies within a plane of reality where the gravitational pull of every celestial object is billions of

times stronger. Space itself shrinks, causing stars separated by lightyears to exist within a stone's throw of each other."

While my wife speaks, I raise my head and glance at Raphael, noticing his odd expression.

"Hey, gramps," I say. "Any of this ringing a bell? That look on your face tells me Camael might have mentioned it once or twice."

Raphael nods. "Mmm. As I have said before, Camael was the cleverest of all angels. Her ability to invent new artifacts made her a genius, even to the point I knew little of the inner workings of her mind. It seems this... this 'shrunk void' thy wife speaks of, it might be the concept of 'P-Space' Camael once mentioned."

"P-Space..." Phoebe mutters. "It's a decent name for now, I suppose. In any case, this plane of reality effectively allows for even slow starships to cross huge distances with little fuel requirements. However, there is one big flaw."

Phoebe switches the holographic emitters again, summoning an image of a vast, white galaxy, one filled with pitch-black spots in all directions, almost like a normal galaxy, but with inverted colors.

"The problem lies in what I said earlier; gravity itself is far stronger. Not only are stars and planets much more tightly packed in P-Space, but their gravitational pulls are amplified massively. If we were to draw too close, the stars would rapidly pull us toward them, yank us out of P-Space, and plunge us into an instant fiery death."

My body shivers involuntarily. "Seriously? That sounds incredibly dangerous. How have we managed to avoid dying all this time?"

"Because," Phoebe mutters, "the Cube itself has a consciousness of its own, instinctual, but capable of navigating P-Space without our assistance. The only reason I've even thought to mention all of this is because... well, it could prove useful in the future. I spent a good deal of time with Solomon and soaked up a lot of his knowledge, but never did I imagine there was an entire branch of science he didn't know about! This could change space travel forever!"

"Haha..." I laugh, after wearily closing my eyes once again. "Solomon wasn't omniscient. His genius came from his ability to copy the memories of other people and store them inside the Crown. This allowed him to copy the minds of humanity's greatest thinkers, extrapolating and combining their knowledge together in wholly new ways. However, anything those people hadn't thought of, Solomon wouldn't know. I'm sure there's plenty that old bastard still had to learn."

Phoebe falls silent, as do the Archangels.

A few seconds later, my mind-wife awkwardly waves her hand and brings back the map of Tarus II.

"Anyway. None of that P-Space information will matter in the slightest if we can't survive this war. Let's see what the demons have been up to, now that you've gone a few minutes without closing their portals."

While she navigates the Tarus II situation, I take a break to relax my eyes, sag my shoulders, and flop backward onto the floor, all while my mind swims around, half-dead.

I loll my head to the side and smile when I see Shana, Sir Lorent, and the Phoenix way off to the side, goofing around and having a bit of fun. Sir Lorent holds the Phoenix's consciousness in his hands like a ball, then gently tosses the bird to Shana. Shana laughs excitedly and catches the Phoenix, then throws the bird back.

[Whee! Haha! This is such fun!] The Phoenix chirps. [Boing! Boing! Whee!]

I laugh to myself and close my eyes.

At least someone here is having fun.

* * *

Eventually, I exhale deeply and force myself to sit up, once again experiencing a rush of exhaustion as my body creaks back into the 'awake' position.

I climb to my feet and shuffle over to Phoebe's side as my mind-wife flutters around from point to point.

"What's the situation?"

My wife doesn't reply. Upon closer inspection, I notice a look of consternation on her face.

"Phoebe? Did you find something?"

"Huh?" Phoebe blinks, before turning to look at me. "Oh, it's, um... well, to the east of Hero City, I noticed there weren't many demons here. By my count, only half a dozen or so, and none of them are Warpers. However, if you look closely, you'll see there's a weird bit of mana hovering in the center of their group."

Phoebe points at the mana signature. I follow her finger and frown. Something about it feels familiar.

"Hmm. **Detect.** Ah! No wonder! It's Ose! Her Astral Form! I thought we couldn't locate her on this map, but it turns out we can! Good job, honey. Now, I wonder what that evil bitch is up to..."

I lean a little closer to the blurry image on the map, then speak a word of power.

"Eavesdrop."

My senses stretch out across the fabric of space, enabling me to listen in to any conversations occurring within that specific spot on Tarus II.

...Silence.

After a few seconds, I frown, then glance at Phoebe.

"Weird. I don't hear anything. I thought Ose would be giving her grunts orders or something."

Phoebe shrugs. "Maybe there was a lull in the conversation?"

Suddenly and without warning, Ose does speak.

"Ah, Wordsmith. *There you are.* I was beginning to wonder when you'd show up."

Her words send a chill down my spine.

What the hell? Did she somehow sense my Word of Power? I only listened in from a distance! How could she possibly...

During that brief instant of confusion, a bomb goes off in my brain.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

A wave of pain strikes me, like a flashbang grenade detonating mere inches from my face.

"Ah..."

The world becomes a blur. Blood vessels rupture in my eyes. The ground rushes at me.

Whump.

"-asooon!"

Phoebe's words are the last thing I hear before the world goes dark.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 264: Orias's Origins

An hour earlier, near the eastern side of Hero City.

Orias, Baron of the Stars, sits cross legged atop a small hill with a few dozen trees surrounding him. This lightly forested bulge in the otherwise wide-open eastern plains grants him a layer of concealment from any hostile gazes.

The Baron takes a long, deep breath. He closes his eyes for a moment to sense the ambient mana surrounding him.

"Mmm. Tarus II. This world is rich with life."

He balls both of his hands into fists, then presses them together in front of his chest. After leaning his head forward, he quietly inhales several additional breaths, all while reflecting on a great many things.

For ages, I've sought the truth of Enlightenment. Sadly, even after all this time, I've yet to free myself from the shackles of mortality.

Orias opens his eyes. He gazes down at the fields before him, where a half-dozen demons stand in a circle. He barely gives them any heed before raising his eyes to the horizon, where he observes the towering cliffs leading to Hero City's eastern edge.

All of this is so... meaningless.

The Baron's eyes become glazed as his mind travels a million lightyears away, toward a reality he may never experience.

Transcendence. The freedom to unshackle one's mind from one's body at will. The apex of spirituality; a peak I can someday only hope to reach.

Oh, my great and ancient master. Your legacy lives on through me. What more must I do? What feats must I accomplish to someday achieve that which you found so effortless?

Orias's thoughts become disturbed as the air ripples beside him. A demon Lord steps through a tear in space and drops to one knee before extending his hands out to reveal a pitch-black metal box.

"Baron Orias. A delivery from Ose."

Orias blinks twice before turning to look at the young demon on his right. Absentmindedly, he plucks the box from the Lord's grasp. "Ah. Thank you. You may leave."

"Yes, Baron."

The Lord nods once, then leaps backward through the tear in space, disappearing into the Labyrinth.

Orias continues staring at the spatial tear's position for several seconds before wearily shaking his head. He lowers his gaze to the black box in his hand, then casually pops it open, revealing a small, palm-sized metal orb, one with all manner of fancy magical symbols engraved on its otherwise smooth surface.

The Baron of the Stars wriggles his nose in disgust. "Another weapon of war. Oh, Ose. Your desire for power, your desperate need to win at all costs... these feelings will someday plunge you into the depths of despair."

While keeping the metal orb, Orias discards the black box, tossing it behind himself as if it were a piece of garbage. Then, he sighs. He returns to his meditation, casting aside any cares or thoughts about the outcome of the Stormbringer war.

"Master. How long has it been? The world you showed me. The visions you bequeathed. Were those all lies? Were they meant only to turn my heart away from the trifles of existence?"

Orias's memories play in his head while he waits for Ose's order... her command to unleash the device she just gave him.

I remember the fateful moment that changed my life as if it were yesterday, even though more than 100,000 years have passed since that encounter.

I was still the Lord of the Moon, back then. A child compared to how I am now. A loyal servant of Satan the Devil. Whatever orders he gave, I followed. Even as a mere Lord, my powers greatly eclipsed other demons of the same rank. They called me a Pseudo-Baron, all because of how mighty my gems made me.

Still, compared to genuine Barons, let alone Dukes and Emperors, my power felt underwhelming. I sought to increase my standing among demonkind, and so I went out on any mission that might temper my image in the minds of my peers.

That was why, on that fateful day, I could not begin to imagine how my life would change.

* * *

It was a hot summer's day. The mission Satan gave me was simple: I had to travel to a remote Tibetan mountain range and eliminate all of the humans living there. It turned out these humans possessed an ancient artifact, something with an origin derived from humanity's first age. Satan wasn't sure what it was, but he assumed it would eventually help the demons in our war against humanity and the angels.

I climbed the mountain range without much trouble. Neither the snow nor the wintry chill bothered me, and my body proved perfectly adept at scaling even the steepest cliff face. Anywhere I couldn't reach with my own power, I simply activated one of my hundreds of gems and made my way past those barriers.

However, despite how easy climbing the mountain proved, locating the village was surprisingly troublesome. I wandered for days, searching north and south, east and west, looking for trails, hints of human settlements... yet I found nothing.

Finally, I made my way to the very top of that snow-crested peak. I intended to leap from the mountain top and glide around it in circles until I spotted my target. Instead, I arrived upon a scene I've never forgotten, even to this day.

Atop the mountain, a muscular man with pure white hair and well-nourished skin sat amidst a small field of flowers. No snow touched the ground within ten meters of his body, and the sun itself pierced the biting cold, illuminating his position with a ray of light. Somehow, it seemed as if the Creator himself had acknowledged the man's existence.

His clothing was naught but simple robes, woven together haphazardly in the poorest and most meager fashion. So thin were they that under any other circumstance, he would have certainly died from frostbite. Yet, despite the flimsiness of the man's garb, he sat perfectly still with both eyes closed, as if the Earth's rage could not touch him. Mother Nature's frozen fury flew in his direction, only to disperse when it came into contact with the invisible aura surrounding his body.

The aura of a *Hero*.

In an instant, I knew who this man was. How could I not? The demons felled by his hands were too numerous to count. Kerrigan, the Temptress. Oderos, Duke of the Fallen. Melgon, Baron of the Secret Fire.

I had met many heroes before, but none as mysterious as the man before me. Nebuchadnezzar, the previous Hero, had put humanity's house in order. His right fist could split the seven seas, while his left could tear the sky in half. Known as Humanity's Champion, he was a powerful one-on-one combatant who frequently ripped demonkind's best warriors limb from limb.

However, unlike Nebuchadnezzar, the Hero sitting before me was something of an enigma. He had slain many demons, yet had never left anyone alive who could identify him. We would only find corpses at various mission points, the bodies of dead Lords and Barons and Dukes left to rot under the midday sun, with deep wounds and lacerations torn across their surfaces.

Immediately, I raised my fists and struck a defensive stance. I gritted my teeth as a feeling of doom swept across my skin.

"You! You are this era's Hero!"

I spoke words that, in hindsight, sounded unbelievably stupid. Of *course* he was the Hero. Stating such only made me more fearful. I was not an Emperor, a Duke, or even a Baron. I was merely one Lord among tens of thousands of others. My existence was ant-like in the grand scheme of things.

The man raised his head. His eyes glowed a deep purple, like the color of royalty. He gazed upon me with the same indifference a lion might bequeath a gnat.

"And you are a demon," The man said, remaining seated. "Have you come to die?"

"N-no..." I muttered, feeling my courage waver. "I... I didn't realize the bloody Hero would be up here. I merely wanted to find a vantage point."

"To assist you in your quest, no doubt," The man said, his words dry. "It seems you intend to slay a great number of humans today, hellspawn."

I faltered. My feet took two steps back as I became even more frightened out of my wits.

"W-well... yes... but I'm... I'm only following orders..."

I could hear my voice trembling, my pitch cracking, as I tried to swallow my nerves.

Suddenly, the man stood up. So fast was his movement that it looked as if he had teleported to his feet. He folded his hands behind his back and assumed a dignified posture. His white hair sat unmoving, untouched by the mountain's blistering winds.

"Well, how unfortunate for you, hellspawn. You've come here alone, with no-one to back you up. Have you any final words before you reap the fate you've sown?"

My mind went blank. I realized, in that instant, that I would die. The man didn't look like a merciless killer; that much I could see in his eyes. Even so, it was clear to me that he took his duty as humanity's protector seriously. He would not let me off the hook.

My teeth chattered. Not from the cold, but from my nerves.

"Y-you... what... what is your name?"

I don't know why I asked that question. Perhaps it was only to sate my curiosity before I died. Perhaps, I wished to know the name of my slayer, in order that I might haunt him in the afterlife.

Whatever the case, it caused the man to frown and cock his head.

"You wish to know my name, hellspawn? I assumed you would ask me to spare your life, as did all those before you."

"There's... there's no point..." I muttered. "You won't spare me. Why even ask? I would rather die with dignity than humiliate myself in my final moments."

Several seconds passed.

The man met my gaze, and the two of us fell silent.

After a full minute elapsed, he nodded.

"Very good. You are not like the others. Allow me to grant you this last request. My name is Siddhartha Gautama. You may refer to me by my heroic title, **Buddha**."

I nodded. "B-Buddha. Yes. Well, I, ah... I thank you for this... this last kindness."

"Hmph. Where are your manners, hellspawn?" Buddha asked, pointing an accusatory finger at me. "I have given you my name. What is yours?"

For a moment, I felt a bit stupid, realizing I hadn't reciprocated in kind. I quickly corrected my mistake and nodded eagerly to his words. "Ah, my name is Orias. I am the Lord of the Moon."

"Orias! I've not heard of you before," Buddha said. "But, then again, I know little of the demons who roam the Earth. A few names have passed through my ears, but I've long since forgotten them. In my eyes, mortal matters are of little consequence."

After pausing for a moment, Buddha tucked his hands into his sleeves, folding them in front of his waist.

"You are a fascinating demon, Orias. Perhaps you do not even realize that much, yourself. If you can pass this test, the same one that so many demons have failed before you... I should hope that we might

even become... friends."

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. "T-test? What test? Are you going to spare me, after all?"

"I have no say in the matter," Buddha replied. "Listen well, young demon. My heroic abilities are not like those found among the previous heroes. They contain no innate strength in and of themselves. The one I use most often is a special one which absolves me of any guilt related to causing another sentient being's death. In all my years, I have never slain a demon. Rather, they have killed themselves."

Buddha extracted his hands from his sleeves. He raised his right hand to his forehead and pressed his palm there for a moment before pulling it away. To my astonishment, an eye opened up, one which greatly resembled Lucifer's third eye!

"Tell me, Orias. Have you ever heard of karma?"

I shook my head. "I have not."

"It is a simple concept, one I discovered when I was but a babe suckling my mother's breast. The Creator came to me in a dream. He informed me of the great truths of the world. When a creature dies, its soul passes on to the Great Beyond. But what happens afterward? Where does that soul go once it has departed our mortal plane?"

Buddha held up both of his palms, causing a black flame to appear in his right hand, and a white one in his left. He merged them together, forming a chaotic circle of light and dark energy.

"Righteousness and sinfulness; they are two sides of the same coin. Neither can exist without the other. Good men have committed foul deeds to benefit their people, while evil men have performed great merits to enrich themselves. This is true of all sentient beings, be they human, demon, angel, or otherwise."

Buddha continued. "Doubtless, you have committed many heinous acts during your lifetime. If I have judged you correctly, you have also performed many virtuous deeds as well. But what if I told you, Orias, that those feats carried a heavy burden with them? Every act you perform in this life will influence your next. Those who live lives of virtue will enter the karmic cycle of reincarnation, becoming kings and emperors in their next life. However, those who practice wickedness and devilry will reincarnate as peasants and slaves."

Hearing Buddha's words, my body lost some of its strength. I sank to my knees, listening to his speech with rapt attention. "This life... the next... do you mean to say that there are lives beyond this? What of my current one? I am neither strong nor weak. Did I perform poorly or superbly in my previous existence? Can you tell me, great Buddha?"

Inadvertently, I accepted Buddha's words as truth. I began to look up to him, feeling as though he were not some fool speaking in riddles, but a man whose gaze had pierced the veil of mortality.

He had seen the truth of existence. How? I knew not the answer.

What I did know was that, in that moment, I felt as if my mind had expanded, and my gaze spread across the cosmos.

There was more to life than following orders, seeking promotions, and working my way up the demonic hierarchy. There was more to my existence than I ever could have imagined!

Buddha smiled. His expression carried no malice nor hatred. Rather, he looked at me with pitying eyes, perhaps realizing the fog that had shrouded me for as long as I had lived.

"I do not know the answer to your question, Orias," Buddha whispered. "I cannot see into your past lives, nor your future ones. I can, however, use my Eyes of Karmic Retribution on you. I shall call down Divine Lightning upon your body. You will suffer a pain most excruciating as the total karma you've accrued up to now will activate ahead of time. If the Creator deems you unworthy, you will die where you stand, and your soul will evaporate into the Void. You will never enter the Great Beyond. You will never again step onto the path of reincarnation. Your tale will end here."

The Buddha paused.

"But... if you have not lived a hedonistic life... if you have not succumbed to foolish, evil desires within your heart, perhaps the Creator will spare you. Perhaps he will gaze upon you with pity and reset your karma, allowing you a new chance at forging your destiny."

The black and white flames within Buddha's hands faded away, while the eye on his forehead began to glow with divine energy.

"I cannot say what the result will be, young Orias. All I can say is... I hope, for both our sakes, that you will give me a pleasant surprise."

A moment later, a burst of light shot out of Buddha's forehead-eye. It struck my chest and sent me flying backward, where I crashed into the snow.

Anguish, torturous agony, and blinding pain struck my soul. In an instant, I felt my consciousness ripped from my body. I flew into the clouds, through the void, to a distant point upon the horizon.

My mind suffered innumerable cycles of misery. I felt the pain I had inflicted upon others throughout my life, the humans I had dismembered, the other demons I had dueled, and the angels I had butchered. Their pain became mine, as I felt the wounds I inflicted upon them fall upon me, but with a thousand times the severity.

Just when I thought I couldn't endure any longer, the barrage of attacks stopped.

I arrived inside a castle of light, a shining fortress within the Creator's domain. I felt His gaze fall upon me, and with it, a comforting warmth.

Moments later, all of the good acts I had performed in my life began flowing into my mind. I remembered the kind words I had given to a suicidal young imp, and how those words touched his heart.

I remembered a human child who, in passing, I had found unconscious in a forest and returned to his family. I never revealed myself to the boy or his parents, but even so, I saved his life, when killing him and reaping his soul would have been the first thing any other demon did.

Over and over, all the acts of kindness I had performed in my life flowed into my mind. I wept tears of sorrow. I felt the joy those people felt as if they had instead been my benefactors.

After an eternity passed, He spoke. The Creator's voice fell upon my ears.

"Now, do you understand, my child?"

I nodded, with tears in my eyes.

"Yes, Creator. I understand! I do! Inflicting pain upon the world spreads nothing but misery, while spreading joy and cheer improves the lives of everyone involved! All my life, I have been wrong! I have walked the line between good and evil thoughtlessly, like a headless chicken... but no more!"

The Creator smiled. I felt His love as He looked upon me with the eyes of a doting father.

"Good. Now go, Orias."

With a gentle push, the Creator flung me backwards, out of His domain, where I hurtled through the Void endlessly. I crashed back into Earth, awakening within my body as before, but this time, with a sense of purpose I had never felt in all my years.

"Great Buddha!" I cried. "I saw it! I felt the Creator's presence! He told me... he told me... great Buddha? Where did you go?"

I gazed around the snowy plateau, but no longer did the sun hang in the sky. Instead, the darkness of night had swallowed me, and the Buddha had left, taking with him his knowledge and wisdom.

Even the flowery clearing where he had once sat had accrued half a foot of snow, masking his presence to any who did not already know he had been there.

I sank to my knees, a deep sense of sadness in my heart. I wanted to thank him... to thank the man who had rekindled my spirit.

But I couldn't. He had left me behind.

Orias's eyes open. He gazes into the distance, as the ancient memories fade away.

I spent the next four decades casting aside my Earthly desires to live a life according to the Buddha's will. Eventually, I encountered my master once again.

The Buddha had not forgotten me. He told me I was the inheritor of his will, and that so long as I passed one final test, he would reveal to me the secret of Enlightenment.

"He struck me once again," Orias mutters out loud, his eyes losing focus. "He tested my karma a second time and found that I had stopped walking the path of hedonism. Sadly, he determined that I had not fully embraced his teachings. Buddha left me, telling me that I would certainly find the answers I sought someday... but that day would not come during his lifetime."

The Baron of the Stars sighs deeply. He gazes into the sunlit sky, a forlorn look on his face.

"What more must I do, master? What more must I sacrifice? Have I not given up enough?"

While shaking his head, Orias ruefully smiles.

During the second test, my master's Karmic Eyes unlocked some of my hidden potential. He instantly elevated me from a Lord to a Baron, increasing my power tremendously. My master told me this was

because karma was, in itself, a form of authority over the material plane. What did he mean? Could I, perhaps, use Karma to increase my rank? Is it possible that devouring souls is not the only way for demons to mutate into greater forms?

The Baron falls silent. He rolls Ose's orb-device around in his palm, feeling the texture of its engraved magical conduits with his fingers.

After several long minutes, a flicker of mana appears at Orias's side. He tilts his head up to see Ose's Astral Body towering over him. She rests her hands on her hips and looks at Orias with a neutral expression.

"Is something the matter, Orias?"

"No, not at all," He replies, lowering his head once again. "I was just reminiscing about some old memories."

"I see. I'm sure you remember what I told you before. I'll attract the Wordsmith's attention soon. Wait until that device starts glowing, then hurl it into the air above my head. If all goes well, your contribution to this war will be among the highest of anyone here."

Ose points toward the six low-ranked demons standing in a circle out in the plains. "Those Amplifier grunts will suit my purposes well. Aim for the space roughly one hundred meters above their heads. I'll be standing in the center, using their power to make myself visible to the Wordsmith."

Orias nods. "You told me before that you can sense the Wordsmith through a... a soul-link? How does that work?"

"Haha," Ose chuckles. "It's a bit of luck on my part. The Wordsmith attacked me earlier while he was in a soul-body. During our engagement, I stealthily imprinted a tiny portion of my astral essence onto his soul. Thus, whenever his gaze sweeps across the battlefield, I can sense him. This device is similar to one I was planning to use on him before, albeit modified to fit the current conditions. I don't know why Jason wants to engage in long-distance warfare with our people, but if that's his plan, then I'll just have to modify mine."

"And this metal ball will... kill him?" Orias asks.

"No, no, devils, no!" Ose cackles. "Bahaha! I wouldn't dream of killing that blessed child. The Wordsmith is my key to unifying the Seven Hells. If I can ensnare him into my service, we demons will finally have a weapon capable of taking on the Overlords. I think you, of all demons, know how important that goal is."

Orias appears unmoved. "Mmm. So, it won't kill him. Let me guess; it will cripple his magic conduits?"

"That's right! If it weren't for my *precious* older brother, I'd never have thought of this method. I can take the Wordsmith out of the fight long enough to perform one last assault on humanity. I'll capture his wife and child, hide them away, and force him to do my bidding. If he and Hope wish to skulk about like cowards, then I'll make them regret toying with me."

Orias tilts his head up to stare at Ose. His expression, impassive, counters her evil, wicked grin. She gazes into the distance at the six Amplifier demons standing out in the field and chuckles to herself, imagining the victory she'll soon enjoy.

"Ose..." Orias mutters. "Do you ever... tire of all this? This rat-race? The never-ending quest for power, dominance, and control?"

The Third Emperor's grin falters. She glances back at Orias and frowns. "Hmm? What are you babbling about? You're a wonderful Baron, Orias, but I've always thought your meek and mild-mannered ways were shameful for a demon. Have you no pride? Evolution and growth is what defines our species. All you care about is mining gems. I couldn't give a damn what you do in your spare time, so long as you're there when I need you for the important missions."

The Baron sighs. "I'll take that as a 'no.' It's too bad, Ose. Your lust for power... it will devour you, someday. The fate unfolding before you will come as a result of the karma you've reaped. I only hope that, in the next life... you find some measure of peace."

Ose's frown deepens. "Are you about to betray me, Orias? Am I unable to count on you in this critical moment?"

"Hah..." Orias chuckles. "Do not worry, my Emperor. I haven't failed you before, and I certainly won't now. I just wish you could find peace in life, and a better path forward... one requiring less bloodshed."

"Oh, for devil's sake, not this spiritual mumbo-jumbo..." Ose groans, rolling her eyes. She turns toward the six Amplifiers and flips her hair. "Just be ready for when the moment of destiny arrives. I'll activate the bait in half an hour."

A moment later, she flickers out of existence.

After she leaves, Orias closes his eyes. Then, he plucks an Aquamarine gem out of his right arm. The large and unsightly indent in his skin rapidly closes up, returning the unsightly hole in his arm to pristine condition.

"Perhaps that is why I cannot achieve Enlightenment..." Orias mutters. "I still hold some attachment to my brothers and sisters, my fellow demons. I still fight and kill anyone my Emperors order me to target. I hold no desire toward power, but even so, I haven't yet let go of my attachments to the mortal plane."

Orias clutches the Aquamarine in his hand. Its gorgeous sky-blue luster glitters in the midday sun, making him smile.

Gems are the key to my power. They grant me a wide range of abilities, transforming me into a powerhouse among the Barons. But why do I value them? Is it only because of their utility? Their beauty?

No. It is because I see the karmic cycle of life echoed within their shimmering depths. From the dust of the cosmos, it takes each gem millions of years to form their complete shape. Then, they melt into the cores of planets, waiting for me to unearth them from their pitch-black prisons.

By activating a gem, I give it purpose, and it in turn gives me power. Without me, the gem is nothing more than a pretty rock. It is only when we unify ourselves that, for a few scant minutes, we can realize the deeper meanings inherent in our lives.

Orias clutches the Aquamarine in his palm, then snaps his fingers. It explodes into dust, granting its magical attributes to his body. A liquid-like sensation spreads across Orias's skin as he becomes invisible to the physical world, even hiding his demonic mana so nobody can sense him.

The Baron of the Stars melts into the background cosmic radiation, using the Aquamarine's power to shield his presence from all eyes. Even if someone knew he was there, they wouldn't be able to detect him.

After several minutes pass, Orias plucks out another Aquamarine, sighs, and snaps his fingers, replenishing his faltering invisibility.

He does this a couple more times, until the orb Ose gave him begins to shimmer. Orias flicks his eyes toward the six Amplifiers, where, presumably, Ose stands in their midst. He waits a few seconds for the orb to glow even brighter, then rears his arm back, coils strength into his muscles, and flings the orb across the plains, more than three-quarters of a mile away.

With a size smaller than a sparrow, the orb draws no attention to itself as it rockets toward the designated detonation position. The instant it reaches its target, Ose lunges her arm upward and fires a bolt of lightning from her fingers. It strikes the orb at the speed of light, causing a colossal detonation of chaotic mana throughout the entire area.

All six of the Amplifiers boosting Ose's astral presence howl in pain. The chaotic energy above them not only batters the Wordsmith's presence, but theirs as well, tearing throughout their mana conduits and melting their nervous systems into puddles of bloody pulp. The Amplifiers all fall to the ground in unison, perishing where they stand.

Ose stares into the sky. Her eyes turn bloodshot as a wild, wicked grin stretches across her face.

"Yes. Yes! HAHHAHA! It worked! For a brief instant, I sensed the Wordsmith's soul violently shudder! He took the full brunt of that attack, and now I've crippled him! It will be weeks before he fully recovers! Now, so long as Hope doesn't show up, humanity will plunge into my grasp!"

She cackles evilly, laughing at the heavens victoriously.

"Ahahaha! Oh, what a pleasurable feeling! Even if Hope does show his face, I now have the perfect tool to deal with him! Never again will these Wordsmiths get in my way! First, I'll re-enslave the humans, then unite the seven Hells! After that, the universe will be mine for the taking!!"

While Ose laughs uproariously, Orias watches in silence. His invisibility wears off, revealing a look of fatigue etched onto his face.

"Well, Ose. I hope you've gotten everything you wanted. As for me, I've done enough here to fulfill my duties to demonkind. I'll be heading back, now."

He mutters these words under his breath, not speaking to anyone in particular. After shaking his head, Orias pulls another gem out of his left arm, snaps his fingers, and disappears with a flicker of light. He

returns to the Labyrinth, leaving the rest of his people to finish up their efforts in the Stormbringer war.

Little does humanity know, but their savior can no longer fight on their behalf.

They will have to win the war by themselves.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 265: Humanity, Encircled

AUTHOR NOTE: I corrected a big error in Part 264! [Read about it here!](#)

Day One, Hour Seventeen, at the western edge of the Horned Forest.

Phoebe Hiro and her army tentatively hold the line as countless waves of demons and undead swarm at them from the Warpgate encampment. No longer sealed off, it hums with energy, spewing out Hell's minions one after another, their numbers neverending.

Not only does the Warpgate remain open, but dozens of Warper portals surround the Warpgate Encampment, allowing even more demons to flow forth unceasingly. With so many demons spread out over such a vast area, Phoebe recalls all of humanity's forces to Hero City, placing them in defensive formations on the north, west, south, and eastern edges to hold the demons back. Innumerable enemies swallow up the midday landscape, blotting out the horizon.

A communication signal beeps inside Phoebe's helmet. She lifts her cannon to fire another volley of projectiles before opening a comm channel.

"Yes, this is Commander Hiro speaking! What is it? Over."

Elder Skarde, currently assigned in the center of Hero City to guide its defenses, speaks in earnest. "Commander, I just finished checking the bio-data from our troopers' suits. For the past hour, not one of our soldiers have healed from their injuries. I don't know why, but it appears your husband has stopped supporting us from the backline. Over."

Phoebe, still wearing her fifteen-foot-tall demonstone exosuit, raises her right arm to fire a hail of volatile projectiles into the demon army's backline. They explode into bits of shrapnel, ripping through any fleshy bodies in the vicinity.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Phoebe groans. "Goddamn it, Jason! Why would you leave at a time like this? Don't tell me he exhausted himself from Wordsmithing too much? Fuck! I bet that's exactly what happened!"

After swearing like a sailor for a few seconds, Phoebe grits her teeth and refocuses her attention.

"Never mind that. Elder Skarde, assume that we won't have Jason around to heal anyone. Position our troops in such a way that we can minimize our casualties. Start evacuating the civilians onto the transport ships. Get as many people to Moonbase Kelkin as you possibly can. Over."

Elder Skarde falls silent for a moment.

"That base can't support more than a few thousand people, Commander, and the ten Covenant ships can only save 200,000 people at most. Excluding the hundred and fifty thousand troops we've lost today, we still have more than three and a half million humans and monsters within Hero City's confines. Over."

"I'm aware," Phoebe mutters. "You'll have to decide who stays and who goes, Elder. Prioritize humans over monsters. I want a split of sixty percent children, thirty percent women, and ten percent men. Over."

"Commander, I... yes. I'll do as you command," The man replies, his voice low. "Elder Skarde, out."

The line goes dead, and Phoebe resumes her attack.

"I'm sorry, Elder..." Phoebe mutters, speaking to nobody in particular. "It's selfish of me to put this burden on your shoulders. Even so, someone has to decide who lives and who dies. I'm too biased. I could never choose among all of the friends I've made. I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

She stomps toward the frontlines, hatred smoldering in her chest.

"One hundred and fifty thousand... that's how many humans and monsters these demons have killed. Unforgivable. Ose... when I get my hands on you... I'll tear you in half!"

Phoebe storms toward the frontlines, where her soldiers have hastily erected dozens of heavy steel barricades. The men and women at the front bravely fire at their enemies, cutting them down mere feet from the final barriers. Snipers wearing Hummer suits hover in the air above, picking off the strongest Grunts and Lords wherever possible, while a half-dozen gigantic mech suits and nearly fifty armored tanks swallow up the backlines and middle ground, shelling the demons from a distance. Every cannon fired wipes out a handful of demons, slaughtering humanity's enemies ten times faster than the demons can kill them. Even so, the hordes of demons never slow down for even a second.

"I'm here!" Phoebe yells, as she aims her Zeus Strike cannon at a big clump of demons. She pulls the trigger and fires a heavy shell forward. It rips through dozens of demons in the blink of an eye, traveling like an angry bowling ball through an unending line of pins. After flying more than fifty meters, it explodes with a terrific bang, killing dozens more demons.

Phoebe clicks the trigger again, only for Centurion to blare a notice in her ear. **"ZEUS STRIKE CANNON IS COOLING DOWN. YOU MUST WAIT FIFTEEN SECONDS BEFORE FIRING AGAIN."**

With her right arm engulfed by the heavy cannon, Phoebe drops to her knees, grabs a heavy machinegun from a nearby weapon box, and takes aim with her left.

Brrt! Brrrt! Brrrrrrt!

She fires into the demonic hordes, mowing them down without even bothering to aim. Every bullet finds a target, so thick is the horde's composition.

"They just keep coming!" A nearby trooper shouts, his voice wavering. "I-I must've fired a million bullets already!"

"Then shoot a million more!" A female trooper replies, only glancing at him for a split second. "If these fuckers want to kill us, then we'll drag as many of them down with us as we can!"

Phoebe laughs. "Hah! That's the spirit!"

She resumes her assault, using her Zeus cannon whenever it cools down, but otherwise sticking to her machinegun.

After several minutes, a female voice speaks from behind Phoebe. "There you are!"

Phoebe spins around in surprise. "Samantha? Wait, what are you doing here? Are you okay? I heard about the hospital!"

Belial, wearing what can only be described as a fetishy swimsuit, shakes her head. "There's nothing left. Your teleportation doohickey got destroyed. Jason healed me and refilled my mana, and so, I decided to come here."

Phoebe nods. "Alright. Perfect timing. I have some soldiers over there, they got injured badly. If you could heal them up-"

"No, Phoebe," Belial says, her voice oddly calm. "I didn't come here to heal anyone. I came here to fight."

The Second Emperor of demonkind balls her hands into fists, then flexes her muscles.

"I lost too many people in that hospital, Phoebe. I'm here for blood."

"B-blood?" Phoebe asks. "What do you mean? That's not like you. You've always told me you hated violence."

"I did," Belial growls. "And I still do. But Phoebe, these demons... they almost killed my precious niece. They almost killed *you*. I won't let that happen again. I'm sorry if this changes your opinion of me, but I can't stand on the sidelines anymore. Rather, I *won't*. I'm going to remind my species why I'm the Second Emperor. I'm going to remind them why even *Bael* fears me."

Something about Belial's tone catches Phoebe offguard. She gazes at her best friend for several seconds without saying anything, then slowly nods.

"I understand. Don't worry, Sam. I wouldn't hate you for wanting revenge on scumbags. I just worry you might be going against your inner self. You don't have to force yourself to fight."

"Oh, but I do," Belial answers, her tone decisive. "Without me, the odds you'll win this war are extremely low. Don't worry about my safety... if I can battle Archangels and come out alive, a sea of Grunts, Lords, Barons, and Dukes won't slow me down in the slightest."

Belial's figure changes shape. Her legs and thighs grow noticeably more muscular, while her arms turn into bone scythes attached to whip-like appendages. Her face deforms, turning noticeably more monstrous as she grows several layers of teeth, like a Great White Shark.

"This appearance..." Belial growls, while glancing at her body. "...expresses perfectly the way I feel! I'll show the demons what it means to face a true monster!"

Like lightning, Belial bolts forward, leaps over the heads of a dozen soldiers, and lands amidst the incessant hail of gunfire and demon bodies.

Slash! Slash! Slash!

Belial's blade arms whip around in a tornado of fury, decapitating a dozen demons within seconds. She charges into the flood of enemies, continuously reaping lives no matter what direction she travels.

All the while, Phoebe gazes at her best friend's fading figure with a mixture of sadness and despair.

"Sammy..." Phoebe mutters. "What happened to you? Who made you suffer enough to become... that?"

Across Tarus II's surface, Ose's Warpors continue creating more and more portals, encircling Hero City from all directions. The city's Environmental Shield prevents them from opening rifts inside its confines, but below the cliff-lines of Hero City's elevated plateau, no such limiter exists.

Having retreated from the frontlines hours ago, Brunhilda and the other Felorians swap out with a fresh regiment of soldiers at Hero City's northern border, feeling a momentary surge of relief as they finally get to retreat to the backlines for a breather.

Brunhilda and one of her sisters, Sariah, slump against a rock just below the city's cliffside border while splashing water on their skin. Their bodies ache with exhaustion. Their eyes droop as the sweet release of sleep calls out to them.

"So... so many demons..." Sariah mutters. "They never stop coming. How can we possibly survive?"

Brunhilda rubs her hands against her face furiously, desperately trying to soak the liquid into her pores. "I don't know, sister. I don't know. But still, you must have faith! The Wind Mother protected us earlier. As long as we pray to her, she will guide us to victory!"

"I hope you are right," Sariah whispers.

While the two of them chat, a lightly bearded fellow hurries over in their direction. "Ah! You two are Felorians? The ones just pulled back from the front?"

Brunhilda turns to look at him, noting his white and purple robes. "Yes. And you are?"

"My name is Saul," The man says, as he reaches around behind himself to retrieve a backpack. "It's fine if you don't know me; I'm nobody important. Let's see here, umm... right, here are a few energy and ration bars. Personally, I think they taste quite good. They'll help you restore your stamina and get a good night's rest."

He pulls out several neatly-wrapped energy bars, then hands them over to the women. They accept the bars with faint smiles before sighing.

"Sir Saul," Sariah says, "Have you any word from the frontlines? We Felorians don't wear those metal suits, you see, so we aren't aware of the overall situation."

Saul slings the backpack around his shoulders once again. "I'm afraid I don't know much more than you. Last I heard, the demons started summoning portals around the city. We're completely surrounded. Miss Hiro is off fighting on the frontlines, the Hero started healing people and sealing off the portals remotely, and I think a few demons slipped past the barrier, because the hospital got destroyed! It's dreadful news, dreadful indeed."

"You said the Hero healed people remotely?" Brunhilda inquires.

"Mhm, yes. I heard a few soldiers mention it. Commander Hiro transmitted a message to all the troops informing them that her husband had returned, but was keeping his distance from the battlefield. Evidently, he's been shielding and healing injured soldiers with his Wordsmith magic."

"Oh..." Sariah mutters, glancing at her sister with embarrassment. "Well, I guess it wasn't the Wind Mother after all."

"Pardon?" Saul asks.

"Nothing... it's nothing."

Both women quickly unwrap their energy bars and bite down, savoring the taste of vanilla, nutmeg, and chocolate, all mixed together with a slightly fruity tang.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I still have many many soldiers to visit," Saul says, jerking his thumb toward his backpack. "Thousands of troopers are swapping out now, and all of them are exhausted and famished."

Brunhilda nods. "Your assistance is appreciated, Brother Saul. I thank you for these delicious crunchy bars."

"Anytime," Saul says, offering a quick wave. He runs off, leaving both women behind.

Once Saul leaves, Sariah smiles shyly. "That man was... quite attractive."

"Agreed," Brunhilda replies. "He looked like the sort of fellow who could build an empire. A fine mate for any woman."

"Ugh, there you go with that leader-talk," Sariah groans, nudging her sister playfully. "Anyway, once we finish eating, let's hurry to bed. I'm so tired I could sleep for a week!"

"Sadly, we don't have that much time..." Brunhilda mutters. She glances toward the north, where the demonic hordes continue pressing against mankind's wall of guns and blades. "We'll need to keep our rest minimal. Every minute we sleep, another brother or sister will die."

Sariah lowers her eyes. "I'm sorry, sister. I didn't mean to be so insensitive."

"Don't apologize, it isn't your fault," Brunhilda says.

She caresses Sariah's cheek for a moment, then stands up and walks away.

Hero City's southern border.

Lieutenant Samuel guides a massive platoon of soldiers and mechas to defend against the second-largest horde of demons on either of Hero City's four sides. Having long-since lost the prisons, they can only slowly retreat while continuously blasting away any demons who get within striking distance.

"God fucking damn it!" Samuel bellows. "Just die already! If I had a god-damned nuke, I'd blow you all to kingdom come!"

He wears the same Rhino suit as always, now fully repaired thanks to Jason's Wordsmithing. Using his armor like a wrecking ball, the Lieutenant engages in combat with a pair of Baron demons, one of them

wielding fire magic, and the other, a sound manipulator.

The fire-type Baron, Greedle, cackles evilly. "You're a tough one, human! But I'm the second-best fire-spitter after Beelzebub himself! I'll roast you in that tin-pot you call 'armor,' nyehehe!"

The sound-type Baron, Trinnic, says nothing. Instead, she flickers from side to side, her body turning transparent whenever any attack comes close to hitting her. She transforms herself into a sound-wave, then instantly arrives at Samuel's side.

BANG!!

A deafening thundershock strikes Samuel, flinging him to his left. Despite the unexpected attack, Samuel's suit instantly compensates, shifting its molecular mass to its right leg and stomping down to stop his flight. He reorients himself in midair and whirls to face Trinnic.

Brrrrt!

A wrist-mounted machine gun on Samuel's right arm unloads three dozen bullets at Trinnic in an instant, but the Baron flickers away like a ghost, evading Samuel's attack.

With his attention on Trinnic, Samuel fails to follow Greedle's movements. The fire-type Baron conjures fiery elemental armor onto his hands, heating them to nearly two-thousand degrees Fahrenheit. He lunges toward Samuel and swipes his claws in a downward arc, tearing through the heavily-reinforced nanites on Samuel's chest.

"Aaaaargh!" Samuel screams. The scorching heat instantly invades his suit, making him leap backward. His suit's interior jumps thirty degrees, all but cooking him alive. "Fuck, fuck! Mayday! I can't take these two by myself!"

Greedle grins like a Cheshire cat. He lunges forward and raises his claw to aim for Samuel's head. With the human disoriented from the heat, he hasn't a chance of resisting.

At that moment, from the skies above...

Piff.

A single bullet fires from an elevated vantage point. Greedle, too excited at the thought of killing the human commander before him, fails to detect the bloodlust aimed in his direction. A sniper bullet strikes him dead between his eyes, ripping apart his skull and flinging him backward.

Thunk!

He hits the ground like a sack of dead puppies, only offering one final spasm before his magic dissipates, never to be seen again.

"Greedle!!!" Trinnic shouts, breaking her silence. Enraged by her lover's defeat, she manipulates the power of sound to create a vibrating sound-blade, a sword capable of cutting through anything, provided she can make contact with it. "You devil-damned fleshbag! I won't let you leave here alive!!!"

Samuel's nanites expel the excess heat detected in his suit while also repairing the molten claw-marks Greedle left behind. Even so, they can't regenerate fast enough to deflect Trinnic's incoming attack.

"Oh, shit!" Samuel shouts, as he watches the Baron charge.

"I'm here to help," A voice says through his intercom. Samuel recognizes the voice as belonging to Corporal Hurent, but he doesn't get even a second to respond. Trinnic charges him with her soundblade at the ready. Her Baron-level speed, further enhanced by her manipulation of sound, turns her into an agile combatant. She flickers past a half-dozen other commandos in her path, ignoring their existences as if they don't matter in the slightest.

In less than a second, she clears the five-hundred foot gap, swinging her sword against Samuel's armor with the fury of a hurricane. A sound not unlike a chainsaw grinding against metal erupts in the air, making everyone nearby grit their teeth in pain.

Greeeeee!

Alarms go off inside Samuel's armor as Centurion warns him about the suit's rapid drop in hull integrity. He tries to punch Trinnic away, but she merely flickers out of existence for an instant, ducks under Samuel's clumsy attack, and stabs him in the back.

"I'll kill you, filthy fleshbag!" Trinnic screeches. "I'll melt your brains into glop!"

Above the field, Corporal Hurent fires a few rounds at Trinnic, but the Baron always escapes death by turning into a living soundwave and flickering out of existence. Every time her body hums, she accelerates to half the speed of sound, improving her reflexes and coordination to well beyond superhuman levels.

"Lieutenant!" Corporal Hurent cries. "I can't land a clean shot! She's too fast!"

Several troopers arrive on the scene. Armed with energy rifles, they begin peppering the area around Samuel with photonic projectiles, each one releasing a weak burst of energy during their flight. Trinnic cries out in pain when one of the bullets, instead of phasing through her, crashes against her skin and releases waves of radiation inside her stomach. "Aaargh!"

She flickers away from Samuel, hatred still burning in her eyes. Despite her rage, she quickly realizes the newly-arrived troopers must possess weapons capable of taking down immaterial demons, such as herself.

"Tch! Little pests! You won't get in my way!"

Trinnic desummons her sword and rushes toward the troopers. She claps her hands and fires a sound-blast at them to send them flying, then spins on her heel and flickers toward Samuel again, rearing her hand back to deliver the killing blow.

Unexpectedly, a huge figure comes stomping toward Trinnic from her left. She whips her head in that direction, only to see a heavily armored Minotaur bellowing angrily, his gauntlet glowing a fierce purple.

Yamir, the head chef for the Hiro household, swings his fist forward and opens his palm. A blast of mana fires from his hand, making Trinnic's heart jump in fright.

A royal minotaur?! But they shouldn't be-

Trinnic doesn't finish her thought. The chaotic mana strikes her left shoulder and flings her to the right, where she crashes into the ground with a muffled yelp. Her body re-enters the physical realm just in

time for her head to crash against a boulder.

Crack.

Her skull bursts open from the impact, spewing her brains out and killing her instantly.

Yamir stomps his hooves into the dirt and grinds to a stop just ten feet from Samuel.

"Hmph! Lieutenant. Are you alright?"

Samuel sags to his knees. "Cough, cough... I'm alive."

"Your bio-signs indicate you have suffered severe burns to your chest and neck. Please fall back to the medical lines to receive first aid."

The Lieutenant nods. "Ugh... yeah. Feels that way. Alright... I'll be back in a bit. Oh, and uh... thanks for the assist."

Yamir bows his head respectfully. "Speak no more of this matter. I am certain you will save my hide many times in the coming days."

Without any other words, Samuel departs, leaving Yamir behind.

Immediately after the human leaves, Yamir quickly charges forward and arrives at Trinnic's corpse. He stomps her brains into goop, then blasts her body with magical energy. After horrifically ruining her corpse, he turns to look for Greedle's body, but finds nothing.

The Minotaur activates his comm system. "Attention, all troops. This is Captain Yamir speaking. Remember! If you kill any demon, but especially a Lord, a Baron, or perhaps even those of a higher rank... eradicate their corpses! Leave nothing behind! One of our enemies is Mephisto, the Duke of Mist. He can revive corpses, making us fight our most dangerous enemies twice! I need not remind you of how terrifying that fact is. Yamir out."

After Yamir closes his communication link, he snorts angrily. "How unfortunate that one of them got away. I can only assume you must be greatly enjoying this war, Mephisto. You will expand your power greatly at demonkind's expense."

He turns around and charges back into battle, summoning mana into his fists as he rejoins the other troopers in the defense of Hero City.

With humanity's Hero having inexplicably gone missing, the demons no longer hold anything back. Dozens and dozens of portals open up on Hero City's eastern border, forcing Elder Skarde to place multiple regiments of soldiers there. A large-scale battle opens up on the plains to the east, where very little cover exists to protect the demons who emerge.

With the smallest concentration of demons compared to the other three sides of Hero City, most of the soldiers summoned to the east find the battles aren't nearly as much of a life-and-death situation compared to those in the west or the south.

Even so, everyone takes their duties seriously. Waves of demon Grunts flow toward the city, with huge Brutes soaking up gunfire while the smaller and nimbler Scythors hide behind their brethren, the living walls of flesh.

Any demons who fall end up getting sucked into the ground, becoming undead fodder for Mephisto as he opens up two more gigantic Death Gates a few miles away. Higher ranked undead begin appearing, including another Frost Giant, but humanity manages to take down the most dangerous threats with teamwork and coordination.

Suddenly, from amidst the swarms of low-level demons, two blips of energetic mana appear on one of the scouts' scanners.

"We've got two Dukes incoming!" The scout yells. After a moment, he pauses. "Wait, no... they're Barons! I repeat, we have two Barons incoming! They're hiding among the low-ranked demons, but based on their bio-data... I think they're the Battle Brothers!"

Seconds after the scout makes that declaration, Zamiel and Duriel leap into the sky, riding atop a greathammer and greatsword, respectively.

"Not too many fleshies over here!" Zamiel cackles, as his magical hammer flies toward the humans' defensive line. "Let's get some revenge for earlier, little bro!"

"You said it!" Duriel replies, while expertly surfing through the air.

The human defenders quickly start to panic as they try to shoot down the incoming Barons, only for both Battle Brothers to summon a wall of weapons. They fling hundreds of swords and hammers, maces and axes, and all manner of other medieval weaponry toward the humans' defensive lines at half the speed of sound.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Crashes and screams erupt as fifty troopers perish to the Battle Brother's first onslaught. By the time the brothers make landfall, many troopers still haven't recovered from the initial attack.

"Juicy little fleshbags, ripe for the killing!" Zamiel yells. He grabs a warhammer off his back and runs forward, smashing it down with bone-crushing force. Every swing kills a human or a monster, ending the lives of kobolds and Terrans alike.

Likewise, Duriel's dual-wielded greatswords cleave even the sturdiest and most heavily armored Terrans in half, severing their spines and flinging their upper and lower torsos in opposite directions.

"This ain't half-bad!" Duriel laughs. "It's always fun to take a load off after a hard day of killin'!"

While the two brothers massacre the eastern defenders and their army pours through the rapidly widening gap, a terrible sensation of fear sweeps across all of the demons present. They halt in their tracks and look to the west, atop Hero City's cliff-edge.

There, posed majestically against the setting sun, the Monster King stands with both arms crossed, his conquerors' aura sweeping across the land.

"Hurgh! You evil bastards! How dare you lay a hand on my pet humans! Battle Bastards, face me if you dare! I am Kar, the last of the crocodiles! And today... I will exact my vengeance upon you!"

Kar's voice booms outward, projected via his vast mana reserves. His attention-grabbing appearance causes many of the demons to wet themselves in fear.

"Oh, skarn-droppings! It's the Monster King! He beat the crap out of Laharl, Mara, Beelzebub, Bael AND Artorias! What the *hell*, why is he here?!"

"We can't fight the Sphinx!" Another demon cries. "All we have are two Barons! Screw this, I'm outta here!"

Immediately, more than half of the attacking demons turn tail and flee, terrified by the appearance of the Monster King. Those who continue attacking only so so because they fear Ose more.

Meanwhile, Duriel and Zamiel merely glance in Kar's direction.

"Eh?" Zamiel grunts. "Well, well, well. If it ain't that one last croc. The one who got away!"

"Ha!" Duriel laughs. "I bet his blood'll taste better than all the others combined! After we kill him, we'll become tough as hell, bro!"

"Damn straight..." Zamiel mutters. His eyes flick to the left and right. "Of course, we ain't just gonna be facing the King. I bet you ten coins that fairy bitch'll be hangin' around nearby."

"Fine by me," Duriel grunts. He pounds his chest and roars at Kar. "Come here then, little croc! I already killed all the rest of your kind! I ain't afraid of you, not one bit!"

Kar gazes down upon the Battle Brothers from a mile away. He coils strength into his legs while grinning slyly.

"Oh, but you *should*, you murdering bastards. You *should*."

Kar leaps skyward, using his Emperor-level strength to pounce into the air like a reptilian eagle. He crosses the vast gap in a matter of seconds, while his grin only expands further.

"Hurgh! Today, you will PAY for your crimes! And I shall be your executioner!"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 266: Belial's Rage

First Day, Eighteenth Hour.

Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, soars around Tarus II at blinding speeds, unconstrained by wind resistance, friction, or most other limitations placed upon mortal bodies. Only gravity exerts any pull on her invisible and immaterial ghost-body, preventing her from soaring to the heavens and leaving the planet behind.

She flickers from building to building inside Hero City's environmental shield, steadily growing more impatient and antsy as she scours every nook and cranny for the thing she needs most.

"Damn!" Ose shouts, after searching every inch of Jason Hiro's home, the giant building once owned by Bahamut. "It's not here, either! Where did Neil hide the devil-damned Trifrancium?!"

She pauses momentarily to hover just outside the house, scowling as she watches dozens of human commandos running around, traveling through the city to reinforce weakening positions on the border's defenses.

"I must have scoured every godforsaken building in this wretched shithole ten times! I've searched the prisons, the factories, even the stupid little huts on the city's outskirts... I've searched everywhere! Neil, you bloody bastard! Where did you hide it?!"

She paces back and forth in midair, hover-walking to make herself think more strategically.

"...It wasn't in the Core. If it was, then when Neil blew up the core, the Trifrancium would have detonated and left a planet-sized hole in the Labyrinth's center. A kilogram of Trifrancium has almost 50 gigatons of explosive yield; more than enough to irradiate the entirety of the Labyrinth and make it inhospitable to life for a million years. I cannot allow the humans to possess it any longer."

After a moment, Ose flicks her eyes upward.

"Perhaps Moonbase Kelkin? My Astral Body is constrained by this planet's gravity, so I can't travel there myself. What are the odds Neil would know that fact and plan accordingly? Bah! He could have hid the Trifrancium there for any number of reasons. If so, then it will remain out of my grasp until after I conquer these humans. I'll have to fly a ship up there afterward and take it back by force. Drat!"

She frowns. "Oh, devils. What if Neil hid the Trifrancium on one of humanity's other planets? He could have thrown it under some random rock and I'd never be able to find it. It's like looking for a needle in a hundred planet-sized haystacks! Utter insanity."

Ose's shoulders slump in defeat. "I need a drink."

The Emperor of Infiltration falls silent. She continues to hover in midair, thinking slowly and methodically about a great many things.

Jason hasn't made any moves since I last heard from him. It seems my Wordsmith-crippling device successfully bombarded him with chaotic energy. His magical conduits will need weeks to heal; more

than enough time to uncover his hiding spot. Where the devil has he gone, anyway? He only showed up to the battlefield remotely, but also seems to have discovered an inexhaustible source of mana. There's no way the Jason I've observed could have continuously closed hundreds of portals for hours on end. Not even Hope could pull off such a feat.

And speaking of Hope; where has HE gone? Both Wordsmiths mysteriously vanished right as I initiated Stormbringer. Coincidence? Unlikely! They must be planning something. I can't just sit back and smile, thinking I've won this war. If I only capture one Wordsmith, I'll have to give him to Yama. That was the deal I agreed to, in exchange for the Shadow Emperor's help.

Hmph! On second thought, why should I abide by those terms? Yama's worthless Shades failed! They didn't capture Jason's daughter or wife! They died like useless, dried up bags of skarn-droppings. Forget Yama! If I only catch one Wordsmith, he'll be mine! What can Yama do anyway? He'll be going up against Hell's most intelligent Emperor and her Wordsmithing slave! He'd only end up guaranteeing his death! Yes, I like that idea much more.

Ose nods to herself. "An excellent plan. Jason will be out of commission for weeks while his magical circuits heal, leaving me plenty of time to take out humanity, capture his wife and daughter, and turn them into bargaining chips. I can interrogate Neil to uncover where he hid the Trifrancium, deliver it to the Overlords, and avert a catastrophe."

The Third Emperor smoothly flicks her eyes in all directions. She expands her senses, gathering intel from the battlefield, then turns her head to the east.

"What's that? A tremendous surge of mana? Ah, it's the Monster King. Looks like he's engaging with the Battle Brothers. Bah, they're durable. They can keep his attention for a while. Once Bael and I recover, we'll join with Artorias and Mephisto to kill that Sphinx once and for all. Oooh! Perhaps, if I can uncover the secret to his riddle magic, I might even take his powers for myself! Wouldn't that be the ultimate payoff? With a Wordsmith as my slave, and the Sphinx's body transformation powers to elevate my status, no other Emperor will dare to challenge my authority!"

Ose turns toward the west, then zips forward at hyperspeed, traveling several miles almost instantaneously. She arrives above the western front, between the Warpgate Encampment and the Horned forest, where humanity's defenses barely manage to hold the line. Every second, the humans and their monster allies battle to the death, killing ten times more demons than their forces lose as casualties, but even so, Ose's army slowly pushes forward with its unstoppable numerical advantage.

"Hehehe. It seems all is going well over- huh?"

Ose's eyes narrow to slits. She focuses her vision at the ground below her, where Artorias, the highest ranked demon among the western front's forces, engages in battle with an Emperor-level mana signature.

"What! Belial? Satan's whore?! What is she doing here?"

Ose gnashes her teeth. She flickers to a spot only a few hundred feet above the ground, where she watches in fascination as Belial punches away demons by the dozen. Every swing of her fist, capable of

pulverizing mountains, blasts away Grunts and Lords like leaves in the wind. Only a few Barons manage to hold their ground, while Artorias suffers the most under Belial's attacks.

"Blast!" Ose curses. "Last time I checked, Belial had no mana left and was utterly exhausted! Why is she so full of energy now? Oh, let me guess! I'll bet Jason's last defiant act was to reinvigorate her with his devil-damned Wordsmithing! Well, isn't that just *delightful*?!"

It takes a few minutes of screaming and cursing the elder gods before Ose regains control of herself. She focuses her mind and turns her thoughts inward.

Belial and the Monster Royals are the only dangers left to successfully completing this operation. Unfortunately, it seems the Sphinx empowered himself at some point in the recent past, elevating his strength to that of a Duke, or perhaps even an Emperor! Not only that, but his wife possesses incredible strength, as well. Even if I assume the best, it's one Emperor and two Dukes battling one Duke and three Barons. Belial, Kar, and Blinker against Artorias, Mara, Duriel, and Zamiel. Weaker Barons won't matter in an engagement this lopsided.

Worse yet, if both Royals are indeed at Emperor-level strength, then I have no counterplay at all! Even if I show up with Bael, it will be three Emperors vs one Emperor, two Dukes, and three Barons.

Once again, Ose expands her senses, searching the battlefield for mana blips.

I don't understand. Where did Beelzebub go? Did he leave the battlefield without telling anyone? The last I heard, he left Mara and Artorias behind in the prisons, and then he disappeared off the face of the planet. Did the Wordsmith interfere? Did Jason kill him?

She shakes her head. *No. Jason isn't a killer. He's too soft. It might have been Hope. Ah! That must be it! Hope probably turned himself invisible and decided to stalk the demon leaders from the shadows! That's exactly the sort of thing he'd do. I'll bet he attacked Beelzebub and... no, that still doesn't make any sense. Wordsmithing is powerful, but it's far from omnipotent. If Hope had fought Beelzebub, their encounter would have caused quite the uproar. I'd have noticed, for sure! Beelzebub must still be alive...*

Ose's eyes twitch. Confusion appears on her face, along with hesitation.

I don't have enough information. I'm missing pieces. There's something off about this whole operation. Why haven't the devil-damned Wordsmiths appeared on the battlefield? Why haven't I heard a single thing from Hope? Why did Jason come here in soul-form? Could he be trapped somewhere? Did someone capture him after he left my palace? What is going on?! It's infuriating!

Her eyes turn cold.

I don't have a choice. I'll have to leave the battlefield for now. Vepar and Laharl have likely recovered, so I'll send them back to reinforce Artorias. Then, I'll return to the Blood Pits, interrogate Neil, and find out where he hid the Trifrancisium.

Ose turns to the west again. She flies toward the now-open warpgate and flies through, smiling faintly.

That's right. I should focus on killing Belial first. It's unfortunate, but the Battle Brothers will have to act as sacrificial pawns. The Monster King has an old grievance with them. Therefore, he and his wife

won't leave until they've killed both brothers. In the meantime, perhaps I can amass a force large enough to kill Belial. With her gone, the numbers will tilt significantly in my favor! Both Monster Royals against all of my forces? They won't stand a chance.

Ose disappears into the Labyrinth, laughing wickedly all the way.

"Hahaha! My hour will soon arrive! Total control of demonkind! My ascension to Second Emperor, and perhaps even First, once I find and eliminate the worthless bastard sitting uselessly on his fancy throne! I'll enslave the Wordsmiths and make the galaxy mine!"

"A new era of demonkind has all but arrived!"

Tarus II, Western Front.

Belial clashes with Artorias, the Duke of Steel. As the Second Emperor of demonkind, her bodily strength stands an entire tier above other Emperors, placing her at the absolute height of power any Demon will ever hope to possess.

Having assumed a terrifying form, Belial's beach-ball-sized head appears like a disfigured monster with dozens of eyes and a mouth filled with multiple rows of teeth. Her lower body is no less terrifying, sporting four arms, all of which possess five knife-shaped claws capable of turning flesh into sashimi. Her two legs are as thick as tree trunks, giving her the strength to kick her foes into the stratosphere or stomp them into meat-paste.

An apex predator, Belial not only battles the Duke of Steel, but even takes 'breaks' to eviscerate other demons nearby, ripping them limb from limb. Their horrified cries of pain disappear in an instant as the Emperor of Passion slaughters her kin wholesale.

"Belial!" Artorias shouts, after raising his arms to block one of her mountain-flattening kicks, "Argh! Stop! Have you gone insane?! You're killing your own people!"

Belial whips her freakishly large head toward him. The blood of chewed-up demons drips from her lips, while their entrails sit wedged between the gaps in her teeth. "Shut up, Artorias! You don't get to judge me! You attacked humanity, and now all who oppose me will perish! You made your bed... NOW LIE IN IT!"

Her voice, no longer soft, cute, and demure, sounds hoarse and vicious, like an eldritch monster fresh out of the deep sea. She lunges toward Artorias and headbutts him, knocking him on his ass and flinging him fifty feet away. Before Artorias can reorient himself, Belial rushes toward him and rears her leg back.

WHUMP!

Belial kicks Artorias like a football, blasting him into the air. Artorias goes flying. He spins and careens helplessly while hurtling up into the sky at unthinkable speeds.

Before he makes it a thousand yards, a portal appears in the sky before him.

Foop!

Artorias flies into the portal and exits out another one aimed at the ground. He only gets a second to register Tarus II's soil rushing at him before he crashes into the horde of demons below, instantly killing several dozen Scythers and Brutes. Artorias grinds against the dirt while riding a mushy meat-toboggan made of his now-deceased comrades. Several seconds later, he finally grinds to a stop and gasps for breath.

"Huk! Huk! Damn. Damn! Belial is... she's too much for me! She's monstrously powerful, like an unstoppable force of nature. Where is Ose at a time like this? We need her to deal with the Second Emperor!"

Artorias climbs to his feet while grimacing at the sensation of mashed demon parts squishing beneath his shoes.

After steadying himself, he turns his attention toward Belial's Emperor-level mana signature. With Barbatos's tall body, Artorias gazes over the waves of demons and undead, clearly able to pick out Belial's frenzying figure without any trouble.

"Seven Hells..." Artorias mutters. "I'm only one Duke. I can't even stall Belial on my own. All I have is my earth manipulation. Barbatos... if he were awake, he could use both our powers."

The Duke of Steel hesitates. He searches his mana conduits with his spiritual sense, only to find nothing.

"Uriel and Barbatos are both sleeping. I can tap into Uriel's magic for now. Having access to all four elements, plus light and dark manipulation, that would allow me to fight somewhat evenly with Belial. However, if I do that, there's a chance I might awaken Uriel. I cannot allow her to emerge!"

Grunts and Lords sweep around Artorias's motionless figure, avoiding bumping into him instinctively due to his Duke-level mana signature. He, in turn, ignores the flood of comrades surrounding him and grits his teeth.

"I cannot resist Uriel on my own. Only by combining my soul with Barbatos's can we prevent her from controlling us. In turn, I can only manipulate my brother's body when he and Uriel both fall dormant. Tch. If only I could tear the Archangel's soul out, my brother and I would become the strongest Duke in all the seven Hells, even beyond Bael. The power of two demons unified in one body would make us unstoppable among our peers."

Artorias shakes his head. "But even if that were the case... we still wouldn't match up to the Second Emperor. She isn't only an Emperor, but the strongest of our species. Only Satan himself could defeat her in battle, and that's only assuming a theoretical matchup."

The Duke of Steel crouches down to build up strength in his legs. He aims his gaze in Belial's direction and sighs.

If I can't beat her... I'll have to convince her to stop fighting!

A moment later, Artorias jumps skyward. His superior Duke strength allows him to jump half a mile with ease, leaping over the heads of all the grunts beneath him while gazing fixedly at Belial's rampaging form.

The Second Emperor roars like a mad lion, then pounces at a group of Burner demons. They panic and throw fireballs at her, but she ignores their pitiful attacks as if they were gnats timidly bumping against her nose. She opens her mouth and bites down, chomping three of the Burners in half, before swinging out her bladed arms to eviscerate those who remain.

Whump!

Artorias stomps into the dirt behind Belial and slides to a stop. He assumes a defensive position and shouts. "Belial! Stop fighting! We can talk about this! I understand that you're angry, but-"

"SHUT UP!!" Belial roars. She spins around to face Artorias with a crazed look in her eyes. "I ALREADY BROKE A SOLEMN VOW! NOW, I'LL BREAK YOU!"

Artorias sucks in a quick breath before Belial lunges at him. "Oh, spawn of a..."

He doesn't even see Belial's attack coming. She skitters along the ground like a lizard, clearing the short gap with lightning speed, then jumps into the air.

BOOM!

Belial's muscular legs stomp Artorias into the dirt, crushing the Duke with brute force. In one instant, he finds himself crouched and ready for anything, but in the next, the world turns upside down while stars dance in his eyes.

Artorias's helmet strikes a rock, pulverizing it into earthen powder. Belial pauses for a split second to spread out her bladed-fingers, then stabs them toward the Duke's chest.

Tink-tink-tink-CLANG!

Most of Belial's makeshift knives bend when they strike Artorias's sturdy demonstone armor, but a few find their way between the gaps in his armor and impale his vital organs.

"Argh!" Artorias shouts. He tries to push Belial away, but his strength proves wildly inferior to hers.

"It's too bad, Artorias!" Belial shouts. "I never disliked Barbatos! He wouldn't have chosen to come here! But you did! Now, you both will die for that decision, along with Uriel, too! At least I can finally give her the burial she deserves!"

"Wait, Belial! Stop! You're not a killer!" Artorias yells. "This isn't like you!"

A twisted grin plays across Belial's monstrous face. "I didn't choose this path, Artorias. You forced it on me. OSE forced it on me!"

Belial lifts her foot up.

BOOM!!

It crashes upon Artorias's chest, smashing him into a shallow crater in the dirt.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Again and again, Belial stomps Artorias, overpowering him to the point he can't even offer even the feeblest resistance. His limbs hang off to the side uselessly, while he gasps for breath.

After bringing her heel down upon Artorias ten times, Belial hesitates. She takes a step back and scowls, the expression looking even more hideous upon her shapeshifted face.

"Barbatos saved Phoebe's life once. Out of respect for your little brother, I'll return the favor. Cross me again, and you will not be so lucky."

Artorias coughs. "Kuhuk... Ph-Phoebe? The... the Hero's wife?"

"That's right. I'm sure you remember it. Even if you don't, I couldn't care less. I'm only going to give you one warning, Artorias. **STAY OUT OF MY WAY!**"

Without another word, Belial departs. She jumps out of the six-foot-deep crater and disappears from Artorias's view, leaving him to cough out several wads of blood.

"Kuh! Kuh! Shit, I... oh, devils... she buh-... broke all my ribs..."

Suddenly, a demon flickers into existence inside the crater. Mara, the Baron of Games, dissipates a veil of invisibility surrounding her body and kneels beside Artorias to examine his condition.

"Stupid bastard," Mara mutters. "Do you have a death wish? Let Belial rampage for a while! So what if she kills a bunch of Grunts and Lords? We have trillions more lined up to die! You're lucky she spared you."

Artorias groans. "You... you were here... the whole time?"

"Of course I was. Unlike you, I'm not stupid enough to fight Belial directly. I just tried to slow her down from a distance, so as to not draw attention to myself. I stayed invisible, out of her line of sight. Like I said, you're a stupid bastard."

Mara motions with her hands. She casts a spell, summoning a magical card from her spiritual deck.

"...Wrong one. Sorry, give me a sec. I'll fix you up. I just need to draw the right card."

Artorias lays motionless, listening to the screams of other demons outside his crater. Many times, their cries of alarm instantly fall silent as Belial cuts them down.

"You..." Artorias coughs. "Did you... ever meet Satan?"

"Stop talking," Mara mutters. "It won't help your condition. And no, I didn't. He died before my broodmother whelped me."

Artorias's expression remains hidden beneath his helmet. Only a faint dimming of his glowing red eyes reveal the pain on his face.

"Belial... was the nicest... of all of us. Satan conquered. He killed. He slaughtered... but she never hated him. She always stood by his side... yet she also never partook in his violence."

Mara summons another card, then frowns. "Blast. Another dud. Thanks for the history lesson, but I'm trying to concentrate."

Artorias ignores her. "Were we wrong? We turned Belial... into a killer. Cough, cough. Somehow, all of this feels... so evil."

"Our enemies are fleshbags," Mara replies, her voice monotone. "They're inferior to demons. We will kill them, because that is our right. The weak should fear the strong."

She motions with her hands again to summon another card. When it appears, she breathes a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank the devils. Temporal Cricket, **Evoke!**"

A flash of golden light ignites in Mara's hands. It leaps upward, then falls down upon Artorias's body and envelops him in golden light.

Immediately, Artorias regenerates from all of the injuries he sustained. His ribs pop back into place, his concussion disappears, and all his lost blood flows back into his veins.

Ten seconds later, the golden light disappears, allowing Artorias to stand up. He stares at Mara incredulously.

"Your healing magic... it's incredible! That was just as potent as any spell Belial has ever cast!"

Mara rolls her eyes. "It wasn't healing magic. I merely reversed the flow of time on your body, returning it to a state from several minutes ago. It would have been useless if the injuries were more than ten or so minutes old."

"Oh," Artorias mutters. He glances toward the top of the crater and sighs. "Well, I owe you my thanks. And now, I must return."

Mara's expression falls. "Are you kidding me?! You're going to go back and fight Belial again?! You almost died! Next time, she'll kill you for sure!"

Artorias lowers his head to stare at Mara.

"Yes, that is true. However, a friend recently gave me an idea. Perhaps, instead of fighting Belial head-on, I should try slowing her down from a distance. I will travel underground and use my earth manipulation to hamper Belial's killing speed, at least until Ose, Bael, and the other reinforcements appear."

Mara sighs in relief. "Oh! Well, great, yes. Do that. Please. You're not Beelzebub; I'd hate to lose my second favorite Duke."

Artorias chuckles. "And the first is...?"

"Bael."

"Of course."

The Duke of Steel shakes his head and laughs. A moment later, he kicks the ground and sucks into the dirt, disappearing into the planet's bowels.

Mara taps her foot, then draws a card.

"Dammit. Another dud. Oh, well. The next one will be what I need, for sure! I have the heart of the cards!"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 267: Brightest Cave, Darkest Dawn

A silent assassin creeps through the Labyrinth's hallways. Decked out in a stealth-class exosuit, Amelia Greyheart, the Black Queen, slithers through the darkness like a shadowy snake searching for prey.

Having spent the better part of an entire day scouring the Labyrinth, Amelia's movements appear much twitchier and alert than when she first started. Many times, she ducks into doorways or narrow crevasses in the walls to hide while troops of demons and monsters pass her by. Their frenetic energy reaches her ears, along with the words they speak.

"That's what I'm sayin'," A random Demon Lord declares to a small group of Grunts as they pass Amelia's invisible form. "It's been a whole day and we still ain't killed them fleshbags! That Ose's a typical woman, always takin' her damn time, makin us lose lives. We coulda swarmed them fleshies by now and overrun 'em like crazy, but nooo! I bet she likes watching us die!"

"Yeah, you said it, boss," His Scyther underling replies, clanging his two blade-arms together. "Pah! Some Emperor she is! If Big Boss Deebs were still in charge, those humans woulda been toast by now!"

The demons fade into the distance, continuing to rant and rave as they leave. Amelia steps out of the darkness and looks around, then growls under her breath.

"I don't get it. Why would Jason disappear the same day the demons decide to attack? Nobody's seen him on Maiura, nor Tarus II, nor anywhere else! How utterly frustrating."

Inside Amelia's Spectre exosuit, Centurion pipes up. **"PILOT AMELIA GREYHEART, I HAVE DETECTED ANOTHER SEVENTEEN DEMONIC ENTITIES APPROACHING YOUR POSITION."**

She frowns. "Again? The locals have been patrolling more frequently, lately."

Amelia glances upward. Using a chip that mentally links her brain to her exosuit, she manipulates the four metallic tendrils on the Spectre's back to aim at the ceiling. They turn into climbing spikes, zip forward, and impale the roof, yanking her into the air.

Like a half-human, half-spider hybrid, Amelia crawls along the ceiling, only slowing down once the group of demons Centurion pointed out round the hallway up ahead. She stops moving and reactivates her invisibility, melting into the darkness and becoming one with the Labyrinth.

Twenty seconds later, the group passes her. She starts to drop to the floor, only to pause when she sees another demon, a lone Lord, slowly ambling down the corridor. Dressed in a tacky yellow vest, he appears out of place compared to the demons from half a minute before. Amelia freezes in place and watches silently, like a predator, as he approaches her position.

The Lord yawns several times. His eyes droop, and he mutters words under his breath, which the Spectre's sensors easily pick up.

"...such a drag. Everyone's all excited 'cuz they get to kill some fleshies. Seven Hells. What a waste of time. Just send Bael in, he'll take care of it. *Oh, but Skopl, that won't help our morale.* Give it a rest. I'd so much rather be sleeping right now than chasing after Heroes and eating bullets for breakfast. Why should I have to die just because some Emperor bitch thinks that's my purpose?"

Skopl, the demon below Amelia, continues to mutter to himself, oblivious to his surroundings. Amelia glances at her HUD to make sure there aren't any other demons around, then grins evilly.

"Jackpot."

Like a silent assassin, she drops from the ceiling, decloaking with only enough time for Skopl to register something falling toward him.

Thump!

Amelia tackles Skopl to the floor, clamps a hand over his mouth, then turns the four tendrils on her back into makeshift torture spears. Before Skopl can react, they dart forward and stab both of his hands and feet, impaling him to the floor so that he can't resist.

Skopl's eyes bolt open. Fear rushes into his brain. "Hmmmrrgh! Mrrrrm!!"

He tries to scream for help, but Amelia's iron-grip muffles his voice excellently. With her free hand, Amelia pulls out a pair of small, metal cubes, each one a little bigger than a set of playing dice, and tosses one to her right and one to her left. The cubes silently activate, creating an invisible sound-dampening field between their positions.

Satisfied, Amelia removes her hand, allowing Skopl to howl pain-filled words of bloody murder. "Aaargh! F-fleshbag! Stop! Get off me, you evil bastard! I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you! Aaaah!"

Amelia deactivates her helmet, allowing the nanites to flow away and reveal her face. Seeing a beautiful human woman instead of a man does nothing to tone down Skopl's ranting.

"My hands! You stabbed my hands, auugh! And my feet, why my feet?! You crazy, lunatic bitch!"

Smiling prettily, Amelia crouches atop Skopl's stomach and cocks her head. "You're a loud one, little demon. Yell all you want; nobody will hear you. I'm surprised you haven't recognized me yet, considering my infamy."

"Why in the Seven Hells would I give a shit who you are, you filthy fleshbag?!" Skopl bellows. "I'm the Lord of Luck! I'm a big shot among the other Lords! If you kill me, they'll rip your clothes off, turn you into a fucktoy, and feed you to the Hellhounds!"

Amelia nods. "Mmm. Yes. Nice to meet you, Skopl, Lord of Luck. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Amelia Greyheart. I am the Black Queen."

"Oh, a queen, huh?" Skopl sputters. "That's quite the fancy title, *your highness!* What, do you think I'll bow and beg for mercy just because you give yourself a fancy name like-like... like... the Black... Queen?"

Skopl's enraged words suddenly slow to a stop. It takes him a moment to filter out the hatred in his mind, but when he does, he blinks his eyes and stares at Amelia with a fresh look of horror.

"B-Black Queen? No... no that's impossible! You died! Diablo killed you six years ago! Everyone confirmed your death! How... how can you still be..."

"Hah..." Amelia laughs emotionlessly. "It involved magic. I don't have to explain anything to the likes of you. Now listen closely, little Lord. You may think you're hot stuff in your circles, but in front of me, you're not even a gnat on the wall. I want information, and you're going to give it to me, or I'll kill you without hesitation."

All the blood drains from Skopl's face. "B-but... you'll kill me anyway... even if I tell you what you want to know..."

Amelia glances up at the ceiling thoughtfully, then back to Skopl. "Fair point. Indeed, I will. However, your death can take place over the course of several long, agonizing hours, which will then follow with my devouring of your soul and an eternal agony for all eternity, *or*, you can tell me what I want to know and I'll make your death quick and painless. How about it? Doesn't that sound fair?"

Skopl's body begins to tremble. "P-please... please don't kill me... I'm just a Lord... I'm nobody important! You don't have to kill me to get any answers, okay? You're a b-beautiful human woman... I'm sure we can work something out."

A flash of insight appears in Skopl's eyes. "Ah... ah! That's- I could be your slave! Yes, everyone needs a good slave, don't they? I'll pledge myself to you for, um, a thousand years! How about that? Please! Please don't kill me!"

Tears well up in his eyes, but with his hands impaled, he can't wipe them away.

Amelia purses her lips. "Hmm... a slave for one thousand years. Well, if you can give me the information I need, I suppose I can settle for simple enslavement. You said you were the Lord of Luck, didn't you? This might be your lucky day, and mine too! We can both greatly improve our lives!"

Skopl nods. "Y-yes! Yes! I'll do anything you ask! Anything at all, lady Greyheart! Just s-say the word!"

Apparently pleased with herself, Amelia starts winding her hair around her finger. "Well, okay then. So! First question. What news have you heard about the Wordsmith, Jason Hiro?"

The Lord of Luck pauses for half a second before smiling excitedly. "The Wordsmith? Oh, yes! I just heard something not that long ago! He appeared on, um, on Tarus II! Well, I mean, he didn't *exactly* appear there, but he used his word magic to heal up a bunch of human troops from somewhere else. He hasn't killed any demons, but he, uh, he helped the humans a bunch!"

Amelia frowns. "Are you telling me that no demons witnessed Jason appearing on Tarus II?"

"Y-yes, Lady Greyheart," Skopl says smiling as sincerely as he can manage. "Nobody saw his appearance, but the head Warper, Ying-Ying, confirmed he had used his magic on the planet! Everyone knows it; the news is spreading like wildfire!"

"What else have you heard?" Amelia asks, her expression turning colder by the second. "About Jason Hiro, I mean. Has there been any other news?"

"N-not that I know..." Skopl replies, his smile fading as he notices the frigidity on her face. "B-but I have a bunch of contacts! I could, um, ask around for you! Anything to please my glorious, beautiful, and highly intelligent master!"

"...You're good at groveling," Amelia mutters. "But useless for information. I'll have to rate your services a one out of ten."

"Wait!" Skopl yells. "Ask me anything else! Maybe I can offer other information! I know all sorts of demons!"

"I only wanted to know about Jason Hiro," Amelia says, an edge of finality in her tone. She plucks a dagger from her waist belt and activates a button on its side, making it hum to life with energy. "And you told me basically nothing."

"No... no, please!" Skopl yells, his voice turning hoarse. He watches helplessly as Amelia raises the dagger over his head. "Please don't kill me! I'm a good demon! I've never hurt a fleshbag in all my life!"

Amelia scrunches up her face in annoyance. "Now there's a lie if I've ever heard one."

Skopl tugs so hard against the tendrils impaling his palms that he nearly rips his hands free. Sadly, he fails. Amelia plunges the knife into his face, allowing him one quick scream before his voice cuts off and his body goes still.

Blood spurts from the gaping wound between Skopl's eyes, where his nose once belonged. Amelia stares at him emotionlessly, without the slightest sympathy.

"There's no such thing as a good demon; only a dead one."

She yanks the blade out of Skopl's face, causing even more blood to gush forth. After standing up, Amelia retracts her Spectre's tendrils, then taps a button on her suit to unleash a wave of fire upon Skopl's body, scorching him with three-thousand degree flames. In less than twenty seconds, she reduces his corpse to ash, leaving little evidence behind of her murder.

Several seconds of silence follow. Amelia retrieves the sound-dampening cubes, reactivates her helmet to cover her head, and sighs.

"Jason. Did I miss him? When the heck did he return to Tarus II? Perhaps I should go back and try to find him."

She nudges Skopl's ashes with her feet, scattering the half-foot pile across the Labyrinth's floor.

"Well, I don't have any other leads. I've killed a dozen Lords and ten times as many Grunts. That was the first I've heard about Jason's whereabouts. Guess I've no other choice."

Amelia turns around to head back in the direction of the Labyrinth Core. The moment she completes her heel-turn, she jumps in fright and quickly retreats several steps.

Behind her, a female Demon Lord with pale white skin, blood-red eyes, and jet black hair stands in the hallway only twenty feet away, her hands folded in front of her waist.

"Ah! Why hello there, Black Queen. It is my plee-asure to meet you."

Amelia's heart races, not from fear, but from the demoness's unexpected ability to evade Centurion's sensors. "Y-you! Who are you? How did you sneak up on me?"

The pale-skinned demoness wears a long, black cloak with a gorgeous red and white ensemble outfit underneath. She smiles from ear to ear, allowing two fangs to poke out of her lips.

"Ah, ah, ah. Who am I? I am surprised that you do not know! My name is Dawn, and I am the Lord of Caves. I serve Mistress Fenrir, Emperor of the Hell of Blood! As for how I made my way behind your back; that is one of my special, precious little talents, you see?"

After blinking several times, Amelia regains her calm. "The Hell of Blood? I'm not familiar with that sector."

"That is to be expected," Dawn replies, her words and intonation somewhat slow, haughty, and deliberate. "After all, the infamous Jeanne D'Arc sealed you in a statue right at the end of the Energy Wars. You did not witness the fracturing of Earth's Seven Hells, and thus, the unification effort which occurred after the Overlords destroyed our homeworld. So sad! Such tragedy! But that is life, you know?"

Amelia bristles visibly. "Hey. Don't go talking about *Joan* around me, not unless you want an ass-kicking."

Dawn's smile fades. "So touchy. Well, I have not come to exchange pleasantries. I came to check up on you and see if you needed anything. It seems that you have been sear-ching all day, yet you have not come any closer to reaching your goal. My mistress is sad. She cries for you. She wishes to express her sincerity by giving you that which you seek."

The Lord of Caves unclasps her hands and spreads out her arms in a welcoming gesture. "So, what is it that you seek, little lost Queen?"

"I'm not lost," Amelia snaps. "I am feeling pretty pissed, though. How long have you been following me?"

"Me? Not long at all," Dawn replies. "My mistress has watched you from a distance all day, though. Did you not realize that eliminating a dozen Lords would draw attention to yourself? Your hyuu-man technology does not protect you from magical investigations, silly girl. Fenrir is the master of the night. Where there is darkness, her eyes will always see."

"Sounds like your Emperor is pretty powerful..." Amelia mutters. "Why hasn't she attacked me, then? Why watch from a distance?"

"Why not?" Dawn asks, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly. She slowly ambles toward Amelia without a care in the world. "We have no quarrel with you. After all, it was that wretched Joan who ambushed and entrapped you, not us. It was Satan who slew your best friend, not us."

Amelia's eyes erupt with rage. "You! Don't... don't you dare talk about Levvy!!"

She lunges toward the Lord of Caves, only for Dawn to flick her fingers, explode into a cloud of chittering bats, and spread throughout the corridor. Amelia's anger goes unanswered as she grabs nothing but the air.

A few seconds later, the chittering bats reform behind Amelia, transforming into Dawn's figure. "Ah, ah, ah. There is no need for violence, my dar-ling! As I said, the Hell of Blood had nothing to do with your imprisonment or any of the things that you have lost! There is no need to direct your anger toward me."

"I don't care who you are..." Amelia growls, turning to face Dawn. "Never bring up my friend in front of me!"

Dawn hesitates for a moment. She gazes at Amelia with pitying eyes, then shakes her head.

"So much sadness. So much sorrow. I can feel your pain, my poor, wilted flower. You lost him because of Satan's treach-ery; his underhandedness. The Devil used all of his tricks to slay the Last Dragon, and in doing so, he tore out your heart. Truly, you have my deepest sym-pathies."

"I... I don't want your pity..." Amelia hisses. "Stop with all this nonsense. Just tell me why you've come."

Dawn begins walking toward Amelia with the expression of a doting mother. "Precious little dear. You have once again lost someone close to you; your beloved Wordsmith. Each time you cry out his name after killing a Lord, your pain echoes throughout the Labyrinth. You have lost many friends during the course of your life. As a result, you have grown to hate yourself. You hate your inability to protect them; to shield them from harm."

Amelia flinches. "Quit acting like you know me. We've never even met before."

"No, we have not..." Dawn acknowledges. She slows to a stop only an arm's length from Amelia while gazing at her lovingly. "But many demons admire you, you know? During your imprisonment, we often made pilgrimages to your statue to gaze upon the Black Witch, the one known as Satan-slayer. Satan is my Mistress's enemy, dar-ling. Thus, he is my enemy, too. As I said when I first arrived, I am not here to hurt you. I only wish to assist you in whatever way that I may."

Despite Dawn's gentle tone, Amelia's gaze still harbors many misgivings. Still, seeing Dawn's non-aggressive stance and her clearly-stated position, Amelia can't help but lower her guard, even if only a little. She deactivates her helmet, allowing her to speak to Dawn face-to-face.

"I... I need to find Jason."

"The Wordsmith, yes," Dawn replies, nodding with a smile. "You wish to know where he is. But how curious! All this time, you have searched for Jason Hiro. Why do you not look for Hope?"

"Hope?" Amelia asks. "I... don't follow."

Dawn pauses. Her usual smile cracks, causing a flash of confusion to bubble to the surface.

"Yes. Hope Hiro! The second Wordsmith. You came here not long after his disappearance. My mistress assumed you were sear-ching for him, all this time. Was she wrong?"

"I think so?" Amelia replies, sounding just as confused. "Who is Hope? How can there be two Wordsmiths? I thought... I mean, isn't there only Jason?"

Both women fall silent for several seconds. Dawn gazes at Amelia's face, attempting to search for clues. Gears turn in her head as she tries to see if Amelia is messing with her.

"...No. There are two Wordsmiths. There is Jason Hiro, the original Wordsmith. Then, using his Wordsmithing, he created a clone of himself, who he named Hope."

Amelia's heart skips a beat. Her blood runs cold at this shocking revelation. "No... you must be lying! Why would there be two Jasons? That doesn't make any sense. He would have told me."

Dawn brushes a strand of long, white hair out of her eyes. "I speak no lies, Black Queen. Both Wordsmiths are well-known by all of demonkind. I don't know why you aren't aware of Hope's existence, but-"

"When did Jason clone himself?" Amelia asks, interrupting Dawn.

"When? About six years ago," Dawn replies.

Amelia stares at Dawn for a moment before lowering her eyes. "Six years ago... that's the same time as when..."

Despite trailing off, Amelia's words linger in the air, making Dawn wiggle her nose. "You are much more in-teresting than I expected, precious Queen. Your sudden reappearance caught my mistress's attention, and now that I stand next to you, I cannot help but notice you lack even a trace of magical energy!"

Water drips from the Labyrinth's ceiling, hitting the floor some distance away with a *plop*. Amelia narrows her eyes as she gazes at Dawn with caution.

"Jason saved my life only seconds before the supernova struck. As a result, I lost much of my magical energy. However, once I get back around to eating a few demons, you'll sense my magic just fine."

The threat contained within Amelia's words slips in one of Dawn's ears and right out the other. She steps forward and coils herself around Amelia's right arm while flashing a seductive smile. "Are you trying to scare me? Ahaha! I love when a woh-man gets aggressive. To me, such words merely heighten my *appreciation* for the feminine form."

Amelia tries to escape Dawn's grasp, but the Demoness simply pulls herself closer, pressing herself against the human's side.

"I have a lover already!" Amelia snaps, tugging even harder. "And he's in danger. Get off me!"

"Ahaha, you are so cute when you protest!" Dawn laughs, releasing Amelia's arm. She backs away from the human while giggling into her hand. "Now then, about that Wordsmith! Since you are probably looking for Hope, I can tell you where to find him! He is not far from here! My mistress saw what happened to him, and she felt much sorrow for the pain he experienced."

"Pain?" Amelia asks. "What do you mean? Did something happen to him? Is he hurt?!"

"Yes!" Dawn says, nodding quickly. "He got in a big fight with a powerful Demon Emperor. The Emperor defeated him easily, as my mistress expected. Then, the Emperor drag-ged Hope away. The last we saw of him, he was beaten and unconscious."

The Demoness talks about Hope's situation in a matter-of-fact way, not caring in the slightest about whatever fate may have befallen the Wordsmith. Amelia, on the other hand, nearly jumps out of her skin

at the news.

"No! W-Why didn't your Mistress save him, if she is an Emperor herself?! He might still be alive! Please take me to him!"

"Hm?" Dawn grunts. "Why didn't my mistress save him? Oh, silly Queen. She would not interfere in another Emperor's business so casually."

The demoness's smile fades away. In its place, a deathly solemn expression appears.

"Among my species, none of us are equal, Amelia Greyheart. That holds true for Grunts, Lords, Barons, Dukes, and Emperors, alike. The demon who took Hope is among the most powerful and most dangerous of all the Emperors in the Labyrinth. My mistress knows better than to involve herself in *his* dealings. We *all* keep our dis-tance."

Sensing the change in atmosphere, Amelia grits her teeth and nods. "I... I see. Who was it, then? Can you at least tell me?"

"I can..." Dawn mutters. "But you won't like the answer. The demon who took Hope was none other than Gressil... the Hidden Emperor of Chaos."

Amelia blinks twice. "Gressil? The prison-master?"

"That's right. Few even know that Gressil has ascended to the rank of Emperor. My mistress only deduced as much by observing his battle with the Wordsmith from a distance. Had she not witnessed his strength herself, she would never have known he had reached such heights. Few pay Gressil any mind, for he lurks within the Labyrinth's most wretched region, rarely leaving, rarely speaking."

Dawn continues. "Right now, Ose, leader of the Hell of Dam-nation, is in a race to capture both Wordsmiths. She has already promised one of them to Yama, Emperor of the Hell of Cor-ruption. If she cannot capture both, her plans to unify the Seven Hells will fail... and that is the second reason my mistress made no effort to rescue Hope."

"The Seven Hells...?" Amelia asks. "Wait, that isn't just a demonic saying? Are there really seven Labyrinths? Seven Hells?"

"Haha... something like that," Dawn answers. She begins pacing back and forth, deliberately pausing to kick Skopl's ashes as she passes them by. "There are seven Hells, but only one Labyrinth. Individually, they are known as the Hells of Damnation, Lust, Blood, Punishment, Calamity, Isolation, and Corruption. I am not surprised you haven't heard of them. Even when the Seven Hells resided upon Earth, few knew where to find their entrances."

She pauses her pacing to sigh. "Sadly, after Earth's fall, only the Hell of Damnation had a foundation upon which it could stand. Satan built the Labyrinth in secret, and as such, when our world disappeared, he for-ced the other Emperors to bow to him in exchange for living within his Hell's confines. Now, the remnants of the other six Hells lay scattered about on various worlds given to us by our betters. We have our Emperors, our Dukes, and our other royal demons... but we no longer par-take in power squabbles involving the First Hell."

"Wow..." Amelia mutters, her eyes fogging over. "That... that explains so much. I remember, back when Earth was around, I heard of many powerful Emperors, but I always wondered what happened to them. Now I know. How many Emperors still remain?"

Dawn shrugs. "I am just a messenger for the mistress. I do not possess any knowledge of the other Hells' inner workings."

Amelia gestures to Dawn's fangs. "And... you said you were from the Hell of Blood... so does that make you a vampire? One of Dracula's thralls?"

"Ah, ah, ah!" Dawn laughs, exposing her teeth. "A vampiress am I, yes! But Dracula? Long dead. He turned his back on the angels to forge a union between humanity and the demons! He founded the Hell of Blood, but sadly, his spirit no longer exists in the mortal realm. Only his legacy lives on in the hearts and minds of all my vampire-kin."

Amelia crosses her arms. "I saw him once."

"Who? Dracula?" Dawn asks. Her eyes light up with excitement. "You met our founder?!"

"No. I watched him from a distance," Amelia clarifies. "I've run into a lot of Heroes in my life. Couldn't help myself. Their mana signatures were always unique and seemed to call out to me. I could sense them from tens of miles away, assuming they didn't suppress their power. Dracula was one such Hero. I sensed something was different about him and observed him for a few days, but eventually I became bored and left."

"Wow, I'm still envious!" Dawn giggles. She runs over and hugs Amelia's arm again, leaning her head against Amelia's shoulder. "You should tell me all about him while we head over to find your boyfriend!"

Amelia starts to pull her arm away, but ends up relenting. "Fine. We just have to go to Hell's prison, right? That's not far from here."

"Yes, yes, not far at all," Dawn answers, smiling giddily. "Come with me. I shall show you the way!"

The human stares at her unexpected new vampiress 'friend' with suspicion. However, given the lack of hostility on Dawn's face, she decides to play along.

If Dawn really does have an Emperor backing her, Amelia thinks, then there's no point fighting her. On the other hand, if she doesn't, I can take her out easily, or at least escape. My suit has plenty of tricks I've yet to employ.

The Black Queen smiles politely. "Very well. I'll take you up on that offer. And while we walk, perhaps you can fill me in on the gaps in my memory..."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 268: Kar's Vengeance

Tarus II, to the west of Hero City. Second day, first hour.

Darkness covers the land. With the clock having struck one hour past midnight, the night-time gloom spreads out in all directions, illuminated only by red-hot bullets whizzing through the air, magical fireballs exploding against metallic armor, or the spotlights of Phoebe's mechanized war machines.

Half of the Horned Forest blazes uncontrollably, lit aflame a few hours before by unscrupulous Burner Grunts. From the forest's confines, countless huge and horrifying creatures flee, some enraged, others terrified. A fifteen-foot-tall Buffalo-looking animal with two gigantic horns and a mouthful of knife-shaped teeth charges toward humanity's embattlements. Before the Troopers can gun it down, it stomps ten men and women to death, killing them mercilessly. Eventually, a nearby mechanoid whirls around, fires twice into the creature's skull, and puts it down for good.

Phoebe Hiro leans heavily against a furred Felaris soldier, a female of her kind. The cat-like biped helps ease Phoebe into a chair on the backlines, allowing the exhausted Commander to slump in its embrace and breathe heavily.

"Mraww! Are you okay, Miss Hiro? You need to sleep! You've been awake for over twenty-four hours!"

Phoebe closes her eyes. She swallows several breaths while listening to the distant screams of her dying friends and comrades.

"The... the demons... they're coming faster than ever... cough. I can't sleep now. They need me."

"They need a leader who can think properly," The Felaris lady says. "You're much too tired for that!"

It takes the Hero's Wife several seconds to reply. She forces her eyes open for a moment before they close again of their own volition. "No... I can't sleep. The, the uh... the injector. Give me the injector."

"The injector? What injector? I don't understand..." The Felaris female meows.

"It's in that toolkit over there," Phoebe explains, vaguely gesticulating in the direction of several black chests. "The adrenaline injector. You know what a hypodermic needle is, right, Sandy?"

Sandy, the Felaris, nods. "Yes! Big, long, pointy needle. But miss Hiro, this isn't good for you! If you give yourself adrenaline, you'll only exhaust your body further."

"Haha..." Phoebe laughs, her voice strained. "I'd rather end up in a coma than dead. My husband can always Wordsmith me back to optimal condition, as can Belial's magic."

"Well... if you insist..." Sandy meows. She walks over to the metal chests, pops them open, and starts rifling around inside. It only takes her a minute to locate a small syringe filled with golden liquid, tucked inside a transparent box. She pulls it out and extracts the syringe, then walks over to Phoebe. "Mraww! Here is the needle. Be careful! Don't hurt yourself with it."

Phoebe takes the needle and sighs. "Thanks. This is, without a doubt... the worst part."

After sucking in a deep breath, Phoebe grits her teeth and plunges the needle into her heart, then squeezes the fluid into her body.

"Aaaaargh! Ahhh! Goddamned, shit-licking, cow-balls!"

Tears flow freely from Phoebe's eyes as her special solution rips through her blood vessels and all throughout her cardiovascular system. She quickly pulls the needle out and throws it aside, then jumps to her feet and kneels forward.

"Huuack! Huurk!"

She vomits onto the grass several times from the sheer shock of so much energy traveling within her veins. Sandy watches nervously, clasping her paws together as she tries to assess Phoebe's health.

"M-miss Hiro? Are you okay? Here, have some water!"

She grabs a nearby bottle of cold water and holds it out. Phoebe snatches it away, tilts her head back, and dumps half of the bottle into her mouth, while the rest washes across her face and spills onto her chest.

"Kuhak! Oh, heavens... that feeling is one I'll never enjoy..."

After rinsing the puke out of her mouth, Phoebe stands up straight, a forced alertness in her gaze. She blinks several times and shakes her head ferociously.

"Okay. Okay! I'm awake. Thank you, Sandy. You helped me a lot."

The Felaris woman nods. "Anything to help, miss Hiro. I'm just sorry I can't help on the frontlines. I'm only a relief worker..."

"It takes all types of personnel to fight a war," Phoebe replies. "Your work here is invaluable. I'm going to head back to the frontlines, now."

"Okay! Stay safe, miss Hiro."

As Sandy waves goodbye, Phoebe stumbles away. Her stomach burns with an electrical pain, forcing her eyes open in spite of the exhaustion wracking her brain.

"I'm only buying myself another hour or two..." Phoebe mutters. "My next crash will be way worse."

She heads in the direction of a communication and armory depot, one of the many mobile platforms built to service the battlefield in the long-term. A giant square surface with dozens of boxes of weapons, ammo, and supplies rests atop a drivable vehicle, allowing it to move backward or forward as the battle-lines shift.

Phoebe climbs onto the moving platform and walks over to a group of officers clustered together. The moment they spot their Commander, they spin on their heels and salute. "Commander Hiro on deck!"

The vomit and water splashed all over Phoebe's face doesn't bother her officers in the slightest. A single glance at her baggy eyes tells them that despite getting a short sleep-break earlier themselves, their Commander has taken no rest whatsoever, and worked far harder than all of them combined.

"Status update." Phoebe mutters.

"Commander," A nearby male officer says. "We're losing ground more quickly now that night has fallen. Already, we've pulled the frontlines back another hundred and fifty feet in the past hour. The demons have begun mixing shadow-walkers into their army, allowing them to take out our troopers with carefully placed ambushes."

A female officer nods. "On the southern front, Lieutenant Samuel has managed to gain ground on the demonic hordes. After Captain Yamir reinforced him mid-day, they started working together to set up reinforced walls and battlements as per your specification."

"On the Northern Front, we've successfully launched five of the ten Covenant ships. We've sent 100,000 citizens offworld, and are loading the second group now," the First Officer continues. He holds out a datapad with several numbers and diagrams. "Here are the manifests, Commander."

"I don't need to see them," Phoebe says, ignoring the man's outstretched hand. "Elder Skarde knows what he's doing. What about the Eastern Front? Has Kar managed to kill both Battle Brothers yet?"

"I'm afraid not, Commander," The female officer says. "Their battle still rages. Fortunately, because of how intense the fighting has become, it's significantly cut our losses on that side. Any demons who try to bypass King Kar's battle end up dead. Apparently, Kar has declared that anyone who interferes before his battle finishes will die. Our troops have decided to standby and wait."

"That is good news," Phoebe says, forcing a smile. "Fewer casualties are always worth praising. What about Samantha? Belial, I mean. Is she still alive?"

The man nods. "Yes. Alive and well, I might add. I could be wrong, but she seems to be rampaging even more fiercely than when she started. Apparently, the demonic forces cannot kill her, and have thus chosen to instead slow her down. Reports have it that several Burrowers have taken to manipulating the terrain around her to stymie her movements, but these actions have only enraged her further, making her attacks even more vicious and violent. Were it not for Belial's assistance, I fear the demonic armies would have poured across our barriers several hours ago. They hold a tremendous advantage during the cover of night."

Phoebe's energy-filled eyes lose some of their luster. "...Even more vicious and violent, you say."

"Commander?"

"No, it's... it's nothing. I just... I feel a bit helpless and angry right now. Belial shouldn't have to step in for us. This is my failing. If I'd prepared better, maybe we could have defended ourselves better... maybe the hospital wouldn't have..."

The female officer shakes her head. "Do not blame yourself, Commander. You've done all that you could. We can still win. Your husband is the Hero! Once he returns... he'll certainly save us from this hell."

"Yes. I hope you're right," Phoebe mutters.

After listening to a few more reports, Phoebe walks over to the munitions chests and grabs a beaten-up exosuit controller, the same one she's worn all day. She sticks her arms through the straps, then connects them behind her back. After fitting it snugly against her chest, Phoebe taps its ignition button twice, causing nanites to erupt from its core and spread across her body.

After her nanosuit solidifies, Phoebe starts to leave. Before she can depart the communication platform, the female officer from before steps in front of her.

"Commander. I mean no disrespect, but you're in no shape to return to the field."

"I'm not going to fight," Phoebe replies. "I'm only wearing this for my protection. I know damn well I can't shoot when my body aches as badly as it does right now."

"Alright, I understand," The officer says. "Just... take care, Commander. We need you right now. If something happens and you fall tonight... we'll lose this war in the same hour. You're our moral support, so please don't do anything that will get yourself killed."

"You don't need to tell me twice," Phoebe replies, squeezing her subordinate's shoulder. As she leaves, she taps the side of her helmet. "Let me know if anything important comes up."

"Like your husband returning?"

"Exactly."

Humanity's Commander leaves the depot. With an exosuit wrapped around her skin, Phoebe's speed increases substantially, allowing her to jog at a casual twenty miles an hour.

She arrives at the midlines, where three Planet-Walkers continue firing into the distant demonic hordes, only ever pausing to reload. However, a fourth mech lays on its side some distance away, a huge hole torn through its cockpit.

"What happened here?" Phoebe barks, while walking up to a group of flustered mechanics.

"Commander!" A Salamander yells. The yellow-scaled monster doesn't even bother with a salute, instead continuing to frantically dig around inside the mech's internal circuitry. "It shuckin' sucks! A group o' dem' Burrowers and Brutes emerged from the backline. They done popped up in our blind spot and attacked Gold Three. Pilot Daniels died during the ambush."

The Salamander gestures to his left with a quick head-nod. Phoebe follows his gaze to find a half-dozen dead demons laying in a pile, each one with blaster holes in their chests.

"God... god damn it..." Phoebe growls. "Can you fix it? These Planet-Walkers are our strongest assault mechs!"

"We'll need sev'ral hours, ma'am," The Salamander drawls. "I called up Ogie, but it'll be a bit 'fore he can make it here. He knows this stuff way better'n me."

Phoebe's expression clouds over with doubt. "We don't have hours. I need this thing back up and shooting, pronto. Can you hack together a solution?"

The Salamander shrugs. "Dunno, ma'am. I could maybe jump in 'n make it go on auto-pilot, but it'll be way slower 'n less reliable without a pilot."

"That'll have to do," Phoebe replies, nodding confidently. "Make it so. I'll check back later."

After finishing with the Salamander, Phoebe recalls her helmet and rubs her head as a bit of her energy fades away.

"I just... have to hold on... until Jason returns. If he doesn't... then we're all doomed."

On the eastern side of Hero City.

Deafening shockwaves erupt, flattening the fields between humanity and the demons. Both sides keep their distance, watching with a mixture of shock and horror as Kar, King of all Monsters, engages in combat with the Battle Brothers, Zamiel and Duriel.

The two Demon Barons take beating after beating. Kar punches Duriel's stomach so hard that the younger Battle Brother flies three hundred feet straight backward, bounces off the ground, and skids another hundred feet before eventually sliding to a stop. Kar doesn't even pause before tail-whipping Zamiel, sending him flying in the opposite direction. He, too, forms an intimate relationship with Tarus II's terrain as he lands face-first in the dirt, shearing much of the skin off his cheeks, forehead, and nose.

Before Duriel can get back up, Kar jumps into the air with his fist raised. He falls upon the younger, bigger brother like a meteor, pounding him against the planet's soil with enough force to knock dozens of distant humans and demons off their feet.

The humans' battle line, not far west of Kar and the Battle Brothers' positions, remains tense as they watch the brutal display of power unfolding before them. "Kar is incredible! I haven't even seen Blinker help him much over these last eight hours; he's been treating those two Barons like his personal punching bags the whole time!"

"Yes," A nearby kobold grunts, "but don't you find it odd? The Battle Brothers are only Barons, yet they're still putting up a hell of a fight. Any other Baron would have died by now."

On the demons' side of the battlefield, Ose's armies stand at the ready, eying the battle with caution.

"Remember," A low-ranking Baron says, "don't take a single step forward! I'm not going to die in some useless, unwinnable fight. We don't wanna lose any more troops to the Sphinx, so we'll just keep our distance."

"You're a coward!" A nearby Demon Lord yells. "You're a Baron, too! Go help the Battle Brothers!"

"Screw that! Can't you tell something is different about Zamiel and Duriel?" The Baron retorts. "Those two are WAY stronger than me! If I go over there, the Sphinx'll kill me without batting an eye! I'm as useless as you against someone like the Monster King!"

The Lord snarls. "Shrakh! Since when were monsters better than demons? Everyone knows monsters are low-class rats."

Not far behind that Demon Lord, a pair of Orcs glance at one another meaningfully.

"Hmph. Stupid demon. He not know glory of Elder Orc and Ancient Orc," the first one mutters.

"Quiet," The other Orc grunts. "That a big secret. We no talk about the Ancient Ones here."

"Oops. Sorry."

Both of them grin evilly, but fall silent, saying nothing else.

Meanwhile, Kar continues kicking and punching Duriel. He grabs the giant Baron by the neck, lifts him overhead, and slams him into the dirt, over and over.

Whump! Whump! Whump!

The sound of a body hitting the topsoil makes all the distant participants cringe sympathetically, even the humans.

"Hurgh! You are a durable little snake," Kar says, as he holds Duriel's limp body high. He punches Duriel's demonstone armor, causing a gong-like sound to ring out over the battlefield.

Bwang!

Duriel coughs. "Ugh..."

At that moment, a dozen spectral hammers form overhead, each one five feet long with quarter-ton heads attached to their handles. They fly at Kar, forcing him to spin around and hold Duriel up as a shield. Instead of striking the Battle Brother, the hammers curve around and crash into Kar.

Boom-boom-boom!

Kar drops Duriel reflexively and staggers backward, but appears relatively uninjured. Before he can grab the younger brother, another hammer violently flies in an upward curving arc, punts Duriel skyward, and sends him flying into the demons' battle lines.

"Oh, shrakh!" A goblin screams. Too late, before he can shove his way through the throng of Ose's assembled army, Duriel hurtles into the mass of enemies, crushing and killing half a dozen of them.

Zamiel, still badly injured, staggers toward Kar while weaving hand signs. His eyes flash red as he summons another wave of hammers and sends them hurtling toward Kar.

"Hurgh!" Kar grunts. "More useless tricks! You never know when to give up, murdering bastards."

The hammers crash against Kar's scales, but he wades through them easily, shrugging off the hits as if they were pebbles glancing off a windshield.

Kar glances back at the demon army, watching as Duriel jumps to his feet, completely healed of his injuries. The Battle Brother roars in rage and charges at the Sphinx again. "Stupid croc! You keep letting me heal! I'll make you regret that decision!"

Instead of fear or panic, a casual smirk passes over Kar's face. "I have broken your bodies dozens of times now. Finishing the two of you off is a simple matter for me. What you have failed to realize is that my only goal is to cause you pain."

Duriel summons a one-ton greathammer. He grabs it, hefts it high, and swings it down, intending to shatter Kar's skull.

The crocodile raises his arm. When the hammer reaches striking distance, he backhands it, tearing the weapon's head off and flinging it to the side. The remaining stump whacks Kar's chest with the piddling impact force of a whiffle bat.

"You slaughtered my family..." Kar grunts, as he balls his right claw into a fist.

"You tortured them, maimed them, and caused them immense suffering," He continues, as he rears his arm back.

"And so I must pay you back in kind, ten times over... for each life you ended!" Kar roars, while lunging forward.

BOOM!

He socks Duriel in the stomach, once again sending the Battle Brother careening backward. Duriel again crashes into the demons, this time crushing two dozen of his comrades into meat paste. He grinds to a stop atop their meaty chunks, gasping for breath.

"What I do not know... is why!" Kar yells, turning to face Zamiel. "Why did you kill my people?! Why did you murder the crocodiles?"

The older brother, still badly injured, clutches his broken ribs and wheezes out a laugh. "Hahaha... you know we can heal by absorbing blood, so you keep using our bodies as battering rams against our fellow demons. All this, just for your *pathetic* revenge. You are a- *cough!* You are a miserable little reptile."

"Of course I am miserable..." Kar growls. A look of hatred envelops his face, causing his eyes to shrink to the narrowest of slits. "Pyra was a fine female. She was my beloved mate. She never hurt anyone in all her life, yet you butchered her! You crushed her eggs, tied her down, and impaled each of her limbs with your weapons! Why?! What was her sin? What were any of my people's sins?!"

Zamiel laughs again. "Sins? Pahaha! You're an imbecile. *Cough!* What makes you think we needed a reason? We killed the crocodiles because it was *fun*."

"Liar!"

Kar leaps toward Zamiel. His speed, as swift as the wind, brings him into striking range in less than a second. All Zamiel sees is a blur of motion before Kar backhands him and sends him spinning and careening into the demon army once again.

Crocodile tears well up in Kar's eyes. "Huuuurgh! I never even got the chance to say goodbye! All I could do was hug my wife's corpse! Even if you die a million times, it won't be enough to make up for her suffering!"

Instead of running forward, Duriel climbs out of the bloody, meaty pit, and stands before the demonic army. He seems to realize something and grins sadistically.

"Ohhh, yeah. Pyra. Psh, you think me and big bro would remember one slime-scale's name? As if. I gutted so many nasty crocs, I couldn't tell you which of the ugly ones were female, and which were male. They all looked and smelled the same ta' me."

Zamiel, too, having crushed a bunch of demons to death, climbs out of their blood-soaked bodies and walks over to his brother's side. "Dur-Dur's got a point, croc-face! You might be the strongest crocodile of 'em all, but you're still a peace-loving simpleton. That's why you won't kill us!"

Kar pauses. The Reptile King straightens his posture and glares at both Battle Brothers with murderous intent.

"Hurgh. You are wrong. I *will* kill you. But before then, I will break your bodies so that your souls may learn humility. I will make you experience the same suffering that every single one of my people did."

"Big words..." Zamiel mutters.

Both brothers look at each other, then nod.

"Alright Croc. We're done playin' games," Duriel says, curling his lips into a sneer. "You think you're big shit, but you ain't. We've been lettin' you knock us around for a good, long while now, all to see just how strong you've gotten."

"Turns out, you're tougher than we ever could've imagined," Zamiel adds. "But in the end, you're still a stupid croc. You're 'bout to find out how we took down all of your species in one day. Fifty thousand reptiles. Didn't even bat an eye."

Both brothers inhale in unison. Their armor audibly creaks, while popping sounds erupt from their joints. They raise their arms and flex their muscles, shifting their skin into a deathly, pale white color. This change makes their blood-red eyes stand out even more, giving them an appearance distinctive from all other demons.

Zamiel laughs. "Hahaha! Let's see what you're made of now, tough guy!"

They charge toward Kar, covering hundreds of feet in seconds. Their boots leave deep depressions in the flattened soil, each step bringing them thirty feet closer to the Sphinx.

Kar frowns. "Hurgh. So be it. Let me reveal your misplaced confidence to the world!"

Again, both sides enter a brutal melee. Kar's fists shake the planet while sending shockwaves out that knock humans, demons, and monsters off their feet. He summons rocks onto his fists and batters Duriel from left to right, but to Kar's surprise, Duriel takes the hits like a champ. Every time Kar knocks him back, Duriel stomps his feet into the dirt and holds his own, no longer allowing himself to go flying.

Zamiel too, doesn't bother with summoning weapons from above. Instead, he conjures a powerful greathammer, one with a solid demonstone shaft and head, and proceeds to attack Kar while he's busy with Duriel.

Bang!

Zamiel's first strike crashes against Kar's back, momentarily jarring the Sphinx's senses. Zamiel lands two more hits before Kar whirls around and spin-kicks the older brother in the chest, but the attack only pushes Zamiel back a few feet while he doesn't lose his footing.

Kar's animal instinct activates, processing the changes in his opponents. *Hurgh. The Battle Bastards have suddenly increased their power tremendously. Why has their skin turned pure white? Is this a limited-time transformation? Their bodies have become as mighty as a top-ranked Demon Duke!*

Instead of going to town on Duriel, Kar starts exercising more caution. He continues fighting both brothers, but it doesn't escape his notice that their speed and strength have skyrocketed, putting them on par with Barbatos.

"Hurgh! How tricky! It seems you two have been hiding some secrets," Kar remarks. Duriel swings a greatsword at him, but Kar instantly reinforces his arm with a layer of diamond to block the strike. "But I wonder how long you can hold on!"

* * *

Minutes pass. An hour.

Kar continues to breathe evenly, but to his shock, not once does he manage to send either brother flying. Hundreds of blows get exchanged between himself and his mortal enemies, but the Crocodile realizes they must have been holding back earlier. Their durability easily approaches his level.

"What's wrong, croc?" Zamiel laughs. "Not having fun anymore? What was all that nonsense you spouted earlier? Something about making our souls learn humility? Get real! Your power may have reached the level of a Demon Emperor, but it ain't enough to kill the likes of us!"

The brothers momentarily pull back and circle around Kar like a pair of wolves looking for an opening.

Kar assumes a defensive stance. His crocodilian eyelids flick over his eyes for a split-second. During that instant, both brothers lunge at him!

Crash! Thunk! Bang!

They beat and slice Kar a dozen times, finally drawing blood. Before Kar's blood can hit the ground, they both retreat while motioning with their hands, causing the plasma to fly up and into their mouths.

"Mmm! That's **good!**" Zamiel laughs, his pupils dilating. "Your blood tastes much better than your wife's!"

Duriel smacks his lips. "Nice and sticky, just the way I like it."

Kar, lightly injured, easily seals his wounds with his reptilian physiology. The sudden attack only momentarily startles him, but it doesn't cause him any long-lasting injuries.

"Hurgh. I see now. Your powers... they revolve around blood. How could I not see before? Blood doesn't only regenerate your injuries. It must also empower you."

"Wow! You figured it out!" Zamiel laughs, while sarcastically clapping. "Good job, croccy cunt!"

Duriel grins, exposing his teeth. "That's right, Monster Chump. Me 'n Zammy get way stronger each time we drink blood. And guess who got us to our current level? Bahaha! All your worthless croc friends!"

Zamiel lowers his voice. "You wanted to know why we killed the crocs? There's your answer, croc-master. We didn't go there to waste our time slaughtering some useless 'reps. We killed each one and drank their blood! When we started, we were low-level Barons. Weak, useless. Now? We're stronger than most Dukes."

Kar's expression turns to one of horror. "You filthy, evil wretches! HURGH! Crocodilian blood... is sacred!"

"And tasty!" Zamiel laughs. He and Duriel keep their distance, even as Kar starts to stomp toward them. "Just imagine how strong we'll be once we reach the ranks of Duke and Emperor! Our bodies will

become invincible, just like Bael! And it's all thanks to your generous family, donating their slimy juices to us! What kind citizens!"

Before Kar can reach the Battle Brothers, a female voice suddenly speaks.

"I've heard enough!"

A tiny figure pops into existence next to Zamiel's face. He barely gets a second to react before she rears back and swings her arm, summoning a fist-shaped projection to crash into his face.

WHUMP!!

Zamiel goes flying for the first time in an hour. Taken completely by surprise, he spins helplessly through the air and crashes into the dirt, only to immediately jump to his feet a second later.

"Grr!! Nice ambush! Sneaky fairy!"

Blinker disappears, then reappears four inches from Duriel's face. Once again, she rears back her fist, but when she lunges forward, the projection doesn't fly out of her hand. Instead, it appears from the air in front of Duriel's chest.

Thunk!

She sends the younger brother flying by tricking him with misdirection. The unexpected frontal assault knocks the wind out of Duriel, making it tough for him to jump up even once he hits the dirt and skids to a stop.

"I won't listen to any more of your filth!" Blinker declares. "Kar! We have to stop playing around. These are the two who killed your species. Let's work together to send them to the Great Beyond!"

Kar hesitates. "Butterfly. This is not your battle. They are mine to kill."

"Wrong," Blinker replies. She teleports to her husband's side, reaches up, and touches his face. "Our friends are dying on the northern, southern, and western fronts. Every minute you drag out this fight, more of them will perish. Are their lives worth the cost of dragging out your revenge? What would Pyra say?"

The reptile shudders.

"N-no. No... Pyra would not like that I used her death as an excuse to sate my bloodlust. Not if it cost the lives of my friends."

Blinker smiles gently. "You're not invincible, gator-man. You're suffering. Everyone can see it. Don't kill these losers just to fulfill some twisted revenge. Do it to prevent any further deaths."

The Sphinx lowers his head. After a few moments, he raises it, then watches as Duriel and Zamiel fall into step beside one another while gazing at him and Blinker warily.

"I am sorry, Butterfly," Kar murmurs. "I acted selfishly earlier. All my life, I have thirsted for a chance to exact my revenge. I never imagined a time would come when my strength alone was not enough to end their lives. Please assist me."

"You've got it, honey bunches." Blinker says. She kisses his cheek, then activates her fairy magic, turning herself invisible.

With his mind recentered, Kar assumes a dominant stance.

"Hurgh. No more games, Bastard Brothers. I will kill you here and now. After that, I will wipe away your armies and make all who have invaded my world rue the day they crossed me."

The Battle Brothers don't move. They keep their distance and instead smile.

"So you're done screwing around, huh?" Zamiel asks. "What a coincidence. So are we."

From the ground in front of them, amidst the darkness of the night, a ghastly specter emerges. Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, rises from the planet's depths while clasping his bony fingers and cackling gleefully.

"Kekeke! Lassst of the Crocodilesss. I have awaited thisss day for agesss. You have marinated yourssself perfectly. You have sssurpassed my every expectation. Now, watch ass I bring you to the brink of dessspair!"

Mephisto motions with his hands. The dirt around him shifts and rumbles.

From the underground depths, a ghastly scream cries out in pain.

"No! Please, spare us! Spare the children!"

Kar freezes in place. He watches, horrified, as dozens of figures crawl out of the ground, all of them covered in ghastly wounds, with exposed bones poking out of skin and scales.

"No... no... no..."

The Sphinx takes a step back. Tears well up in his eyes as the figures begin limping and crawling toward him, all of them only able to move thanks to Mephisto's necromantic magic.

"You graverobber..." Kar whispers. "You... you stole them away..."

Kar's long-dead kin, the ancient crocodiles, make their way in his direction. Some of them cry out in pain. Others yell profanity at him, blaming him for their deaths.

The nearest crocodile, a female with faded red scales, gurgles in her throat. "Kar... Kar... is that you? It hurts... my whole body... hurts..."

Kar presses his fists against the sides of his head. "No! Nooo! Not Pyra too! You abhorrent, scum-sucking flesh-pirate! Mephistoooo!! I'M GOING TO **RIP YOU APAAAAART!**"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 269: Visiting the Oracles

Inside a distant corner of the Labyrinth, within the confines of a makeshift prison area, a spectral demoness with an immaterial body raises her palm into the air.

Smack!

She slaps a human trapped inside a cage before her, the captured leader of humanity's military forces, Neil Adams. Neil cries out in pain and stumbles backward, hitting the Labyrinth's compacted dirt floor with a violent *thud!* Magical energy and electricity courses through his veins, torturing him for several seconds afterward, but he only grits his teeth and endures the pain, glaring at Ose with bloodshot eyes.

"Gaaaah! B-beat me all you want, bedeviled witch! You shall never find the answers you seek!"

Ose's eyes flicker with annoyance. "You know where the Trifrancium is! You must! I'll break that Wordsmith's magic if it's the last thing I do!"

Humanity's former military commander grins evilly, as blood gushes from a broken tooth. "Hahaha! Stubborn and stupid, as expected of a bloodskin harlot! I told you, Ose! Hope erased my memories of all top-secret knowledge long before your invasion! There are no 'seals' you can break, no memories you can coax or rip out of my mind! There's nothing of importance hidden in my head, and no matter how you slap and kick me, you'll find nothing!"

"Liar!" Ose roars. She motions with her hands to conjure electrical energy, then aims her fingers at Neil's heart.

Crackle!

The weakened bolt of lightning strikes the human and sends him crashing against the demonstone bars of his cage, knocking the wind out of him and leaving him a crumpled mess on the floor.

"C-cough... cough..."

Tears flow uncontrollably from Neil's eyes as the unbearable torture threatens to shatter his sanity. He presses the glove on his right hand against his heart and clutches his chest, desperately willing the pain to fade with all his strength.

"You... you must be lying!" Ose shrieks. She tugs at the hair on both sides of her head and stomps her astral foot against the ground, momentarily hardening it to interact with the physical plane. Even with her Emperor-level strength, the impact barely even scatters a thin layer of dust coating the ground, revealing just how weak her interactions with the physical world are when she enters her Astral Form. "What sort of imbecilic leader hides the knowledge of his deadliest assets from himself?! You're simply asking for yourself to be betrayed!"

Neil continues to cough and sputter for several seconds. Eventually, he gathers his strength, grabs his cell's bars, and shakily pulls himself up. He defiantly rises to his feet to glower at Ose with the strongest look of anger he can currently muster.

"Kuh... huh... stupid wench. Don't you get it? I trust my soldiers. You wouldn't *understand*, being a filthy bloodskin and all. Your kind knows only betrayal and backstabbing, but my men and women are loyal to the core. We stand together as proud warriors. The only things that will ever break their loyalty are demonic lies... filthy, heretical magic conjured from the mind of a wretched being such as yourself."

Shakily, he points a gloved finger at her, even as his vision wavers. "That's what makes humans superior to demons. We may fight among ourselves at times, but in the end, we will always unite to combat an external threat. And when we do, we become an unstoppable machine of ruthless efficiency. In only six years, we've created weapons capable of combatting your kind. Just imagine the heights we'll reach once ten years, or twenty, or a hundred pass! We're a ticking time bomb... one that will signal the end of your reign."

Ose's eyes twitch, but she forces a smile. "Haha. Is that so? You sound awfully confident for a beaten *dog*. Make your jokes while you still can, Little Neil. Your fellow humans are already at death's door. It only took me a day to shatter their defenses and press upon them from all sides. The Wordsmiths abandoned them, and many of your top generals will soon perish. Once they fall, what remains of your resistance will crumble into ash."

Neil's smiles fades, while a look of hatred replaces it.

"Taunt me all you like, Ose. I can tell you're lying. Why else would you be so desperate to find the Trifrancium? Could it be that you're worried? Ten kilograms of Trifrancium... that's enough to blow a planet-sized hole in the Labyrinth's center and irradiate all the poor bastards contained within. They'd perish within a week. Be a shame if I rigged it to detonate upon humanity's fall."

Ose's eyes flicker. "Ten kilograms? You're bluffing. I know you've only one kilogram, two at the most. Don't even think of testing my intelligence, mongrel. Tarus II might be rich in deposits, but no planet has ever exceeded thirty kilos in total... and we've already mined it for several millennia."

Neil's breathing grows steadier as some of the pain from Ose's earlier strike subsides. He straightens his posture and grins at the Emperor before him. "We might have one kilogram, or we might have ten. Go ahead. Flip that coin."

Ose crosses her arms. "Tch. What a pointless waste of air. This conversation has squandered my time for long enough. It is clear to me that you possess no knowledge I need. Still, you may yet prove a useful hostage."

"What, do you not wish to smack me around some more?" Neil taunts. "Why don't you come here in person? We'll see if you can act so tough when we speak face-to-face. Then again, I suppose it's hard for you to meet me, given how badly my third in command broke your body. You must be suffering terribly right about now."

Despite her clearly superior position, Ose still grits her teeth in frustration. "Imbecile! That crocodile didn't injure me at all! I was the one who bested him! I broke my own arms willingly to bury the Sphinx forever!"

"Oh?" Neil asks, smiling bemusedly. "So you killed him then? Kar? How interesting, considering I remember seeing him still breathing after your battle. Who are you trying to fool?"

"Shut your mouth!" Ose snaps. She raises her hand and conjures electricity into it, then slaps Neil's face with enough force to send him flying to the left. He crashes against the bars like a ragdoll, then flops to the ground lifelessly.

Several seconds pass. Ose scrunches up her nose. "Shit. Did I kill him? No. He's still alive. Barely. Tch. Can't believe such a wretched little pissant made me lose my temper."

Her body trembles with rage, but she swallows that anger and exhales it through her nose.

Breathe, Ose, the Third Emperor thinks. I cannot waste time on this mutt any longer. Right now, locating the Wordsmiths should be my number one goal.

She turns away from her downed prisoner and slowly floats away, passing through the cage's confines. She pauses for a moment to look at the prison room, a small makeshift facility with three dozen other cages lined up along the walls, all of them with magical gems embedded on their tops to disrupt certain types of magic. No other demons reside in the room, having stepped outside to await the results of Ose's interrogation.

The Emperor of Infiltration curls her upper lip into a sneer. *I should have Jason's wife and daughter in my grasp by now. Yama's Shades failed me miserably, leaving me with only one hostage of any value. Perhaps I should return and capture the Wordsmith's family myself, ensuring they won't slip through my fingers again. Seven Hells! Must I do everything on my own?! What use is there in the title of Emperor if all of my subordinates become useless buffoons the moment I avert my gaze?!*

Without another word, Ose jumps forward, accelerating from a standing position to ten times the speed of sound. Her body rushes through the Labyrinth's walls at blinding speeds, while she pauses only for half-seconds at a time to double-check her surroundings.

She arrives inside the Blood Pits and quickly jumps to her main body. After examining her nude figure soaking in virgin blood, she frowns, then flickers to the side, where a nearby Demon Lord stands at attention, one of the assistant healers in the Blood Pits.

"Jiro," Ose says, as she materializes before him. "Tell Hellga to accelerate my healing. I don't care about the costs or risks. Use whatever methods she requires. Just get me out of here as quickly as possible."

The assistant demon loses some of his color. "Y-yes, Emperor Ose, but... while I'm sure Miss Hellga has a few methods left at her disposal, the after-effects won't be mild..."

"Did you not hear me? Stupid bastard!" Ose roars. "I don't give a damn about the risks. Relay my orders at once! Don't make me repeat myself!"

The Demon Lord jumps in fright. "Okay! Of course! I'll tell her at once!"

He leaves in a hurry, while Ose flickers over to a nearby blood pit where two demonesses lounge and chat with each other quietly.

"Vepar! Laharl! What are you two doing, lazing about?! Look at you! Your bodies are fully healed! Get out of the bloody tub and get back to the frontlines!!"

At the sound of Ose's astral voice, both Barons nearly wet themselves in fright. Laharl jumps up and aims her claws at Ose, then sneers angrily. "Tch! Shut your trap, bitch! We got our asses kicked by that damned Sphinx earlier! So what if we take our sweet time gettin' back, eh? What's it to you?! You've still got plenty of Barons who can do your dirty work!"

"I couldn't even hurt the Sphinx," Vepar complains, her raspy voice and rotted face giving her a frightening appearance. "I might as well not even return to the fight. What use will I be anyway?"

"No protesting! No arguing!" Ose shouts. "I've lost Beelzebub, and now Artorias is all alone fighting Belial! You two need to go and reinforce him. Slow Belial down, choke her with poison, I don't give a damn! Stop sitting on your asses, yapping about worthless pleasantries, and make yourselves useful!"

Both Barons open their mouths to complain, but think better of arguing with an Emperor capable of obliterating their existences. With reluctant shrugs of their shoulders, they climb out of the blood pits and walk over to a nearby pool of water to clean their skin.

"Fine..." Laharl mutters. "But if I don't find some nice, hunky pieces of man-meat when I get there, I'm going to be awfully disappointed."

"You'll find my foot planted firmly in your rectum if you don't pick up the pace," Ose snarls. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a Wordsmith to locate."

Ose flickers away, not even deigning to wait for a retort from her Barons. She flies through the Labyrinth's walls once again, this time increasing her speed tenfold.

Within seconds, she travels a thousand miles, treating the Labyrinth's winding passages and confusing corridors as if they don't exist at all.

It doesn't take long before she stops inside a secret facility, one with giant magical crystals hovering in midair. Beneath each crystal, half a dozen demons sit cross-legged in a circle, all of them holding out their arms to press their palms together. They bow their heads and close their eyes, performing a demonic ritual of meditation to increase their spiritual awareness.

Aside from the hundreds of demons located beneath the dozens of floating crystals in the center of the room, countless other monsters and demons walk around with studious looks on their faces. Wearing prim and proper black robes and other similar garments, the entire facility ripples with a cult-like sensation, giving the environment an uneasy atmosphere.

Ose turns her head from side to side, instantly scrutinizing every demon in the room. It only takes her half a minute to spot one specific Demon Baron, a female perched atop an outcropping in the wall. With jet black hair bundled up in a ponytail and a punk-rocker-girl T-shirt and shorts, she visually stands out from all the properly-dressed demons below her. A succubus tail flicks around behind her as she jots down notes on a clipboard.

The Third Emperor rolls her eyes. "Ugh. This is the part I hate."

She grits her teeth and flies toward the succubus. The moment she draws near, the Baroness raises her head, spots Ose and smiles giddily.

"Omigooooosh! Ose! Long time no see! How have you been?!"

Sparkles dance in her eyes as she jumps up and down excitedly. Ose visibly cringes, but forces herself to smile.

"*Abby*. You always act so bloody excited to see me, but you *do* realize we spoke not even two days ago, don't you?"

"Really? Wow, that's even longer than I thought!" Abby, the Baron of Happy Thoughts, answers. "What can I say?! It's always great to see my precious, favorite, sweetie-pumpkin!"

"Don't call me that," Ose mutters. "I'm here on business, and I don't have a lot of time."

"Oooh!" Abby grins. "You need my H-E-L-P then, HMMM? Well, you can always come knocking any time you want, sweetie-pumpkin! You know I'll break down your door if it gets me into your knickers,ahaha!"

The corner of Ose's lip twitches in disgust, not from Abby's sexual advances, but from the sheer level of excitement radiating from the succubus's body. Anyone exuding such intense positive emotions tends to nauseate Ose, making it impossible for her to trust them.

"Just... help me find someone," Ose says. "I need to locate the Wordsmiths. Both, preferably, but even a single one will do. We should have enough demons on Tarus II for the Oracles to search the planet. Additionally, check the Labyrinth. The Wordsmiths must be hiding somewhere secretive, somewhere I've not yet checked, but still close to the battlefield."

"Okay!" Abby says, casually tossing her clipboard behind her. It hits the ground with a clatter at the same time as she claps her hands excitedly. "This sounds like an adventure! Oooh, how exciting! You finally came to ask something of me! Could this be the start of our blossoming relationship? Our budding romance? How delightful! I always knew you'd come around!!"

Having known Abby for as long as they were both Barons, Ose merely crinkles her nose and looks away. "Sure, sure. Call it whatever you want. Can you find the Wordsmiths or not, Abby?"

"Dunno!" Abby says. She jumps off the outcropping and falls to the ground a hundred feet below, landing soundlessly without making even the slightest impact. She dances forward, clapping her hands while spinning around like a ballerina. "Okay, guys! Hey everyone! Can I have your attention, please? My precious-*wecious* Ose needs to find the Wordsmith guy! You know, the one with the big muscles, or maybe the other one with the even *biggerer* muscles! Come on now, people, snap to it! I can't leave my sweetie-pumpkin waiting!"

Ose watches from on high, shaking her head in embarrassment. She facepalms and groans audibly. "Ugh. Abby is just too sickening. Why must *she* be the most adept of all Oracles? If only I could find someone less nauseating to replace her."

Despite her griping, Ose doesn't interfere with Abby's work. She does, however, stare at the back of Abby's black T-shirt, where in sparkly pink letters, the words "LOVE CONQUERS ALL!" rest upon her spine.

Several minutes pass. Abby skips around, jumping from one group of Oracles to another while clapping her hands rhythmically to a song nobody but her can hear. "Come on, come on, raise those spirits! Put some peppy in your steppy, boys and girls! My sweetie-pumpkin needs our help!"

However, as the minutes pass, Abby's appearance grows less enthusiastic. After hundreds of Oracles shake their heads in unison. Abby finally stops prancing about and slows to a stop.

Ose floats down to her side. "Nothing?"

Unexpectedly, Abby bursts into tears. "Uwaaah! Oh, Ose! Sweetie-pumpkin, I'm so sorryyyy! I couldn't find even one hair on their heads!! I'm useless, hic, a total failure! Uwaaaah!"

Utterly revolted, Ose swallows her gag reflex and chokes back vomit as she tries to 'comfort' Abby. "H-hurk... okay, calm down. Seven Hells, you're a bloody handful. Enough with the waterworks. Why can't you find the Wordsmiths? Did you not search the Labyrinth's entirety, as well as Tarus II?"

Abby presses her fists against her eyes while still sobbing uncontrollably. "Hic, hic... I'm doing my beee-eeest! I'm just a stupid, no good Oracle! A total dummy! Uwaaah!"

Ose spends the next few minutes delicately consoling Abby before finally exploding in anger. She smacks the back of Abby's head, injecting electricity into the sobbing Baron's brain. "Enough! Stop with all that damned blubbering!"

Caught off-guard, Abby stumbles and falls to her knees. A moment later, she jumps to her feet and whips her head around to grin with sparkling eyes at Ose. "Oh wow, that felt great! Hit me again, sweetie-pumpkin! That tingly-feeling really cleared my head!!"

"I know. That was the *point*," Ose snaps. "Now explain to me why you can't find the Wordsmiths."

With her emotions momentarily disrupted, Abby becomes noticeably more analytical. She presses her finger against her lips and falls silent for a few seconds before speaking.

"Well, Ose dearest... it's like this. Oracles can only see the areas around where other demons exist. The more demons in one area, the more clarity our visions have."

"Right, yes, I know..." Ose mutters. "So, are the Wordsmiths not on Tarus II? Are they not in the Labyrinth?"

"I don't think they are," Abby replies. "But I can't say for certain! After all, aren't the Wordsmiths super powerful? Maybe they've hidden themselves from our Oracles' eyes!"

"Damn," Ose curses, "that's a distinct possibility. Hm. Can you at least peer into the future for me? Maybe you can find out if, or when, the Wordsmiths will return."

"No can do," Abby says, shaking her head. "Using our foresight requires time and preparation. I can look five minutes into the future whenever I want, but any further than that? I'm useless! I'd need to meditate for several hours just to look ten minutes into the future!"

"I thought the Oracles could combine their minds to increase Foresight's efficiency?" Ose asks.

"Oh, sure, if you want to lose the war," Abby says, nodding seriously. "You know we're pretty busy guiding the attacking forces, right? Silly Ose! You're always so focused and determined... that's what I love most about you!"

"Devils, no more sappiness, *please*," Ose groans, recoiling from Abby. "Just tell me if you can locate someone else. How about Jason's wife and daughter?"

"Oh, them? Sure! I already saw those two," Abby says, nodding matter-of-factly. She motions with her hand to summon a tiny ball of mana in the air. Ose takes the energy and presses it against her forehead, then falls silent for a few seconds as images appear in her mind.

"I see. Phoebe Hiro continues to fight on the frontlines, but she appears beaten and exhausted. Meanwhile, Daisy Hiro- hmm?"

Ose pauses mid-sentence. She closes her eyes and frowns deeply.

"What... what is this feeling? It can't be! Heroic Energy? Has the Wordsmith's daughter awakened a set of Heroic Powers?"

Abby cocks her head. She examines those same memories and widens her eyes. "Wow! I think you're right! It's faint, but I can definitely sense Holy Energy emanating from her soul!"

Ose's expression grows considerably more serious.

"I see. So that must be the reason why Yama's Shades failed. Four Shades would never be enough to kill Belial, but slowing her down and apprehending a mere child? I could never have imagined them failing at such a trivial task. Perhaps, with her awakened powers, the child fought back long enough for Belial to rescue her and kill three of Yama's Shades."

Satisfied with her conjecture, Ose nods slowly. "I doubt the child will be a threat to us for the moment. No Hero reaches their full power until their eighteenth birthday. Even the early awakeners, such as Joan, only fight with a fraction of their strength. Still, the brat is a future threat... and a potential asset. If I can't obtain the Wordsmiths, then capturing her will grant me a valuable hostage, as well as a powerful weapon. Hehehe. Perhaps my bounty for this war will be far greater than I first thought."

"Hm, say, Ose?" Abby says, her voice more muted than usual. "I found something weird while I was searching for the Wordsmiths."

Ose raises an eyebrow. "Be more specific."

Abby shrugs. "Well, I just don't get it. Why is Beelzebub hiding underground? I sensed his mana on the opposite side of the planet, but he doesn't seem to be moving. Is this another one of your super-awesome, super-secret strategies? I know you always like to plan ahead, so I'm a little curious..."

The Third Emperor stares in bewilderment at Abby for all of three seconds. "What?! You found Beelzebub?! Where is he? Show me!"

"Okay!" Abby chirps. She summons another mana-ball of information, which Ose greedily accepts, merging it into her mind.

When she sees Beelzebub's location for herself, Ose scoffs. "How absurd. Beelzebub's mana signature, all alone, ten miles beneath the planet's crust. What the Devil is he doing there? Taking a nap? Bah! I'll bet the Wordsmith had something to do with this! Abby, dispatch someone to dig the poor bastard out. At least then, I'll have gained another crumb from this visit."

Abby claps her hands. "Oh, yay! I'm soooo glad I could help you, sweetie-pumpkin! How about a good-bye kiss? Maybe several kisses? E-even some hand-holding?! This is a great chance for us to deepen our relationship!"

She reaches toward Ose, who quickly pulls away in response. "No! Seven Hells, never! Just... just do what I told you, Abby! I'll return later!"

"Haha, you always play hard-to-get!" Abby giggles, as Ose starts to fly away. "Ta-ta, dearest! I love youuuu! Huggie-wuggies to my sweetie-weetie!"

Ose vanishes into the walls, scowling darkly as she heads in the direction of her body.

"...So *this* is how Beelzebub always felt around that ugly servant of his."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 270: Amelia's Quest for Hope

Somewhere near the Labyrinth's center, some ten miles from the Core, a pair of women walk through the darkness. One of them, a human, wears a shadowy-black military exosuit to help her see through Hell's infinite gloom, while the other, a vampiress, needs no such artificial enhancements due to her demonic heritage. As they walk, they pass the occasional torch mounted on the walls, but thanks to the demonesses' guidance, they never once run into any other demons or monsters heading toward the battlefield on Tarus II.

Amelia Greyheart glances around as her impromptu companion, Dawn, guides her in the direction of Faith's End. "I'm still waiting for you to spring a trap on me."

"Ahaha, you are very fun-ny, Black Queen!" Dawn laughs. "My master has no need to use tricks if she wishes to see you. Did you know that vam-pires and hyuu-mans were once great friends? We liv-ed in a symbiotic relationship. Contrary to the myths you may have heard, there are very few downsides to becoming a vampire, and countless upsides. Immortality, for example."

The Black Queen's expression darkens. "Eternal life is overrated. It's nothing but a hollow, empty void if you haven't anyone to share the time with you."

"Mmm. Yes, it seems that you spe-ak from experience," Dawn nods. "Indeed. Losing the one you love can ruin you for the rest of your life, no matter how long your existence may last. A shame, to be sure. However, I am confi-dent that Leviathan would cry if he knew that you were unable to move on."

Unlike the past several times Dawn has brought up Amelia's long-dead friend, the Black Queen barely even bothers feigning anger. "Don't act like you know anything about Levvy. He was more than just a friend to me. More than a best friend, or a lover... he was like a second half of my soul. I barely even remember the life I endured before I met him."

Dawn stays quiet for a few moments. Only the sounds of her and Amelia's footsteps echoing into the Labyrinth's distant hallways pierce the silence.

"What sort of person was he?" Dawn asks. "Or what sort of a dragon, I suppose?"

Amelia lowers her eyes. She gazes at the ground while walking and ruminating on her thoughts.

"I... I don't want to talk about him."

"You don't?" Dawn asks. "Why are you so eager to forget him? Was he not pre-cious to you after all?"

"Of course he was!" Amelia snaps. She shoots a nasty glare at Dawn. "It just... it hurts to talk about him, okay? It really sucks! There isn't a moment that goes by where I don't wish he was still with me."

The two women round a corner, when Dawn pauses to touch Amelia's shoulder. "I have not known you long, Miss Greyheart. I doubt you see me as anything more than an acquaintance. Nevertheless, I must say that it is of-ten better to speak about the pain in your heart than to bury it. I, too, have lost beloved companions."

Amelia pushes away Dawn's hand. With her expression hidden under her helmet, only the pain in her voice reveals her turbulent emotions. "Don't lecture me. I'm not interested in pouring my heart out to a demon."

"What about your lover? What about Hope?" Dawn asks. "Have you spoken to him about Leviathan?"

"...A little." Amelia mutters.

"So you haven't," Dawn says, clicking her tongue. "I suppose you are content to merely allow the last dragon's memory to rot in your mind, withering away to the annals of time. It does not matter to you if you die and nobody else remembers him. Some might even call such inclinations selfish!"

Amelia balls up her fists. "Stop messing with my head. You think I don't see what you're doing, Dawn? You're just trying to squeeze me for intel on Leviathan. You're hoping you can learn more about him so you can... you can... I don't know! You're probably trying to figure out how his powers worked, or something! That's always how it is! Everyone just treats dragons like weapons, or tools, or magical batteries! You're no different from the rest! I'll bet your Emperor put you up to this!"

Dawn stares at Amelia quietly for a few moments.

"She did not. I am sorry to tell you this, Miss Greyheart, but perhaps if the last dragon were still alive, people might desire his power... but he has been dead for millennia. The reappearance of his corpse under Mephisto's control was a shock to many, but now even that has disappeared to the tempest of a dying star. No matter how much anyone tries, nobody could even gain a fragment of his power. I... I was merely trying to get to know you better. I find you to be an inter-esting hyuu-man."

Amelia locks eyes with Dawn, her expression hidden behind the metal helmet covering her face. After a few moments, she looks away and sighs.

"I'm sorry. You're... you're right."

She hesitates for a moment before lowering her head.

"Deep down inside, I just want to bury Levvy's memories. It hurts to even think about him. I spent thousands of years listening to him all throughout any given day, and since his death... I've heard nothing. Only silence. Every day that passes, it becomes harder and harder for me to remember the sound of his voice."

Dawn slowly walks forward to rest one hand on Amelia's shoulder, while gently wrapping the other around Amelia's fist.

"Hope could help you, you know? As a Wordsmith, he could open up your memories... make you hear Leviathan's voice again. Perhaps, once you rescue him, you could sit down and have an honest conversation with the Wordsmith, hm?"

Amelia snuffles. "I... I don't know."

"Well..." Dawn says, pursing her lips. She starts to say something, but thinks better of it and shakes her head. "I am sorry for pressuring you, Miss Greyheart. Never mind. Let us continue to the prisons. They aren't far, now."

"Okay..." Amelia mutters softly.

Both women continue walking, but this time in silence.

* * *

An hour passes.

As they travel, Dawn's expression becomes more and more solemn. Soon, Amelia begins to notice the structure of the Labyrinth gradually change. Torches attached to the walls no longer remain lit. Bloodstains, both fresh and ancient, sit splattered above, below, and to her sides as well. Distant screams and choked sobs echo from the hallway ahead of her.

Finally, the vampiress slows to a stop. Her cute smile, one she's worn since she first met Amelia, fades away.

"I wish you the best of luck, little lost queen, but I cannot guide you any further. We have reached the edge of Gressil's domain."

Amelia turns to look at Dawn. "Are you afraid of Gressil?"

"Yes. And you should be too," Dawn replies, an edge to her voice. "Gressil is vicious, violent, and unrelenting. Even among demons, he is a terrifying scourge, one who derives pleasure from only the most brutal and barbaric acts. If he gets his hands on you... I do not imagine we will ever see each other again."

After pausing for a moment, Dawn shifts her feet uneasily. "...You can still turn back now, Miss Greyheart. I know you care about Hope, but it would be safer if you could bring backup along. What you're about to attempt is nothing less than a suicide mission."

Amelia taps the side of her helmet, causing it to deactivate. In the pitch-blackness of the Labyrinth, without her exosuit's assistance, the only thing she can see are Dawn's glowing, blood-red eyes.

"If you really want to call yourself my friend, Dawn, then I need you to do me a favor."

Dawn's ears perk up. "And that would be?"

"If I don't return... inform everyone else that Hope is trapped here. I don't care what happens to me, but Hope is different. He's important."

"Do you understand that the Wordsmiths are the enemies of demonkind?" Dawn asks. "Mistress Fenrir likes you, but she has no love of Heroes. It would be better for her if Hope perished here, rather than if he escaped to reinforce humanity's forces."

"You mentioned a power struggle in the Labyrinth," Amelia counters. "Gressil works for the First Hell, doesn't he? If he doesn't kill Hope, but instead finds a way to use Hope's power, that will prove disadvantageous to your Hell's future."

Lowering her eyes in thought, Dawn stares at the floor for a moment before returning her gaze to Amelia. "I cannot make any such decision on my own, Miss Greyheart. However, if something does happen to you, then... I shall attempt to persuade my Mistress."

Amelia smiles. "That's enough for me. Thank you, Dawn. I can move forward now with confidence."

Dawn forces a smile, exposing her teeth in the darkness. "Anything for a friend."

After a moment, Dawn motions with her hands. She explodes into a swarm of bats, then flees down the hallway in reverse, her swarm chittering as they fly. It doesn't take long before silence engulfs Amelia.

The Black Queen reactivates her helmet, once again illuminating the pitch-black gloom surrounding her. Without another word, she begins walking deeper into the Prison.

Her footsteps, once soft like the beating of a butterfly's wings, slowly increase in volume, making her tense up after every step so that she can pause and listen.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Gingerly, Amelia walks forward, eventually arriving inside the Prison's main area. Doors line the walls on either side of her. Their quality and construction materials vary widely, demonstrating that they were not built all at once, but added over time, likely by the many goblins living within the Labyrinth.

Uncertain of where to look, Amelia starts by approaching each door, one by one. She activates an ultrasonic scanner on her helmet, piercing the insides of the first room, only to find a pair of badly mangled female corpses, both of them physically and sexually violated, with parts of their limbs missing, their eye sockets hollow, and their mouths frozen open in neverending screams of agony.

Amelia gazes upon the women without so much as a flicker in her eyes.

Truly, demons are disgusting abominations.

Coldly, dispassionately, Amelia walks from room to room, scanning each one's interior with an ultrasonic pulse. The rooms with wooden doors reveal their contents openly, while those with metallic or demonstone doors prove harder to inspect.

A man, his body broken, hangs limply from a pair of chains attached to a wall. Missing both his legs, he opens his mouth, whispering two words, over and over. "Help me. Help me. Help me."

A woman, naked, shivers on the floor. A bowl of rotten food sits beside her head, while the bones beneath her skin tell the story of a long, arduous confinement, one which shall never end. Her suffering will only reach its conclusion if she should die.

A brother and a sister, each one with skin and muscle peeled off their arms, lay together, embracing each other as they swallow their final breaths.

At one point, Amelia finds a new prisoner, a man who has only recently been locked up. The man paces in his pitch-black room, scratching his face and peeling away the skin as some unknown demonic chemical screws with his brain.

"-me out! Let me out! Let me out!" The man shrieks. He walks from one end of his cell to the other, clearing the distance in only three steps before spinning on his heel to continue the neverending loop. "She betrayed me! She ratted me out! That bitch! When I get my hands on her...!!!"

Amelia examines room after room, never once bothering to help the prisoners caged within. Having lived a hellish life herself, their tortured existences barely linger in her mind for a few moments before she forgets about them entirely.

The Black Queen leaves the psychotic man's cell door and scowls. "Where is Hope? I don't even know how many rooms there are here, let alone the layout of this place."

She continues deeper into the Prison, checking every room without fail. At one point, she finds a room with a locked demonstone door, one which her scanners can't pierce. She shatters the lock without hesitation and steps inside, only to find a mountain of rotting corpses, as well as an injured demon child inside, both of his legs broken.

The child, a pureblooded demon boy, jerks in fright when Amelia enters. Without hesitation, he reaches out to her.

"Please! Please help me! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do it! I'll never talk back again!"

Amelia ignores him. She glances around the room, double-checking the corpses to see if any of them are Hope. When she confirms they aren't, she starts to turn away and close the door, only for the boy to reach out and grab her ankle.

"Please! Please don't leave me here!" The boy sobs. "I don't want to die!"

Amelia scowls. She kicks her hand free and glances at the demon. "I'm not your savior. I don't give a damn about you. But since I'd hate to see you suffer, I'll put you out of your misery."

Without hesitation, Amelia lifts up her leg, swings it down, and stomps the boy's head. Her strength, reinforced by the exosuit, proves more than enough to smash his brains like a watermelon, killing him before he can react. Amelia steps away from his bloody carcass and closes the door again, shaking her head in disgust.

"I've killed millions. One more won't make a difference..."

However, instead of continuing forward, Amelia's right eye twitches. She pauses outside the door and stares vacantly at the wall in front of her as a weird sense of disembodiment swallows her up. For several seconds, she sways from side to side, while a strange feeling appears in the back of her mind. She stumbles and falls to her knees, growing more confused by the second as her hands start to tremble.

"What... what's going on? Why do I feel like this? Why am I acting so strange?"

She narrows her eyes, then widens them, then narrows them again. Conflicting thoughts enter her head, until eventually, a singular concept, long ago lost to her, resurfaces.

"Is... is this... *guilt*? Do I feel guilty right now? Just because I killed a... a demon child? Why? I've slain so many! One more shouldn't make a difference..."

It takes several minutes for Amelia's breathing to return to normal. Slowly, she leans against the wall and climbs to her feet, clearly shaken by the strange emotions running rampant in her mind.

"This can't be right. I... I'm the Black Queen. What nonsense. Why would I ever experience guilt? It's a bit late for that, don't you think?"

She directs her question to nobody in particular. However, in the back of her mind, a sense of disappointment materializes.

"...If Levvy were here, he'd know what to say. He always did."

She bites her lip, while warm tears form at the corners of her eyes. With the helmet blocking her face, she cannot wipe them away, but instead allows them to roll down her cheeks.

"Fuck. Damn you, Dawn. Why did you have to keep bringing him up? This is all your fault."

Amelia turns around. She pushes the cell door open again to gaze at the child's corpse, his fresh blood slowly spilling across the cell's floor.

"...I'm sorry. I... I shouldn't have... done that. Dammit. Why am I apologizing to a corpse? He's just a stupid, worthless little..."

She closes the door again and forces herself to continue walking. "Stupid. Stupid! Why do I feel like my body has suddenly become defective? It's as if there's some bastard guiding my thoughts, trying to turn me into a normal human again. Don't tell me Hope put some spell on my brain in case I turned evil again. He wouldn't do that, would he? I don't know!"

She resumes checking the Prison's cells, all the while, muttering and cursing to herself. Despite spending an hour checking more than a hundred rooms, not once does the Black Queen encounter a prison guard of any species, making a pit slowly form in her stomach.

"Where the devil is everyone? Don't tell me they've all gone to attack humanity. Is Tarus II okay? What about Jason? The 'real' Jason. Could he help me find Hope? Doubtful! Hope must have kept me hidden from Jason for a reason. But why? I don't get it. Do I even really know Hope? Was our entire relationship built on a lie?"

As Amelia inspects the rooms, she suddenly finds herself standing in front of a door very different from all the others she's inspected so far. This one, constructed of solid oak, somehow still manages to confound Amelia's sensors. Dozens of locks and latches line its surface, each one adding another layer of reinforcement, making forced entry an impossibility.

"Could it be...?" Amelia mutters. "Maybe Hope is in here. This room seems like it's hiding something important."

After inspecting the door, Amelia pauses for a moment when she spots a series of faint scratch marks cut into the doorframe's top. In the demonic language, they reveal a single word.

Forbidden.

The word means nothing to Amelia, but still, its presence excites her.

"This room has to be important. I must see what's inside."

Quickly, Amelia reaches for the first lever. She slides it to the left with an audible click. Then, she grabs another one, and it too slides open with a clack.

Just before she touches the third latch, Amelia pauses. From inside the room, a faint sound catches her attention, one Centurion boosts with its sensors.

"...Is that a mouse squeaking?" Amelia asks. She bunches up her forehead and listens more intently. "No. It's... a woman crying? Doesn't sound like Hope. Still, I wonder who she is."

With a shrug, Amelia reaches for the third latch.

At that moment, a deep, masculine voice speaks.

"You should not touch that which doesn't belong to you."

"EEEYAAH!" Amelia screams. She spins around to see a massive wall of muscle standing behind her; a pale-skinned demon with two dozen blood-red eyes embedded in his arms, torso, and legs. Two heads adorn the demon's body, with one sporting what looks like a Pterodactyl's beak, and the other, three closed eyes, one of them on its forehead.

The Black Queen stumbles to the side, her heart racing like crazy. She loses her balance and falls to the ground, then quickly scoots away, cowering in fear.

"Y-you are...! Gressil?!"

The prison-master stares at her unsmilingly. The eyes embedded in his body twitch and squirm, while blood drips from the corners of their eyelids.

"Ah, if it isn't the False Queen," Gressil says, while standing motionlessly. "I've been expecting you."

Amelia jumps to her feet, her heart racing a mile a minute. "W-where is Hope?! I... I know you took him!"

Gressil doesn't answer. Instead, he turns his eyes to the door she started to open. He reaches toward it and slides both latches back into place.

"You have come to steal my possessions..." Gressil says. "That is a move most unwise."

"I've come to take back my f-friend!" Amelia stutters. "My lover!"

Gressil turns to look at Amelia and sneers. "Lover? Ah, so even the False Queen can stoop to such a level. Once, you were the terror of demonkind, a being so mighty that even Emperors would quake in their boots. But look at you now. You've lost your edge after returning from beyond the grave."

Amelia slows her breathing. She forces herself to stand up straight, even though her diminutive figure barely exceeds half of Gressil's height.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I may have temporarily lost my magic... but my character remains unchanged. Now... stop stalling! Give me Hope!"

"'Hope' is not mine to give," Gressil says, smiling coyly. "Unless you mean the Wordsmith."

"You *know* what I mean." Amelia snarls.

"The only thing I know is that you've not a trace of good manners," Gressil replies, his smile fading away. "Do you think yourself better than me? Only the strong may make demands of the weak... and we both know who among us is the mightier. Surely, you've brought something to bargain with? Surely, you do not expect me to give up a Wordsmith in exchange for nothing?"

Amelia's resolve weakens. Faced with a Demon Emperor of incalculable might, she suddenly realizes that, indeed, she doesn't have a single thing worth bargaining for.

"T-trade him for me..." Amelia says. "My life for Hope's. I'm the Black Queen! If you want power and prestige, making me your slave-"

"Would mean nothing," Gressil interrupts. "Stupid girl. Who, exactly, do you imagine yourself to be? The great conqueror of the Labyrinth? The sole heir of the Last Dragon's legacy? You are neither. You are merely an ordinary human girl, one who claims a birthright which long ago ceased to be hers."

Slowly, deliberately, Gressil takes a step toward Amelia. His foot strikes the ground with a heavy *thud*.

Reflexively, Amelia takes a step back. "I may not have my powers anymore... but I'll surely develop them again, in time!"

"You will not," Gressil says. "How sad. I weep for you. You've no idea of what method the Wordsmith's clone used to bring you back, yet you still prance about, certain of the truth behind your delusions. Amelia Greyheart? No. You are not her. You are a cheap imitation. A fake. A copy."

Gressil takes another step toward Amelia, then motions with his hands. Hope's figure suddenly appears to Amelia's right, conjured via illusory magic. Amelia spins to look at him, only to gape in shock as she sees her lover tied to a table, his body covered in countless cuts, lacerations, and bruises. His arms and legs, now amputated, stick out of a blood-filled bucket at the head of the table where he lays motionless.

"HOPE!!" Amelia screams. She runs toward the comatose Wordsmith, only to smack against the wall Gressil projected his illusion against. "Ah!"

Gressil waves his hand, causing the illusion to disappear. He smirks at the stunned exosuit-wearing human while shaking his head. "There? Don't you see? I've taken excellent care of the Wordsmith's clone. He is alive and well. No need to thank me."

Fury erupts in Amelia's eyes. Murderous intent boils in her heart as she grabs both vibro-knives attached to her waist and activates them with the press of a button. "You piece of shit! What did you do to him?! I'll kill you!!"

She jumps toward Gressil, raising both arms overhead. At the last second, her suit's teleportation module activates, causing her to flicker behind Gressil.

Skrik!

She plunges both knives into Gressil's spine, then drags them downward to rip open a horrifying wound from his neck to his thigh. The instant she completes her strike, Amelia jumps back and gazes at the Emperor of Chaos in horror.

Gressil remains unmoving. He stares ahead at where Amelia first started, unmoved by her sneak attack or the damage she inflicted on his body.

"Human technology is powerful and versatile," Gressil says, as his body fades away. A moment later, he magically materializes in front of Amelia, causing her to yelp in fright and fall on her ass. "...But it is far from omnipotent."

Amelia scootches back again, only to accidentally bump into someone behind her. When she turns her head to look, Amelia spots Gressil's leg pressing against her back. "Eeeyah! What the hell ARE you?!"

Her heart races like never before. Suddenly, the realization that she has no magic and no way to counter Gressil begins to dawn on Amelia, making her terrified for her life. She pulls away from the second Gressil, quickly looking at the first one to confirm both of them actually exist.

"You came here to steal from me, and then you attacked me," The second Gressil says. "You are a very rude person. How should I deal with such a graceless insect? Shall I swat you and end your misery here? Shall I tear that armor off your body and throw you in a cell?"

He pauses, then cocks his head.

"Hmm. No, that would be a waste. She could make such a good pawn if used correctly. She could become one of my *eyes*."

Amelia's heart flutters as Gressil's two bodies start walking toward her. "No! No... stay away! Stay back!!"

She reaches into her suit's pockets and grabs a miniaturized flashbang grenade. With a quick toss, she flings it above her head, where it explodes with a deafening *bang*, flooding the hallway with blinding light. Her suit instantly adjusts to compensate, preventing the grenade from affecting her.

Amelia starts to move toward the nearest Gressil, hoping to dodge him in the confusion, but before she can take even one step, the other Gressil lunges an arm at her. Her heart skips a beat, but all she can do is watch as he grabs her by the throat and smashes her against the wall.

Boom!

Even with an exosuit protecting her, Amelia gets the wind knocked out of her, making her gasp for breath while Gressil squeezes her neck like a vice.

"Human tricks. Armor. Weapons. Your species is always so very proud of their technological supremacy. Sadly, your opponent is me."

Gressil smiles, his expression one of contempt.

"I expected you later, but that meddlesome Fenrir decided to interfere. Well, it doesn't matter now. Come, let me have a look at that pretty face."

Amelia grabs Gressil's arm and tries to pull, push, or pry the Emperor off her, but her struggles prove fruitless. Without any effort, Gressil presses two giant fingers against the top of Amelia's helmet and swipes downward, shattering the nanites protecting her head with ease. He repeats the motion three more times, destroying any that appear to fill in the gaps, and soon, he fully exposes Amelia's head.

"There," Gressil says, his glowing eyes all that illuminate the pitch-black hallway. "That's nice. What an incredible facsimile you are, False Queen. Your face appears identical to Amelia Greyheart's, and your memories, too, but I know better. You are a fraud. A little girl who wanted to play princess."

Amelia chokes hard and tries to swallow even a single breath, but Gressil gives her no respite. He opens up his hand, revealing an eye embedded in his palm. The eye gazes at Amelia with the look of a bloodthirsty wolf, causing her to panic.

"Now, now, there's no need to feel frightened," Gressil coos, using a tone one might describe as 'ominously soothing.' "It will all be over soon. You'll know the truth, and your farcical existence will come to an end. But first, please accept my gift, for I am a kind and generous soul."

Without any fanfare, Gressil places the eye palm against Amelia's face, making her wheeze uncontrollably. She fights back with all her strength, but her delicate body proves infinitely weaker than her captor's.

After several seconds, Gressil retracts his palm. He releases his grip on Amelia's throat, allowing her to drop to the floor, broken and defeated. The young woman curls up into a ball and starts to cry. "Guhuk... please... please don't hurt me..."

A pitying look enters Gressil's eyes. "Now you understand. You are not Amelia Greyheart. You are not the Black Queen. You are little more than a con artist, one who can only fool the blind and stupid. Now that I have opened your eyes to the truth, you may leave. Go and tell your friends about your beloved Wordsmith. With luck, you'll soon deliver me the other one, and I may yet fulfill my goals. But please... move with haste. I am a patient demon, but I hunger for the coming era more and more every day."

Gressil chuckles to himself, then starts to walk away.

"Hah hah hah... yes. Soon, the Era of Chaos will descend upon this galaxy. What great fun we shall all have."

He fades into the distance, leaving Amelia to sob on the ground, her spirit broken, and countless memories filling her mind.

"No... no... Hope... it's all my fault... it's all my fault..."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 271: Ose's Exasperation

My head spins and tumbles like a washing machine falling from the sky. Nausea wracks my stomach and boils into my throat. Somehow, I keep myself together and hold my vomit, but when I open my eyes, the spinning doesn't stop.

My mind-wife, Phoebe, stands next to my head. I stare at her through the hazy, foggy film covering my eyes. Her body whirls and tumbles in front of me, even as I try to make out the words she says.

"Rep rum derr ruhun?"

Phoebe speaks. I close my eyes, unable to understand her. My body seemingly spins in place, disorienting me further as I try to wrap my head around my surroundings.

"RELL RUH PO LO RUHH RUHH?"

Phoebe's voice booms in my ears like the speakers to a heavy metal concert. I open my mouth to ask her to stop, but the only sounds that escape my lips are mumbled words even less comprehensible than her own.

"Juh luh rrrr holl husser ruh?"

Every time Phoebe speaks, the nausea in my gut bubbles up again. Her booming voice makes me want to cry. I can't remember any point in my life where I felt as dizzy, disoriented, and sick to my stomach as right now. A ride on a plane dive-bombing toward the Earth while spinning a hundred times a second would feel like paradise in comparison- oh, fuck!

"Bluuurck!"

Unable to control myself any longer, I heave a massive spew of yesterday's dinner straight up into the air. My stomach-rot fires out of my mouth and nose, only to immediately fall back down and splash against my face, sickening me further.

"Bluur-huurk! Guuuhhh!"

Noises reminiscent of a vomiting dog burp from my mouth and nose. Before I can feel even the slightest sense of shame for what might be the lowest moment of my entire life, a wave of pleasure floods over me.

Immediately, the dizziness plaguing my body fades away, allowing me to open my eyes. The awful taste of bile pervades my mouth and burns my nose, but when I spot my mind-wife hovering over me, I feel a great sense of relief.

"Oh, thank heavens. You finally purged," Phoebe says. "Are you okay, Jason?"

I don't reply. I can't. I feel as if I'll throw up again any second. Instead, I shake my head.

Phoebe gets the message. "You still have a crapton of foreign energy contaminating your body. One moment, I'll get you all cleaned up."

Suddenly, ten flying saucers, each the size of a dinner plate, appear before my eyes. My heart jumps in alarm, making my nausea return greater than ever. I turn my head to the side and vomit again, with this second round making me feel even better than the first.

Little metal arms pop out of the tops and bottoms of the flying saucers. They fire beams of light at the vomit spewed all over my face and chest, and within seconds, the acrid liquid covering the area around me disappears, as if magically teleported to another dimension.

"What... happened...?" I ask, as I start to sit up. The moment I try to move, a burst of electricity explodes in my stomach, like a bomb formed from thunder. I yelp in pain and fall backward, bonking my head against the Cube's platform.

"Ose attacked you," Phoebe says. "Just lie down. I've spent hours trying to bring you back to life. Lord knows if I weren't here, you'd have needed weeks, if not months to purge that witch's evil magic from your system."

Before I can ask what Phoebe means, she continues, anticipating my question. "Remember? You started observing Tarus II, and then Ose detonated a burst of electricity in the sky. You instantly fainted, and it took me an hour to figure out what she did. Apparently, she released a burst of terrible energy into your Mind Realm. It didn't affect me or the Archangels, but it hit you like a sledgehammer to the face. Every time you moved, Ose's energy flared up and forced you back into a coma."

Still delirious, I shut my eyes to stop the world from spinning around me. "I... I see. Argh. Fuck, everything hurts so bad. I can't think at all."

"I'd say you're lucky to be alive, but I don't think Ose intended to kill you," Phoebe explains. "It's as we thought. Her plan is to capture the Wordsmiths, you and Hope both, and turn you into her puppets. If her goal was to overrun and slaughter humanity, I'm sure she could have done it by now. The fact she hasn't must mean she planned to lure you out of hiding, then render you unconscious with a sneak attack. Right now, since she can't get you, she's probably angling for me and Daisy. Err, for the 'real' me and Daisy. She wants to use us as hostages to get to you."

I nod my head, even while keeping my eyes shut. "Cowardly bitch."

"Not cowardly. Smart," Phoebe retorts. "I still haven't seen Hope show up on the battlefield, and I kept a pretty close eye on the holo-map while you were comatose. Ose might have captured him already, but I doubt that."

"Hope went into the Labyrinth," I say. "I don't know why, but he did. With her ability to control minds, Ose could easily have captured Hope and used him against humanity. The fact we haven't seen any signs of Wordsmithing probably means she hasn't located him yet."

I pause, then flutter open my eyes to look at Phoebe. "We *haven't* seen anything like that, right? What happened while I was under?"

Phoebe's expression turns grim. "Stay there, and don't move. I'll bring the holo-display to you."

She instantly disappears, then reappears several dozen feet away with her back to me. A moment later, she reappears at my side with a miniaturized model of the Tarus II battlefield playing out in real time.

"Son of a bitch..." I gasp. "So many demons. They have humanity surrounded from all sides!"

Phoebe nods. "They do, but we're still holding on. I can't contact anyone on the planet, not without your Wordsmithing, but the holo-map still shows me the situation. Daisy will soon board the last ship off the planet, while my main body has fallen comatose from exhaustion. She injected several neurostimulants to keep herself awake, but nearly died when her legs gave out while she was walking. She fell and cracked her head on a rock."

My heart flutters in fright. "Is Phoebe okay?! The other Phoebe, I mean. Is she alright?"

My mind-wife nods. "Yes, but she's unable to walk or move. She fought for over twenty-four hours straight. She ran herself absolutely ragged, as did many of her generals. She gave the others at least a couple of hours of sleep, but never rested once herself."

I grit my teeth and sigh. "Goddamnit, she's way too fucking stubborn."

"I'm right here, you know," My mind-wife says with a shake of her head. "Anyway, our forces are planning to ship her offworld along with Daisy. My other half and our daughter will leave the planet together on the last ship."

"Flesh Phoebe won't like that," I say. "She's, err, *you're* both unwilling to leave and allow the rest of your friends to stay behind and die. You'd rather stay and die with them than leave them to perish."

"I'm well aware of how I'd feel in this situation. And you're wrong," My mind-wife says. "I love all of my friends more than life itself... but in this situation, where I wouldn't know what happened to you, protecting Daisy would become my number one priority. I'd understand if everyone else forced me to leave under these circumstances, so long as it meant protecting our daughter."

Phoebe pauses for a half-breath. "By the way... 'Flesh Phoebe'? Can't we come up with better nicknames? I can accept 'mind-wife,' but flesh-wife is awfully dehumanizing, don't you think? How about 'Squishable Wife,' because of my lovely, squishy body, eh?"

"This really isn't the time for jokes," I groan. I try to sit up again, only for more electrical agony to erupt in my stomach. "Aaaaargh! Fucking Jesus, please tell me there's a way to stop this pain! I can't move an inch!"

After the wave of pain subsides, I regain a tiny bit of feeling in my arms and legs, making me frown as I sense faint movements coming from below my neck. I flick my eyes downward, only to see the other four-fifths of my body trembling, twitching, and spasming uncontrollably. No matter how I try, I can't regain the slightest bit of control over my limbs.

"What did Ose *do* to me?" I ask, not particularly expecting an answer. "If she had this kind of magical energy at her disposal, she could have captured me during my visit to her residence."

Phoebe shakes her head. "I don't think so. You forget, but your body is only about as hardy as any normal human. However, at that time, Kar was with you, as well as Blinker. I feel whatever Ose struck you with wasn't a particularly energetic cocktail of nastiness, so it would have crippled you, but it wouldn't have so much as tickled our monster friends. Moreover, the energy hurting you now doesn't have Ose's

mana signature. I believe it comes from another demon, or a different being besides herself. She might not be able to activate it on command."

"Well, isn't *that* comforting?" I complain. "Forget me for a minute. What about the Subspace Interference Relays? Did you manage to finish them while I was out? Give me at least *some* good news. If we can shut down all subspace travel around Tarus II, we can prevent any other Warper Portals from opening."

Phoebe hesitates. "...Jason. Didn't you pay attention to Tarus II's present condition? Even if you came back right this instant and shut down every portal while ensuring no others opened, the demons now outnumber our entire combined military might ten times over. We're down to fewer than two million soldiers, but there are twenty-three million demons swarming us from all angles... and those are still only the tiniest fraction of Hell's armies. I gave up on the Relays."

My wife points at my chest. "Besides. If I hadn't switched gears, you'd probably have fallen comatose for weeks and died from starvation. You're lucky I was here, hubby. I reconfigured the Molecular Assembler so it would create Medical Drones capable of alleviating your symptoms, since I can't touch your body directly without assistance."

My heart skips a beat. "No! You shouldn't have stopped producing the SIR's! What good will it do us if I awaken here but can't stop the flow of demons attacking Tarus II? We're days away from home and the demons will only continue to expand their numbers while our soldiers dwindle."

"A lot changed while you were unconscious..." Phoebe murmurs. "You can't use your magic at all. Even if we had all the SIR's we need, we have no way to get them to Tarus II, and they won't do anything beyond delaying the inevitable."

Phoebe pauses to spread her arms out, gesturing at the space around us. "I came up with a new solution. After examining the properties of P-Space, I discovered I could shave multiple days off our travel time by taking manual control of Camael's Cube. When running on autopilot, it chooses the safest possible route to reach its destination. When manually controlled, though, I can guide it through much narrower choke-points near the gravity wells of planets, stars, and black holes. We're now only half a day, maybe one full day away from Tarus II, tops. Once we arrive, assuming I can heal you to normal, you can then use the Cube's power in the battle. At that point, the demons will have no choice but to flee."

Despite my annoyance, I force myself to take a deep breath and calm down. I mull over Phoebe's words for a moment, remember how much smarter than me she is, and conclude she did the best she could, considering the circumstances.

"...Alright. So what do we do now? Are these little drones of yours going to get me back on my feet soon?"

"Should only take a few hours," Phoebe replies. She turns around and looks off in the distance. "Hey, uh, Cheep-Cheep. Come here for a second."

After Phoebe calls out, a ball of red light rushes toward her. The Phoenix's soul stops a few feet away and bounces up and down. [Hi, hi! Here I am! What's wrong? Does the man-friend still have hurtness

somewhere?]

"He does," Phoebe answers. "But he'll be okay. Jason, I had the Phoenix assist me with your recovery. She has a far better control of mana flow than anyone else here, especially me, but she couldn't do much while you were unconscious. I'm going to need you to help force out the remainder of Ose's 'cursed energy' along with Cheep-Cheep's assistance."

I frown. "Cheep-Cheep? Is that what we're calling the Phoenix now? Bit disrespectful for an ancient entity millions of times older than both of us combined."

[I think it's a cute name!] The Phoenix answers, lilting her voice. [You can call me Chirpy, too! Or Squawker! Or even Birdie!]

"No thanks, I'll pass," I grunt. "Just help me expel this mana poison, Phoenix. I'm counting on you."

The Phoenix bounces up and down in the air again. [Okay! But watch out! You're gonna spit that black and green liquid all over the floor again! It's really nasty. Yucky. Ew.]

"I'll cough up a lung if doing so gets me back on my feet," I groan. "I can always Wordsmith myself to full health later."

Phoebe clenches her fist. "That's the spirit. Okay, Jason, this next part will be pretty unpleasant, but I need you to follow my orders."

"You've got it," I reply.

As I follow my wife's instructions, my mind wanders to the situation on Tarus II.

I can only hope everyone will hold out long enough for me to return.

Tarus II. Second day, fifth hour.

Faint shimmerings of sunlight peek over the planet's sky. These rays of sunshine, the first glimmers of twilight, reveal a horrific scene of mass carnage, one with countless dead bodies of humans, monsters, and demons scattered haphazardly here and there across Tarus II's landscape. Half a dozen Planet-Walkers continue ripping demons to shreds on the Western Front, while Belial rampages around just as bloodthirstily as before, her rage unabated.

Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, slowly walks out of Tarus II's Warpgate with Bael, the Duke of Pain, shuffling along behind her. She sniffs the bloody air, crinkling up her nose in disgust as waves of demons flood through the portal and sweep around her instinctively.

"Disgusting. I despise the smell of death."

Bael, his lone remaining eye glassy and unfocused, walks past Ose aimlessly. He chuckles under his breath. "Yeah? You think so? Doo-doo is a funny word. Hehe. Doo-doo. It's like poop, but it's doo-doo."

Ose flicks her eyes toward Bael's back. "Hey! Imbecile. Stop mumbling and get over here. Pay attention! I'm going to explain the plan- Bael! Bael, are you listening to me?"

The Third Emperor's expression shifts to annoyance as Bael continues walking forward, oblivious to the sound of her voice. With his right eye having been gouged out by the humans' horrifying anti-Bael barb, his crippled appearance makes him a pitiful sight to look at.

Bael stops and stares blankly into the distance. "That so? Yeah, I've heard of her. Yorflem-a-ling. That's a funny name. You're funny, Shax. We should talk more."

"Stop ignoring me!" Ose shouts. She walks over and pokes Bael's arm, only to wince as her finger twitches in pain.

Tch. Hellga's last-ditch solution repaired my fingers' dexterity, but any level of exertion still hurts like hell. I haven't any strength in my arms, but at least I can still weave magical signs.

Ose settles for nudging Bael with her elbow instead. However, the Duke of Pain completely ignores her prodding, forcing her to walk around and look him in the eye. "Bael! Hello! Is anyone home in there?!"

Bael's eye momentarily flickers in recognition. He gazes at Ose's sharp-featured and beautiful face until a spark of light appears in his eyes. "Huh? Oh! Murmur! It's you!"

Before Ose can react, Bael lunges toward her and spreads his arms out. He grabs Ose in a bear-hug and squeezes her hard, making countless demons nearby pause their rush toward the distant humans to stare in shock.

"Murmur! Heh, heh, heh! Long time no see, kiddo! You're still as cute as a bibby-bobby-balloon!"

Ose recoils in disgust. She tries to pull away from Bael's unexpected embrace, only to find her strength coming up short. "No! Get off me, you oblivious dunce! I am Ose, your Emperor! Bael! Bael, you fiendishly stupid lunkhead! What the devil has gotten into you?!"

Bael continues hugging Ose for several seconds until she sucks in a deep breath and fills her lungs with air.

BOOM!

Ose fires a thunderous shockwave from her mouth, flattening the terrain around her and sending demons flying. The sheer force of her point-black thunder-blast momentarily stuns Bael, loosening his grip enough for Ose to duck out of his arms and retreat several steps, disgust still in her eyes.

"Oww, ohh... my ears..." Bael grunts. The Duke of Pain rubs both of his eyes in frustration, only to lift his head in surprise when his right hand *squishes* around inside his now-empty eye socket. "Huh? Hehe. That feels funny. Poke. Poke. Hehe. Look Shax, no eye! It's all gone now. Bloop! Stupid eye made me mad, so I yoinked it out. Pretty cool, huh?"

He continues babbling at the empty air, making Ose stare at him in alarm.

"Devils. I didn't realize it before, but Bael is acting ten times more idiotic than usual. It seems the humans' attack did a number on him, halving his brain cells from two to one. And at a time like this! He's completely useless, now!"

Ose grits her teeth in frustration and balls up her fists, even when the sharp pain in her fingers makes her wince.

"I can't kill Belial alone, not as I am now. If I were at my peak, that might be possible, but at this moment, not even Artorias will be enough to assist me. Bael! Can you hear me? I need your help, you damned dimwit!"

Bael's eyes flicker. "Huh? Help?"

"Yes! Good, good boy! You *can* listen after all. Come here, Bael! Be a good little Hellhound!"

Ose sarcastically pats her legs, as if calling to Bael like a trained puppy. The Duke of Pain nods dumbly. He ambles over to Ose's side, accidentally stepping on the head of a demon Grunt who Ose sent flying moments before. Bael crushes the demon's skull, not even noticing the accidental murder.

When he arrives within a few feet of Ose, the Third Emperor flinches, half-expecting Bael to try and bear-hug her again. Luckily, he doesn't. He stands obediently in front of her, a blank expression on his face.

"...Are we gonna play a song now, Murmur?" Bael asks. "I wanna sing 'Rooty Tooty Fresh 'n Fruity.' That's my favorite."

"No! We're not going to play a song! *You* are going to help *me* kill Belial! Understand? Kill Belial. Bael! You... kill Belial. Belial dead. Understand?"

Slowly, Bael nods. "...Uh huh. Kill Belial."

"Great! Fantastic!" Ose exclaims. "He *can* be taught after all!"

Bael cocks his head. "But I don't like that song."

The Third Emperor freezes. "S-song? What song? What are you talking about?"

The Duke of Pain rolls his eye, acting as if Ose just asked the dumbest question he's ever heard. "Kill Belial. That's a bad song. I like the movie better."

"Ahhhh!! You... you're dumber than a sack of rocks!" Ose screams. "Seven Hells! It's not a bloody song! You need to help me kill Belial! This isn't complicated! Just swing your fists at her until she stops- ack!"

Like a robot following commands, Bael doesn't even let Ose finish her sentence before lunging toward her again. This time, he rears his arms back and starts trying to punch the Third Emperor, but she dodges just in the nick of time, evading his clumsy movements.

"What are you **doing**?!" Ose screeches, while ducking another punch. "You have to punch *Belial*, not *me*! Baaaaael!! You bottom-feeding sludgebrain!"

After ten seconds of failing to stop Bael's barrage with words, Ose finally gives up. Realizing she's lost any chance at communicating with the Duke of Pain, she motions with her hands and transforms into a bolt of lightning, flickering away to another position half a mile in the distance.

Ose pants like a mad dog. Her eyes turn bloodshot as the fury of a dying star erupts in her mind.

"All my minions are low IQ failures!! Garbage, worthless, and totally beyond redemption! Why must the Creator torture me like this?! How am I supposed to capture the Wordsmiths when I am the only competent being in the entire Hell of Damnation?!"

Among the flood of demons surrounding Ose, one Demon Lord overhears her outburst. He turns to look at her. "Emperor Ose? Are you alright? Did something happen?"

Sadly for him, his words only enrage Ose further. She whips her head in his direction, shooting him a bloodthirsty glare capable of freezing hellfire.

"Another imbecile, here to confound me with stupid questions!" Ose bellows. With a flick of her fingers, she fires a blast of lightning at the Lord, killing him before he can even lift a finger to protect himself. The Demon Lord explodes into ash, vaporized from existence by the sheer might of Ose's casual attack.

With her anger slightly vented, Ose grins feverishly.

"Fine! Fine. I don't need anyone else. I'll kill Belial myself, if that's what it takes. I'll show them. I'll show everyone!"

Ose locks onto Belial's mana signature two miles away. In no time at all, she scans the other demons nearby as well, quickly pinpointing two important mana signatures.

With a wave of her hand, Ose transforms into a bolt of lightning.

Fwip.

She instantly disappears and reappears a quarter-mile from Belial's position, directly adjacent to the first mana signature.

"Mara!" Ose snaps. "Show yourself."

A second later, Mara decloaks next to Ose, revealing her body as the invisibility spell hiding her presence disappears.

"What do you want?" Mara asks. "I'm busy trying to help Artorias slow Belial down. Are your hands and arms fixed already?"

"Somewhat," Ose says. "Forget Artorias. I have a new mission for you. Yama's Shades failed me, so I want you to infiltrate Hero City. Bypass the humans' front lines, prevent any others from escaping off-planet... and most importantly, capture Jason Hiro's daughter, Daisy Hiro. She is now your number one priority."

Mara blinks in surprise. "Huh? You're still trying to go for hostages at a time like this? We've nearly dealt the killing blow to humanity."

Ose shakes her head. Now that she's started talking to someone with a small modicum of intellect, her fury at Bael rapidly diminishes. "You don't understand. The Wordsmith's daughter is special. I've detected a small amount of Heroic Energy building up in her body. I don't know why, but somehow, she has become a Hero, like her father."

Mara's eyebrows jump in alarm. "What? A Hero?! You've got to be kidding me. I can understand two Wordsmiths, since Jason cloned himself, but how could his daughter become a Hero? Did he give her Heroic powers with his Wordsmithing?"

"I don't know, and that's not important right now," Ose answers. She glances around, checking to make sure Belial hasn't detected her presence yet. The former Second Emperor continues rampaging unabated, killing demons in a murderous frenzy and soaking the battlefield with their blood. "All that matters is you understand the risk moving forward. The brat had Belial to protect her earlier, but now all she has at her side are mere humans. With the Monster Royals encumbered in the east, and Belial distracted here, now is your best chance at capturing Daisy. Since we don't know what abilities she's manifested, you should proceed with caution. Hit her from the shadows before she can react. Knock her unconscious, and get out as quickly as possible."

"What about Phoebe Hiro?" Mara asks. "Should I try to capture her, too?"

"If you get a chance, by all means, go for it," Ose nods. "But otherwise, target the child. Not only is she a Hero, and thus a potential weapon for demonkind, but she's a valuable hostage, too. We must capture her at all costs."

"Alright. I understand," Mara says. "I won't disappoint you."

"You'd damn well bloody not!" Ose snaps. "I've had more than my share of failures reported during this campaign! No Wordsmiths sighted anywhere, Beelzebub captured, then buried beneath the planet's crust, and then the Shades perished, and now Bael is acting ten times dumber than usual. It's enough to make me rip my hair out!"

Mara winces sympathetically. "Well, even if the details don't all work out properly, the end of this campaign will arrive soon. Be careful during your fight with Belial, Emperor Ose. She's extremely powerful and dangerous beyond belief. You'll need to pull out all the stops to defeat her."

Ose's eyes turn cold. She exhales through her nose, then straightens her posture.

"Don't you worry about me, Mara. I've been planning Belial's death since long before your birth. After what Satan did to my mother... I'll never forgive him or his wench. Lucifer should have ruled the Hell of Damnation from the beginning, but Satan stole her birthright. How fitting that, in the end, she got her revenge on him. Hehehe..."

Mara stares at Ose questioningly, but doesn't speak out of turn or pry any further. "...I see. Well, I'm heading out, now. Take care of yourself, Ose."

Without another word, Mara turns and starts running eastward, pulling cards from her spiritual deck as she travels. Ose remains behind, her eyes locked on Belial's mana signature.

"...Finally, I shall wipe away the last of Satan's diehard followers. After Belial, I'll kill Diablo too. I shall be the only Emperor left in the Hell of Damnation. I shall unite the Seven Hells and turn our gaze outward. Only then will we be able to use the Wordsmith's power to its fullest extent."

She falls silent, retreating into her thoughts.

Even if I manage to capture both Wordsmiths and unite all seven Hells... I'll still have to defeat the Overlords. And beyond them? I will have to contain and destroy the Plague. But how can anyone consider such a monumental task simple? All that matters is capturing the Wordsmiths. Once I have them, I will forever have time on my side. Hell's power will never again wane.

For a brief moment, Ose smiles.

The universe is mine for the taking. I need only complete this war successfully, and never again will anybody be capable of opposing me.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 272: Zamiel's Siren Song

Tarus II's eastern front. Second day, sixth hour.

Kar and Blinker, the mightiest of all monsters, battle against an army of undead crocodiles. Mephisto, the Duke of Mist, hovers in the sky and cackles evilly while he summons one crocodile after another, coordinating with the Battle Brothers to attack the Sphinx from all sides.

Having spent six straight hours fighting, Kar's rage continues to escalate further every minute as he forces his way through the horde of his former family members. One of the undead in particular, Kar's former wife, Pyra, dogs him relentlessly, always attacking his back while screaming obscenities.

"You left me to die! You left our children to die! You abandoned our bodies to the necromancer! Perish, Kar! Perish and burn for all eternity!"

Pyra punches Kar's spine, but her weak, Demon Lord-level strength barely even catches his attention. The last living crocodile merely grits his teeth and ignores her, instead turning his attention toward Mephisto's mana signature.

"Smokey! You foul, disgusting graverobber! These cowardly tricks will not save you from my wrath! Hurgh!!"

The Battle Brothers, Zamiel and Duriel, duck down low and hide themselves among the several thousand crocodiles, cackling wickedly as they slither through their ranks, cautiously keeping out of Kar's reach.

"What's the matter, croccy?" Zamiel asks, his voice impossible to pinpoint. "Having trouble finding me? If only these useless 'reps' weren't in the way, you could easily slay me! What's taking you so long? Just kill all your friends! They're dead anyway!"

Zamiel's words jab Kar's heart cruelly, like poisonous barbs fired from a distance. The Sphinx winces, then glares in Zamiel's general direction.

"Show yourselves, murderers! I dare you to combat me directly, unless you lack the guts!"

A hail of claws and fists rains upon Kar's body. Some of the strongest undead crocodiles, standing near the top of the Baron ranks, manage to inflict a few light bruises on him, but still, Kar doesn't fight back. He merely holds up his arms to protect himself, sometimes shoving the strongest crocodiles away.

"Kar!" Blinker says, her voice magically transmitting to a position near the Monster King's head. "I know these people are your family... but we have to end their suffering! We have to kill them for good! Don't you see, gator-man? They're nothing more than Mephisto's puppets, now."

"I cannot do that," Kar immediately answers, his tone firm. "I will not end my family's lives! I will save them. I will bring them back from the dead."

He leaps into the air and flicks his eyes around for a split-second, then changes his direction mid-flight to fall toward Duriel's position. The bigger Battle Brother sticks out a little more from the crocodiles

around him, especially with his pale, white, vampiric skin.

Kar dive-bombs Duriel, intending to stomp the younger brother's body into pulp. However, just before the Sphinx lands his surprise attack, Duriel motions with his hands and explodes into a cloud of bats. They scatter in all directions, causing Kar to impact the dirt uselessly.

"Hurgh! Damn!"

Kar curses Duriel's quick thinking, all while remembering how many times the Battle Brothers have evaded him during these past six hours.

Earlier, I beat both of the Battle Bastards around without any trouble... but now, having revealed their vampiric powers, they've somehow become ten times more slippery! They always dodge just before I can land a killing blow. Somehow, I must find a way to trick them!

As Kar mulls over his options, Blinker speaks to him again, her body cloaked invisibly somewhere nearby. "We can't bring the crocodiles back from the dead, Kar. It's pointless to even try! I know it hurts... but you have to let go."

"I refuse!" Kar snarls. He glances around and spots Pyra rushing toward him again, his former wife's figure sticking out from all the other crocodiles as a particularly heart-piercing memory within his mind. "You may not realize this, Butterfly... but Turtle and Rabbit have the power to save my people. They can undo Smokey's curse and revive my people from the grave!"

"No, they can't," Blinker retorts. "Nobody can bring back the dead. Not even a Wordsmith! Don't you remember? Jason told us it was impossible."

"The Wordsmiths might not be able to pull a soul back from the Great Beyond," Kar counters, as he pulls away from his rapidly-approaching former wife, "but they can still create new bodies from scratch. Smokey surely still has possession of my people's souls! He controls the River Styx, after all! Hurgh! That means if we can defeat him, Turtle and Rabbit can revive the crocodiles. We can save my people!!"

Blinker hesitates.

"That... I mean, that might be possible, Kar, but..."

"You see?!" Kar yells. "Even you must admit there is a chance! So please, you mustn't kill any crocodiles! Help me slay the Battle Bastards, and afterward, we can capture Smokey! Surely, we will be able to revive my species if we work together!"

"I..."

Blinker, protected behind a wall of illusory magic, gazes down at her husband from the sky. Her expression flickers between uncertainty and doubt. Seeing the look of pleading on Kar's face, she ultimately relents against her better judgement.

"...Okay. Alright. If this is what you want, Kar, then I'll help you. But you have to be careful! The Battle Brothers are way stronger than before, now that they've assumed their vampire forms!"

"I am not afraid of two pissant posturers," Kar snorts. The Sphinx raises his fists overhead, then swings them downward, bashing them against the planet's surface. Powerful shockwaves fire out in all directions,

flinging all of the nearby crocodiles into the air, where they flail around helplessly for a few seconds before crashing upon their backs. "Rather, it is they who should fear ME!"

To the west of Kar's position, the aftershocks of his attack knock tens of thousands of humanity's soldiers off their feet. To the east, demonkind's forces also go flying. Even so, after both sides clamber back to their feet, a spark of realization appears on their faces.

"Hey, wait a minute!" A Demon Baron says. "Why are we just standin' around with our thumbs up our bums? it ain't only the Sphinx fightin' the Battle Brothers anymore. Mephisto's here, too! He's got a bunch of undead at his disposal. I say we attack the fleshbags while the Monster Royals are all tied up!"

Another Baron raises his eyebrows. "Wow, you're right! Good idea! I was super scared earlier, but look at the Sphinx now! He won't dare attack if it means his shitty dead croc friends might get hurt. Let's use those scabies as meatshields!"

"Yeah!" The demon army howls. "No more bullshit! Let's get in there and FIGHT!!"

Like a tsunami of blood, the red-skinned demon army suddenly surges forward, startling humanity's forces into action.

"Shit! What the hell? Everyone, get ready!" A nearby lieutenant shouts. "The demons are attacking! They aren't gonna hold back any longer!"

"Fuck. Why are there so many of 'em?!" Another soldier shouts. "There must be a million bloodskins coming this way!"

"Hold the line!"

Within seconds, humanity recognizes the incoming threat and jumps into action. The frontline soldiers assume their battle positions, with each one lining up to prepare cover fire for their battle-buddies. Mechanized defense troopers stabilize themselves, rooting their feet to the ground to ensure maximum accuracy with their heavy gunnery. Snipers jump into trees or line up along the eastern cliffsides, steadying their aim to take out any high-value targets. And finally, giant assault mechs form up in the backline, readying their cannons for long-range bombardments.

Half a minute later, the demon army floods into the valley where Kar and the undead crocodiles await. Kar reacts the instant he sees the invaders coming. "Why, you-! What guts you have!"

Kar jerks his claws upward to summon a wall of earth one mile wide, fifty feet tall, and five feet thick. The massive barrier momentarily stymies the demon's assault, but only until a few hundred Burrowers jump out and punch the wall, using their earth manipulation to demolish it with the force of TNT explosions. The wall crumbles immediately, allowing the demons to overrun the undead crocodiles.

Pandemonium ensues. Kar's Emperor-level might allows him to stomp and kill anyone who enters his range without so much as breaking a sweat. Likewise, Blinker's area-of-effect projections and fairy magic give her a wide area of destructive force. Even so, they quickly realize that killing such a huge number of demons is an impossible task, made even more difficult when the demons grab Kar's undead family members and hold them up to use as hostages.

Kar fires a shotgun-blast of earthen bullets at a half-dozen Demon Lords approaching him, but then they grab several nearby crocodiles and hold them up, forcing Kar to halt his bullets' momentum with a quick flick of his wrists. "Cowards, the lot of you! How dare you use my people against me?!"

His hesitation to hurt the crocodiles emboldens the demon army further. "Bahaha! Looks like we guessed right, boys! The Sphinx cares too much about his precious family to hurt any of us! Let's push forward and rip apart the fleshies!"

Blinker watches in horror as the demon army wades through the crocodiles, using guerrilla tactics to avoid Kar's wrath. They push through the wall of scales and charge humanity's ranks, but to her relief, the demon army's treacherous tactics meet a hard limit when humanity's bullets start flying.

Ratatatata! Brrrrrt! Boom, boom!

A hailstorm of lead and explosions rips through demonkind's ranks. Suddenly, their brilliant strategy becomes an exercise in stupidity when the demons realize the undead crocodiles might be providing them with cover from Kar, but their sheer numbers are also slowing the demons' advance down enough for humanity to overwhelm them with bullets.

"Oh, shrakh! Bad move! Bad move!" One demon screams, only for his cries of fear to cut off abruptly. A sniper bullet pierces his skull, violently whipping his head backward and stopping his advance. He falls to the ground, followed by a second and third demon as they perish at the same spot.

"One bogey eliminated. Two. Three," The sniper says, counting his kills as he lays flat on his stomach atop the western ridge. "Baron spotted. I'm taking the shot. Dead. Mark four-one-five, a pair of Lords. First one down. Nice shot, Red Two."

"Same to you," A second sniper replies. "I think the little cunt pissed himself when he saw his brother die."

The soldiers all continue speaking, while the Centurion network transmits their chatter amongst one another as necessary.

Meanwhile, Kar resumes his attacks. He slowly begins working his way through the demon and crocodile army, eliminating anyone who stands in his way. Despite his inability to slaughter the demons en-masse, lest he accidentally kill any of his fellow crocodiles, Kar still proves more than capable of surgical strikes, killing individual demons even when they use his family as shields.

One Demon Lord holds the undead body of a crocodile child by the back of its neck. He dangles the croc in front of himself, sneering when the Sphinx glances his way. A moment later, Kar's eyes flash with rage. Like a snake in the grass, he 'swims' through the bodies around him and instantly arrives before the demon taunting him, causing his opponent's cocky smile to transform into a look of horror. Kar swipes the demon's neck with his claws, ripping his foe's head off effortlessly. The demon perishes where he stands, while Kar gently pulls the crocodile child out of his enemy's grasp and drops the kid to the dirt.

"Hurgh! Cowards, the whole lot of them. Damn! Where have the Battle Bastards gone? There are too many Barons in the area! Too many demons entirely! I can't tell one from the other!"

Kar continues swimming through the sea of flesh, killing every demon who gets in his way. The scaled predator uses his tail, claws, and teeth to their maximum potential, eviscerating his red-skinned foes one by one. Still, he finds himself unable to locate Duriel or Zamiel.

"Butterfly! Where have Ugly and Stupid gone? I cannot find either of the Battle Bastards!"

Blinker, flying high above her husband, focuses her eyes. She glances around the battlefield, yet finds herself just as confused as Kar. "I... I don't know, hubby! It's like they've melted into the crowd! I'm sure they're near you, but I can't get a bead on their positions! Keep your guard up. You might be able to take a hit from the other weaklings, but the Battle Brothers have bodies way stronger than ordinary Barons and Dukes. A single strike could mess you up!"

Kar nods. He swings his tail at a nearby demon, one who foolishly thought he could sneak up and assassinate the Sphinx. That fellow perishes instantly, never knowing that his death had arrived.

"Hurgh. Butterfly, have you any experience dealing with vampires?" Kar asks. "I only know tales regarding them from myths and legends. Never did I imagine they were real."

"I've heard that vampires can drink blood to empower themselves and heal their bodies," Blinker says, but that's all I know. It seems they can turn into bats, too. The Battle Brothers probably have other powers we don't know about, so be careful."

"You need not tell me twice," Kar grunts. The Sphinx leaps into the air and falls toward a dozen demons clumped together. He lands atop them and rips them to pieces before they can grab any crocodilian hostages, then jumps again, using his leapfrogging strategy to increase his killing speed.

Suddenly, a female voice cries out from the crowd.

"Aaah! K-Kar! Help me!"

The Monster King's heart skips a beat. He whirls around to see Zamiel standing proudly a hundred feet away, Pyra held in his grasp.

"Hey, 'scales'! Looky who I've got here! It's that ugly, slimy bitch you used to get all freaky with!"

Zamiel holds Pyra up by the back of her neck. The comparatively small and delicate crocodile hangs limp in his grasp, unable to fight back thanks to Mephisto's magic.

"Unhand her!" Kar roars. He starts to move toward Zamiel, only for the eldest Battle Brother to grin evilly.

"Don't move," Zamiel rasps, revealing his teeth. "Take one more step, and I'll snap this froggy's neck. Maybe your Wordsmith friend can bring her back as she is now, but The Boss's undead die forever if you kill 'em a second time. You only get one do-over, Sphinx! It'd be a real shame if this were the last time you ever saw the old lady!"

Kar freezes in place. He stares, wide-eyed, as Zamiel squeezes Pyra's neck tighter than before.

A faint cloudy mist spreads across the battlefield, its chilliness mirroring the cold fear in Kar's heart.

"If you kill Pyra, there won't be anything stopping me from ending your life..." the Sphinx snarls.

"You've spent the last six hours trying to kill me and failed every time," Zamiel retorts. "That's the thing about becoming a vampire, crocco! We're awfully hard to put down."

The eldest Battle Brother takes a step toward Kar. "Here's the deal, Sphinx! Give up now! Tell these humans to surrender, as well as all the others around Tarus II! Tell everyone to surrender, and the slaughter will stop! No more dead humans! Be a good little croc. Accept defeat, and all your troubles will come to an end."

Zamiel pauses for a moment before continuing. "The Boss'll give you back the crocs, and you can have your Wordsmith pal revive 'em before living happily ever after. Everything you said was true, buddy-boy. Their bodies died once, but the Boss says a Wordsmith can bring the undead back to life. Just think about it! You could reunite with your old flame, maybe even bring back the little tykes too! Doesn't that sound like a good deal? Of course, it'll be a shame for your current gal, but hey, that's just how the die falls, sometimes. Life ain't fair."

Zamiel lazily glances up at the sky, as if to look for Blinker. He doesn't see her, but the mere gesture makes Kar's heart skip a beat.

The Sphinx pauses, unsure of what to do.

My wife... Pyra. I... I could reunite with her. I could bring her back! Not just Pyra, but my children, too. My entire village. My species! Turtle and Rabbit could bring them back. Even Smokey says so!

Pyra continues to hang in Zamiel's grasp. She gazes at Kar pleadingly, making his hesitation intensify. "Kar, please... we need you!"

"Don't listen to him!" Blinker says, speaking to Kar from afar. "You can't trust the demons! These are the same jerks who killed all the crocs! They're just using your people against you! If you agree to their demands, we'll lose the war, and they won't have any reason to keep their promise!"

Kar's entire body starts to tremble. "But... Pyra... Butterfly, she could... she could return..."

"There's no way Jason or Hope could bring the undead back to life!" Blinker replies. "Zamiel is lying! I'm sure of it. Don't believe him, gator-man!"

A strange look appears in Kar's eyes, he flicks his gaze into the sky, then back to Pyra.

"Butterfly. Are you sure you are not saying such things... because of jealousy?"

Blinker's eyes become as wide as saucers. "...What?! What do you mean?"

"Perhaps you do not wish for me to reunite with Pyra..." Kar murmurs. "You... you only want me for yourself. You don't want me to bring my people back, because then you might lose me."

Blinker stares in shock at her husband, the Sphinx. "Kar... Kar, that isn't true. How could you say something like that? How could you think such a hurtful thing? I... I love you. I always have!"

"Of course you do..." Kar continues. "But perhaps, in the back of your mind, greed has clouded your judgment. Perhaps, due to these unforeseen circumstances, you wish to deny me my chance at redemption."

Blinker falls silent. She opens her mouth several times to speak, but instead, only tears form in her eyes.

"Kar... Kar..."

She squeezes her tiny little hands into fists, then presses them against her eyes.

"Stupid! You big bully! I'll always love you to the ends of the galaxy! Even if... even if you threw me away for Pyra, I'd still love you! I'd happily stay your side-gal, even if you never loved me again!"

Her reply causes Kar to fall silent. He gazes at Zamiel emotionlessly, trying desperately to wrestle with the choices in his mind.

"What'll it be, croc?" Zamiel asks, his evil grin spreading from one side of his face all the way to the other. "Should I snap the broad's neck right here and now? Maybe that Wordsmith can't do anything anyway, huh? Guess that's the extent of your love. I bet you never cared about her at all."

"Shut your mouth!!" Kar roars. "You are a psychopathic murderer! Do not lecture me, you tiny, insignificant BUG!"

Kar summons mana to his heart and fists. Bloodlust ignites in his eyes as he stares Zamiel down. But still, he doesn't make a move.

The early morning fog engulfing the battlefield continues to condense, further isolating Kar and Zamiel from the battles around them.

Zamiel, unmoved, remains in place. His sinister smirk fades away, replaced instead with a look of boredom.

"Are you gonna do somethin' or what? Come on. Come over here. Hit me, croc. What's the matter? Ah, I see how it is. You know you won't be able to move fast enough to kill me, not before I perform a little *snappy-snappy* on this broad. Even if you succeed, the Boss can kill all of these crocs with wave of his hand. Their lives rest in his grasp."

Kar's heartbeat quickens, speeding up like crazy. Several crocodiles punch him, but he ignores their feeble attacks, focusing his tunnel-vision on Zamiel and Pyra.

"...I cannot trust you..." Kar mutters. "You'll kill all of my people anyway, no matter what I do."

"Oh, please, get over yourself," Zamiel counters. "Do you really think that's the case? Climb down off your high horse, pal. I don't give a shit about you or anyone else. I'm a selfish bastard. I didn't kill your people because I *hated* them. I did it because of their juicy, tasty blood. Killing the crocs made me and my bro super strong, way more so than any other Baron at the time. If I say I'll let you keep the crocs, I mean it; same for the Boss."

Zamiel leans forward and lowers his voice. "Think about it, Sphinx. We only came here to stop the fleshbags. You're just in the way. Why do you even care about these fleshies? Don't you understand? They're only *using* you. All these humans just see you as a meatshield; someone to soak up the damage while they hang back and shoot us demons from afar. You call me a coward, but the very people you've chosen to protect are just as bad! Screw these fleshies, Sphinx! Join up with the demons and get your

people back. We ain't got no beef, pal! I may have killed the crocs, but look! They're right here, just waiting for you to revive them!"

Like an adept fisherman, Zamiel drops one last piece of bait. "Besides, crocco... even if the Wordsmith can't bring back your friends, what about your mother? What about *Marie*? Don't you have any faith in her? I hear she's a real smart cookie. I bet she could think of some revival method, provided my Boss gives you the souls and bodies of your people."

Kar's body slowly stops trembling.

"Mother..."

The Sphinx's eyes lose a bit of the rage they once held. The distant sounds of gunfire grow silent in the Sphinx's mind as the battlefield fog thickens even further.

Cautiously, the Sphinx lowers his fists to his side.

"You. Ugly. Do you swear to keep your word? Do you swear to give me back my family? To return the crocodiles to me, unharmed?"

Zamiel nods unsmilingly. "Of course I do, champ. This is just business. I ain't got any reason to make an enemy of Hell's strongest monster, after all."

Kar closes his eyes.

"I see... then... in that case..."

Blinker watches, her heart clenching up, as Kar makes his decision. "No... Kar, no... he's a liar..."

Kar releases a turbid breath.

The Sphinx opens his eyes, and smiles at Zamiel.

"...I refuse."

Suddenly, and without warning, Kar swivels around, revolving on his heel. He lunges his fist at a position behind himself, punching a seemingly random spot amidst the fog.

BOOOM!!!

Kar's fist connects with a nearly invisible figure, one whose body all but perfectly blended together with the misty battlefield.

Duriel, the younger of the Battle Brothers, gets no chance to react as the Sphinx's fist strikes his face. Every ounce of Kar's might transmits into the Baron's head, crushes his skull, and sprays his brains violently backward in a cone of blood.

CRACK!

For a split-second, time seems to freeze for Zamiel. He watches in disbelief as his brother's head vanishes, followed momentarily by the entirety of his upper torso. His legs, stomach, and arms scatter away to the four fucking winds, leaving nothing behind but the memory of his existence.

After a moment of deliberation, Kar lowers his fist. He turns to look at Zamiel, then shakes his head disapprovingly.

"You stupid child. Did you think you could fool this predator? Did you think your clumsy assassination attempt would succeed against one whose body is most adept in the fog of a swamp?"

Zamiel takes a step back, shock in his eyes. "L-Little Bro... you... you killed him."

Dark fire smolders in Kar's chest. As the fog around the battlefield rapidly begins to dissipate, the Sphinx exhales deeply, readying himself for the hardest choice he has ever had to make in his life.

"Butterfly is right. I cannot revive my people. Even if I could, doing so at the cost of my friends' lives would bring only shame upon the crocodiles. I would sooner die than force such a terrible humiliation upon my people."

Kar raises his hand. He extends a finger to point at Pyra, then shakes his head.

"Besides. Do you believe such a pathetic deception would fool me? My beloved would never curse me as that puppet did. She would never blame me for her death, since she was a kind woman who cared deeply about my feelings. Whatever soul you've stuffed in Pyra's body, it most certainly is not hers."

Blinker, watching from above, covers her mouth with her hands. Tears stream down her face as she realizes just how clever her husband's deception was. "Kar... you big, mean bully... haha... you even fooled me."

Zamiel stares at Kar with wide eyes. After several seconds, his pupils expand, giving him a glassy-eyed appearance. He tosses Pyra aside like a ragdoll, then nods slowly.

"I see. So that's how it is. You... you spawn of a broodmother. You killed my little bro. That mistake will cost you *dearly*."

Kar smiles. "An eye for an eye, Battle Bastard."

Zamiel shakes his head. "Not quite. There's something about my brother and me that you don't know, croccy. We share everything. Food. Lovers. Powers. We even share... our *strength*."

A sense of danger tingles in the back of Kar's mind. He turns around just in time to see the remnants of Duriel's corpse fading away and turning to ash. In that moment, all of Duriel's Baron-level strength transforms into a blood-red mist, congeals in the air, and flies toward Zamiel!

The older Battle Brother reveals no expression of delight as his younger brother's mana floods into his body. In the blink of an eye, Zamiel's strength explodes, blasting him through the limits of the Demon Baron level and straight up to Demon Duke. His height increases by several inches, along with the length of his horns. His muscles expand. His skin becomes younger and more taut, giving him a menacing appearance far scarier than before.

Kar observes silently as his opponent doubles, triples, and even quadruples his strength. In the end, his might reaches the apex of the Demon Duke realm, outputting a tremendous amount of demonic energy throughout the local area.

Zamiel closes his eyes and inhales deeply. His appearance, much more handsome than before, also drips with the sensation of unfathomable evil.

"I told you, croccy. Killing my brother was the last mistake you will ever make."

Kar's eyes flicker.

"And I told *you*, Ugly. I will avenge my people."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 273: Sphinx-Slayer

Recommended Listening

Zamiel's eyes glisten with tears of rage. The essence of his younger brother, Duriel, flows through his veins, simultaneously empowering him while also reminding him of that which he's lost. His carnivorous gaze fixates upon the Monster King as he imagines the taste of the crocodile's flesh he'll soon consume.

"You worthless rep..." Zamiel growls. "My little bro and me were gonna stay together forever! We were both gonna become Dukes, and eventually Emperors. But now we can't! And it's all because of YOU!"

He stomps his foot against the ground, causing an earthquake for a mile in every direction. With that impact, Zamiel flings himself forward and lunges at Kar while motioning with his hands to cast a summoning spell.

"I will consign you to oblivion!!" Zamiel shrieks.

He spreads out his arms. Magical particles swirl in his palms, morph into a greatsword in his right hand and a greathammer in his left.

Kar's eyes flicker with recognition. *In his evolution to Duke, it seems Ugly has gained the power to conjure both bladed and blunt weapons!*

Kar leaps to the right, evading Zamiel's first strike. The Battle Brother swings his greathammer down and smashes it against Tarus II's soil, the impact of which creates a tidal wave of dirt and stone, sweeping into the demon army to send them flying. Countless Demon Grunts perish to the unexpected avalanche, while the hardier ones manage to survive with mere bruises and scratches.

Zamiel puts all of his strength into that single strike, causing Kar to narrow his eyes in alarm. *Ugly's body is far stronger than any other Duke I've met. His strength might reach as high as the Emperor-level!*

What follows are ten minutes of unabated fury. Zamiel unleashes all of his hatred against the Monster King, while Kar fights more passively than before. Zamiel slashes and smashes Kar, striking him with his greatsword and hammer repeatedly, all while Kar deflects or dodges the most dangerous blows.

Blinker, watching from above, gasps in fright. She uses her magic to shield Kar some of the time while also teleporting her husband out of harm's way if he moves a half-step too slow. With their combined powers, they quickly start turning the tides against Zamiel, allowing Kar to push back against the eldest Battle Brother's frenzied attacks.

However...

While Blinker works to protect her husband, another figure lurks amidst the demons and crocodiles. Rather than dealing with the Sphinx, he turns his attention skyward, to the carefully concealed Monster Queen.

"Ksss..." Mephisto hisses, as the Duke of Mist floats among the demons and undead crocodiles on the ground. He dives under the planet's surface, keeping only his eyes above the soil. "Zamiel'sss powerup wasss more efficient than I expected... kekeke! What a wassste it would be if I allowed him to die here!"

Mephisto waves his hands. Instantly, a horde of ethereal monsters materializes next to him; the Wraiths who summoned themselves to Tarus II during the first day's battle. These ghost-like creatures moan and shriek, their voices disappearing into the soil surrounding them.

"Kekeke! Go, my prettiesss! Sssearch for the Sssphinx'ssss wife. That wretched little fairy will not be able to avoid the eyesss of those whossse visssion remainssss unssstymied by the mortal realm!"

With a wave of his hand, Mephisto dispatches his ghosts into the sky. They fly around at ludicrous speeds, executing turns and spins that would make any fighter jet pilot blush with shame. Within seconds, one of the Wraiths screeches out loud, alerting the others. In unison, all fifty of them jerk their heads in the direction the first one indicated. There, they spot faint distortions in the air; the telltale signs of illusory camouflage.

Like a pack of hyenas, they race toward Blinker, whose heart jumps into her throat. "Ack!"

She teleports away, using her spatial magic to evade the wraiths. However, when she reappears, her body creates additional ripples that again draw the Wraith's attention. They continue chasing after her, playing a deadly game of cat and mouse, one where the loser will perish horribly.

Mephisto grins evilly. "Gooooood! Yesss, sssuccesss! Now, while the Monster Queen evades my mossst ghassstly minionsss, I ssshall dissspatch otherssss to interccept her!"

He begins conjuring other, much stronger undead beings, such as Bone Drakes, a dozen Gargoyles, and many random birds and bats. The weakest creatures serve as nothing more than annoyances to Blinker, but they also work to distract her, peppering her position wherever she reappears with pecks and scratches. The stronger monsters pose a genuine threat to the six-inch tall fairy, though she does use her small stature to evade their attacks.

Meanwhile, without his wife's support, Kar's increasing battle momentum loses steam, causing his attacks to stagnate. He quickly finds himself on the backfoot, allowing Zamiel to press the advantage.

The newly arisen Duke cackles maniacally. "Oh, what great power! What frightening speed! Are you scared, little lizard?! You should be! I have become the mightiest Duke amongst all of demonkind!"

Zamiel bashes Kar's shoulder with his greathammer, knocking the Sphinx backward like a ping-pong ball. Kar quickly reorients himself with his tail, then lands upright on his feet.

"Hurgh! You are indeed a mighty Duke, Ugly! Sadly for you, I am an Emperor! You cannot measure up to me. And so, I will end your life today as remuneration for all the wicked deeds you have wrought!"

Kar digs his claws into the soil. He dives underground for a moment, then bursts back out, his body covered in rock and dirt. The earthen debris rapidly hardens and solidifies, transforming into diamond-like armor.

"What a great trick!" Zamiel laughs. "Oh, I can only imagine what might happen once I kill you! Surely you must know, little lizard! After you perish, your Sphinx magic will transfer to me! I'll become the mightiest demon in existence, even without the title of Emperor! My power shall reach the stratosphere, while my influence will touch every end of the galaxy!"

Kar assumes a defensive posture. He snorts derisively. "Hurgh. You are an arrogant brat; a stupid child suffering from delusions of grandeur. All these years, I wondered what sort of bastards could have killed my people... but it turned out to be a pair of tiny, small-minded whelps, barely worthy of my attention. How shameful! If only a truly powerful being, such as Bael, had slain my people, at least they could have perished honorably! Instead, their slayers were nothing more than insignificant little worms."

"Bael? Bael?!" Zamiel howls. "The so-called First Duke is no longer anything in my eyes but a gnat! Look at this body, this perfectly sculpted weapon formed by the Creator's hands! It is clear to me that the path I walk is no longer one comparable to any other demon."

Zamiel pauses for half a breath. He glances into the sky, where Mephisto's demons continue attacking Blinker. Then, he smiles.

Heh heh. Why should I serve Mephisto any longer? My 'Boss' no longer outranks me. Rather, it is I who towers over him! Mephisto should be grateful knowing he raised the future leader of demonkind. Provided he follows my orders, I will allow him to stay at my side as a loyal dog! Hehehe!

The eldest Battle Brother snickers to himself, keeping his intentions hidden from the demon who elevated him to his current heights. After a moment of deliberation, he raises both of his weapons in an X-shape before his chest.

"Hey, croccy! Now that I am a Duke, it seems I need a new title. I believe I've just thought of the perfect one! Tell me... what do you think of 'The Emperor-Slayer'? Is it not fitting? After I rip you apart and avenge my brother, none shall consider such a title inappropriate!"

Kar's eyes flicker with disgust. "Such conceit. You may call yourself whatever you wish, but I will continue to refer to you by the name which best suits you, *Ugly*."

"After I break your body," Zamiel snarls, "I will capture your wife and feed her to the Hellhounds. That is the end most appropriate for those who defy their future god!"

Zamiel lunges toward Kar, and Kar matches his movements equally.

A clash of cataclysmic proportions erupts across the battlefield. Zamiel's weapons slam against Kar's armored body, while Kar retorts by punching, kicking, and tail-swiping his foe. The shockwaves caused by their fists send many demons flying or scurrying away. Soon, the valley's flow of demons slows to a stop, giving the humans to the west a bit of a reprieve. Nobody dares to enter within a thousand paces of Kar and Zamiel, instead watching with either bloodthirsty or fearful gazes.

"Lucifer's tits! Just look at Zamiel go!" One of the Demon Barons crows. "Is that the strength of a Duke?! I saw Bael fight Barbatos a few years ago, but their battle wasn't anywhere near this level!"

"This is just nuts..." A Demon Lord mutters. "I've never seen a battle like this in all my life. If I become a Duke, will I become as strong as Zamiel? Isn't he practically at Diablo's level?"

"Forget Zamiel," A Harpy says,. "Aren't you two ignoring the Monster King? Kar might not be a demon, but look at his overwhelming power. His strength easily reaches the level of a Demon Emperor. Have you ever heard of a monster capable of outmatching a Duke?"

The Demon Baron glares at the Harpy. "What, are you planning to join *his* side now? Kar is only strong because of the Sphinx's power. Everyone knows that. But once Zamiel kills Kar, he will become the new Sphinx."

"A half-monster," The Demon Lord says, his voice ringing with disgust. "Tch. For a monster to attain the same level as a Demon Emperor, this is a stain the historical scrolls won't soon forget. No doubt, Zamiel will gladly accept all of that power, but it must disgust him to absorb the strength of his inferior."

The Harpy falls silent. He lowers his eyes, feeling a bit ashamed by the two demons' conversation. However, he doesn't offer a retort, due to the shame they heap upon him.

They're right, the Harpy thinks. Monster King Kar is an incredible being... but no matter how strong he is, us normal monsters are just not as strong as demons. We'll always suffer under their thumbs, with no possibility of escape.

The demon army continues to hold back and watch, while Kar's crocodilian relatives also keep their distance, unable to draw any closer to the battle between the Duke and Emperor.

Over and over, Kar pummels Zamiel, while Zamiel retaliates in kind. The Emperor-Slayer cackles with glee as he flexes more and more of his newfound strength.

I always knew obtaining the powers of a vampire would strengthen my body, but never could I have imagined it would be to this extent!" Zamiel exclaims. "If only my little bro could see me now!"

However, despite his victorious words, Zamiel's unending onslaught never quite reaches its apex. Time after time, he lands what he thinks is a killing blow, only for the attack to barely knock Kar backward. Then, Kar retaliates with an equally powerful blow, one that stuns Zamiel with its ferocity.

After another hour passes, frustration wells up in Zamiel's heart.

Tch! This filthy scaled rat! Why can't I kill him? Is his stamina inexhaustible?! How many times must I stab and bash this slimy bastard before he succumbs to his wounds? I'm in no danger of dying anytime soon, but it seems the Sphinx isn't, either! Confound him!

During a momentary lull in the fighting, Zamiel flicks his eyes upward, where he spots Mephisto and Blinker still engaged in combat.

The Duke of Mist hasn't yet slain the Monster Queen. Perhaps he can't. After all, she too is an Emperor! If something doesn't change, our battles are liable to drag on for weeks!

When Kar charges at Zamiel again, the Battle Brother hesitates.

I can keep fighting the Monster King all day, but it won't alter the result. Perhaps, instead, I should try a different strategy.

A vicious glint appears in Zamiel's eyes. Just before Kar reaches him, Zamiel explodes into a cloud of bats, causing the Sphinx's attack to whiff his afterimage harmlessly. Immediately, Kar goes on the

defensive, glancing around to await his enemy's reformation.

Without warning, several horrified screams erupt to the west. Kar whirls on his heel to find Zamiel wreaking havoc upon humanity's soldiers. He appears in the center of their formation and unleashes his magic, slaughtering dozens of humans before they can react. Within seconds, the Battle Brother kills more than two hundred men, women, and monsters, sending waves of panic throughout their ranks.

"Oh, God! He's here! He's-"

A voice cuts off as the speaker's head leaves their body.

"Fire! Shoot him, goddammit!"

"Mark! He killed Mark!"

"Where are the snipers?! Why aren't the mechs attacking?!"

The mecha pilots become frozen momentarily in shock over Zamiel's appearance, then regain their wits, only to freeze again when they realize shooting Zamiel will also mean firing explosive munitions into the heart of their battle-lines.

"What do I do?" One pilot asks, his hands shaking with fright. "If I shoot Zamiel, I'll kill-"

"Just start shooting!" A different mecha pilot exclaims. "Don't hold back! Our friends are dead anyway!"

A hailstorm of bullets and explosions rings out. Humanity's soldiers force all sensations of fear into the back of their minds, quickly swapping them with fury. They blast Zamiel from the backlines, unloading heavy munitions, sniper bullets, and explosive shells upon his Duke-level mana signature. Many of their fellow soldiers perish in the crossfire, but nobody lets up their assault, since they have no hope of survival with a Demon Duke in their midst.

Zamiel responds by transforming into bats, scattering to the wind, and reappearing amidst another dense cluster of soldiers.

In less than thirty seconds, Zamiel causes humanity's defenses to fall apart, giving Kar no time to react.

"That bastard!" Kar roars. He starts running toward Zamiel, only to realize that with this move, he's also opened up the valley to the demon army. The moment his fight against Zamiel pauses, the demons lying in wait begin rushing forward, eager to join their brother.

"Haha!" The Demon Baron from before laughs. "That Zamiel, I knew he was a genius! If the Sphinx attacks us, Zamiel will kill the fleshbags, but if the Sphinx tries to stop Zamiel, *we* can kill the fleshbags ourselves! It's a win-win!"

His excitement, boosted by Zamiel's equal level of power to the Monster King, suddenly meets an impenetrable barrier.

Kar pauses mid-stride. Despite the distant screams of his friends and comrades, he turns to face the demon army alone.

"Hurgh. Against such terrible agents of evil, I must once again go all-out. I must show these bastards the true might of the Last Crocodile."

Kar claps his claws together. He performs several rapid motions with his fingers, lifts his palms overhead, then slams his fists into the planet's surface.

Thoom!

The impact momentarily causes every demon and monster charging Kar to stumble and trip. By the time they steady themselves, they find that Kar is no longer alone.

Dozens and dozens of dirt, mud, rock, and diamond Golems emerge from the planet's soil. Each one reaches the same height as Kar himself, their imposing figures causing fear to well up in the hearts of the demons.

"Th-that's the Monster King's golemancy!" A Demon Lord exclaims. "He used that magic to protect the Labyrinth Core for an entire day! If Ose hadn't shown up and taken him out with one blow, we might never have broken through!"

"I thought the Sphinx could only summon dirt elementals," The Demon Baron says. "How did he create even stronger golems?"

"The Labyrinth's soil must have been too brittle to create stone and diamond golems," The Harpie from earlier explains. "But Tarus II's soil is rich in nutrients and life. If we enter the valley... we're sure to die!"

Several Burrower Grunts step forward. "Hah! No worries! We're strong against earth-type enemies! Once we crush those golems, nothing will stand in our way!"

They charge into the valley, all while the Demon Baron's heart jumps into his throat. "No, you idiots! Your magic is far too weak to counter the Monster King's! Stop! I'm ordering you to- oh, shrakh."

He watches, helplessly, as Kar's army of golems moves to intercept the Burrower Grunts. Seconds later, all forty of the idiot demons end up squashed into meat paste beneath the claws and feet of Kar's constructs.

Satisfied, Kar turns on his heel and runs west, rushing to save his friends.

"Lucifer's tits!" The Baron exclaims. "What rotten luck! We can't just stand here, twiddling our thumbs. Alright, listen up, maggots! We can destroy those golems, but we'll have to work together..."

He starts detailing a plan to take out the golems, but Kar pays the demon army no more mind. He already knows his constructs won't last forever. Their only purpose is to slow down the demons long enough for him to take out Zamiel.

Kar's eyes flash with a sinister light.

For you to attack my pet humans... you are a bold one, Battle Bastard. It seems the time for fun and games has ended. I wanted to toy with you... to teach you the meaning of despair... but like all demons, you made the cowardly choice to use my pets against me.

Kar leaps into the sky. As he does, he closes his eyes and presses his palms together.

I shall show you the reason why I am the strongest monster in all of Hell.

A calm serenity swallows Kar. As his figure hurtles skyward, time seems to slow to a crawl.

His body shifts, changes, and morphs. Kar's scales soften, then disappear. Feathers appear along his back and the tops of his arms and legs, while thick, woolen fur sprouts along his underside.

His crocodilian head changes shape. In its place, a Lion's eyes and teeth pop into existence. Eagle wings sprout from his back, while his body shifts from a bipedal form to a quadrupedal one.

Kar completes his transformation into the Sphinx. He attains his maximum power, a level so profound that demons all across Tarus II instinctively flick their eyes in his general direction.

The King descends from on high, falling upon Zamiel's rampaging figure with the speed and grace of a diving hawk.

BOOM!!

Kar crashes into Zamiel, his swiftness fully catching the Duke by surprise. He strikes the Battle Brother from behind with such force that Zamiel inadvertently opens his mouth to gasp as he scrapes along the ground, inhaling several mouthfuls of dirt and grass.

The Sphinx grabs Zamiel's wrists with his front paws and his ankles with his back paws. Kar pins his opponent to the ground, only pausing momentarily to glance at the countless dead humans surrounding him.

"Battle Bashtard. Your reign of terror endsh here!" Kar roars, his words drawling due to his lion-like mouth.

"Kuak!" Zamiel coughs, spewing the accidentally-inhaled dirt from his mouth. He tries to motion with his hands to transform into a swarm of bats, but with his arms pinned, he can't complete the signs. "Get off me! You spawn of a...!!"

Kar gazes at the back of his enemy's neck. He opens his mouth and lunges toward Zamiel, aiming for the kill.

Suddenly, Zamiel's body tenses up. As if realizing something important, the Battle Brother hesitates, and a sinister gleam enters his eyes.

He makes a single quick motion with his right hand, instantly causing his upper torso to become as hard as steel.

Chomp!

Kar bites the back of Zamiel's neck, causing two of his front teeth to snap. Instead of his enamel meeting Zamiel's soft, juicy flesh, Kar chomps down onto a block of ultra-hardened metal, shattering his molars and causing blinding pain to erupt in his brain. "Aaaargh!"

Momentarily stunned, Kar squeezes his eyes shut, giving Zamiel a chance to break his left arm free. He wrestles it out of Kar's grasp and quickly forms a magical sign, transforming himself into bats.

By the time Kar recovers, he discovers his opponent has disappeared. He looks around to find Zamiel standing a short distance away, sweat dripping down his forehead.

"Hah... hah... you shit-licking croc!" Zamiel curses. "You almost had me! Almost!"

Kar's two broken teeth continuously send pulses of pain into his gums. However, with a quick infusion of mana, they regrow, aided in part by his reptilian biology.

"What a fascinating ability..." Kar growls. "Perhaps a new power? Your rise to Duke was not in vain after all."

Zamiel smiles, but his expression betrays a hint of fear. Kar's Sphinx transformation leaves him with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, a sensation caused by the difference in strength between a crow and an eagle.

Quickly, the humans surrounding Kar and Zamiel begin to clear the area. As they do, Zamiel cocks his head. He glances at the corpses around him, each dead fleshbag leaving a strange impression on his brain unlike any he's experienced in his life.

Hm? What's this? Their blood... it calls out to me differently from before.

Reflexively, Zamiel flicks his fingers. The fresh, warm, crimson liquid spewing from the dead bodies around him leaps into the air, then flies in his direction. Kar, uncertain what is happening, only watches in confusion as Zamiel absorbs the blood of several hundred humans through his skin.

A moment later, Zamiel coughs violently. "Kah! Kahak!"

He falls to his knees and presses his palms against the dirt. A sense of disorientation seeps into his mind, along with huge, incredible, overwhelming waves of information.

"...I see. I see! Haha! Kahak! So that's how it is!"

Zamiel's demonic eyes turn completely red as his vampiric side takes over. He greedily yanks as much blood as possible to himself, gulping it down like fries soaked in ketchup.

A few seconds later, he jumps to his feet. His body becomes much more limber and supple than before, and his muscles stretch taut. More importantly, a fresh glimmer of intelligence bubbles in his eyes.

"How unfortunate for you, Monster King, but I have just learned something important."

"Does it relate to the ugliness of your face?" Kar quips.

"It turns out vampires don't only strengthen their bodies by ingesting blood," Zamiel continues, ignoring Kar's sarcasm. "We also evolve our minds!"

Zamiel motions with his hands. Kar crouches low, readying himself to spring into action. However, instead of rushing toward the Sphinx, Zamiel simply stands in place while magical particles transform the air in front of him.

Five seconds later, Kar's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets. A humongous minigun materializes before Zamiel, one with a revolving, multi-barreled chamber. Powered by magical energy, it hums to life, as if hungry to kill.

"Hahaha! It seems I was too hasty with my Duke title earlier!" Zamiel declares. "I now know what my title must be! As if spoken into my ear by the Creator himself, there can be no other option. I am now Zamiel, the Duke of Weaponry!"

The minigun hovers in the air before Zamiel, while the Duke spreads out his arms and cackles.

"FIRE!!"

Unassisted by its master, the weapon unloads a barrage of projectiles, each one traveling at the speed of sound. Kar instantly leaps aside, evading the magical minigun's attacks. It chases after him, dogging the Sphinx relentlessly.

Kar's speed, boosted to its peak by his Sphinx transformation, exceeds the minigun's accuracy by a huge margin. Even so, its mere presence forces Kar to go on the defense while Zamiel summons a second minigun, followed by a third.

Soon, Kar ends up trapped behind Zamiel's neverending barrage of magical bullets. Zamiel himself joins the fight, forcing Kar back as he works together with his creations to overpower the Sphinx.

"Hell's mightiest monster?! I think not!" Zamiel laughs. "Even I, a mere Duke, can take your life! You won't be able to run forever, Monster King!"

Zamiel corners Kar against the cliffside wall. As a hail of bullets fires upon Kar, the Sphinx makes an unexpected move and dives downward, burrowing into the planet's depths with his earth manipulation. Zamiel's miniguns harmlessly splatter against the soil, missing their target.

"...Well, shrakh! I forgot he could do that," Zamiel groans.

Kar bursts out of the soil beneath Zamiel, but the Duke of Weaponry evades him by transforming into bats.

Once again, the two mightiest warriors on the eastern front resume a relative stalemate, both of them outputting as much power as they can in an effort to kill one another.

Blinker, still battling Mephisto and his undead, scowls angrily. "Hey, you big dumb jerk! I'm going easy on you, ya know! You're lucky I don't like killing, or I'd smush you like a bug!"

She teleports away, narrowly avoiding a Gargoyle's claw as it swipes at her. Not far in the distance, Mephisto laughs to himself. "Sssee if I care! Do your worssst, little fairy! My minionsss are unssstoppable, neverending, and infinite in number!"

As he and Blinker fight, the Monster Queen finally decides to go on the offensive.

Okay, that's it. No more missus nice-fairy! Mephisto's creatures are already dead anyway, and I only promised my honey I wouldn't kill the crocodiles. He didn't say anything about gross gargoyles and gangly goblins!

When a group of Wraiths attacks Blinker again, she activates her fairy magic, revolving it within her body. Her tiny six-inch figure explodes with power, increasing her size tremendously! Much like Kar's ability to grow and shrink, Blinker increases her height to a foot tall, then two feet, three feet, four...

Soon, she stands over seven feet tall, a giant compared to the average human. With her sudden increase in size, Blinker no longer fears the pitifully weak attacks of Mephisto's undead mooks. She summons projection magic to her fists and punches away any creature foolish enough to enter her range. The Gargoyles' bodies explode into gory fragments, while the Wraiths dissolve into astral essence.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

In between punching everything in melee range to dust, Blinker also fires thin beams of light at distant targets, shredding their brains and killing them even when they decide not to attack her up close.

"Is that the best you've got?" Blinker quips. "I guess this is what happens when the demons send a scraggly little Duke like you to do an Emperor's job!"

"Watch your mouth!" Mephisto snaps. "I ssshall be the ultimate victor of thisss war! Jussst you wait and sssee! All of my carefully laid plansss will sssoon bear fruit!"

"Yeah, but you demons *always* say that," Blinker says, rolling her eyes. "Color me unimpressed!"

They continue their battle for several minutes. While they fight, a strange and foreign mana source suddenly sweeps over the entirety of Tarus II. Like a beacon of light in the darkness, its presence quickly captures everyone's attention, proving even more striking than Kar's transformation into the Sphinx.

In unison, Kar and Blinker both flick their gazes westward, toward Hero City.

"What?!"

From the center of the city, a terrible screech, malevolent in its fury, erupts from a monster's mouth.

"SKREEEEEE!"

Blinker's heart skips a beat. To her complete astonishment, she observes a sight she never could have anticipated, not even in her worst nightmares.

"...A hydra?! No! Not another one!"

Within the distant confines of Hero City, a dreadful monster appears, one that will surely change the balance of the war.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 274: Battle Against Belial

Tarus II's western front. Second day, ninth hour.

Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, stands a quarter-mile away from Belial's rampaging, monstrous form. She crosses her arms, scowling as Belial rips apart one demon grunt after another, chewing them up and spitting them out with her hideous, oversized head full of teeth.

Artorias, Laharl, and Vepar hesitantly glance at their leader.

"Wait for my signal," Ose hisses through her teeth, as Belial swings a razor-sharp claw toward three bunched-together demons, severing their bodies at the waist. "I want to take out Belial in one shot. If I fail, you will be my backup."

Artorias frowns. "I have seen Belial fight other demons and angels many times. She even beat the tar out of your mother on a few occasions. Good luck. We'll all need it."

"I don't need luck. I'm a genius." Ose replies, sneering condescendingly.

The Third Emperor inhales deeply. She summons electrical power into her stomach, coils strength into her legs, then leaps fifty feet straight upward! Once she reaches the apex of her ascent, Ose exhales, releasing the pent-up mana boiling in her gut.

Instantly, her body transforms into a bolt of lightning. She flies forward at the speed of sound, sticks out her leg, and brings it crashing against Belial's spine.

BOOOOM!

Ose kicks Belial so hard that she doesn't even get a chance to scream. With the breath knocked out of her body, Belial crashes into the dirt and grinds forward more than two hundred feet, digging a shallow gulley across the battlefield. Ose's kick creates a shockwave that flings away several hundred nearby demon grunts, sending them flying in all directions.

Several seconds pass as Belial shakily jumps to her feet, clearly having been taken by surprise. She turns around, gasping for breath, while Ose stands triumphantly with her hair billowing in the wind.

"What's the matter, Belial? Need a breather?"

The Emperor of Infiltration taunts her gasping opponent, grinning devilishly as she relishes the pained expression on Belial's face.

"Kuh, huk... cowardly... cowardly as usual, Ose," Belial coughs. "Always attacking from the back..."

"I like your new form," Ose says, gesturing toward Belial's monstrous body. "Now you look as ugly on the outside as you always have on the inside."

Belial motions with one of her four bladed hands, casting healing magic upon herself. Once she regains her breath, she nods slowly. "And you, *little Ose*, you haven't changed one bit. Still the master manipulator, playing the puppeteer. You've killed many of my friends today... so I'll be sure to return the favor."

Ose's eyes twitch, revealing a hint of anger beneath her sneer. "You still talk down to me, thinking yourself the *invincible* Second Emperor. Well, I have news for you, Belial. You don't have Satan here to protect you anymore. You don't have anyone. Your species has abandoned you, just as you abandoned them. Now you're all alone, and you'll soon find that even without the use of my hands... I'm more than your match!"

Without warning, Ose's eyes flash with light. She transforms into a bolt of electricity, disappears, and reappears behind Belial. Before the Emperor of Passion can react, Ose revolves on her heel and delivers a powerful spin-kick to Belial's spine, sending her flying.

"Aargh!" Belial cries, as she launches to the west.

An instant later, Ose's eyes flash once more. She teleports in front of Belial, jumps into the air, and swings her right leg downward like a sledgehammer.

BOOM!

Ose axe-kicks the back of Belial's head, propelling the Second Emperor straight downward, where she crashes into the dirt. Belial's face smashes a rock just beneath the soil, pulverizing it into rocky fragments.

Several seconds of frenzied attacks follow as Ose doesn't let up for an instant. She kicks Belial into the air again, then teleports above her and kicks downward, only to send Belial flying at her once-again transmitted form. Like a ping-pong machine, Ose kicks Belial a dozen times, knocking the Second Emperor around helplessly, while Belial proves unable to react to her incredible speed.

After the dozenth strike, Ose motions with her fingers, summoning electrical energy into her palms. She conjures a double-blast of lightning and detonates it against Belial's chest, blasting the Second Emperor up into the sky.

Belial rockets away, while Ose remains earthbound. The Emperor of Infiltration breathes hard, grinning wickedly as she watches her hated rival vanish into the clouds.

"Hahaha... how was that for my first round of abuse, eh, Satan's Whore?! I've plenty more to come next! Don't die on me now!"

Several seconds pass. Ose locks her mind onto Belial's Emperor-level mana signature. Belial surges into the upper atmosphere, slows down due to wind friction and gravity, then begins falling toward the planet's surface. As she plunges earthward, her figure passes through the clouds, making her once again visible to the naked eye. Ose's smug grin disappears as she examines Belial's body.

"Oh? Finally getting serious, are we?"

Belial, no longer in her monstrous form, instead returns to her original figure, except now, her skin appears ash-grey, with scale-like armor covering her body from head to toe. Her succubus tail morphs into a bone-trident, while two leathery wings sprout from her back.

Ose's expression dims noticeably.

Belial's True Succubus Form.

Instead of a helpless free-fall, Belial flaps her wings and deliberately increases her speed, hurtling toward Ose at alarming speeds. She raises one arm to attack, readying her muscular, clawed limb for a deadly strike.

Just before Belial impacts Ose's awaiting figure, her opponent transforms into a bolt of lightning and zips away.

BOOM!

Belial crashes into the dirt, spraying soil in every direction.

"Oh, darn. I missed..." Belial says emotionlessly, as she turns her head toward Ose's new position. "Did the little girl get her anger out properly, Ose? Is it time for your nap yet?"

Ose, standing fifty feet from Belial, tenses up her muscles. Her face becomes deathly calm as she senses the power flowing off Belial's Pure Succubus body.

"My mother gave you that transformation..." Ose mutters. "And in return, you betrayed her countless times. Lucifer should have led the Hell of Damnation, not that worthless Satan!"

"Is that what mommy dearest told you?" Belial laughs. She straightens her body while resting one claw on her hip. "Lucifer always was a sore loser with an inferiority complex. Seems the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. You know she's only your *adoptive* mother, right?"

Ose furrows her brow. Rage appears in her eyes as she readies herself to attack.

"My mother was a great demoness! Far better than the likes of you, whore! If it wasn't for her, demonkind would have gone extinct long before the War in Heaven!"

"You speak as if you were there," Belial murmurs. "You weren't even a glimmer in the Creator's eye during the Ancient Era. I suffered through those hellish days. I know what Lucifer did... what lengths she went to for the sake of our people. I respect the measures she took to preserve our existence, but not the torment she unleashed to satisfy her twisted cruelty!"

"Her actions were necessary!" Ose shrieks. "You aren't a tenth the demoness my mother was, nor are you a tenth of me! And today, I'll prove that fact!"

Ose launches herself forward, transforming her arms into whips made from lightning. She and Belial begin engaging in an Emperor-level clash, one which shatters the surrounding land, turning it into an apocalyptic hellscape.

The Emperor of Infiltration lashes Belial's front and back, sending electricity coursing into her veins. She kicks the former Second Emperor, using her still fully-intact legs and Emperor-tier strength as a bludgeon to beat Belial back. Meanwhile, Belial counters by using her enhanced Succubus Form to its fullest extent. Her speed and power increase dramatically, allowing her to just barely keep up with Ose's unending salvo of hurricane kicks and whip-lashes.

Thanks to her increased durability, Belial takes Ose's attacks head-on, tanking them without complaint. She swipes Ose's after-images time after time, always failing to land a critical hit, yet still forcing Ose to play defense, lest the Second Emperor's monstrous strength crush her body in a single hit.

"That's quite the transformation!" Ose cackles, as she ducks backward to avoid Belial's horizontal claw-swipe. "Did you ever thank my mother for her benevolent gift?!"

Belial's tail swings at Ose, but she turns her body into electricity for a split-second, allowing it to pass through harmlessly.

"Why would I?" Belial hisses, venom in her eyes. "Your mother stole that power from Agares. She was a thief!"

"She was our rightful leader!" Ose howls. She transmits behind Belial, lashes out her lightning-whip arm, and wraps it around Belial's neck. Then, she plants her feet against Belial's back and pulls hard, tightening her appendage like a noose. "Die, Belial! Choke and die!!"

Belial's eyes nearly pop out of her head. She bucks like a mad bull and tries to throw Ose off her back, but Ose uses her superior positional advantage to evade Belial's clumsy claw and tail-swipes.

"Hahk! Get- get off me!" Belial gasps.

"Never!" Ose yells. "Hahaha! What great fun this is! How long I've dreamed of punishing you in my mother's name! Hey, Belial! Would you like to know a secret?!"

Belial tries to tail-whip the demoness mounted on her back, but Ose dodges it, then wraps her free arm around the appendage, rendering it useless. She stomps her foot against Belial's lung, knocking the wind out of the Second Emperor and forcing Belial to her knees.

"My mother..." Ose says, her eyes glowing blood-red. "She led Satan to his death! Bahaha! How about that, eh, Belial?! Did you think the Black Witch randomly stumbled upon Satan out of nowhere? That's right! Lucifer told Amelia where to find him! She tricked Satan and led him to his death! All these years, you've wondered how your precious husband died... and now you know! My mother was his killer, while I shall be yours! What poetic justice!"

Belial's eyes widen in horror. She kicks even more violently, trying desperately to get Ose off her back.

"No... hahk! You... you filthy..."

A circle of demons forms around the two battling Emperors. Countless Lords and Grunts pause their assault on the humans to gaze at Belial and Ose in shock, while still keeping a wide berth.

Artorias stands amidst the crowd. He listens to Ose's confession, his jaw slack from disbelief.

"...Lucifer led the Black Witch to Satan? That... that can't be true. That must be a lie..."

Vepar and Laharl stand beside him, watching the life fade from Belial's eyes. Vepar sneers condescendingly. "You're too naïve, Artorias. We're the same age, yet you've always played the goody two-shoes Emperor kiss-ass. Ose isn't lying. If anyone had the ability and motive to pull one over on Satan, it would have been Lucifer. I'm not surprised even one bit."

Laharl rolls her eyes. "I never liked Lucifer. Biggest bitch of the Energy Wars. I'm glad she died, even if it meant losing Satan, too."

"It is never a joyous occasion when demonkind loses one of our Emperors..." Artorias mutters, his eyes locked on Belial's gasping body. Not in the past, not today, not ever."

Belial flaps her wings. She tries to take to the skies or to roll Ose off her back, but Ose conjures electricity into her feet and stomps Belial's spine, taking the wind out of her sails.

"You're not going anywhere but the depths of the River Styx!" Ose declares. "I've got a war to win, so I'll make this quick!"

The light begins to dim in Belial's eyes. Her struggles weaken noticeably as she fails repeatedly to toss Ose away.

"S... Satan..." Belial gasps. "No... he c-couldn't... cough..."

Belial's memories return to all the good times with her husband. Their conquering of human kingdoms. Their mutual despair when Belial's sister, Nerissa, died. Their war on ten fronts against fellow demons, the angels, and the humans. All the times Satan expressed his undying love for her.

Then, in her mind's eye, an image appears, one of Lucifer watching from afar as the Black Witch devours Satan's mind, body, and soul. Lucifer cackles maniacally, taunting Belial for her weakness.

You're nothing more than Satan's Whore! You couldn't save him then, nor can you save anyone else now! Not even yourself!

As the electric whip tightens around Belial's throat, one comforting thought appears in her mind.

At least soon... I'll be able to meet my husband again... in the Great Beyond.

Just when her body loses its last drop of strength, a miracle occurs.

Artorias lunges forward, rage filling his vessel.

"NO!!"

Ose flicks her gaze toward the charging Duke. "Wha-?"

A metallic fist crashes against Ose's face. Artorias blasts her with all his strength, knocking her off Belial's body and into the dirt. Ose's arm continues to hold tight around Belial's neck, but only until Artorias brings his foot down, stomping that thin cord with all his strength.

Thump!!

"Aaargh!" Ose shrieks, feeling her right arm snap like a twig. The electric whip silently reverts back to its original form beneath Artorias's boot, blood spewing from its mangled form.

"I will not allow this!" Artorias bellows. He kicks Ose away and assumes a defensive stance, hovering above Belial's body protectively. "Ose! You have just revealed a horrible crime committed against demonkind!"

Belial coughs weakly. Her eyes flicker open, while question marks appear over her head. She slowly turns to look at the Duke of Steel standing over her, his fists raised while he gazes at Ose.

"Ar... Artorias?"

Vepar and Laharl, both shellshocked, stand frozen along with all the other demons, uncertain what they should do.

"Artorias!" Vepar shouts. "What are you doing? You just attacked your rightful Emperor!"

"She's not!" Artorias objects. "Ose's claim to the Hell of Damnation's rule is now in question! She possessed knowledge of her mother's treachery, yet said nothing all these years! I cannot, in good conscience, support an Emperor who would harm her own people's interest!"

"Satan may have been your friend, and your former First Emperor," Vepar says, "but he is dead now. There's no point in questioning the past."

Artorias keeps his gaze locked on Ose. She gnashes her teeth and climbs to her feet, her right arm hanging awkwardly at her side.

"Ar... tor... ias... you... you TRAITOR! How dare you raise a hand against me!"

Belial woozily stands up. She takes a few steps back from Artorias, uncertain of what he just did.

"...You saved me?"

Artorias glances at Belial. Hesitation appears in his eyes.

"Not exactly. Sort of. I do not know! Satan was demonkind's greatest leader... but Lucifer led him to his death. Knowing that... I cannot allow his mate to perish here, not without a full investigation by the Demon Council!"

"You imbecile," Ose hisses. "You have no idea what you've just done. This war is almost won! Victory is within our grasp!"

"*Your* victory," Artorias mutters. "Not necessarily our *people's* victory."

A tense standoff follows. Ose's hate-filled gaze flicks between Belial and Artorias, while Artorias and Belial waver between examining one another and Ose.

Belial rubs her neck, where several burn marks sit cooked into her armored skin. "Heh heh heh... oh, Ose. You never change. You can't help but gloat when you're about to win. And now... now you've just given me ten million more reasons to kill you."

Ose grinds her teeth. "Artorias! Just whose side are you on? Are you going to fight alongside Belial? Have you forgotten just how many demons she's killed today? Are you going to pretend the humans don't wish to kill all of us, too? Where I stand, all I see are two agents of the Angels."

Belial glances at Ose's shattered right arm. "This fight is over, Ose. You nearly had me, but now, you don't stand a chance. Give up and call off your forces, or perish and fall into the Great Beyond. It's your choice."

Several tense seconds pass.

The Emperor of Infiltration grimaces. Veins pop on her forehead as she glances at the two traitors before her, uncertain of what action she should take.

"My mother..." Ose whispers. "She suffered endlessly because of Satan. She deserved better than what she got, yet the demons only ever favored The Devil. It was beyond unfair. It was blackhearted. Evil! Lucifer's broodmothers are the only reason our people have expanded and swelled enough to conquer our enemies... yet even after what happened... you filthy turncoats still dare to question her actions! Satan deserved to die! Lucifer deserved to rule! Since Mother is no longer here, then I will do so in her stead!"

"You no longer have the qualifications to lead," Artorias murmurs. "Stand down, Ose."

"You stand down!" Ose shrieks. "If you want to die alongside Belial, then so be it! You can rot in the topsoil like the worthless mutt you are!"

Artorias releases a turbid breath. "...Alright. I'm sorry it had to come to this, Ose. I didn't dislike you as an Emperor. If we must leave this battlefield as enemies, then so be it. I would rather stand alongside Belial if it means honoring Satan's true legacy."

He and Belial both crouch down, readying themselves to attack. Laharl and Vepar, alarmed, look at each other, unsure what to do.

"They're going to kill Ose! Should we intervene?" Vepar asks.

"How the bloody hell should I know?!" Laharl asks. "I came here to catch some man-meat, not to die fighting for Ose! Two Barons won't be any use against an Emperor and a Duke!"

Seeing her enemies preparing to attack, Ose slowly lowers her shoulders. She exhales, forcing herself to calm her anger.

As she does, a faint but unmistakable glimmer of malice gurgles in the back of her throat.

"Huhuhu... very well. Artorias, I will burn your body to ash and leave behind not even a memory of your existence. For daring to turn your back on your rightful Emperor, I condemn you and your brother to death. It's better this way. That Archangel inside you was always a liability. Now I can erase her for the sake of demonkind's safe and secure future."

Belial uncurls her claws. "You're outnumbered and alone, Ose. The same as I was, earlier. When you reach the Great Beyond, tell your mother I said hi."

"No need. You may tell her yourself," Ose retorts.

The Emperor of Infiltration motions with her still-functional left hand. In the blink of an eye, she completes a dozen demonic incantations, then smiles.

Electricity crackles in the air. Mana condenses within Ose's stomach, then spreads out into her bones. The energy travels around her entire body, imbuing her whole figure with the elemental power of lightning.

"I planned to use this against the Hidden Emperors and the Volgrim, not against Satan's Whore and his loyal dog..." Ose whispers. "But consider this transformation my mother's final gift to you, Belial."

Within seconds, electricity begins to bubble across Ose's skin like liquid magma. It spurts from her pores and crackles from her mouth, while her hair transforms into millions of angry electric snakes.

Ose's right arm shifts back into place, healing as if by magic. She balls up both of her hands into fists, no longer wincing due to their pain.

The moment Ose completes her transformation, she bolts forward!

Her thoughts play out a series of words, causing her to grin wickedly.

Aspect of the Thunder God. Proof of my supreme right to rule!

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 275: Lightning and Fire

In the skies above Tarus II, a thunderstorm swirls, its electrical energy fomenting with the rage of a long-dead Titan King. Lightning bolts fire toward the planet's surface at random, striking trees to start fires, or lancing toward members of the human and demon armies. These hyper-energized thunderblasts impact with a hundred times the force of any ordinary bolt, killing many warriors with weak constitutions instantly while the stronger ones end up paralyzed, shivering in pain.

As the thunderstorm increases in scope, Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, cackles maniacally.

"Hah hah hah... Belial and Artorias, two traitors to demonkind! Today, I will wipe you both from existence!"

Ose's skin shimmers white and blue. Electricity crackles in the air around her, giving her the appearance of an elemental who escaped from the land of thunder. Before Belial and Artorias can react, Ose stabs her fingers forward, firing out twin beams of lightning!

CRACKLE CRACKLE!

Belial screams as Ose's attack strikes her chest, flinging her off her feet, where she crashes onto her wings and drags across the ground.

Artorias raises his palm, causing the lightning to flood into his limb and electrify his demonstone armor. "Aaaargh!"

The Duke of Steel holds his ground against Ose, even with his lesser status making him the weaker combatant. However, the pain proves agonizing beyond belief, to the point he nearly faints. When Ose stops attacking for a split second, Artorias lolls forward, unable to stop his descent. In that instant, Ose appears before him with a fist reared back.

BOOM!

Ose uppercuts Artorias's face, violently reversing his momentum and sending him cartwheeling backward. The Duke crashes into a group of nearby demons, killing several of them by crushing their bones.

The Third Emperor's evil grin fades, ever so slightly.

"I'd be having a lot more fun if I unleashed this transformation by choice and not out of necessity. Damn you, Belial! I hate you. I hate you for always getting in my way!"

Belial staggers to her feet. Numbness pervades her internal organs and several limbs, making it hard for her to catch her breath. Even in her True Succubus Form, with her defense massively bolstered, she can't shrug off Ose's attacks easily.

"As always- cough! You're just a little girl throwing a temper tantrum."

Ose gnashes her teeth. She transforms into a bolt of lightning and flies at Belial's chest, feet-first. Before she can land a kick, Belial's eyes flash with insight. She flaps her left wing, spinning herself

counter-clockwise. In the instant before Ose hits her, Belial releases a focused mana-pulse.

The mana-pulse flies into Ose's foot, momentarily disrupting her thunderbolt-form. She shifts back into a demonic body, only to see Belial's fist flying at her stomach.

Thunk!

Belial punches downward into Ose's gut, smashing her opponent into the soil. Ose crashes hard, spraying rocks and dirt in all directions. Belial's title of the 'Strongest Demon,' not merely one for show, gives her a physical strength two tiers beyond any other Emperor.

Ose, momentarily stunned, lays in the crater, desperately trying to gasp for breath. Belial grabs her enemy by the throat and squeezes, pressing her against the planet's soil.

"I don't like dragging things out," Belial hisses. "Even for you, who has killed many of my friends, I won't make you suffer. I'll give you a quick and painless death."

Belial contracts her grip, intending to crush Ose's windpipe. However, as she does, Ose's entire body shatters, dispersing into particles of light that coat the soil. Shocked, Belial jumps backward, looking around herself in alarm. Ose reforms herself not far away, still clutching her stomach.

"Kahaha! It... it won't be THAT easy to kill this ruler, Belial!"

Ose raises her left hand. Ten bolts of lightning drop down from the skies above, surge into her body, and fill her with electric power. A second later, Ose stands up straight, her pain gone and her aura revitalized.

"I am thunder! I am lightning! I am the storm, Belial! I am nature's wrath, and the embodiment of the universe! If you believe you can kill me with that stolen form, think again!"

"Nature's wrath?" Belial echoes. "There's nothing *natural* about you. You're a genocidal tyrant, one I'll soon bury forever."

Both women launch into a full-scale battle. Ose continuously attacks Belial from all sides, forcing the Emperor of Passion to play defense. Belial guards herself, moving on high alert while ducking, dodging, and deflecting anything Ose throws at her, including electric bolts, kicks, punches, and grapples. Sometimes Belial lands a lucky hit, only for Ose to heal herself with lightning from above.

While the two women fight, Artorias pulls himself together. Taking a hit from an Emperor isn't something any ordinary Duke can take without suffering aftereffects, and he is no exception. He climbs out of the pile of dead and badly injured demon grunts, paying them no mind.

"Tch... what the devil is going on? Ose never told me she possessed a Superform. I suppose her mother must have given it to her, but still! She could have healed her arms earlier with this transformation, yet she didn't. Why not?"

The Duke of Steel hesitates. Dozens of conjectures flick through his mind while he watches Ose and Belial's battle intensify.

Perhaps the healing factor won't persist after she exits the transformation. Maybe Ose's new body isn't a Superform, but an Ultraform. It certainly isn't an Omegaform; only Emperor Diablo can hold

claim to that title.

Superforms empower a demon with no downsides, while Ultraforms often grant far more strength, albeit at a high cost. Bael's Balrog Form, for example, turns him into a colossal idiot. I've yet to see any gaps in Ose's transformation, but it's possible we've simply yet to observe them.

For now, I should focus on assisting Belial. Since my opponent is Ose, then my best bet is to...

Artorias claps his hands together, then drops to his knees. He presses his palms against the dirt, causing the planet's soil to flow onto his body. He coats himself with dirt to ground himself against electrical energy, then sighs.

Earth manipulators have long held an advantage against lightning manipulators, but this trick won't help me much. Ose already fought Uriel in this body, so she's well-versed in dealing with topsoil-armor. At best, I can only hope to soften her blows.

Gritting his teeth, Artorias digs his right foot into the dirt, then launches forward!

Ose, preoccupied with attacking Belial, senses Artorias's charge seconds before he arrives. "Satan's lapdog, returned for another beating! Come here, boy!"

Artorias swings his fist at Ose's back, but she transforms into light particles, disperses, and reforms thirty feet away. "You forgot something important, Ose! I am far older than you! I fought in the Ancient Era, not you! I led the assault on Heaven's Gate, not you! You are the child here; a brat who needs reminding of her place in the social order."

The Duke of Steel falls into position beside Belial. The two of them face Ose down, readying themselves for her counter-attack.

Ose laughs and shakes her head. "What a sad excuse for a demon you are, Artorias! Trapped inside the body of your little brother, forced to kill your fellow demons whenever your Archangel 'slave' takes control. I might be younger than you, but I've also accomplished far more. I was the architect of humanity's demise. Not only during the Energy Wars, but today, as well! It is I who possesses the means to advance our species, not *you* two gullible buffoons. Do me a favor. Stop resisting, so I can finish my subjugation of humanity already."

"I am no ally to humanity," Artorias retorts. "I have suffered beneath their boots the same as I did beneath the angels'. What I see in you is the same lust for power that Raphael once had; a desire to rule over all life by instating yourself as a supreme leader. Were you an admirable demon like Satan, I'd have followed you to the ends of the universe. Sadly, you are not half the demon he was."

Artorias's words dig deep. Ose scowls at him, while lightning crackles in her palms.

"Treasonous words from a treacherous worm."

Suddenly, Ose flicks both of her hands backward. Her body transforms into a beam of light, and she shoots toward humanity's frontlines not far to the east.

"What? Where did she go?" Belial asks.

Seconds later, screams erupt among the human troops. Ose injects electrical power into two of the five still-functioning Planetwalkers. She seizes control of the giant mecha, turning them on the humans to unload a hailstorm of bullets. Not even the advanced T-REX exosuits manage to protect humanity's soldiers from their own weapons. Countless screams abruptly fall silent as bullets rip through their flesh and armor, killing them on the spot.

"Traitors! We have traitors in our midst!" One human commander shouts. He starts to bark orders, only for Ose to materialize in the midst of his platoon. She spreads open her palms and releases waves of lightning bolts at random in all directions, blasting the nanite-based armors into nothingness while charring the fleshy life-forms inside to ash.

"Hahahahaha!!!" Ose cackles. "Today, you pitiful insects will learn to fear your betters!"

Ose waves her hands from side to side. With each motion, she snuffs out the lives of a hundred humans and monsters alike. Their bodies burn, explode, and detonate like grenades under the sheer power of her ultimate transformation.

"We have to stop her!" Belial cries. She lunges forward, while Artorias follows in hot pursuit. "Ose, that evil...!!!"

Artorias pays no mind to the dying soldiers. Instead, he fixates his gaze on Ose herself.

"Look, Belial! Ose's mana seems to be increasing! She's not simply firing electricity outward; she's sucking it back in. She siphons electricity from any power source near her, then releases an opposite charge outward to slaughter the humans!"

Belial flaps her wings. She pounces skyward, then dive-bombs toward Ose's position at breakneck speeds. She tackles Ose at two hundred miles an hour, slamming her fellow Emperor into the planet's surface. On impact, Ose explodes into energized particles, then reforms her body with her heel planted against Belial's back.

"Too slow, Satan's Whore! Try again!"

Ose fires electricity through her feet into Belial's spine, but Belial uses the attack's propulsive force to dive underground and swim like a land-shark. She escapes Ose's electricity, suffering only minor injuries.

Belial swims half a mile underground, then pauses for a moment to unjumble her thoughts.

I've been going about this all wrong. My True Succubus Form isn't much use against Ose. She's much faster and smarter than me. I need to try a new tactic!

Seconds later, Artorias arrives on the scene. He jumps toward Ose while swinging his palm in an upward arc. Using his earth manipulation, Artorias summons a golem-like hand from beneath Ose's feet, wraps its fingers around her body, and squeezes with all his might.

With Ose momentarily pinned, Artorias charges at her. Ose struggles to break free of the earthen prison fastening her to the land. She turns her head just in time to see a dirt-coated fist flying at her face.

Bang!

Artorias punches Ose with all his strength, breaking her out of his makeshift prison and sending her flying. She crashes into the leg of a Planetwalker, crumpling it like papier mâché and causing the giant machine to topple over. It collapses atop Ose, crushing and burying her alive.

Seconds later, the Planetwalker flies upward as Ose throws it off herself. She jumps toward Artorias and spin-kicks his chest, knocking him away like an errant bowling pin. Her electricity-imbued attack leaves the Duke stunned as he slams into the side of a nearby hillock and falls motionless.

After casting aside the Duke of Steel, Ose pauses. She glances around at the humans turning their weapons on her and smiles.

"Bullets? *Try me.*"

Hardly have the words left Ose's mouth before the ground explodes beneath her. Belial, no longer in her Pure Succubus Form, jumps onto Ose's body and stretches her limbs, wrapping around the Emperor of Infiltration like a giant squid. She entangles and constricts her opponent's movements, much as she did to Hercules during the Ancient Era. Belial shifts her right fist into a bone maul, then begins punching Ose's figure anywhere she can find exposed skin.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Ose cries out in pain as powerful blows strike her repeatedly. She struggles to break free of Belial's entanglement, but Belial bends Ose's arms around behind her back to prevent her from casting magic spells.

"Aaargh! Get off me! Get off!" Ose shrieks, just before Belial knocks the wind out of her.

"Make me!" Belial exclaims. She shifts her bone-maul-fist into a bladed knife, then stabs it toward Ose's heart.

Unable to fight back, Ose's eyes lock onto the incoming threat. Instantly, her lightning-accelerated brain flips through a hundred possibilities, making her eyes dart toward one of the remaining Planetwalkers still shooting at the demon army.

Ose's eyes flash with light. She transmits herself and Belial straight forward into the giant mecha's line of fire. As a result, a storm of heavy munitions falls upon Belial's back, catching her off-guard. Belial shrieks in pain as bullets lance into her flesh. She reflexively detaches herself from Ose and jumps away, but lands on the dirt just outside the firestorm with blood spewing from a dozen giant blood-craters in her back. Ose, meanwhile, remains uninjured, thanks to Belial's Emperor-body absorbing all of the damage.

Momentarily stunned, Belial struggles to remain conscious. Her eyelids flutter as she groggily shapes her hands into magical signs, then presses them against her chest.

Before Belial can activate her healing magic, Ose transmits to her side with her foot reared back.

Thunk!

Ose kicks Belial viciously, sending her careening to the side. Belial slams into a boulder, crushing it into fragments. She loses consciousness for a few seconds, then wakes up, only to see Ose towering over

her. The Emperor of Infiltration exhales triumphantly, then snaps a pair of electric whips around Belial's wrists and yanks Belial's arms apart.

"Sorry, Belial! No healing for you! Ooh, look at all that blood! You seem a little pale around the eyes. How does it feel knowing you never stood a chance against me? How does it feel, knowing my mother killed your husband? I'll bet this is the most dreadful moment of your life!"

Belial blinks her eyes, but she fails to readjust her vision. Ose's figure shifts in and out of focus, sometimes morphing into a pair of bodies, sometimes as many as four.

"Twice, I've beaten you," Ose continues. "Twice, you've failed. Don't you see? This is all because you were just too weak; a miserable excuse for a demoness. Who's going to save you? The Wordsmith? I crippled his meridians! Artorias? He's only a Duke! Maybe your precious little humans? Oh, yes, I'd love to see the little rats try. If an Emperor can't defeat me, nobody can!"

Blood spews from Belial's mouth. "Kuhuk... you..."

She tries to flex her arms, but as more and more blood drains from her body, Belial finds it nearly impossible to keep her thoughts straight.

"I *what*?" Ose taunts. "Go on! Spit it out! You can do it!"

Belial closes her eyes.

"You... talk... too much..."

A moment later, her head lolls backward, and she falls unconscious.

Ose stares at Belial, then laughs.

"Haha. I talk too much? Is that all you have to say? What a fool! She must have bumped her head too hard."

Shrugging, Ose tugs on the electric whips, pulling Belial's arms outward without any resistance. "Well, Belial, this is where you die. Goodbye."

As Ose tugs on the whips to rip Belial's body in half, a sense of unease materializes in her stomach. A gut reaction, one born of fear, causes Ose to jerk her head up and look around, uncertain what is causing her distress.

"What? This strange power. What is it?"

The Emperor of Infiltration narrows and widens her eyes repeatedly, only to immediately release her whips and go on the defensive.

"Holy Energy! I sense it! But why?! Could the Wordsmith have recovered?"

From the planet's depths, a rushing figure burrows upward, making Ose look toward her feet.

"From below!" Ose exclaims. She transforms into a bolt of lightning and teleports five hundred feet away, narrowly avoiding an explosion of dirt and rock as an armored figure emerges.

Artorias bursts out of the ground and grabs at Ose's afterimage, only to sneer as he realizes he's missed.

"Oh? Thou art quite the agile little rabbit, Ose," Artorias says, glancing casually in her direction. He waves his hands, then conjures two massive fireballs within his palms, making Ose look at him differently.

"Holy energy? Fire magic? You... you aren't Artorias!"

The Duke of Steel gazes expressionlessly at Ose through the holes in his mask. His blood-red eyes slowly shift color to pure white as he nods.

"Attentive as always. Hello, Ose. Seems like just yesterday we had a nice chat."

"Uriel," Ose mutters. "Of course, with everything else going wrong, you *would* reveal yourself at a time like this."

"I just got through suffering a series of most unpleasant dreams," Uriel hisses. She begins revolving her fireballs, increasing their heat while contracting their size. "And who, pray tell, forced me to suffer them? Ah, t'was *thee*."

A moment of silence follows as Uriel, the Archangel of Vengeance, and Ose, the Emperor of Infiltration, stare each other down.

"I defeated you once. I can do it again..." Ose hisses. "You should have stayed asleep, Uriel."

"That is a most interesting transformation," Uriel says, ignoring Ose's taunts. "I do not recall seeing it the last time we fought."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I didn't need it then," Ose replies, "nor do I now. However, I'm in a bit of a rush today, so you'll have to forgive me for my rudeness."

"I forgive thee for nothing," Uriel says. "So, we mustn't tarry any longer. I have many demons to kill, beginning with thee. Come! Let us fight as we were always meant to!"

Ose flicks her eyes toward Belial's comatose body, then back to Uriel.

"Tch. Fine. I'll burn you to ash, then Satan's Whore. I was going to kill you both anyway!"

Ose transforms into a lightning bolt and flies toward Uriel. Uriel presses her fireballs together and nods.

"Yes. Just like that."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 276: Stealing the Archangel's Thunder

Ose, one of the fastest demons in existence, races toward Uriel at breakneck speeds. Uriel swings a pair of firebolts at her Emperor enemy, detonating them in front of Ose like a landmine. However, thanks to her enhanced Ultraform transformation, Ose dodges at the last second, zips behind Uriel, and swings her foot at the Archangel's back.

Thunk!

She kicks Uriel forward, sending the Archangel flying. Ose grins wickedly and starts to pursue Uriel, only to pause and gasp in surprise as Uriel's body instantly halts mid-flight. The Archangel seemingly strikes an invisible wall, stops her momentum, and thumps her feet against the ground, regaining her balance in the blink of an eye.

"An admirable effort, bloodskin," Uriel says, as she turns her head to look at Ose. "Thou seemeth much faster in that form than when we last fought. Stronger, too."

Ose grinds her molars together. "You haven't a clue, Uriel! I'm more than a match for the likes of you!"

Uriel watches Ose turn into a lightning bolt once again. The Emperor of Infiltration zips around at incredible speeds, circling the Archangel like a shark in the ocean. Far too fast for any human eye to follow, she whirls around Uriel at hundreds of miles per second, her afterimages splitting apart into fifty different blurs of light.

Thy speed is indeed formidable, Uriel thinks, while flicking her eyes from side to side. *But 'tis far from an invincible offense.*

Suddenly, Ose lunges toward Uriel and unleashes a flurry of leg and fist strikes, aiming to jar her opponent senseless. Thanks to her lightning-fast speed, she attacks from three directions at the same time, each punch or kick indistinguishable from the others.

Bang bang bang bang!

A series of explosions ring out as her blows connect with Uriel's armor. However, they cut off only two seconds later as Ose retreats while shrieking in pain. "Aaaargh!"

The Emperor of Infiltration immediately puts some distance between herself and Uriel, then presses her palms against her chest while smoke hisses off her fists.

Uriel smiles, her expression hidden beneath Barbatos's mask. "Ahh, did my holy energy harm thee? My apologies. Thy swiftness appears unstoppable to the untrained eye, but I have battled many a speedster in my day. Merely coating my body in holy energy would naturally prove an effective deterrent against a demoness such as thee."

Ose scowls. "Do not mock me, Archangel. I crushed you in our last battle, and I will do so again."

Uriel narrows her eyes. "Thy lightning was an unexpected and potent weapon at the time, Ose. Indeed, electric magic is one of the few things that can cause this weary body pain. I suffered immensely at thy

claws, and, as a result, fell into a deep sleep. Agonizing nightmares wracked my mind while I replayed our battle time and time again. However, my coma was far from a waste of time, as it allowed me to think carefully of how I might slay thee when we next met. The Creator has smiled upon me, allowing us to battle alone like this, with no other pests to block our path."

"Do you think my previous victory was only a fluke?" Ose asks. "I had a hundred methods at my disposal to erase you from the mortal realm. Since adjusting to my Emperor body, I've only become more clear on how to bury a long-dead chicken fossil!"

Uriel performs a quick series of incantations. Moments later, four light-bathed figures materialize before her; her Holy Constructs.

"We shall see about that."

Without fanfare, Ose attacks. She and Uriel engage in a furious melee, with Ose unleashing her incredible speed and offensive power to attack Uriel from all directions, maintaining a constant pressure. Uriel retorts by relying on Barbatos's sturdy defenses along with her mastery of half a dozen elements to withstand Ose's onslaught.

Uriel's constructs, Units One, Two, Three, and Four, assume their standard battle formation. Unit One, a somewhat masculine but faceless energy-based life-form, stands near Uriel protectively. Unit Two, a feminine construct, retreats a short distance to act as a backline attacker. Unit Three, a hovering orb capable of attacking with elemental magic, positions itself at the periphery of the battlefield, along with Unit Four, a gravity-controlling cube construct.

Ose and Uriel trade blows. Despite her enhanced physiology and empowered form, Ose finds herself somewhat on the back foot. She attacks Uriel with a bloodthirsty frenzy, firing lightning bolts, turning nearby human constructs on the Archangel, and always making sure to use her speed to its fullest extent.

Unlike the last time they fought, Uriel doesn't rush to action. She maintains her cool and slowly but surely begins adapting to Ose's whirlwind-like speed.

"Oh, Ose. How tragic. How unfortunate for thee," Uriel laughs, taunting her adversary. "Hads't thou not foolishly struck Artorias with lightning, I may never have awoken! Thy magic broke the mental shackles fastened to my soul, freeing me to crush thee! How tragic that thy glorious life story shall come to an end here, today!"

Ose narrows her eyes. She tears through Units Three and Four, destroying them in an instant before rushing toward Uriel again.

"Keep gloating, Uriel. Keep it up! You're not the only one who's thought about our last fight!"

Ose spins around Uriel to attack her from behind. As she does, she conjures an orb of lightning, much smaller and yet more potent than any she's wielded before. She surges toward Uriel and rears back to strike.

Without warning, Ose's momentum halts! She crashes into a wall at Mach 10, a barrier made of nearly invisible holy energy. Formed by Unit Two, the wall holds firm, treating Ose with the same contempt that a car's windshield would to an errant insect.

"Gah!" Ose gasps. The latent holy energy contained within the wall courses into her body, fries her skin, and causes smoke to roll off her figure. She immediately retreats, gritting her teeth to endure the pain.

"Oops! Just a tad too slow," Uriel says, mocking Ose once again. "Compared to Zeus, thou certainly cometh up *short*."

Ose retreats a hundred feet. She pauses for half a second to catch her breath, but the moment she pauses her movement, the ground rumbles beneath her feet. Startled, she looks down just in time to see an earthen golem burst from the dirt beneath her feet. A hand made of hardened topsoil grabs onto Ose's ankle, holding her in place for the briefest of moments.

The Third Emperor's heart skips a beat. She kicks at the golem to shatter its grip, but with her attention momentarily diverted, she fails to notice the Archangel's pivot to offense. Uriel spins on her heel and launches toward Ose. In the split-second before Ose breaks the golem's grip on her ankle, Uriel rears her fist back and coats it with earth.

THUNK!!

Uriel punches Ose square in the chest, blasting her opponent backward and sending her skidding off the land. Ose manages a quick scream before she reaches the edge of the Horned Forest. She crashes into half a dozen giant trees, shattering them under the impact force of her flying body, then comes to a stop as they tumble down and collapse atop her.

Uriel cracks her neck. She smiles as she watches the trees topple onto Ose's injured figure.

"What a pitiful 'Ultraform.' Compared to the Balrog, 'tis unworthy of praise."

While Uriel waits for Ose to recover, she glances inward at her Mind Realm.

"Come now, Artorias. Have thou nothing to say? I shall soon slay thy Emperor."

A few seconds pass, but Artorias says nothing. Uriel locates his spiritual figure sitting in a field, his legs crossed as he assumes a meditative state.

"Pish-posh. Where is thy good-humored nature, Little Arty? When I awoke, thy resistance amounted to none at all. Could it be? Hath thou deliberately assisted me in achieving my freedom? Hath thou fully embraced thy lying, deceptive nature, just as Belial did? Art thou now permanently a traitor to demonkind? Speak!"

Artorias remains silent. He closes his eyes and bows his head, refusing to say a word to his captor.

"...Hmph. Leave thy lips sealed, then," Uriel snorts. "Thy opinion matters not to me. Ah, there she is. It seems Ose finally recovered from my grievous blow."

Uriel waits, but Ose doesn't leave the forest. She shoves aside the trees effortlessly, their fifty tons of weight barely even an impediment before her Emperor-level strength.

"That was... a good move... Uriel..." Ose says, her words somewhat labored. "I'll admit, that trick caught me off-guard."

"I need not use tricks to slay thee," Uriel retorts. "I have planned thy demise for the past six years. Even if thou dost attempt to resist, thy efforts shall fail."

Ose nods. She assumes a defensive stance, spreads out her legs and arms, then reveals a faint smile.

"Very well. You seem confident, Uriel. Come! Show me the might of a fallen Archangel! I won't move from this spot! Strike me with your mightiest blow! Let's see which of us is truly the weaker fighter!"

Electricity crackles in Ose's palms. She continues nodding at Uriel, as if to egg the Archangel on. Uriel hesitates, while doubts itch at the back of her head.

However, after a few moments of thought, Uriel coils strength into her legs. She summons magic into her fists, readying herself to attack.

"Heh heh heh. Very well, Ose. If thou desireth a swift death, let me not be the one to deny thee! Stand right there, and I shall end thy life in an instant!"

Uriel conjures holy magic into her grasp. Two spears of light materialize, each one sturdier and far more dangerous than ones made of titanium.

"Thou art nothing if not a trickster, Ose! Even so, I wish to see the true limits of thy Ultraform!"

"Oh, don't worry," Ose says menacingly. "You *will*."

A moment later, Uriel lunges forward! Her twin spears spiral and twist on her right and left sides, revolving around like twin vipers going for a dual-strike!

Uriel flies toward her unmoving enemy, clearing the gap in only two seconds. To her surprise, Ose doesn't move a muscle. The Emperor of Infiltration stands firm, not making the slightest attempt to dodge.

"Haha! Die, Ose! Perish now and tumble to the Great Beyond!"

Uriel stabs her spears at Ose's chest, releasing a pressure capable of making a mountain tremble.

The instant before Uriel's attack lands, Ose's eyes bolt open. A horrific grin spreads across her face as she crosses her arms in front of her chest in an X-shape.

"You fell for it, fool! **Thunder-Cross Ultimate Defense!**"

Unable to stop her attack, Uriel's heart skips a beat. Her spears ram into Ose's arms, then bounce off a barrier made of pure electrical energy. All the attack might she directed at Ose reverses direction and flies backward, crashing into Uriel's chest like a thousand rampaging lions.

"Aaaaaaargh!!!" Uriel shrieks, as she ricochets in the opposite direction, unable to save herself.

The Archangel loses control of her body, flies a quarter of a mile backward, and crashes into a platoon of demons, killing two hundred of them from the sheer explosive impact of her arrival.

A moment later, the world falls still once more, and Ose lowers her arms. A mischievous smile plays on her face as she giggles quietly.

"Hehehehe... all according to plan."

Recommended Listening

The Emperor of Infiltration hesitates for only a moment before launching herself at the Archangel once more. With Uriel temporarily stunned by the reversed force of her own full-power attack, she can't manage even the feeblest of resistance as Ose arrives at her side and kicks upward, firing Barbatos's body into the sky!

"You stupid dodo!" Ose taunts. "Did you really think you could kill demonkind's greatest genius in a single blow?! You're ten times more pathetic than I thought!"

She teleports into the sky above Uriel, raises her leg, and kicks downward.

Boom!

Ose brings her leg down like a sledgehammer, landing it square against Uriel's chest-plate. She kicks the Archangel planetward once again, causing her to impact the planet's soil at the speed of sound.

"You are truly laughable!" Ose yells. "Compared to the other Archangels, you aren't worth a piss in the wind!"

She pounces downward, falling from the sky like a meteor. She dives at her prey as the Archangel rolls on the ground, clutching her stomach.

"How did you like my ultimate defense, Uriel? I borrowed the idea from Diablo! As expected of this genius, I never fail to impress!"

Ose swings her fist down and punches Uriel's head, using her momentum to further increase her attack strength. The impact releases a shockwave that clears away hundreds of nearby demons, even reaching as far as the edge of humanity's frontlines, where they stumble and lose their footing.

Despite the terrific power behind Ose's attack, Uriel doesn't fall unconscious. Instead, Ose's punch jars Uriel's senses, reactivates her brain, and awakens her fight or flight instincts.

Before Ose can pull away, Uriel lunges an armored hand forward and grabs the Emperor's throat.

"Grrrgh! Thou shalt not flee again!" Uriel roars.

Ose tries to retreat, but Uriel maintains her iron grip. She treats Ose's throat like a guardrail, pulls herself to her feet, then spins around and throws Ose against the dirt.

Thoomph!

Uriel's Archangel physiology, boosted further by Barbatos's incredible defense, allows her to not only survive Ose's deceptive reversal from earlier, but even to thrive, empowering her strength with sheer willpower and rage.

"Now, stay right there!" Uriel bellows, as she rears back her free fist to throw a punch at Ose's face. "Try blocking this one!"

What follows are several minutes of violent beatings and bludgeonings.

Uriel pounds Ose's face repeatedly until Ose transforms into a bolt of lightning and escapes. She and Uriel, both injured, start trading blows nonstop, each collision of fists, legs, and magic flattening the

world around them.

The Archangel and her constructs manage to land several blows on Ose, further weakening and slowing down the Third Emperor. However, Ose doesn't slack off, either. She continuously batters the Archangel from left to right, tiring Uriel out.

Minutes becomes an hour, then two hours.

Much of the battlefield, now utterly soaked in blood, ripped up and torn apart by the Emperor and Archangel-level battle, appears unrecognizable compared to its state from only three days ago. Half of the Horned Forest lies in ruins, while many of the humans at the Western Front can only grit their teeth nervously and pray Ose will perish to her black-armored demon opponent.

Vepar and Laharl, no longer anywhere close to the fighting, hang back atop a pile of dead bodies over a mile from Ose and Uriel's battle-site. They sit and watch as their Emperor battles the Archangel, a complete lack of concern apparent on their faces.

"Think we should help?" Laharl asks.

"No." Vepar replies.

"Well, I'm bored..." Laharl grumbles. "It sucks just sitting here and doing nothing. Come on! Let's go slip inside the human city and see if there are any big, hunky men I can capture!"

"I'll pass," Vepar mumbles. "I'm only here because Ose ordered me to come. If she dies, I'm leaving."

Laharl scowls. "Aww, you're no fun! Come on, Vepar! Chill out! Smell the blood-roses! Tie up some good-looking guys and make them swoon! You don't have to act all miserable just 'cause your face is..."

Vepar's expression turns ugly. "My face is *what*? Go on. Say it."

Laharl shifts uneasily. She glances at Vepar's mottled, rotten, ugly face, one which looks like someone threw acid on it, and sighs. "...Never mind. Sorry. I shouldn't have said that!"

"It's just the truth," Vepar hisses. "At least I still have my skin, unlike Mephisto. Then again, perhaps becoming a pure skeleton wouldn't be such a bad idea. Better to be uniformly ugly than to suffer from partial hideousness."

A minute of silence follows. Laharl twiddles her thumbs, then sighs.

"Alright! That's it, I ain't gonna waste my time lounging around here anymore. I've got shit to do! I'll see ya around, Vepar. Wish me luck so the fleshbags don't kill me!"

Vepar nods. "In that case, good luck. Watch your back. The humans are nothing if not resourceful. Don't forget how they managed to save the second Wordsmith even after he landed right in our clutches."

"Mmm. I'll keep that in mind," Laharl says.

A moment later, Laharl leaps off the pile of corpses and starts running eastward, toward the battle-site between Uriel and Ose. As she approaches, Laharl merges into the sea of demon Grunts and Lords, making herself inconspicuous. She circles around the two powerhouses and approaches the human military, ducking low to the ground to make herself less of a target.

"Hmm... these fleshies are quite adept in the ways of war. I wonder how they stack up compared to humans from the ancient days?"

A fairly young demoness herself, at only forty thousand years, Laharl possesses no memories of the pre-Labyrinth era, a time when humans stood above demonkind in the power hierarchy. Her entire life, she's never looked at humans as anything but pissants, their only purpose to serve her twisted fantasies.

With a motion of her hands, Laharl shrouds herself in illusory magic, making her figure partially invisible. She diffuses the light around herself, making it difficult for anyone to spot her, let alone track her exact position.

"Whoops, 'scuse me! Coming through!" Laharl mutters, as she slips past the humans' frontlines. She ignores the soldiers and mecha around her, opting purely for an infiltration approach. After passing through the humans' defenses, she flits past their midlines and backlines, then reaches an area where few humans walk at all; the road leading back to Hero City.

"Not far now! Gonna get me some man-meat!" Laharl laughs. The Baron of Misery increases her speed as she runs toward the city's cliffs, less than two miles in the distance.

"Almost there! It's boy-toy time, whee-hee!" She yells, whistling a merry tune to lift her spirits.

Suddenly, Laharl screeches to a halt. Her heart momentarily stops, while an ice-cold sensation of terror sweeps across her body.

"W-what? Hold on... this feeling... it's..."

In the distance, from the center of Hero City, a terrifying, unearthly scream cries out.

"SKREEEEEEEE!!"

Laharl's entire body shudders upon hearing that sound. It takes her a split-second to recall where she's heard it before, but when she does, her terror increases two-fold.

"A Hydra! That's impossible! How could there be a Hydra here? One already appeared on this world just a month ago! Don't tell me Tarus II is some sort of breeding ground for the damn things!"

Despite every fiber of her being howling at her to run away, Laharl grits her teeth and presses on. She rushes forward faster than ever and reaches the city's walls in under a minute, then pounces skyward to land atop the cliff.

There, she sees a sight unlike anything she could ever imagine.

"That- that is a Hydra! But what are those GIANTS beside it? They look like fleshbags, but they're... they're freaking humongous!"

Laharl's eyes bug out of her head. Her jaw drops as she witnesses a four-headed hydra battling three bipedal beings, each one resembling a human, except they stand anywhere from thirty to seventy feet tall!

"Giant humans? Do those actually exist?! And why do I sense incredible amounts of mana flowing from their bodies? Wait... hold on a moment..."

Laharl falls silent. She wracks her brain while trying to think of a word for these 'giant humans.' Eventually, her breath catches in her throat.

"That's... that can't be the truth. No. My eyes must be lying! How could Titans appear here of all places? It's not possible! Every demon knows the Titans went extinct tens of millennia ago during the Formative Wars! But if they aren't Titans, then... what the devil are they?"

Slowly, Laharl raises her head. She watches as the biggest giant, a seventy-foot-tall female, transforms into a beam of holy energy, somewhat like Ose's power to become a lightning bolt. The female flies into the air, then rushes downward and crashes against the Hydra's back, injuring it and pissing it off.

"SKREEEEEE!!"

While the giants fight, the town collapses into rubble. Humans and monsters flee in all directions, terrified of the rampaging goliaths battling in their midst.

Completely baffled, Laharl violently rubs her hands against her face.

"WHAT in the Seven Hells is going on here?!"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 277: Killer in the Shadows

Hero City, one hour earlier.

Mara, the Baron of Games, darts around inside the human encampment, relying on her invisibility to evade the humans' detection systems. Thousands of heavily armored troopers patrol the streets, march quickly to reinforce command points, and otherwise keep on the alert, using every trick in the book to search for enemies in their midst.

Mara presses her back against an apartment building's wall. She motions with her hands and flicks a magical Tarot Card out of her sleeve, then whispers under her breath: "Ice Orc, **Imbue**."

A layer of frost coats Mara's body, lowering her temperature to below the surrounding area's ambient levels. As an added bonus, her strength increases significantly, giving her a boost of fighting power.

Okay. For the next ten minutes, I'll be able to keep my body temperature low enough that the humans won't detect me on their heat-scanners. Not bad for a Silver Aspect. Now, if only I can find the Hero's family quickly and without any fuss...

Mara flicks out another card, then activates its effects. "Three-Eyed Gecko, **Enchant**."

The Baron of Games enchants the Gecko's illusion-piercing eye onto a ring on her right hand. Then, she carefully pokes her fist around the corner and pivots it in several directions, using its all-seeing gaze to search for any traces of her prey.

Over there? No. Maybe to the north? No. South? Drat! This city is much bigger than it appears! I must have at least ten kilometers of area to search, not to mention any hidden, underground facilities.

Mara stealthily slinks through Hero City's confines, her invisibility and low body temperature making it impossible for even the highly advanced exosuit troopers to spot her. Once in a while, she finds a soldier standing by themselves with their weapon at the ready. With a quick, sudden movement, she skitters over to them and snaps their neck, then burns the body and darts away.

Naturally, with troopers dying inside the city, humanity's forces go on the alert, but curiously, nobody manages to catch the assassin. As Mara spends ten minutes, twenty minutes, and even thirty minutes searching for Phoebe and Daisy, her expression becomes cross.

"Seven Hells! Where the devil are they? Don't tell me they already escaped! Ose will rip me apart if I fail here!"

Mara curses under her breath several times. She arrives at the eastern edge of the city, where powerful waves of mana emanate over the horizon, giving her an idea of the colossal-scale battle occurring between the Monster King, Kar, and his opponent, the Eldest Battle Brother, Zamiel.

Mara stops at the edge of the eastern cliffs and gazes into the distance. Her jaw drops as she observes the titanic battle unfolding within the valley.

"Z-Zamiel? Is that Zamiel?! When did he become a Duke? Why? How?! Was this part of Ose's plans? She didn't tell me anything!"

Mara's eyes grow as wide as saucers. She watches Zamiel trade blows with Kar, wincing whenever their fists and weapons connect.

"The Monster King is an Emperor-level powerhouse! How can a mere Duke stand up to him? There's something fishy going on here..."

Despite her misgivings, Mara still cheers for Zamiel in her heart.

The Sphinx toyed with me. He embarrassed me, making me the fool during our clash. I won't forgive him. Kill him, Zamiel! You must succeed!

However, she doesn't move to assist Zamiel, given that Ose's assignment has nothing to do with him. After observing the battle for a few minutes, Mara creeps away, slipping past a small battalion of human and monster reinforcements as they roll up to the battlefield.

"Just where exactly could the Hero's Wife be?" Mara muses. She sneaks atop the roof of a four-story building in the middle of Hero City, assassinates two guards, then peers down on the city's center to get her bearings.

"Hmm. A group of ten soldiers over there, five to their north, and the hospital to the west... wow! The humans' hospital got annihilated! I guess the rumors about Belial were true."

Mara's gaze flicks to a lone figure wandering down the streets. An unarmored Salamander, a red-scaled monster holding a box of tools, shuffles to the west, toward the edge of the city.

"Aw, shucks. My back is killing me... but I can't just sit on my dad-gum rear while everyone else does all the fightin'. Gotta git out there and make m'self useful."

Mara aims her palm at the back of the monster's skull, reading herself to fire a burst of magic at him. However, after a moment, she pauses and shakes her head.

"Killing fleshbags is one thing. I won't hurt a sweet old lizard, though. Poor guy looks like he's had a bad enough day."

Mara resumes her search, scouring the city from top to bottom. After twenty minutes, she catches sight of a shimmer in the air to the north.

"Hmm? Wait, could it be? Ose mentioned something about... 'space-shits.' Could the space-shits be over there?"

Mara slinks over to the northern side of Hero City. There, she spots a cordoned area with hundreds of troops patrolling, each one swiveling their heads from side to side to look for threats. However, past the cordoned area, the only thing Mara sees is a vast, empty field.

"Why are the humans protecting a whole bunch of *nothing*? They must think I'm stupid..." Mara mutters. She holds her fist up and shines the enchanted Gecko eye to the north. A visual imprint of some enormous, gigantic metal machine catches her eyes, making her gasp.

"Aha! I found it! The space-shit! ...Sheesh, what human came up with that name, anyway? It's idiotic beyond belief."

Having spotted one of the Covenant ships, Mara strokes her chin thoughtfully.

"I don't see the mother and daughter anywhere, but if these big flying machines can travel offworld, then I can't afford to let them leave. I had better destroy it before it's too late."

Mara flickers past the patrolling guards. She arrives not far from the Covenant vessel, then scans its interior with her Gecko eye. She observes more than thirty thousand humans already packed on board, but none of them resemble Phoebe or Daisy.

"Good. It seems the Hero's family hasn't arrived, yet. In that case, I will solve three problems with one move."

Mara grins devilishly. She flicks a card out of her Spiritual Deck, then places it back and draws another. For the next five minutes, she draws a card every ten seconds until finally pulling the one she needs.

"Hehehe. Farewell, fleshbags."

Mara coils strength into her legs, then leaps skyward. She jumps toward the top of the nearly-invisible Covenant ship, scaling its heights by adhering to its hull via magic. She rapidly climbs its half-mile-tall rocket-shaped body, then kicks off from its nose and pounces another three hundred feet into the air.

Wind whistles in Mara's ears. For a brief moment, she hangs in the sky like a fairy standing atop the apex of an invisible rainbow, then begins falling earthward. The moment her body starts to reverse direction, Mara holds her Tarot Card high and bellows in her loudest possible voice, "Thunder Giant, **Evoke!**"

Mara's rich mana pours into her sole Platinum Aspect, the strongest offensive card in her Spiritual Deck. As she starts to fall toward the Covenant ship below her, a tremendous fist made of thunder and lightning conjures into existence from the Tarot Card, then fires straight down at the planet's surface.

BOOOOOM!!!

The insanely powerful magic blast strikes the Covenant ship, compressing it like a tin can. Instantly, every human and monster aboard the vessel perishes, never knowing what hit them. The fist tears through the metal machine effortlessly and continues toward the ground below, where it crashes into Tarus II's soil and explodes, firing off thousands of lightning bolts in all directions.

Within two seconds, every exosuit-wearing trooper in the area screams and explodes, their bodies unable to withstand the power of Mara's magic. Her attack all but vaporizes the biological life within a half-mile radius, killing more than forty thousand humans in fewer than six seconds.

Mara plummets toward the soil below, then rotates in midair and lands deftly on her feet like a cat. She glances around for a moment, admiring her handiwork.

"See? Now *that's* how an evocation of the Thunder Giant *should* work! I can't believe it didn't even shake the Sphinx a little... just goes to show how durable that blasted crocodile is."

Mara shakes her head disdainfully, then turns to walk away. However, out of the corner of her eye, she spots a Felaris kitten lying amidst the crumpled spaceship's burning remains, half her body charred and scorched from Mara's evocation. The kitten lays on her back, coughing and gagging as blood gurgles and vomits from her mouth.

"Kuh... kuh... huh... hulp..."

The kitten's eyes pan from side to side frantically. Delirious and suffering from shock, her body starts to shake and tremble as the claws of death fall upon her.

Mara hesitates.

The Baron of Games turns to look at the sole survivor of her attack, someone who likely only endured thanks to a one in a million freak occurrence.

"Someone lived through that?" Mara mutters. She trots over to the kitten, but pauses as a painful sensation wells up in her chest.

"...That's right. I suppose there were children aboard the space-shit."

A hint of remorse appears in Mara's eyes. She glances around and even uses her Gecko eye to search the area, but doesn't find any other survivors.

Several seconds pass as she gazes at the dying child. The Felaris kitten raises a shaky paw toward Mara.

"Hull... hulp... muhhh..."

Guilt washes across Mara's face. Finally, she balls her hand into a fist.

"I'm sorry. I intended to kill everyone quickly and painlessly. Since I don't like to see people suffer, I'll put you out of-"

She rears her fist back to attack, only to pause mid-motion. Several expressions pass over her face as images flash through her mind.

A human male.

An olive branch.

Faint, indistinct words.

Mara's eyes twitch. She tries to swing her fist down and kill the kitten, but once again, her body freezes up.

If I manage to put an end to this stupid war, you should pop by the Core sometime.

Pop by the Core sometime.

If only I can put an end to this war...

Pop by the Core sometime.

Mara gasps for breath. She jumps back from the kitten, frightened by the uncanny feeling of déjà vu.

"What... what the hell is wrong with me?"

Unable to bring herself to deal the killing blow, Mara scrunches up her face and relents, digging into her Spiritual Deck to search for a card.

Somehow, on the first draw, she miraculously pulls the one she needs.

"Temporal Cricket, **Evoke!**"

She aims a spell at the Felaris kitten, bathing her in time-reversing magic. Moments later, the cat's wounds rapidly undo themselves, restoring the child to her state from five minutes before; well before Mara's bombastic attack.

The kitten freezes up and curls into a ball. She shivers uncontrollably as memories of the awful pain she just suffered linger in her head.

"Mommy... mommy... mommy, I want mommy..."

Mara looks away. Her eyes flicker with uncertainty. She takes several steps to the side, avoiding the kitten.

"Th-there! I saved you, okay? I saved you! That's all you get! Don't ever talk to me again!"

She quickly retreats from the Felaris child, leaving the kitten to fend for herself. Mara heads toward the south, where the sounds of approaching military troopers catch her attention.

Her expression dark, Mara rubs her eyes. She conjures another field of invisibility around herself, then darts toward a series of buildings, making herself scarce.

"Stupid. Stupid! Why did I do that? Why did I save that little girl? She won't have a mother to protect her anymore. There's no reason to... to help her! None at all!"

Self-doubt tugs at Mara's psyche, making her sweat bullets. It takes her five minutes of reflection before she manages to shake the feeling of existential dread weighing on her shoulders.

"I've never behaved this way, not in my whole life. If Ying-Ying were here, she'd definitely tell me I was acting strangely!"

Mara lifts her hand to touch a pair of earrings hanging at the sides of her head. She starts to inject mana into them, but pauses after a moment.

"...I don't have the time or luxury to sit around and chat with Ying-Ying! Forget it. I'll tell her later!"

Mara lowers her hands and shakes her head. Despite the muddled thoughts plaguing her mind, she forces herself to calm down and think rationally.

"The Hero's wife and daughter, Phoebe and Daisy Hiro. I have to find them. I've already scoured most of the city, so they can't be far!"

A minute later, Mara scurries out of her hiding spot into the open. With the Ice Orc's imbuelement having run out many minutes before, she takes care not to stride directly into the path of any troopers, lest their heat sensors detect her. Even so, relying purely on her invisibility, she manages to evade detection, sticking to the rooftops wherever possible.

"These humans are formidable, but it seems that Barons can deal with them if we use our heads."

Having interacted with humans innumerable times during her life, Mara has always considered them inferior life-forms incapable of threatening even a modicum of her existence. However, now, having witnessed dozens of Lord and Barons perish to the humans' weapons and enhanced armor, she realizes they do have the means to stand up for themselves.

"Could it be?" Mara muses. "Did humans really once possess the means to rest their boots atop the necks of demonkind? Were those rumors and legends not as exaggerated as I once thought?"

Mara recalls several tales relayed to her by the great Duke of Reptiles, Agares, as well as by many other long-lived demons. Their words, often containing lingering memories of fear, hinted at the mighty planet-busting weapons humans once built. Even so, they never went into great detail about the humans' capabilities, leaving her to wonder just how exaggerated those tales really were.

"Bombs capable of destroying nations. Armored machines that could tank the attacks of even mighty Dukes like Bael. Soldiers with metal parts built into their bodies. If these errant humans hadn't risen up under the Hero's banner, I'd never have believed such tall tales in all my days."

Mara travels toward the southern edge of Hero City. She slows to a stop once the Pyramids come into view, great monoliths constructed by the former leader of Tarus II, the Sphinx, Bahamut.

"Hmm. I've never seen Tarus II's Pyramids in person before... they're surprisingly impressive! As I recall, Bahamut had them built in memory of her former home, a place with unique- hmm?"

Mara narrows her eyes. She leans forward to gaze off the top of her perch, a four-story nondescript apartment complex. She spots a large platoon of three hundred exosuit-wearing commandos, all of whom hustle southward toward the pyramids.

In the midst of the troopers, two figures stand out. A woman, laying motionless on a stretcher, and a small child running alongside her. One of the troopers picks up the girl and hugs her protectively to their chest while looking around worriedly.

"Ah!" Mara gasps. "That... that child! I sense a faint but unmistakable mana resonance! It must be her; the Hero's Daughter! And if that's the case, then the unconscious woman is most likely her mother, Phoebe Hiro!"

Immediately, Mara calms her frantic heart. She focuses her senses, draws a silver card from her Spiritual Deck, and holds it before herself.

"Howling Night Wolf, **Imbue!**"

Mara calls the power of the Tarot Card onto herself, forming a silver dot upon her forehead. Shaggy hair grows from her skin, her eyes shift into bestial forms, and a pair of dog-like ears sprouts from the top of her skull.

With her body's strength, speed, and senses enhanced, Mara jumps forward, launching herself into the air. She focuses her enhanced hearing on the group of commandos, easily penetrating the sound-dampening effects of their armor.

"...assets are in danger. Request immediate backup. Unknown demonic entity has destroyed the last Covenant ship. We are returning Bishop and Rook to the safe zone at once, over."

"Copy that, Gold Leader. I'm dispatching additional reinforcements to your position. How long before you arrive at the safe zone? Over."

"Not long now, Elder Skarde. Five minutes at most. We're about to reach- shit!"

The man howls in alarm as his exosuit blares a warning. He swivels his head upward, where he spots a figure falling toward him from above.

"Look out! Protect the Commander!"

He and twenty other troopers swivel to face their attacker. However, with so little time to react, they don't even get a shot off before Mara crashes upon them, bringing her werewolf-like strength to bear.

Boom!

Mara instantly kills two troopers, then swings her fists wildly, using the berserker-like strength of her wolf-imbuelement to its maximum extent!

"Don't hold back!" Another trooper shouts, as he squeezes his gun's trigger. "Blast the motherfucker!"

A hail of bullets descends upon Mara. She flickers from side to side, evading the gunfire and causing the troopers to shoot their comrades. Each movement, already impressive due to her Baron-level might, becomes even more incredible when boosted by the effects of her Tarot Cards.

"Wind Blade, **Summon!**"

Mara activates a Bronze Aspect, one of her weakest cards. An ethereal blade materializes in midair, then lunges toward the nearest trooper. He screams in fright as it plunges through his armor, phasing past his defenses with ease. A second later, it releases a burst of wind magic inside his body, dicing him to pieces. He collapses into his own footprint, leaving little to connect one piece of his tissue to another.

The razor-sharp weapon begins rapidly dicing apart the troopers, improving Mara's killing speed dramatically. Within thirty seconds of her arrival, she slaughters fifty of the three hundred troopers, leaving the rest pale with fear.

Even so, they quickly form up a defensive line between Mara and her two targets. Bullets whizz toward the Baron of Games, some striking her and sending blood spraying, but never do any manage to reach her vitals.

Mara grits her teeth. "You devil-damned insects! Just perish, already! Polar Deathworm, **Enchant!**"

Mara summons frost energy onto her fists. She lunges toward a pair of nearby troopers, intending to flash-freeze and shatter their figures.

However at that moment, a surge of magic pushes against Mara and flings her backward!

"What?!"

Mara flies away from the troopers, dumbstruck at the unexpected development. She crashes against a nearby building, fragmenting its wall into chunks of brick and mortar. She recovers immediately thanks to

her wolf-enhanced body, then jumps out of the wall's imprint, confusion on her face.

"Who dares?"

The troopers fire on Mara's position, but she dodges to the side and leaps skyward, still warily looking for her attacker.

"Finally, just what I needed! Matured Drake, **Transform!**"

Mara's body rapidly shifts in midair. One of her few Golden Aspects activates, empowering her with the might of half a dragon. Her body, still somewhat wolf-like, begins to change further, transforming her into a twenty-foot-tall and fifty-foot-long ancient monster.

Even stronger than when she fought Kar, Mara cackles evilly. "This is your end, fleshbags!"

She crashes into the ground below, flattening twenty troopers with her sheer bulk. No longer does she fear their bullets as her scaled armor deflects them with ease. In twos and threes, Mara swings her head from side to side, snapping and severing her enemies' bodies effortlessly.

It doesn't take long before she spots the figure of Daisy Hiro standing protectively in front of her mother's stretcher, a look of fright on her face.

"There you are!" Mara shouts, as she kills another five troopers desperately trying to protect the child. "All this trouble to catch one brat!"

The thirty remaining troopers put their lives on the line to protect Phoebe and Daisy. Even so, they fail to injure Mara in the slightest. After transforming into a half-drake, her strength reaches the bottom level of Demon Dukes, making her more than a match for humanity's conventional weapons.

"Grab the assets and run!" One of the troopers shouts to another. "Get them out of here!"

An instant later, Mara brings a claw down, crushing him into his shadow. The man perishes, as does the one he just yelled out to.

"Trying to run? You'll fail!" Mara laughs.

While the Baron of Games rampages, her primary target, the child known as Daisy Hiro, trembles fearfully.

"Mommy, mommy, wake up! There's a bad person here!"

Daisy grabs her mother and shakes her, but Phoebe doesn't stir. Daisy tries to touch the 'bad spots,' but even then, Phoebe doesn't awaken.

"Mommy, I'm scared!"

Mara finishes off several more troopers, leaving only a handful behind. Realizing they can't offer even a smidgen of resistance, the men and women freeze up in terror. Their bodies tremble and shake as they mutter their final words.

"D-demons... they're just... too frightening... too powerful!"

Mara raises her claw again. She swings it toward the five remaining soldiers, finally breathing a sigh of satisfaction.

"My work here... is done!"

At that moment, her claw slams against a barrier of light. Mara's gigantic claw, easily twice the size of her human opponents, grinds to a halt and freezes in midair.

"Huh? What?"

Mara tries to pull her claw back, but as if stuck in a quagmire, it refuses to budge.

"What the devil?!"

Daisy turns to look at the Baron of Games.

"You... you are a very bad person! You hurt all my friends! You hurt my mommy!"

The child rears her palm back, then swings it toward Mara's face, some thirty feet in the air. A projection of psionic energy in the shape of her hand materializes, increases in size, and swings at Mara's draconic face.

Slap!

The might of an anvil crashes against Mara's face, jarring her senses. She stumbles to the left, momentarily dazed by the hit.

"Argh! What the devil?! That child... she is a Hero after all!"

More angered than injured, Mara turns her head to look at Daisy. A sneer of rage crosses her animalistic face, giving her the appearance of a predator.

"You... you little shit! How dare you slap me! If that's all you've got, then I think it's your naptime!"

The five troopers watch helplessly as the shield of light that protected them fades away. Their momentary relief changes to bloodcurdling fright as they see Mara rear back, sucking oxygen into her throat.

"Blaaaaaugh!"

Mara releases a torrent of flames at the troopers, angling her flames in such a way that they'll just barely miss Daisy and her mother.

"This is the end!" A female soldier whimpers, closing her eyes and waiting for death to arrive.

However, Daisy takes a step forward and raises her hand.

"...No! Bad dragon! Bad!"

Another psionic palm materializes beneath Mara's head. It mimics Daisy's motion, slapping upward toward the underside of Mara's fire-spewing maw.

Glomp!

The impact slaps her lower jaw shut, abruptly cutting off Mara's dragon-breath. With nowhere for the flames to go, they backfire in Mara's throat, making her cough and wheeze.

"Huk! Kah! You- *cough!* You little... *hack!*"

Mara chokes several times, while tears stream from her eyes. Even angrier than before, she turns to howl at Daisy, only to see the child woozily stumble to the side, exhausted from expending too much mana. Daisy flops to the ground and falls unconscious, leaving herself completely defenseless.

A moment of silence follows.

Mara and the troopers both look at Daisy, then at each other, then at Mara.

One trooper wets himself in fright. "...Oh no."

Mara furrows her brow. "Tsk. Stupid child. It seems all of your luck has just run out. You might be a Hero now, but your strength is far too lacking to use such powerful magic without restraint."

After a moment of debate, Mara shrugs her gigantic shoulders.

"Too bad for you lot! You may die, now!"

Finally able to capture her targets, Mara wastes no more time. She swings her claws at the troopers and splatters them into meat-paste.

"About time. Now, to grab the little girl and her mother."

Mara deactivates her transformation. She returns the Matured Drake to her Spiritual Deck, where it won't be useable for many more hours, then walks over and bends down to grab the back of Daisy's shirt.

Suddenly, Mara pauses. A strange look crosses over her face as a sense of danger seizes her.

"What's this? This mana! Something powerful... underground!"

Alarmed, Mara jerks her eyes toward her feet. There she sees an unbelievable sight as a gigantic blob of mana begins rushing toward the surface.

"Spawn of a broodmother! That's-?!"

Mara immediately retreats, saving herself by only a fraction of a second. A gigantic head filled with razor-sharp teeth erupts from Tarus II's depths, snapping onto her previous position with deadly intent.

"SKREEEEEE!!"

A Hydra, one of many legendary creatures from ancient myth, claws its way out of the planet's bowels. Mara retreats further and further as she gazes upon the monster with shock-filled eyes.

"This can't be! Another Hydra?! Since when did ancient monsters from the olden antiquity era become so commonplace? And what of the mother and child? Surely, they'll be crushed to death!"

Hardly have the words left Mara's mouth before she spots an even more incredible sight. Daisy's unconscious body, as well as Phoebe's, somehow cling to the Hydra's back, as if held there by a magical magnet.

Astounded, Mara quickly flips through many possibilities in her mind. "The Hydra... it's protecting the Hero's wife and child? Could this be a secret weapon he left behind to shield his family?"

The Hydra screeches again, only to begin rampaging wildly. It thrashes about, swinging its four heads in all directions. Houses and apartment buildings crumble into dust, while people from all walks of life flee in terror.

"Why would the Hero create a monster to protect his family, yet allow it to rampage uncontrollably? There's no way he'd do something so idiotic! That must mean... he didn't make it. Perhaps... his daughter?"

Mara continues putting distance between herself and the Hydra. She glances backward at Daisy, slumbering atop the Hydra's back, and frowns.

"How could a child cast magic while asleep? That shouldn't be possible. Even so, who else could achieve such a feat? It must be her or her father!"

Gritting her teeth, Mara shakes her head.

"Forget this! Ose can do what she wants to me! I'm not fighting a devil-damned Hydra! I'm leaving this shithole before it kills me!"

Mara turns to leave. Just as she starts to head westward, she freezes in her tracks, a look of sheer terror on her face.

There, before her, three giants slowly begin to materialize. Their figures, vaguely humanoid, yet otherworldly and rippling with power, scare the devil out of her. At thirty, fifty, and seventy feet tall, each giant possesses an awe-inspiring aura and level of mana far beyond anything Mara has ever sensed in anything beyond Diablo himself.

"Wha-wha-what?! **WHAT?!** Giant humans! How are they appearing out of thin air?! It's... it's as if someone has summoned them from another realm!!"

Several seconds later, the skin, bones, and muscles of the giants fully coagulate. They land deftly on their feet, the mere impact of which causes a series of micro-quakes throughout the region. Then, they slowly lower their gazes to Mara's tiny, pitiful, insignificant form.

All thoughts of retaliation flee from Mara's mind.

"...Oh... *to hell with this.*"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 278: Sphinx VS Duke Finale

Recommended Listening

Hero City's Eastern Front.

Zamiel, the Duke of Weaponry, howls like a madman. He summons a rain of blunted and bladed weapons, crashing them upon his adversary, the King of All Monsters, Kar. Still in his Sphinx form, Kar shrugs off Zamiel's attacks as if he were a metal-plated tank being pelted by snowballs. A two-ton hammer crashes into his head, only to ricochet away and flop to the ground.

"Hurgh! You will have to do better than that!" Kar bellows.

The half-lion, half-eagle monster rears up on his hind legs. He swings one of his massive paws horizontally, summoning the weight of a planet upon Zamiel's figure.

THUMP!

Kar slaps Zamiel to the east, where he careens helplessly into the canyon filled with demons and Kar's summoned Earth Golems. Zamiel flies for half a mile before finally crashing into the leg of a Diamond Construct, knocking it off-balance until it tumbles to its side.

"Argh!" Zamiel cries, after finally grinding to a halt. His vision blurs for a moment before he forces himself to his feet. With so many of Kar's constructs slaying demons, plenty of blood lingers in the area, allowing Zamiel to draw the plasma toward himself. Within seconds, he heals his injuries and rises to his feet.

Damn! My body might possess the strength of an Emperor, but my magic is still that of a Duke's! My summoned weapons can barely slow the Sphinx down, let alone allow me to kill the bastard! If only little bro were still here...

Remembering the pain of watching his brother's corpse explode into a bloody mist, Zamiel's eyes turn red with emotion. He squeezes his hands into fists and punches his chest.

Little bro! I won't let you die in vain! I WILL avenge you! No matter what it takes! No matter what price I have to pay!

Zamiel raises his head. He spots the Sphinx leaping into the sky and flapping his wings, then dive-bombing the Duke of Weaponry.

"You want to kill me, reptile? Try! Just TRY!!"

Off to the west, the terrible screechings of a hydra continue to bellow into the surrounding world, but Zamiel pays them no attention.

I'll bet Mephisto must have summoned that Hydra from the body of the previous one. Heh. If that's the case, then I have no reason to worry. I'll focus all my attention on killing the Monster King!

Kar hurtles downward. He opens his mouth to bare his lion-teeth, aiming to bite off Zamiel's head.

Just before Kar can land the killing blow, Zamiel flickers to the side, evading death. The Monster King's jaws snap onto his after-image, but this doesn't seem to bother Kar in the slightest.

"Hurgh! You demonsh are all the shame! You talk big, but run away when shomeone shtronger than you showsh up!"

With his mouth no longer in its usual form, Kar's words drawl a bit. Even so, the sheer timber of his voice proves menacing enough to freeze the blood of those facing him.

"I don't fear you..." Zamiel replies. "I'm merely suffering a little disadvantage. Once I find your weak spot, I'll end you in an instant!"

"You may try!" Kar roars.

A terrifying battle unfolds. For the next twenty minutes, Kar and Zamiel trade blows like twin thunderstorms competing over who can best devastate the land. Deafening sonic booms erupt whenever their fists and claws meet.

Time after time, Kar smacks or eviscerates Zamiel, leaving him at death's door. However, with all of Kar's golems repeatedly killing demons in the valley, Zamiel manages to regenerate his body back to full.

By contrast, while Zamiel's tenacity proves immovable, Kar begins to show signs of slowing down. Despite the power afforded by his Sphinx form, its limited duration ticks silently in the back of his mind. Unlike his opponent, who can drain the blood on the battlefield to heal himself, Kar possesses no such means. Light injuries accumulate on his body, causing his blood to spew forth.

Unsurprisingly, Zamiel notices this fact. Every time Zamiel inflicts even the smallest cut on Kar's body, he forces the wound to bleed, then sucks out the blood to nourish and empower himself.

Twenty minutes become thirty. Finally, Kar pulls back, panting heavily.

"Hah... hah... you are quite the hardy cockroach."

Hatred glimmers in Zamiel's eyes. "Feeling sleepy, reptile? Don't worry. I'll soon put you to bed forever."

Zamiel summons another hundred hammers and swords. This time, instead of hurling them at Kar, he pauses for a split second before firing them outward.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

A series of explosions resound in the valley as Zamiel's weapons meet their marks. All of Kar's golems collapse under the sheer might of his duke-level attacks.

"Shit!" Kar curses. "You shneaky little..."

In an instant, the demon army moves as one. They rush the humans' frontlines once again, clearing the distance with frightening speed.

"Don't worry about them, Monster King," Zamiel hisses. "Those squishy little fleshbags are the least of your concerns."

He lunges forward while summoning another hailstorm of maces and spears. They fly at Kar, forcing him to defend himself from the two-pronged attack. This time, when the demons and humans collide at the western side of the valley, Kar proves unable to run to their aid.

So furious is Zamiel's onslaught that Kar quickly finds himself in a passive position, forced back one step after another. The Sphinx pants wildly, drawing forth all his strength to forcefully maintain his Sphinx transformation.

Eventually, during a momentary lull in the battle, Kar leaps backward, only to trip over a rock and land on his side. Immediately, he loses his battle momentum, causing his body to detransform. Within seconds, he morphs back into his crocodilian form, sapping him of the enormous strength he possessed as a Sphinx, yet also returning him to a much more sustainable power level.

"Hurgh... I underestimated you, Ugly," Kar says as he jumps to his feet. His breath no longer comes in ragged gasps. Unlike before, where maintaining his Sphinx form could be likened to a mountain climber desperately trying to clutch a rock with the tips of their fingers, Kar now finds his feet back on solid ground. Despite possessing somewhat weaker strength, the drop in mana requirements alone prove capable of reinvigorating him.

"Cocky as ever, Sphinx..." Zamiel murmurs. "Your words seem to imply that if you'd just fought me more seriously, you'd have killed me by now. Don't lie to yourself. We both know I'm far too much demon for you to handle."

Kar nods slowly. "We shall see."

The Monster King suddenly launches forward, tearing across the plains to clear the few-hundred-foot gap separating him from his most hated enemy. Zamiel's heart skips a beat as Kar charges at him.

Damned croc! I thought he was sapped dry, yet somehow, he gained a second wind!

Another vicious melee ensues as Kar rushes forward, using his far less bulky crocodilian body to bob and weave, ducking and deflecting Zamiel's ethereal weapons each time he summons and flings them. With their weight ranging from half a ton to five tons, each one sends rocks and mud spraying whenever they strike the ground, yet not once does Zamiel manage to land a blow.

As their battle picks up in intensity, Zamiel starts retreating two and three steps at a time, furiously blocking Kar's claw and tail swipes. Like an enlightened martial artist, the crocodile continuously strikes at Zamiel's weak points, sometimes knocking Zamiel backward, while other times forcing him to evade.

Damn! Zamiel thinks. The croc might be weaker when he isn't in his Sphinx form, but he's also nimbler and still hits like Bael's big brother! What the HELL?! How can the universe be so unfair as to give him all that power?!

Zamiel tries to telekinetically yank a patch of nearby blood off the ground, but during that moment of inattention, Kar rushes over and violently slaps his face, sending him crashing into a boulder.

"Hurgh! Ah-ah-ah! I don't think so, punk! You aren't healing anymore. Not with me around."

Hearing his opponent's declaration, Zamiel's thoughts turn grim.

I can't keep this up! The Sphinx is deliberately limiting his strength. He's not trying to kill me anymore, but to beat and break my bones. He wants to cripple me so he can drag me somewhere without any blood. If he succeeds, I'll be a goner! I have to find a way to beat him while I still can!

Gritting his teeth, Zamiel jumps to his feet and starts focusing on defense. He retreats toward the main demon army, hoping to stumble across blood-soaked patches of the battlefield. However, to his horror, no matter where he looks, he doesn't find even a single corpse.

"Looking for something?" Kar asks, grinning viciously. "Oops. I must have accidentally sucked all those juicy, bloody bodies into the ground. Shame you don't have the powers of earth manipulation, eh?"

Zamiel pales in fear.

"You bastard! Do you think you can fuck with me?! I'm the strongest Duke in all of Hell!"

"But in the end... you are *only* a Duke..." Kar chuckles. He jumps into the air and dive-bombs toward Zamiel, intending to land a grievous blow.

Zamiel launches another barrage of weapons at the falling Monster King. However, even as he does, the sensation of death wraps itself around his heart.

I won't win. I can't win... Zamiel thinks.

The Monster King is too strong. No matter how many weapons I hit him with he never goes down.

They're all too weak to pierce his hide. Even if they could hurt him, he'd just dodge them.

If only I could land one critical hit...

As the crocodile descends upon him, a flash of insight sparks in the Duke's eyes.

What am I thinking? How could I be so stupid? Of course! All this time, I've focused on quantity, when I should have poured my magic into quality!

Seeing Kar on a direct collision course, Zamiel stomps his foot against the dirt and dives to the side, causing the crocodile to smash into his previous position. Zamiel dives into a roll, then leaps to his feet.

"Tch. I'm sorry, little bro. I almost gave up. But don't you worry... this reptile won't live ten minutes longer!"

Once again, Zamiel taps into his magic. He conjures another summoning portal, but this time, instead of summoning a hundred random weapons, he pours all of his magic into one single, unbelievably powerful greatsword.

Harnessing a magical energy equal to half of Zamiel's mana reserves, the weapon pulsates with rage, fueled by his emotions. The menacing curved blade, like a dragon's tooth, seems to demand energy-rich blood. Zamiel jumps into the air and wraps his fingers around the sword's hilt, then drops down and plants his feet on Tarus II's soil. His entire demeanor shifts, changing him from a fleeing red rat into an unfathomable expert.

Zamiel inhales deeply, allowing the smell of death permeating the valley to flow into his nostrils. His pupils enlarge as he gazes at his opponent without a trace of emotion on his face.

"...I see. To think I've been chucking swords and clubs at the Monster King like rocks this whole time. Truly, my approach to combat has been nothing short of amateur. That changes now."

Magical energy wraps around the weapon's blade. It carries a sensation of bloodlust, causing any who look at the sword to feel a sensation of despair. Kar takes a step back and examines his opponent's changed posture warily. As a long-lived predator of the swamp, he has faced countless vicious enemies.

"Hurgh. Have you been holding back the whole time, Ugly? Come, then. Show me your 'true' strength."

Zamiel nods.

"Gladly."

The Duke of Weaponry slowly slashes his sword upward, aiming to chop the Monster King in half. However, with more than fifty feet separating them, his sword seemingly won't hit Kar at all.

The instant his weapon starts to curve upward, the malevolent mana enveloping its blade transforms into a wave of ultra-sharp Sword Qi. It lashes forward, flying toward Kar at the speed of sound. In that split-second, Kar dashes to the side, his eyes following the Sword Qi as it rockets forward.

Slash-slash-slash!

The blade's energy chops through ten boulders and half a dozen demons in its path, instantly severing all of them in half. It continues flying until it plunges into a cliff at the north, where it finally sinks into the mountainside and loses its momentum.

Kar's eyes widen in alarm. "What the-?!"

Without hesitation, Zamiel lunges forward. His movements, no longer as slow as during his first slash, speed up tremendously. He fires off wave after wave of Sword Qi, forcing Kar to dodge, lest that deadly energy behead him in a single move.

"Hurgh!! You... when did you learn such a terrifying attack?!" Kar howls.

Zamiel executes a horizontal slash. Kar jumps to avoid it, but the blade still flies out in a huge arc and slaughters several hundred demons, chopping them in half at their waists. Some of them cry out in agony, while the rest perish in the blink of an eye, never even seeing their death coming.

Kar grits his teeth. "You are much more dangerous than I thought!"

Seeing Zamiel killing his fellow demons without a shred of conscience, Kar explodes in anger. Even if he couldn't give half a damn about their fates, seeing them killed by friendly fire stirs up his rage toward the dishonorable.

"You complete lowlife! How dare you throw away the lives of comrades who depend on you?!"

Kar charges toward Zamiel, clearing the gap at lightning speeds. He evades one last slash from Zamiel's sword, then narrows his claws into a spear of bone.

SKRIIIK!

Kar plunges his claws into Zamiel's stomach and tears through his back. With a single move, he impales his entire arm through the Duke of Weaponry's body, spewing a gallon of blood out behind him.

"Ah! Puhak!"

Zamiel cries out in pain. However, a vicious grim spreads across his lips.

Got you.

With Kar's arm plunged deep within Zamiel's guts, the Monster King finds himself within a danger zone, one he didn't expect. Zamiel's sword, still infused with Sword Qi, flits around behind the Monster King and stabs into his back!

RIIIP!

Not expecting his badly injured opponent to use such a move, Kar gasps in pain. he quickly pulls his arm out of Zamiel's guts, allowing the Duke to stagger backward and flop to the ground. However, Zamiel's sword, possessing an animal-like sentience, continues to pour razor sharp Qi into Kar's back. The Monster King tries to cry out in pain, only for the sword's bloodthirsty mana to eviscerate his lungs, making it impossible to breathe.

"Shuh! Shuhhh... kuhhh..."

Kar wheezes and gasps for breath. He grabs the front of the blade and tries to forcibly reverse it out of his body. Instead, the Sword Qi rips apart his hands like a garbage disposal, causing him even more horrifying wounds. With his claws mangled, Kar's eyes widen in horror. He staggers backward and tries to think of a way to pull the sword out, only for it to retract of its own volition. It retreats from his back, allowing Kar to flop to the ground, wheezing and coughing up blood while his useless lungs fail to do their job.

On the other hand, with Kar's blood soaking the nearby terrain, Zamiel quickly heals himself back up, then jumps to his feet, a look of glee playing upon his face.

"Hahaha! HAHAAHAHAH!! I can't believe it! Oh, what luck."

Zamiel's smile disappears, replaced instead with the look of a bloodthirsty, homicidal maniac.

"Monster King. I've been waiting for this moment all day."

The older Battle Brother slowly walks toward Kar, who barely manages to push himself away with his feet. Kar repeatedly vomits blood, while even more spills from his ruptured internal organs out of his back and stomach.

"Kuuk... krrrnn..."

Zamiel holds out his hand. His sword flies into his grasp, purring like a contented kitten. The Duke strokes its blade while smiling sweetly. "Yes. Good boy. You did well. Did you get a good taste of the scaley's blood? Mmm. Me too. But what say we have some more? There's plenty for both of us."

Without warning, Zamiel stabs the sword down, impaling Kar's knee. The Monster King opens his mouth to scream, but all he manages is to gasp out dozens of air-filled blood bubbles.

Zamiel greedily levitates Kar's gushing blood. He splashes some of it on his sword, enriching its spiritual energy. The rest, he pours into his mouth, smacking his lips while savoring the mana-rich iron-like texture.

"Mmm. Nothing like a few gallons of blood to wake me up in the morning. I think I'll have another!"

With that, he impales Kar's other knee, causing the Monster King to silently shriek in pain.

Over and over, Zamiel impales Kar's mangled claws, his elbows, and his shoulders. He takes his sweet time tearing the Sphinx apart, grinning sadistically the whole time.

"You should have accepted my offer from the beginning, Sphinx. If you had just turned against the humans, my little bro would still be alive, and you'd be secure in your power. Sadly, your arrogance blinded you. You never thought you could lose to a pair of Barons. That was your undoing."

Kar lays motionless in the grass, his body mangled and incapable of moving, his chest heaving, and his eyes glazed over.

"Well, dear Sphinx. I think you know what comes next," Zamiel says. "No more fun and games. I want your Sphinx powers for myself. What say you, hm? Shall we do this the easy way or the hard way?"

Zamiel pauses for a moment to smile. As he does, Kar lifts his head.

"Ssss... **BUTTERFLYYYYY!!**"

Kar bellows at the top of his lungs, startling the Duke of Weaponry.

"What the devil?! Your lungs healed already? Damned reptiles and your hardy- oh, fuck."

Zamiel only gets a split-second to react before a boulder-sized fist made of psionic energy materializes beside him and smashes into his body.

Whump!

The Duke goes flying. Blinker's summoned fist blasts him more than two miles into the distance, causing him to careen uncontrollably until he crashes into the planet's crust.

An instant later, Blinker materializes at Kar's side, her body still human sized.

"No, no, gator-man! You had that guy on the ropes! What happened? Are you okay?! Oh my god, you look horrible! Don't worry, I'll, uh, I'll get you to Belial! Just stay strong, okay!"

Blinker panics. In all the time she's been with Kar, not once has he ever suffered such horrific, gruesome injuries.

"Cough... Butterfly... you came..." Kar gasps.

"Duh! Now, stop talking. I'm gonna teleport you to Belial, okay? Lemme just lift you up-"

Blinker starts to levitate Kar's body with psionic energy, only for his figure to go limp. The crocodile starts shaking uncontrollably, forcing Blinker to set him back down.

"Kar? Kar?! Wh-wh-what's wrong? Oh my god, did I hurt you? I'm sorry!"

It takes several seconds before Kar manages to reopen his eyes.

"D-don't... Butter... fly... hurgh. Can't move. Barely... barely holding on..."

Blinker starts to say something, only to jump in alarm as a hail of ghastly specters falls upon her. Not content to let the fairy get away, Mephisto summons another rain of ghosts to attack her, but Blinker

quickly conjures a barrier of psionic energy to keep them away.

"Shit! Shit! Okay, Kar? I need you to stay calm, alright? Stay calm, like me! I'm always calm, right? Right!"

Blinker nods several times, convincing nobody of the veracity of her statements. Not even herself.

"I can't heal you, Kar! I don't know healing magic. Only Belial does! Wait, don't you have gator healing juices? You can fix yourself, right? Do you need mana? I've got plenty of mana! I can- eek!"

Blinker shrieks in fright as Zamiel suddenly appears and starts whaling on her barrier with his sword.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

"Open up, fairy! Give me that Sphinx! He's mine!!"

With ghosts attacking her psionic barrier on one side and Zamiel on the other, Blinker finds herself forced to send more mana upward, reinforcing her psionic shield further.

Unsure how to get Kar out of such a vicious encirclement, Blinker's head spins. "Uh, uh, don't worry, gator-man! I'll save us both! I'm strong you know! Almost as strong as you! Just gimme a second and-"

Before Blinker can finish, Kar coughs.

"Butterfly. No. There is... no saving me now. Out of mana. Too injured. Won't... won't last long."

Kar's eyes flutter.

"Butter... butterfly... listen to me. One... one question."

Blinker's heart stops. She bites her lip to try and quell her trembling.

"Y-yes? What is it, Kar? A question?"

Slowly, Kar nods.

"Who... who do... I love... the most?"

Uncomprehending, Blinker winces as Zamiel's furious assault intensifies, sending pangs of pain into her chest.

"I don't understand, Kar. What do you mean? Why are you asking me this?"

Kar grits his teeth. "Cough... damn you... woman... cough. Just answer... my question..."

Blinker lowers her head. "I... okay. Who do you love the most? It's obvious, right? Pyra. You love her the most."

Kar lolls his head to the side. "No... wrong... stupid woman... hurgh... answer again..."

Tears stream down Blinker's cheeks.

"Me? Is it me?"

Finally, Kar's expression loosens a little, making him lose some of the pain in his eyes.

"Hurgh. Yes... that's right. It is you, Butterfly. You are... the one... I love most..."

Kar coughs one last time.

"Kuu... I always was... bad at... *riddles*."

"Kar?" Blinker whispers.

A moment later, Kar exhales one last time.

His body sags, losing the last of its strength.

As the light fades from his eyes, a faint smile creeps upon Kar's face.

In the end... he finally achieves the answer he sought his whole life.

"Kar! Kar, no! NOOO!"

Blinker wraps her arms around Kar's head. Even as the smashing of fists and weapons strikes her psionic barrier, all she comprehends is her husband's cold, lifeless body.

Unseen by those of the mortal coil, a congregation of spiritual energy levitates out of Kar's body. It hovers in the air, then dives down into Blinker's sobbing figure.

Shortly after it does, Blinker raises her head.

A look of immense rage plays across her face.

"You... you killed... my HUSBAND!"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 279: Blinker's Gain, Blinker's Loss

Recommended Listening

Blinker's psionic barrier explodes outward, blasting away Zamiel, Mephisto, and more than a hundred of Mephisto's Wraiths. All of Blinker's enemies cry out in surprise and alarm, with Zamiel the most surprised. Before he can react, Blinker rockets into the air and flies at him with her fist reared back.

THUNK!

Blinker smashes Zamiel's stomach, blasting the wind out of him and sending him violently crashing into the dirt below. Zamiel bounces off the ground once, but Blinker falls upon him again, this time with ten afterimages of her fist materializing in that instant.

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP!

She brutally pummels Zamiel, one hit after another, pulling back only at the last second to retreat to her husband's body. Zamiel drags along the dirt, tearing out a massive crevasse in the valley. For a few moments, his consciousness wavers between life and death. It's only his Emperor-level physique that saves him from perishing under the Monster Queen's onslaught.

Huk... what the... devil?!

Zamiel struggles to catch his breath. Multiple internal injuries, including ruptured organs, plague his body. He opens his eyes just in time to see Blinker levitating Kar's corpse into the air. Tears fill the fairy's eyes as she sends her husband away, teleporting him somewhere unknown.

How could... how could the Monster Queen become so powerful? Zamiel gasps.

After a few seconds, his eyes flicker with recognition.

She must have absorbed the Sphinx's power! I never imagined she would be so brutal as to finish off her own husband! No, wait, that makes no sense. She probably solved his riddle instead. Shit! That... that greedy little...

Zamiel motions with his hands. Thanks to his vampiric abilities, he manages to repair his internal organs by using his own blood. However, his vitality diminishes significantly, making the color drain from his skin.

Hah! So what if she took her husband's power?! That only means I have to kill her to reap the Sphinx's magic. With Mephisto and me working together, she's as good as dead!

Zamiel jumps to his feet. Behind Blinker, Mephisto's ghosts reappear, along with the Duke of Mist himself.

"Ksss! Damned woman!" Mephisto cries. "Ssso what if you took the Sssphinx'sss power?! My minionsss and I are more than enough to ssslay the likesss of you!"

Blinker's expression hovers on the edge of insanity. Her eyes, puffy, red, and swollen, look somewhat demonic.

"You murdered him!" She roars. "You killed Kar! I won't let any of you... leave here ALIVE!"

Whoomph!

An aura of inconceivable power erupts from Blinker's body. Having previously increased her size to that of a seven-foot-tall human, she appears about the same height as Zamiel, significantly taller than the hunched-over figure of Mephisto. Thick, intimidating muscles sprout along her body. Her biceps and glutes flex, revealing fine, neatly carved lines, like those belonging to the mightiest Titans.

Blinker points a finger at Zamiel.

"You! You must die FIRST!"

Not one hint of mercy rests within Blinker's eyes. Only rage, anger, and anguish present themselves.

Instantly, Blinker rockets toward Zamiel, roaring like a Banshee. The Duke's veins momentarily turn to ice out of sheer terror.

Holy crap! That's one scary fairy!

Zamiel quickly congeals his mana into Manifested Qi, a type of weapon energy capable of taking many different forms. Unlike before, when he made it assume the properties of a sword, he transforms the purple, viscous energy into something resembling a giant, transparent tower shield.

Blinker crashes into the shield at full speed, the sheer power behind her attack partially passing through the Qi to strike Zamiel's body.

"Argh!" Zamiel howls. He stomps his feet into the dirt and furrows his brow, trying desperately to hold on, before the pressure from Blinker's attack instantly disappears. Caught off-guard, he stumbles forward, then jerks his eyes to the side, where he sees afterimages of Blinker's body circling around to his flank.

"Crap!"

Zamiel spins his shield around to form a hasty barrier behind himself. Much weaker than the first one, he doesn't even get to solidify his footing before Blinker kicks against it and throws him off his feet.

The Duke of Weaponry goes flying for the second time in thirty seconds. He bounces off the terrain and forcibly shifts his momentum by turning his Qi into a mattress-like cushion to slow his flight. When he flips himself around and sees Blinker coming at him again, his expression turns grim.

I was wrong! The Monster Queen is way stronger than before! Her power is ludicrous! It's like facing two Sphinxes at the same time!

Blinker, formerly a fairy with a weak physique but mighty and versatile magic, receives no benefit to her magical attributes as a result of consuming the Sphinx's aura. Instead, her physical body elevates to the same level as Kar's, giving her an extremely well-rounded set of abilities.

With a top tier body, and top tier fairy magic, Blinker becomes terrifying beyond belief.

Just before Blinker reaches Zamiel for another follow-up, she stops mid-movement and retreats, narrowly avoiding a hail of fists from Mephisto's Wraiths. These astral enemies bellow and shriek, diving at Blinker from all angles to surround and bully her.

Blinker's expression become livid. "These... these *toys* stopped me once. But no more! BREAK!"

She swipes out her palms and tears at the air. Instantly, a pair of wraiths explode into astral essence, diffusing into the wind. Unlike before, when she fought them somewhat half-heartedly, thinking she and her husband would eventually win out and overpower Mephisto's goons, Blinker no longer allows herself an inch of compromise.

Her expression speaks a million words of regret, all of them aimed at herself.

Kar died because I assumed he couldn't lose. I took him too lightly. I took everything too lightly.

Now he's gone... and his blood is on my hands.

Without holding back, Blinker rapidly rakes the air. She tears twenty Wraiths apart in an instant, ripping their souls into shreds with her telekinetic magic.

During the few seconds Blinker becomes occupied with killing the Wraiths, Mephisto draws near. He lurks beneath the planet's soil where she can't see. Blinker hovers only twenty feet off the ground, a distance too close for comfort when dealing with Dukes and Emperors.

In a flash, Mephisto attacks! He pounces at her from below and plunges a knife into her back during a moment of distraction, causing Blinker to howl in agony. Mephisto's Pain Inducement sends lightning pouring into her figure, momentarily paralyzing her. He stabs her three times more, aiming for her shoulders and heart.

"Kekeke! Never underesstime the- eh?"

To Mephisto's shock, Blinker's figure fades away mid-stab, causing 'sweat' to drench his bones.

"An illussion?!"

Mephisto whirls around in horror, just in time to see Blinker pop out of seemingly midair, her body previously hidden inside a crack in space. Unable to react in time, the Duke of Mist can only watch helplessly as a psionic-energy-coated fist flies at his face.

THUMP!!

Blinker savagely pounds Mephisto into the dirt. Struck dumb by her attack, his body momentarily loses its ethereal properties, causing him to physically strike the dirt and bounce off it.

"Kuh! Y-you damned trickssster fairy!"

Having not expected Blinker to retain her sanity, Mephisto ends up caught off-guard by her subterfuge.

The Monster Queen's eyes boil with emotions far beyond the realm of mere 'hatred.'

"You two. You're still thinking about how you'll eventually kill me. You continue to lust after the Sphinx's power. Stupid... **bastards!** Forget killing me. You won't leave here alive. Even if you do, I'll hunt you for the rest of eternity. I'll chase you to the ends of the galaxy. You will never live another waking day without fearing my arrival."

Blinker raises her fist. It trembles with a rage so pure that goosebumps start appearing on Zamiel's body.

"Kar wasn't only my husband. He was my one true love. We shared the warmth of every waking day. We looked forward to an eternity spent comforting each other. Now... I have nothing. **Nothing!**"

Slowly, Blinker uncurls her fist. She lowers her palm to her belly while glaring daggers at Zamiel.

"Did you know, *little Duke*? I never got to give my husband the *good news*. He died without knowing about the children he gave me. You took our happiest moment away from each other... the pinnacle of our union. Death is a luxury too wonderful for you. Not even an eternity of torture would suffice for what you've stolen."

An ominous feeling washes over Zamiel's skin. Seeing the horrific expression directed at him from the Monster Queen, the Duke of Weaponry trembles ceaselessly, unwilling to imagine just what horrors await him if that terrifying lunatic gets her hands on him.

"B-boss? Boss! What do we do?!"

Unknowingly, his tone toward Mephisto becomes deferential once again. Having relied on Mephisto's guidance his whole life, and having been raised from imp-hood to his current level of power by the Duke of Mist, Zamiel always, without fail, turns to his 'Boss' during similar moments of crisis.

Mephisto glowers at the Monster Queen. Without a word, he melts into the ground, leaving Zamiel behind.

"Boss? BOSS?!"

Zamiel panics. He turns to look at the fairy, only to see her figure shimmer and vanish.

From inches behind Zamiel's head, a female voice whispers.

"Where are you looking... little Duke?"

Zamiel screams. "Ahhhhh!!!"

He jumps to his feet and throws a random punch in the voice's direction, only to strike the empty air. A slight motion in the wind catches Zamiel's attention. He turns to see Blinker's leg spin-kicking his face.

THUNK!

Blinker savagely introduces her heel to the bridge of Zamiel's nose, horrifying him with not only the strength of her attack, but his complete inability to defend against her illusory powers. Unlike before, when Blinker fought him and Duriel using only her illusion magic, her body has become formidable enough that she can battle him physically and magically at the same time.

Zamiel hurtles to the west. He tries to summon a barrier of Qi to protect himself, but Blinker teleports into his path and swings her fist at his incoming head.

WHUMP!

The Duke's thoughts go dark. He crashes headfirst into a boulder, pummeling it into powder. The impact knocks him unconscious for several seconds, and he wakes up to find himself flying upward in an

arc, with the Monster Queen holding onto his ankle. She swings him overhead like a sledgehammer, then pounds him against the dirt.

Over and over, the Monster Queen brutalizes Zamiel. Unable to catch a break for even a second, he flops limply in her grasp, his consciousness fading in for mere seconds at a time, just before crashing into something and battering him comatose once more.

* * *

After five full minutes of savagery, Blinker stops. She kneels down, grabs the back of Zamiel's neck, and pins his unmoving body to the dirt.

"Where are you, Mephisto? Come out."

Her words evaporate into the wind. The valley where countless demons once stomped lies eerily still, with a horde of them having stopped their advance to the east, too terrified by the Monster Queen's rampage to advance. The rest lay dead at the human army's feet to the west.

Mephisto doesn't appear. Instead, his voice transmits via the wind.

"Kekeke. You are fearssome, Monssster Queen. I musst admit... a mere Duke like me iss no match for the likess of you."

Blinker places her free palm atop Zamiel's scalp.

"Show yourself, or I'll blast your minion's brains to mush."

"Do ass you wisssh..." Mephisto whispers, still not revealing himself. "My power iss far too insssignificant to defeat a warrior sssuch ass you. Plusss, we both know there iss no way you will give my minion to me."

Mephisto pauses for a moment, as if to let his words hang in the air.

Then, he continues.

"Monssster Queen. Where, perssay, did you hide the Monssster King'sss body? I cannot ssseem to find it."

Blinker narrows her eyes. "I know your tricks well, Mephisto. You won't touch my husband. Not now. Not ever. I will keep him at my side until the date of his cremation. Don't even think of finding him. I've hidden Kar somewhere the likes of you can never reach."

"Oh? Iss that ssso? Tsssk, how unfortunate..."

Mephisto's voice fades away, leaving Blinker puzzled.

I hid Kar's body inside a folded space. Mephisto might be ethereal, but he isn't a spatial manipulator. He won't find Kar, no matter how hard he tries.

Blinker waits for several seconds, but Mephisto still doesn't speak, seemingly having disappeared into the nether.

Unsatisfied, Blinker shoots a hateful glare at the unmoving figure at her feet.

"I would love to torture you until you lose all your sanity. Sadly, if I do that, you might break free someday. Kar would never forgive me if I allowed that. I'll just have to ensure that Mephisto can't use you for his evil deeds ever again."

Blinker's eyes lose some of their overwhelming hatred. The Fairy Queen exhales, then wraps Zamiel's body with psionic energy. His figure trembles uncontrollably as she infiltrates all of his vital organs and bones, reaching deep down inside of him to grab as many different points as she can.

A moment later, Blinker jumps to her feet and yanks her psionic energy apart. Zamiel's body explodes like a bomb, spraying rivers of gore in all directions. His brains and bones alike coat Tarus II's soil, making it impossible for Mephisto to resurrect him. After all, Necromancers might possess incredible means, but without a body, they won't have anything to revive.

Still unsatisfied, Blinker stares bitterly at Zamiel's exploded corpse.

Memories surface in her mind.

She recalls the first time she met Kar in the Labyrinth's Core.

Memories of his face appear in her mind. Their shared bond which transcended species.

She thinks back on how she first started out as only his little fairy assistant, and how their relationship swiftly progressed when few were around to see. With Kar's ability to shrink, and her ability to grow, they shared many quiet moments together, reminiscing about the past.

Blinker's expression darkens. She remembers the first time Kar told her about what happened to the Crocodiles. She remembers the sad, helpless look in his eyes as he broke down, telling her about Pyra's death.

The Battle Brothers. They slaughtered his people.

Kar lived for one reason, and one reason only: To kill the monsters who murdered everyone he loved.

Blinker's lower lip quivers. She presses a bloody fist against her chest and chokes back a sob.

"We got 'em, gator-man. We got the Battle Brothers."

Tears streak down Blinker's face, followed soon by a look of deliberation.

"There's still one more to kill, Kar. I won't let you down. I'll kill Mephisto. For you. He was the true architect of the Crocodiles' demise. If our children are to live safely in this new world... I'll have to slaughter the one who brought about their ancestors' end."

With her willpower strengthened, Blinker slowly nods.

She raises her head, only for her heart to skip a beat.

Half a mile away, mired in a fog shrouding the valley, a familiar figure stands.

Kar, the Monster King.

Blinker's blood turns to ice.

"What? No. No! How... how did...?!"

Mephisto rises from the ground. A sinister grin spreads across his face as he chuckles evilly. He raises a palm to show a glowing orb of mana-like energy struggling to escape his bony fingers.

"Kekeke. Sssilly woman. My meanssss are beyond your imagination. I thank you for the Monssster King'sss corpssse!"

Blinker's eyes widen in horror. "You... you son of a BITCH! Give Kar back to me! Filthy graverobber!!"

She lunges toward Mephisto, but with such a huge distance separating them, Mephisto easily motions with his hands, sucking himself and Kar's body into the ground.

"NOOOOOO!!" Blinker shrieks. She smashes into the soil and begins ripping it to shreds, tearing out tons of dirt and rock furiously, flinging it to the side without a care in the world. Unlike Kar himself, who possessed Earth Manipulation, Blinker wields no such power. She tries desperately to dig to Kar's body, but ultimately fails due to Mephisto's inconceivable means.

Soon after, a voice drifts upon the wind.

"You almosst had me. Sssadly, you forgot one key detail, Monssster Queen. You forgot about... Sssoul Resssonance..."

Blinker pauses her frenzied digging. She gazes at the ripped-apart dirt, unable to fully understand Mephisto's words.

"Soul Resonance?!"

"Ehehehe! That isss right. Kar'sss body died. His sssoul passsed to me. I ussed hisss sssoul to locate hisss corpssse. Not ssso difficult to undersstand, isss it?"

Mephisto pauses, allowing his words to ruminate in Blinker's psyche before continuing.

"And ass for hiding hisss body in a folded ssspacce... *clever!* Too bad I am the King of the Dead. I have many ssspatial manipulatorsss buried within my tombsss. Well, I've thanked you enough for your generousss contribution. Fare thee well, Monssster Queen. I've reaped many rewardsss from thisss battle. Ehehehehe!!"

Blinker's thoughts turn blank. "Give him back! GIVE HIM BAAACK! I'll chase you forever, Mephisto! You'll never be safe! Do you hear me?! YOU'LL NEVER BE SAFE!!"

Mephisto doesn't reply. He fades into the distance, no longer caring about what happens next on Tarus II.

Ultimately, he has traded two Baron minions for one Emperor.

As far as gains go, none hold a candle to him.

Blinker flops into her burrowed pit. She sobs uncontrollably, rage and grief flooding her mind.

"Kaa-aaa-aar! Nooo... Uhuuu... Kar, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!!"

No longer able to restrain herself, Blinker leaps out of the pit. Her gaze flashes toward the demon army holding their line to the east. A vicious expression crosses her face as she blasts toward them at supersonic speeds.

"All demons must DIE!!"

* * *

Meanwhile. Among the demonic army to the east.

A pair of Demon Lords watch the events in the valley uneasily.

"Uh. Should we charge in again?" The fatter, uglier Lord asks. "Maybe we can slip past while the Monster Queen is fighting Zamiel."

His skinnier brother rolls his eyes. "No way, Skitch. You kidding? We already lost a bunch of Barons earlier. We'll just hold here and wait for reinforcements."

"Sure, okay..." Skitch mumbles. "Just, uh... seems like we should be doing our part, y'know?"

"Yeah, yeah. Goodie-goodie butt-kisser..." The skinny Lord grumbles. "Ose's over on the Western Front. She's an Emperor. Who do we got? A couple of weak-ass Dukes against a Monster Emperor. I'll just sit here and keep my tush nice and safe where the humans can't hit us."

Skitch winces as Zamiel's body gets blasted apart by Blinker's magic.

"Ow. Okay, that looked like it hurt."

"Duh. You think getting your body 'sploded is fun?"

"I'm just saying..." Skitch mumbles. "Why you gotta be so mean, Vex?"

"Sorry..." Vex mutters. "It's just... this whole thing's got me on edge. Me and my guy are going through a bit of a rough patch. You remember Fiolo, right?"

Skitch nods. "Uh huh. I heard you got yourself an incubus boyfriend."

"Sure did..." Vex mutters, smirking proudly. A moment later, his expression falls. "Problem is, the guy's a damn sex fiend. Can't get done with one session before he's ready for rounds two, three, and four. Says he wants to bring in some other partners to liven things up."

"Mmm. Seems fine to me," Skitch grunts. "What's the problem?"

"Eh, I dunno. Guess I'm just a one-demon-at-a-time kinda guy. I get a little jealous sharing my fella with others. Shucks. Perhaps there's somethin' wrong with me."

"I hear fleshbags are like that..." Skitch says, patting his friend's shoulder. "They get all possessive about their mates. It's good you're venting about this stuff. Not smart to hold it in. Bad for your health."

Vex scratches his head awkwardly. "Aw, geez. You think so? Maybe I oughta try and meet some of the guys Fiolo's into. Make it a three-man party, have some fun."

"Or four," Skitch says, flashing a thumbs up. "You know what they say. The more, the merrier."

"Yeah! That's true!" Vex chuckles. "I guess I'm just feeling a bit down 'cause I don't think I can keep up with him. What if he leaves me?"

"You hafta' open up and talk to your boyfriend," Skitch says, nodding sagely. "Only by expressing yourself freely can ya improve yourself. Nothing worse than secrets in a relationship."

"Yeah! You're right!" Vex says, rubbing his face in embarrassment. "Hey, Skitch, thanks for listening, man. Never thought I'd have such a good chat on a day like this. Really learning a lot about myself."

"Nobody's perfect, Vex. We all have bad days."

Both demons smile at each other warmly. Then, Skitch raises his head to the sky.

"Hm. By the way, Vex?"

"Yeah?"

"Ain't that the Monster Queen up there? What's she doing, flying down at us all super-fast for?"

Vex's smile vanishes. A look of worry replaces it.

"Uh... I *really* hope she just wants to say *hi*."

A moment later, Blinker extends her palm. A blast of psionic energy crashes into the demon army, crushing ten thousand demons into meat paste.

Sadly, Vex meets his end, never getting to go home and reveal his true feelings to Fiolo. In the end, he perishes alongside his best friend.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 280: Best Friends Forever?

Western Front, before the Hydra's arrival.

Emperor Ose and Archangel Uriel furiously battle one another. Their fists and feet collide with thunderous shockwaves, forcing a wide berth of empty space around themselves. Still morphed into her electrical Ultraform, Ose's attacks rain down relentlessly upon Uriel. The Archangel protects herself with earthen armor while summoning Holy Energy to attack the Emperor of Infiltration.

This white-haired Emperor has grown more domineering in the last six years, Uriel thinks as she swings a holy-energy-spear like a hammer toward Ose's chest. Ose flickers backward into the sky, causing Uriel's attack to miss. Last time we fought, I did not come up nearly as short as I have today.

Uriel motions with her hand. She tears off dozens of armored plates from a nearby Planet-walker via Barbatos's magnetism, stripping one of its humongous legs bare. Then, she compresses those shards into thin but dense metal needles and sends them to chase after Ose, aiming to skewer the Emperor to death.

Just as the needles rush toward Ose's back, her eyes flash with electrical energy. She swings her palm backward and fires a bolt of lightning into the center of the needle cluster, which explodes, causing the needles to lose their momentum and plummet to the ground.

Mmm? Uriel grunts, startled. Dost mine eyes deceive me? Ose broke Barbatos's magnetism with that attack. T'was no casual move!

A moment later, Ose cackles. She continues circling Uriel like a bird of prey, looking for an opening. "Foolish Archangel! Do you think I'll lie down and accept whatever punishment you want to vent upon me?! I've planned well for your reappearance! Artorias himself worked alongside me to plan contingencies. Your magic will accomplish far less than the last time we clashed!"

Uriel doesn't reply. She sends a telepathic command to her four Constructs, expertly commanding them to launch a flurry of attacks on the thundering Emperor soaring through the skies. The Cube spins rapidly, trying to drag Ose downward via gravity manipulation, while the two angel-shaped golems attack her from the front and back. Finally, the Artillery Orb launches fireball barrages at Ose, attempting to hit her with torrents of destructive magic.

What's going on here? Uriel wonders. Somehow, Ose's lightning cancelled-out Barbatos's magnetism. Is such a thing even possible?

Using her mastery of four primary elements, Uriel unleashes a series of magical strikes on Ose's flickering figure. She discharges compressed streams of water, fireballs, wind-blades, and even tries to throw huge boulders at Ose. Her eyes glow with radiant light as she follows-up with bolts of holy energy, then tries to grab her ankles with dark magic, too.

All of Uriel's attacks fail. Not only does Ose power through any spells launched by the Archangel's golems, she also manages to slip through the gaps in their offenses time after time.

Most stunningly, when the varying elemental spells rush at Ose's front and back, she merely laughs.

"Hahaha! Are you trying to tickle me, Archangel? You are a hundred million years too late to threaten this genius!"

Five beams of water crash against Ose's chest. Instead of short-circuiting her, a violent burst of electricity races up one of the water beams and surges toward Uriel's outstretched palm.

"Heavens!" Uriel cries. Before she can retract her mana, the bolt of lightning arcs into her body, courses through her veins, and causes her to cry out in pain. "Aaaargh!"

Meanwhile, Ose casually swats away the boulders and wind-blades, then pauses to allow the firebolts to strike her back.

Whoomph!

Multiple explosions detonate against Ose's spine, yet her aura only strengthens!

"Haha! Hahahahah!!" Ose laughs. She dodges Uriel's light magic and dissipates her dark magic, then whirls to grin at the Archangel. "I've been waiting for an opponent upon whom I could test my newfound might! Mother gave me this transformation, and so, I shall honor her by unleashing its maximum power!"

Uriel's expression turns grim. She shakes off the numbness in her body and rises to her full height.

"Wretched demoness! Thy magic violates common sense! How can lightning alone interfere with all of the other elements?!"

"Curious?" Ose asks, her smile fading somewhat. "Electricity, heat, and other such forces all link together via the laws of physics. Of course, as an unenlightened chicken, you don't possess a millionth my knowledge. You could never wrap your feeble mind around the intricacies of quantum mechanics!"

Suddenly, Ose raises her right arm overhead. She curves her fingers into a claw-like shape, then swipes down with her arm.

In that moment, her thunder-powers tear a hole in the fabric of reality!

Riiiiip!

A shimmering gap appears in the air. A spatial tear revealing Uriel's body materializes in the sky, confounding the Archangel.

"What sorcery is this?"

Uriel narrows and widens her eyes repeatedly, trying to comprehend what her opponent has just done. Before she can reach even the vaguest of conclusions, Ose flickers toward the spatial tear and passes through it!

THUMP!!

A fist enveloped by condensed electrical energy strikes Uriel's back, sending her hurtling forward! She falls flat on her face and grinds across the dirt, only managing a quick glance backward, where she momentarily spots an identical spatial tear behind where she previously stood.

That... that is an ability similar to Warper demons! Uriel cries out in her mind. *To leap through gaps in space, only my brother Raphael could accomplish such a feat with ease. I cannot replicate it no*

matter how hard I try!

All these realizations pass through her mind in a fraction of a second. She quickly throws her palms against the ground and frontflips forward, revolving through the air to land gracefully on her feet. Even inside Barbatos's mutilated body, his hulking form, Uriel demonstrates incredible feats of agility.

"Die!"

Uriel fires a blast of holy energy at Ose's smirking figure, but the Emperor of Infiltration transforms into a bolt of lightning and flickers to the side, easily evading Uriel's spell.

"You and I aren't on the same level," Ose taunts. "We aren't even playing the same game! You are a mere toddler fumbling with powers beyond your comprehension, while I possess abilities enhanced by my cosmic knowledge!"

Ose conjures lightning into her palms, then leaps skyward.

"The humans have a saying, Uriel! Fear not the man who has practiced ten thousand kicks once, but he who has practiced one kick ten thousand times. You possess a vast array of formidable abilities, but your usage of them is sloppy and pathetic. That is why you will lose!"

Ose fires off both blasts of lightning, then flickers behind Uriel with her leg coiled for a brutal kick.

Uriel scowls.

"And what of he who has practiced ten thousand kicks ten thousand times, bloodskin?"

Ose's leg rushes toward Uriel's back, but Uriel whirls on her heel and spins to face her attacker! With two powerful blasts of lightning flying at her flank and the leg-strength of an Emperor aimed at her chest, her life hangs on a razor's edge.

At that moment, Uriel claps her palms together. Two immense shields of holy energy appear in front of and behind her!

Thooom!

Ose's thunder spells and her leg both crash against the barriers of holy energy, splattering against them like bugs striking a windshield. Before Ose can react, Uriel swings her palm forward, causing the holy energy barrier to fall forward and flatten Ose against the ground!

"Aargh!" Ose cries.

"Thou speaketh of practicing thy magic with such gusto!" Uriel taunts, "But I am an ancient monster from the Primordial Era. Even if I have long forgotten the memories Raphael sealed away, my body has not forgotten how to fight!"

Uriel waves her arms apart to dissipate her barrier, then conjures holy energy onto her left arm to grab Ose by the throat. She pins the demoness to the dirt, burning her with the Creator's light!

"I have killed millions, perhaps even billions of enemies!" Uriel roars.

The Archangel smashes her right fist into Ose's face, pummeling her brutally.

"You, on the other hand, are little more to me than an unruly child! A brat who thinks far too highly of her meager skills!"

Uriel rears her arm back again. She pauses for a split-second to empower her bones with holy energy, then lunges it toward Ose's stomach.

"Brag all day, and brag all night, but know that your words are worth no more to me than empty air!"

Just before Uriel's punch obliterates Ose's torso, the demoness smirks, her bloodied face appearing particularly hideous at that moment. She flicks a single finger toward Uriel's charging fist, then fires a seemingly insignificant arc of electricity toward it.

Zzt.

Instantly, Uriel's attack loses all of its momentum. The holy energy she built up dissipates like a fart in the wind, making her previously brutal punch turn into a light nudge when it strikes Ose's belly.

The Archangel sucks in an alarmed breath. "What?"

A moment later, the mana in her body rocks violently. Her right hand, previously grasping Ose's neck, momentarily loses its strength, allowing Ose to turn into formless electricity and zip away. By the time Uriel regains control of her body, Ose has already escaped her grip.

The Archangel jumps to her feet. Hatred burns in her eyes.

"Demoness! What... what devilry hath thou unleashed now?!"

Uriel whirls to face Ose. The Emperor of Infiltration stands a short distance away, her face still bloodied and bruised. With a quick crinkling of her nose, Ose magically heals her wounds, restoring her face to pristine condition. This, as part of her transformation's ability to convert electrical energy into a healing factor.

"Can't figure anything out? Aww, you poor little *birdie*. It must be hard for you to understand concepts like mana pathways, elementary quarks, subatomic particles, and other such constants of nature. Even if I tell you, it won't do you any good. You're too *stupid* to match me."

Uriel grinds her teeth. She starts to take a step forward, but pauses, fear evident in her eyes.

I haven't a clue how Ose disrupted the flow of my mana. Somehow, her seemingly insignificant bolt of lightning penetrated my body and... and...

Doubts appear in her gaze. Uriel's constructs ready themselves to attack, but she doesn't give them any orders.

"Verily, thy magic cannot possibly be omnipotent..." Uriel murmurs. "Perhaps, in these past years, thou hath discovered some... secret technique..."

Ose snorts disdainfully. "Secret technique? Stupid bitch. You possess six elemental attributes, wield Barbatos's magnetism, and can even summon multiple holy constructs, yet you cannot defeat me, a lone Emperor with only a single elemental affinity. Ah, such is the gap between a genius and a piss-ant! What matters aren't the number of affinities you control, but how you use them, Uriel. It's no wonder your kind went extinct. You never tried teaching yourselves new tricks."

"Arrogant..." Uriel murmurs.

"Indeed, I am!" Ose laughs. "And I have the right to be. I rose from the bottom of demon society to the very top. The fate of the universe lies within my hands now, and I earned my position! Unlike you, born during an era of rich spiritual energy with a Creator-given body, I had to work to reach my current heights. That's why I'm unstoppable, because I have the determination bred in me from all those years of torment."

Sensing that her attacks won't land against the nimble and spry Emperor, Uriel doesn't make any sudden moves. Instead, she keeps talking to Ose, searching for any hints that will help her conquer this frightening foe.

"If I am truly such a 'piss-ant,' then surely, thou hath nothing to lose by explaining thy magical comprehensions," Uriel growls. "Perhaps thou feareth that I am much nimbler of mind than thou might first think."

Ose's maniacal grin momentarily lessens. An expression of contempt appears on her face as she sneers at the Archangel.

"Oh? Are you trying to trick me, Archangel? To give up my secrets willingly? Perhaps if I tell you how my magic works, you'll be able to defeat me?"

Ose laughs. "Hahaha! Pathetic! You still continue to struggle, even with your corpse looming on the horizon. Fine! I shall inform you of that which you can never understand. Even if you pick up some glimmers of knowledge, you'll never be able to defeat me!"

The Emperor jumps backward, away from Uriel. She backflips twice, then rips open a tear in space beneath herself and dives into it feet-first. As she does, a premonition of danger materializes in Uriel's chest! She jumps to the left, barely evading Ose's attack as she tries to stomp down on her head from above. Another spatial tear hangs in the sky above Uriel's previous position; the place from where Ose emerged.

"You're catching on!" Ose cackles. She initiates a flurry of kicks and punches, driving the Archangel backward. If Uriel counter-attacks, Ose merely flickers away or pounces through a spatial tear to attack the Archangel from another direction.

"How can I tear rips in space?" Ose asks. "Simple! Space is a construct of matter and gravity, and electrical energy binds the two together! I need only destabilize them to create a gap for my body to pass through!"

Ose pounces into the air and starts to motion with her hands to fire two more lightning blasts at Uriel, but Uriel's Cube Construct quickly revolves, tripling the gravity around the Demon Emperor.

"Worthless tricks," Ose grunts. She discharges a bolt of lightning toward her chest, which explodes upon touching her skin and destroys the gravitic space surrounding her. "Listen well, Uriel! Gravity is a fundamental force of nature! To manipulate it, your construct must create 'false matter' which can draw others toward it. I need only break that false matter to shatter its bonds!"

Uriel conjures a massive fireball in her palms, then flings it toward Ose. Ose roars with laughter, then spreads her arms apart to welcome the searing heat as it crashes upon her.

Booom!

It explodes, scorching her clothes and skin, yet still failing to injure her. Instead, Ose's aura surges with might.

"Fire is merely a construct of heat and energy! Compared to the power of fusion, such weak flames are nothing to me at all! These pitiful embers serve only to revitalize my body and empower my spirit. Truly, you are quite the benefactor to bequeath me such a gift!"

The more Ose speaks, the stranger Uriel's expression becomes.

While it is true that I cannot fully understand Ose's explanations, even so, I feel as if they have resonated with me, somehow.

Further, why does she run her mouth like so? Ose is no fool. She is a horrifying genius, one who as a mere Baron laid waste to humanity's majesty. For her to witlessly babble about her abilities, she has stepped well beyond the boundaries of her typical arrogance.

Uriel's eyes flash with insight. She dodges and deflects several more attacks from her opponent, while a new thought crosses her mind.

Could it be? Might Ose's transformation be somehow affecting her personality? Such a thing is not outside the realm of possibility.

Uriel quickly recalls the many demons she's fought and observed over the last hundred-plus millennia. Of them, two stick out in her mind, echoing this battle so far.

When Diablo transformed into the Archdemon, his strength increased explosively, but he lost his sanity. He became like a stupid animal, recklessly attacking friend and foe alike.

When Bael assumes his Balrog Form, his brainpower likewise plunges into an abyss, causing him to act even less intelligently than usual.

Slowly, Uriel nods to herself. She continues putting up a perfunctory defense against Ose's onslaught, but behind the scenes, her mind calculates in secret.

"Water magic? Surely, that must be my weakness!" Ose continues to taunt. She claps her hands, firing a blast of thunder at Uriel and momentarily destabilizing her footing. "But even then, such an assumption is incorrect! 'Water' is nothing more than mashed-together hydrogen and oxygen molecules, both of which create the lifeblood of stars! They are the keys to creating fusion energy, so how could they ever hurt me?!"

As Ose continues to talk, Uriel's heart sinks.

Indeed. Ose's personality seems to have grown far more cocky and arrogant than usual. Even so, I cannot see myself taking advantage of such a weakness. Her words ring true; she has learned how to shield herself from the majority of my attacks. Perhaps, only by seeking outside assistance will I be able to slay her.

Unwittingly, Uriel's eyes flick toward a small, shallow pit half a mile in the distance. Dozens of Demon Lords guard it, while the rest flow around it.

Inside, a single body lays, unmoving.

Belial, the Emperor of Passion.

Uriel returns her gaze to Ose.

*No. No! I will never seek assistance from Satan's Whore! That wench impaled me by assuming my brother's visage. Were it not for her act of deception, I would never have fallen, and her infernal husband would never have made it inside of Heaven! Because of her, Satan successfully exterminated ninety percent of my species! Angelkind died because of Belial! I will **never** forgive her!!*

Uriel's internal thoughts roar with fury, but at the same time, a second voice, one of reason, also speaks in her head.

Tch. What is the point of maintaining old rivalries? Even if the Devil's Whore was the one who undertook vile actions to exterminate our race, she could still be a valuable ally in this battle. If I were to heal her, I could unleash her formidable strength against Ose. We could pin demonkind's most threatening Emperor in place, then rip out her intestines!

A gold glimmer shines in Uriel's eyes.

It won't be too late afterward. I can still slay Belial once the right moment reveals itself. I can still pay Satan's Whore back for all the atrocities she's enabled. Perhaps I'll even capture and torture her for the rest of eternity. Only then will I finally vent my hatred.

The Archangel blocks another of Ose's thunder-blasts. Her thoughts become resolute.

I have simply too many demons to slay. Their numbers, unending. Ose and Belial are far from the only Emperors who must pay. Fenrir. Kristoff. Glinch. Fae. Auger. Yardrat. Gorn. Yama.

These few are merely the tip of the iceberg. I must rip them all to pieces, as well as their subordinates, their lovers, their families, and any others who deem them allies.

A complicated expression appears on Uriel's face.

To slay them all... 'tis an impossible task, one which I will surely fail to accomplish. Nevertheless, I must pursue it as my goal. I must avenge my people and wipe out those who genocided us from existence. Only then will I have the face to visit my brothers and sisters in the Great Beyond.

Uriel fortifies her mind. She continuously sneaks peeks at Belial while verbally sparring with Ose. She builds up her momentum, plays defensively to the best of her abilities, and doesn't overextend, knowing it will only waste her energy.

Even so, Ose's transformation doesn't wear off, nor dissipate. She maintains it during the whole battle, occasionally pausing to siphon energy from the humans' mecha and weapons to heal herself. She taunts Uriel, deriding the Archangel as stupid and incompetent, too weak to even flee.

All the while, Uriel waits for her chance.

Finally, after an hour of vicious and brutal combat, a distant noise erupts from Hero City's confines.

"SKREEEEEEEE!!"

Ose and Uriel both whip their heads eastward. There, they see a shocking sight.

"A Hydra?!" Ose gasps. "It's... it's just like the one that attacked a month ago! Why has it reappeared?"

Uriel's eyes widen in surprise. "T-Titans?! Why are there Titans inside Hero City? Could this be one of Mephisto's secret weapons?! That confounded graverobber!"

Even as shock pulses through Uriel's heart and her outward expression echoes that fact, her mind remains calm.

Chance! This is what I have waited for!

With Ose momentarily distracted, Uriel sneakily burrows underground, falling into the planet's depths soundlessly.

She sucks Belial's body underground, relying on the Hydra's appearance to hide her actions. Even the demons assigned to guard Belial's body don't notice her disappearance, so violent is their reaction to the happenings in Hero City.

As Uriel pulls Belial's body into the planet's bowels, she gazes at her most hated enemy with venomous eyes. Momentarily unable to control herself, she wraps her hands around Belial's neck.

"Worthless wretch. I could slay thee with a thought. The only reason I shall allow thee to live is because thou provideth a slight value to me."

Her hands tremble as she traces her thumb against the contours of Belial's throat.

"One squeeze. Just *one* twist, and thy life would end here. Oh, how long I have awaited such an opportunity."

Uriel's expression becomes bitter as she releases her grip on Belial's neck. Without any fanfare, she conjures water and presses it against Belial's wounds, healing the horrific injuries she's suffered.

"Thy awakening shall only occur for a brief while, Satan's Whore. After thou fulfilleth my needs, I shall slayeth thee with my own hands. Thou shalt joineth Satan in the Great Beyond."

By the time Ose realizes her opponent has disappeared, she's too late. Uriel finishes healing Belial's wounds, then she injects mana into the Emperor's body to awaken her.

"Serve me well... Belial. Then thou may continue living a bit longer."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 281: Friendship Is Magic

Ose's eyes lock onto the huge, lumbering behemoths rampaging within Hero City's borders. Despite a distance of several miles separating her from the action, Ose still easily picks them out and observes how the Titans battle against the lone Hydra.

What's going on? Ose wonders. How could Titans appear here? We exterminated their entire species, along with the Angels! Could this be another of Mephisto's trump cards? Unlikely. Mephisto's greatest weapon, his most prized possession, was the corpse of the Last Dragon. Leviathan turned to ash under the heat of a supernova, so the Duke of Mist can't summon him anymore.

Based on Mephisto's reaction to his loss, he mustn't have also secretly possessed the corpses of multiple Titan Kings as well as a Hydra! Such an astonishing level of power is too terrifying to imagine! If Mephisto could control so many high-level existences, then not even I would be a match for him! He'd be a Duke capable of crushing Emperors! Simply ludicrous!

Ose's thoughts move at lightning speed. In a single breath, thousands of considerations and possibilities flicker through her mind.

The Titans appear to be fighting the Hydra. If they were summoned by Mephisto, why would they battle one another? Might he somehow be incapable of controlling them all? No. Perhaps Mephisto captured the Hydra's body when it perished, while the Titans were revived through... some other means.

The Emperor of Infiltration narrows her eyes.

Jason Hiro. This must be his doing. Somehow, he's summoned the Titans back from the nether realm. But how? My intelligence informed me the Wordsmith couldn't revive the dead. While those conjectures might not have formed the most solid foundation for my knowledge, I cannot possibly cast them away as garbage. I sacrificed many pawns to confirm the matter.

As Ose watches the Hydra, one of the Titans catches her eye. Her heart jolts with terror.

"Zeus?!"

Shell-shocked, Ose's vision turns red as she spots one of her most ancient nemeses, the Titan King of Thunder. Zeus leaps into the sky and fires lightning-bolts downward, striking the Hydra's back with thunderous force. The giant monster screeches and howls, while two other Titans follow up with additional attacks.

Ose doesn't immediately recognize the other Titans, having not seen them in the flesh before. However, as they use their abilities, her expression turns to bewilderment.

Ivaldi, the Titan Queen of Divinity?! Cronus, Zeus's Father?? I've read about them in the ancient texts. How in the Seven Hells could they appear here, now?!

The longer Ose watches, the more her heart begins to twist, as if someone were slowly pressing a knife into it.

My forces aren't enough to combat multiple Titans and a Hydra. If the Hidden Hells were to show up, then subjugating humanity wouldn't take me an hour. However, if I do that, then how can I call myself the leader of the First Hell?! How can my Hell possibly rank supreme with so many rabid mutts snapping at my ankles? I must solve this problem alone, disarm the humans, and crush those who oppose me with unrelenting force!

I am Ose! I am the smartest being to have ever walked the cosmos! I will go to any length to rule over all of creation!

The Third Emperor's arrogance silently reaches new heights as she hypes herself up, hellbent on winning the Stormbringer War at all costs.

Ose whirls to face Uriel. "No more time to waste, Archangel! You shall... eh?"

Despite having only gazed upon the distant action within Hero City for five seconds, Ose finds herself stumped when she turns to see that Uriel has disappeared.

"S-she left? SHE LEFT?! That cowardly dodo! I should have known she would turn tail and flee! Hahaha! HAHAHAH! To think the Seven Hells once feared this pathetic, half-dead relic from the Ancient Era! In the end, she's nothing more than a featherless-"

Right as Ose reaches the apex of her laughter, she stops dead in her tracks. An ominous foreboding appears in her heart, as if having realized something.

"No! She wouldn't!"

Ose turns her head toward Belial's crater, the spot where Ose beat the tar out of the Second Emperor and left her for dead. To her disbelief, she finds all of the Lords she dispatched to guard Belial's body instead staring dumbly at the distant Hydra and Titans, paying no attention to the empty crater in their midst.

The Emperor explodes with rage. "**YOU IMBECILES!!** Where are you looking?! Incompetent, bastardly wretches! You let Uriel steal away Belial's body! AHHHHHH!!!"

With a flick of her wrist, Ose hurls a massive orb of electrical energy at the gawking Lords. They turn and freeze up in terror as the explosive energy-ball rushes at them.

"EMPER-!"

They don't get the chance to beg for mercy. Ose's ruthless attack explodes with terrific might, blasting apart the Lords at the subatomic level. Their bodies disappear and scatter to the ends of the planet, never to be seen again, while another, far bigger crater appears where they once stood.

Eye's eyes turn bloodshot from pure rage. Unable to maintain her cool, she jerks her head downward to bore holes in the planet's soil with her eyes.

"Hiding underground, are you?! Don't think I can't sense your energy, Uriel!! You tricky, backstabbing Archangel!"

As if called to action, the ground quietly opens up beneath Ose. A rocky platform rises from the planet's depths with an uneasy-looking Belial on the right and a noticeably more confident Uriel on the

left.

Uriel rests her hands on her hips. She puffs out her chest a little, as if looking down on Ose.

"I can't *believe* you..." Ose hisses. "To think you would be so spineless as to work with Belial. Have you forgotten that she was the one whose actions led to your imprisonment within Barbatos? She is your mortal enemy!"

Uriel's glowing white eyes narrow to slits.

"Nay. I have not forgotten. We came to... *an agreement*."

Ose nods slowly, fury boiling in her eyes.

"Is that so? An agreement, you say? Haha. Isn't that funny? Isn't that *fucking funny*?!"

Electricity begins to swirl around Ose like a whirling typhoon. Her eyes turn into crystallized embers of lightning as she grinds her teeth together.

"You think... you can kill me... just by working together?! Hahaha!! What a joke!! Ten of you wouldn't be my match!! If you want to resort to such tactics, then don't blame ME for getting nasty!"

Suddenly, Ose disappears.

Fwip.

Her body bolts away at the speed of light, leaving only a momentary afterimage in its wake. Uriel and Belial both twitch in alarm, but frown a second later when Ose doesn't attack them.

"What is she doing?" Belial asks. "Where did she go?"

Slowly, Uriel raises her head.

"Up."

Belial follows her gaze. There, she witnesses a lightning storm of unimaginable proportions brewing. It swiftly expands in size, from five hundred feet in diameter, to half a mile, then a full mile.

Within seconds, the pitch black clouds engulf the sky, causing Belial to knit her brow in consternation.

"Ose's trying to pull something, Uriel! We have to stop her!"

Uriel's gaze flicks across the continuously increasing tempest, uncertainty clouding her thoughts.

"I agree. But how? I cannot fathom this new development. Does Ose intend to strike us down? The lightning is too dispersed. It covers too wide a range. Almost as if..."

Belial's pupils shrink to pinpricks. "The humans! Ose can't beat us... so she's going to attack humanity itself! All of our armed forces! Our citizens!"

Uriel snorts. "*Our* citizens? They are human. Thou art a shapeshifting backstabber. They are not thy people, nor are they mine. I care not for their lives, only for erasing demonkind from the galaxy."

"If humanity dies today, YOU lose!" Belial cries. "We have to work together, Uriel! Fully! If you aren't going to help me save humanity, then why would I help you kill Ose?!"

Uriel's face twitches. A flicker of hatred, shrouded beneath Barbatos's helm, passes across her lips. A hidden grimace, a disgusted sneer.

However, Uriel doesn't immediately respond. Instead, she lowers her head and falls into thought for a moment.

"...I see. Thy words... they do make a small modicum of sense. Jason Hiro might be of use to me in slaying the Demon Emperors. He possesses a timid heart and is slow to violence, but humanity's mere presence might instill some hesitancy in my foes, giving me better opportunities to slay them."

Belial scowls. "Great! So are you going to work with me or not?! Every second we waste, Ose's thunderstorm becomes more powerful!"

Uriel sighs.

"I only healed thee for the sake of slaying Ose. Saving humanity is not something I care about in the slightest. Nevertheless, I do feel we must unite to save the humans, if only to suit my purposes."

"Don't get all broken up over the value of human life or some other nonsense," Belial snorts. "Now, how do you propose we move forward?"

* * *

Lightning bolts begin firing from the skies, slowly at first, but faster and faster as the seconds pass. While not as deadly as Ose's concentrated lightning attacks, they still ignite fires inside the Horned Forest and crash upon the exosuit-wearing soldiers, causing their T-REX's to hiccup and malfunction. Not one lightning bolt ever comes close to striking a demon, proving that Ose can manipulate the storm's power while keeping her presence concealed.

After a quick deliberation, Belial and Uriel launch their counter attack! The Archangel uses Barbatos's abilities to open a portal through space to a spot above the clouds, then Belial jumps through.

As Belial falls, she sweeps her senses around, searching for Ose. Belial sprouts a pair of leathery, demonic wings, then flaps hard to dive into the maelstrom.

"Where are you, Ose?! For someone who called Uriel a coward, it's funny how you've chosen to skulk in the darkness!"

Despite Belial's provocation, Ose doesn't reveal herself. Instead, she projects her voice throughout the storm.

"I've planned humanity's demise for six years, Belial. Don't hasten your death. There's plenty of time for my final show to play out!"

Belial frowns.

Uriel told me that Ose has been unusually easy to provoke since assuming her Ultraform, yet that doesn't seem to be the case at all. Did she misjudge Ose?

While Belial ruminates on Ose's secretive twist, the Thunder Goddess herself lurks within the clouds, turning herself formless to become as undetectable as possible.

It is time. Now, with the battle nearing its climax, I shall unleash my checkmate.

Somewhere unknown, in a bunker concealed within Hero City's depths.

The planet shakes and rumbles as Titans wrestle with a Hydra in Hero City's center. Elder Skarde and a group of human commanders busily go about their work, keeping in contact with the various warfronts to the north, east, south, and west of Hero City, as well as the city's reserve armies.

A glimmer of sadness appears in Skarde's eyes as he receives new intelligence.

"Commander Kar has died. I... I see. Tsk. Tragic beyond belief. And you lot, you still can't find the Hero's wife and daughter? You must! We need to protect them at this critical juncture! Jason shall surely return soon. With the last Covenant ship destroyed, we have to bring them both to a shelter where they'll be safe!"

Skarde's subordinate, a young blonde woman, nods. "I understand, Elder. We're trying our hardest, but with the sudden appearance of a Hydra, as well as those... frost giants? We're losing anyone we send to investigate. I've already lost contact with six platoons. We believe they were stomped to death by the giants."

The hidden base rumbles again. A distant bellow, monstrous in nature, vibrates the stale underground air.

Skarde's expression darkens. "We've also lost contact with the Monitoring Division. Were they...?"

"I believe their facility was reduced to rubble, yes," The woman replies.

"I see. Then they're likely all dead. We can still communicate and coordinate with our teams. Command everyone to spread out to the edges of the city. The giants seem to be keeping their battle contained within the city's center, so more and more citizens will perish if they don't flee. Nowhere is safe within the central killing zone."

"Yes, Elder. I'll relay your orders at once."

The woman turns on her heel and walks away. She heads over to a communication booth, one with digital transmission backups for maintaining command with the army.

Skarde grits his teeth. He squeezes his fingers into fists and mashes them against his hips while growling under his breath. "Ksss! Damnation. How can we possibly win with so many things going wrong?! Giants, a Hydra, Ose's rampage, Kar dead... I have to maintain morale. If the soldiers lose confidence, we'll perish without a chance to weep."

As Elder Skarde loses more and more hope, a trio of officers walk up to him from behind. "Elder. We have good news."

Their words cause his heart to skip a beat. Skarde nearly jumps for joy.

"Y-you do?! Tell me!"

"Hans has completed the modifications for the Atlas Cannon. It can fire when ready, but we'll only have one shot."

Skarde's elation dissipates. He becomes confused.

"Atlas Cannon? What is that?"

The leader of the trio smiles politely. "It's natural you wouldn't know. Hans has kept the existence of this weapon top secret. We wouldn't want the demons to learn of it. It's an orbital satellite with immense striking power. We believe that, given the right circumstances, one might even be capable of slaying a Demon Emperor with a direct hit."

Skarde's eyes brighten immediately. "I see! What a stroke of good luck! If we can use it to slay Ose during a moment of inattention, we will end this war in a single move!"

The Elder turns to someone sitting at a nearby terminal.

"Officer Davis, where is Ose, currently?"

The man glances quickly presses several buttons on his communication hub. Within seconds, he receives a reply from a field scout.

"We aren't certain, sir. Last we heard, she was fighting Artorias and Belial."

Skarde frowns, clearly unaware of the circumstances behind Belial teaming up with 'Artorias.'

"Hmm. Tell everyone to start searching. I want our scouts to be a fly on her ass within the next five minutes. Find that murdering bitch so we can put an end to this war, once and for all."

Skarde turns back to the three officers. "Alright. Now, I need you to tell me how to- hm?"

The Elder's heart skips a beat. Behind him, all three officers stand silently, their weapons drawn and aimed at his chest.

BLAM BLAM BLAM!

Skarde doesn't get even a moment to react before half a dozen bullets and plasma balls burst through his chest, spraying his innards backward.

Screams of fright erupt throughout the command center. Several people grab at their guns, only for the three 'officers' to turn around and fire upon everyone in sight. Along with them, a dozen other traitors materialize, their eyes uncaring for the lives of their fellow citizens.

Bang! Bang! Blam!

"Aaaaugh!"

Horried screams resound, along with choked gasps of people with blood-filled throats. As the Command Center falls into chaos, the turncoats finish up their work. Like efficient killing machines, they blow out the brains of anyone not on their side, taking special care to leave no one alive.

Five minutes later, the Command Center falls silent. Elder Skarde lays dead, his eyes unseeing, yet filled with shock and horror.

One of the traitors walks over to a nearby console.

"These are the command codes. Establish a link to the Atlas Cannon. Emperor Ose wants full control of it within ten minutes. No delays."

The other traitors merely nod, executing her order without complaints. They casually walk past the blood-soaked bodies of their former allies and comrades, paying them no heed.

"A stray bullet hit this console," one man says. "It's shot to shit."

"That's fine. Turn on the backup. Use the code E11-416."

"Yes, ma'am."

* * *

Elsewhere, in a place high above Tarus II.

A satellite ten miles long, with an elongated, thin, needle-shaped cannon, circles Tarus II. Its barrel points toward the planet's surface menacingly, like a shark eyeing its prey.

Inside the Atlas's confines, a similar battle occurs. Fifty turncoats erupt into violence, catching their comrades off-guard. They gun down hundreds of unarmed scientists and officers, none of them ever expecting an ambush aboard a satellite suspended in space.

After cleaning out every human aboard the Atlas, these traitors take up their positions at the weapon's controls.

"Command codes locked in. I've seized control of the mainframe."

"I'm double-checking the coolant pipes. Heat conductors appear to be functioning nominally."

"We're still out of position. Ten minutes before the Atlas orbits to a suitable firing location."

As the humans work together, their thoughts work in tandem, increasing their efficiencies five-fold.

Once they complete their checks, they fall silent. With three minutes left before they can fire the cannon, they have nothing else to do but wait.

One of the men glances at the corpses of his former friends nearby.

"...Should we, uh... clean up the Bridge?"

"Not necessary," Another man snaps, clearly agitated. "Focus on the mission. We have to pull this off, Marco. Our families are depending on us."

The first man, Marco, hesitates.

"...Can we trust Ose to keep her word?"

"We don't have a choice but to believe her," The second man mutters. "Do you really think the fucking Wordsmith will win this war? Think again. Remember all the Hidden Emperors Ose told us about? If they gang up and attack humanity, nothing will save us. It's better to carve out a life for ourselves in Ose's society now than to perish along with the rest of the rabble."

Marco falls silent. He looks at another nearby body and sighs.

"That's Jacob. He and I were good friends, you know? His wife, Petra, she's going to suffer because of us."

"Who gives a fuck?" The second man growls. "Petra's as good as dead anyway, imbecile. Just look at the data they're sending us. The demons have Hero City completely surrounded. All the Covenant ships are gone. Nobody can escape. Just by numbers alone, there's no way the demons can lose."

A moment of silence follows.

Marco's eyes turn despondent.

"I suppose you're right, Cliff. As... as long as my family can escape... that's good enough. It has to be good enough."

Cliff flicks his eyes toward Marco.

"You getting cold feet now, brother?"

"No. No, I'm still loyal..." Marco mutters. He sullenly turns back to his controls and keys in a few commands, checking to see how much longer before they reach a firing position.

Cliff eyeballs Marco from afar. A look of murderous intent appears in his eyes as he jumps to his feet, pulls out his gun, and takes aim.

BLAM! BLAM!

Marco perishes, unable to retaliate, as his so-called 'comrade' guns him down in cold blood.

The others on the bridge glance at Marco for a moment, sneer, then shake their heads.

"Never did like that guy," One lady grunts. "Fucking coward. Gutless."

"Can't trust someone like that," Another person adds. "They're liable to backstab you after backstabbing their other friends. Idiot should have kept his mouth shut."

Cliff nods. He walks over and violently kicks Marco's corpse off the chair, then beckons to someone else. "Take over his spot. Let me know when we enter firing range."

"Yes, sir."

Cliff plops back down in his chair, anger clouding his face.

You think I don't know Ose could backstab us? Of course I do. Unlike you, I don't regret my choices. I act decisively. I'm gonna protect my family, Marco, while you'll just have to visit them in the Great Beyond.

I only have one path forward now. If I fail... if Ose fails... we'll all die like dogs.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 282: Ose's Checkmate

In the skies of Tarus II, an unimaginably terrifying thunderstorm swallows the horizon. Covering the entirety of Hero City and all of the battlefronts, it swells to more than forty miles wide. Inside, Ose draws energy from the planet's magnetic field, capturing small amounts of its potential to energize her ultimate weapon, Limitless Demonic Thunder.

As Ose conjures energy onto herself, Belial flies through the storm, searching in vain for Ose's true body.

"Show yourself, Ose! Where are you? Come and face me!"

Ose, however, remains silent. With her body incorporeal and fused into the storm's latent electrical energy, her presence becomes impossible to detect. Her vision penetrates every inch of the cloud's domain, allowing her to easily track Belial's location.

As if I would fall for such a childish provocation... Ose sneers. Don't worry, Belial. I'll certainly deal with you in a bit. But first, how about these humans?

She turns away from Belial and extends her perception downward. Ose scrutinizes the tiny, insignificant humans battling her equally tiny and insignificant armies. Compared to the gargantuan storm in the sky, they aren't more than specks of sand when viewed from such a height.

Ose's senses sweep across the land. She picks out numerous key areas of conflict, places she can attack to deal heavy damage.

I've held back, until now. I wanted to slowly make my way into humanity's fortress and capture their leaders. However, I can't keep going on like this.

She turns her attention to the Eastern Front. There, she witnesses Blinker slaughtering her army with reckless abandon, driving them into a terror-filled flight. None escape her wrath as she conjures enormous claws to fall upon them from above, crushing them into meat paste.

It seems Mephisto slew the Monster King. But at what cost? He lost two of his best Barons. Given how the Fairy's strength has increased, she must have absorbed the Sphinx's power for herself. Even I might not be a match for her as she is now.

She glances toward the south, where Yamir and several officers fight alongside a platoon of veterans to hold the armies back.

Bael's an idiot, Artorias has gone AWOL, I'm the only Emperor, and even Beelzebub has fucked off to the planet's crust. Who knows when he'll return? Right now, I can only rely on myself.

Ose continues looking. *Damn! Where has Mephisto gone? Has he hidden himself beneath some rock like he always does? Where is Mara? Vepar? Laharl?*

Ose turns her attention toward the city, where she takes a moment to observe the battles between five Titans and the lone Hydra.

Sure enough, Cronus, Zeus, Ivaldi, and two other Titans beat the Hydra black and blue. As always, the Hydra merely shrugs off their attacks while screeching incoherently.

Ose observes the situation intently. She narrows her eyes while looking at the other two Titans, trying to identify them.

Both use water-based magic. Hm? Poseidon and Neptune? Father and Son? What a strange coincidence. These five Titans have never walked the Earth at the same time. Ivaldi... I believe she only reappeared during the War in Heaven, then she vanished back to wherever she came from. As for Cronus, he died to his son's insidious deception. Zeus survived all the way to the final battle of the Energy Wars, along with Neptune, while Poseidon...

Several seconds pass. Ose frowns as she tries to recall long-ancient events.

I don't believe I ever heard how Poseidon perished. Tsk. In any case, for these five to randomly show up here, there can be no mistake that someone brought them back from the dead. But who?

The Emperor's thoughts dwell mostly upon the Wordsmith, Jason Hiro, as well as his clone, Hope Hiro.

I've battled Jason once already, but not once has Hope made an appearance. This is strange, far too strange. For the Wordsmith to ignore his home's destruction, something must have happened to him.

Ose's eyes flash with realization.

Spawn of a broodmother! Did the Hidden Emperors make a move while I fought tooth and nail during these past three days? Perhaps one of them captured Hope without my knowledge! If the Hidden Emperors make a pawn out of a Wordsmith, it won't be long before the First Hell loses its position! I'm already much weaker than the other Emperors, having lost my power base. I can't afford for one of them to obtain such a valuable strategic resource! My future reign depends on capturing both Wordsmiths for myself!

The Emperor's gaze turns menacing. She transmits an electrical pulse toward a location underground.

"How long until the Atlas Cannon reaches firing range?"

Her voice transmits electrically to a radio transmitter. Seconds later, a female voice replies.

"Not much longer, Emperor Ose. We've cleared out Humanity's leaders. We've done as you ordered."

"Specifics, imbecile!" Ose snaps. "How much longer *exactly*?!"

"One minute, thirteen seconds."

"Excellent. Transmit these coordinates to the Atlas platform. Set the weapon to maximum power, maximum radius. I want to cause as much widespread damage as possible."

Ose transmits another electrical signal, one listing off a series of coordinates. Seconds later, her human spy responds.

"The Western Front?"

"Yes! Hurry up!"

"Of course."

Ose turns her attention to the Western Front. As humanity's most heavily fortified position, it possesses the most troops and the heaviest defensive lines. Many more demons pour through the Warpgate Encampment than through any ten Warper portals combined, forcing humanity to defend the west more fervently than the other fronts. The warpgate's size and stability allows demonkind to travel across space much more quickly, thus making it a valuable strategic position.

"Good, good, yes. Not much longer, now."

Ose waits impatiently, chuckling to herself as she glances at Belial's uselessly flailing form. Belial fires off random mana pulses through the cloud, trying to attack Ose's true body, but fails every time.

"Pathetic woman," Ose mutters condescendingly. "You're like an infant who has yet to learn- hm?"

By sheer coincidence, Ose's eyes happen to pick up an unexpected anomaly. Atop the Hydra's back, a shiny barrier of light barely three meters in diameter engulfs a pair of human bodies, both of whom she instantly recognizes.

"Th-the Hero's wife? His daughter, too?!"

A horrific gleam of greed explodes in Ose's vision.

"Hahaha! There you are, you despicable little rabbits! Bouncing to and fro, yet never once stepping into my trap! I don't know how you escaped my grasp for so long, but... but..."

Ose trails off. Her excited expression dims visibly, replaced instead by confusion.

"Why are the two of them asleep? Why are they inside that light barrier? Why would the Wordsmith hide them atop the back of a raging Hydra?? Does he care nothing for his beloved wife and daughter? Impossible! I've seen the sickening puppy-love in his eyes many times from afar. I know he dotes on them well."

Puzzle pieces slowly click into place within Ose's mind. As she thinks, her enlightened perception and electrified brain allows her to comprehend many things at a thousand times the speed of any human.

"Titans... Wordsmith... Mephisto... not Mephisto... daughter... daughter is a Hero? Heroic abilities. Light barrier? Maybe. What else? Guh!!"

Ose's eyes bolt open. A look of horror passes over her face as the most terrifying possibility emerges in her mind.

"No! No, that cannot be! I refuse to believe it! How could a toddler summon five Titan Kings and a devil-damned Hydra?! That's utter nonsense! If she could do that, then she would be... the mightiest being to ever set foot in the universe!"

Ose's breathing turns ragged. She reflexively recoils in fear, gazing at the Hero's sleeping daughter with trembling eyes.

"I've never heard of such a terrifying power! Not in all my life! Is that why Yama's shades failed their task? Could they simply not contend with a mere child?! Heroes almost never awaken their full potential

by their sixteenth birthday, let alone their sixth! If she's this strong now, then what sort of demon-slaying deity will she become in the future?!"

For a split second, a new thought emerges in Ose's mind.

I must kill her. She's too dangerous to be left alive! If that little girl grows up, she'll wipe out the entirety of demonkind with a single thought!

Several more seconds pass. Eventually, Ose calms down.

"No. Daisy Hiro is a rare gem. She's young. Malleable. If I can take her for myself, I will have a pawn at my disposal far more formidable than even the Wordsmith. Capturing Jason is still my top priority, but his daughter is no less important."

Ose glances around at the other humans shouting and screaming. She snorts.

"As for the rest of them... they can fall to ash."

A voice speaks to Ose, communicating through her electrical senses.

"Five seconds to launch, Emperor Ose. Four. Three. Two..."

Ose turns to look at the Western Front. Uriel stands half a mile away, gazing into the sky while sweeping her divine sense through Ose's thunderstorm. However, not even she can pierce the smog to find Ose's position.

At that moment, a bright light shines above the clouds, one that no human can see, thanks to the curtain of darkness shrouding their vision.

The Atlas Cannon, a weapon forged by the Wordsmith for combating demonkind, activates its power cells. It condenses a tremendous amount of power into its planet-facing railgun, opting not to shoot a single small, precise bullet for assassinating Demon Emperors, but a high-impact payload with a huge area of coverage.

Silently, the light condenses to a point on the satellite's tip. A moment later, it flashes for a split-second with a light brighter than the sun.

Fwip.

A quiet rush of air is the only thing anyone hears before a low-yield tactical warhead instantly travels fifty miles from orbit to the planet's surface.

BOOOOOOOM!!

A cosmic blast detonates smack in the middle of the Western Front's battle-lines. Fifty-seven thousand humans vaporize into ash, enveloped by a light that destroys anything it touches.

One second later, the explosive shockwave surges outward as well, obliterating the eardrums of anyone and anything in range.

Humanity's Planet-Walkers, gone.

Their strongest combatants, vaporized.

Their military leaders, reduced to ash.

Never getting even a chance to realize what happened, an additional thirty thousand humans perish within seconds, their nanite-based armor peeling away under the scorching heat, leaving their skin and innards to liquefy into mush.

Along with the humans, many thousands of demons perish, too. Ose pays them no mind.

The Third Emperor watches from above as the blast-wave travels outward, rapidly weakening until it fades into nothingness. In its wake, countless horrifically mutilated corpses lay unmoving, their figures coated by the ashen remains of those even closer to the blast zone. Only tiny pockets of scattered survivors manage to hold on to their feeble lives, but it won't be long before the demonic horde falls upon them.

Ose nods. "Not bad."

Belial, however, falls through the clouds to gaze at the humans in absolute horror. Her eyes become as wide as saucers, while her jaw visibly drops.

"N-n-no... no... nooo... Ose, you... you couldn't have..."

Tears well up in her eyes. Countless friends and acquaintances she's made over the past six years, people she's healed and spent time with, even at only the most surface of levels, still mean something to her.

Belial chokes back anguished sobs. "No, devils, no... Ose, you vile... despicable..."

Uriel, too, lays on her back, having been flung away by the Cannon's impact. A few injuries line her body, but she heals them quickly, then rises to her feet.

"...Monstrous. To think Ose possessed such a level of power. Verily, I have underestimated my foe."

Many demons pull back, unsure of what to do. However, not long after, their eyes turn greedy as a telepathic communication reaches into all of their minds.

KILL ALL OF THE HUMANS. SLAY EVERY LAST ONE. SHOW NO MERCY.

These words, projected by Ose through her thundercloud, cause every demon to roar with excitement.

"Ose! Bahaha! She did this! Not the humans, our Emperor! Now we can kill the fleshbags once and for all boys! Let loose and kill some gooks!"

The demons rush forward, this time not holding back at all. Unlike before, when they had to move slowly so that Ose could locate the Wordsmith's family, she no longer needs to worry about such things.

Ose turns her greedy gaze toward Daisy and Phoebe.

"Hehehe. First, why don't I soften your people up? Then, I'll come for you."

The Emperor of Infiltration focuses her mind. She closes her eyes, calling upon the thunder she's been building up for the past ten minutes.

Hong-long!

The maelstrom hums energetically. It builds up within seconds, narrowing to several focal points above humanity's encampments.

Ose's eyes bolt open. "DESTROY!"

All at once, innumerable lightning bolts fall from the sky. They rush toward thousands of human and monster soldiers, lancing into their suits and vehicles with far more energy than the random strikes from earlier. Countless soldiers scream in agony as Ose's magic tears through them, obliterating their innards and killing them on the spot. Many survive with heavy injuries, while only a few of the hardest monsters, like Yamir, manage to shrug off the damage.

Ose releases every last drop of her pent-up power, collapsing humanity's other three battle-lines, before exhaling heavily and shuddering to a stop.

With her thunderstorm exhausted, Ose retracts her power. A jelly-like sensation spreads through her legs, making her tremble weakly, but she quickly reaches her palm out to suck up a bit of nearby electrical energy from some nearby vehicles and structures.

Ose sighs. With her energy much lower than before, she realizes she doesn't have much left to spare.

"Tch. I planned to take my time, but Uriel's appearance has changed things. I'll have to move swiftly if I want to achieve my ultimate objectives."

As Ose's thunderstorm dissipates, Uriel and Belial both lock onto her, with Belial's anguish quickly turning to wrath.

"Oseeee!!"

Belial flaps her wings. She rushes toward Ose, but the white-haired Emperor pays her no mind.

"Fuck off, Belial."

Ose snaps her attention to the Hydra. She turns into a bolt of lightning and instantly travels to the holy energy barrier atop its back.

"Break for me!" Ose roars, as she fires an electric-bomb at the barrier protecting Daisy and Phoebe's sleeping bodies.

Boom!

The barrier trembles under Ose's might, but to her shock, it doesn't shatter.

"What? So powerful?!"

Ose gapes for a moment, then starts to condense more power into her hands.

Meanwhile, Belial follows Ose's path. She, too, spots Phoebe and Daisy atop the Hydra's back. Her vision turns red as murderous rage surges within her heart.

"OSEEE!! GET AWAY FROM THEM!"

She increases her speed to the max, swooping down on Ose like a bird of prey. Her leathery wings creak under the G-forces as she rears her fist back to punch Ose with all her strength.

Suddenly, the unthinkable happens.

One of the nearby Titans, Zeus, swivels his head toward Belial's falling figure. He bolts toward her, moving at an equally ridiculous speed, rears his arm back, and slaps down.

WHUMP!!

Belial doesn't even get an instant to react. One moment, she's speeding toward Ose. The next, a mountain falls atop her, slapping her against Hero City's confines.

Boom!

Belial crashes into the dirt, breaks countless bones, shatters most of her teeth, and falls into a muddled brain-state. Several seconds of traumatic shock pass through her body before she manages to open her eyes and blink dazedly.

"Uhhh..."

Belial's self-preservation instincts kick in. She blearily motions with one hand, then presses it against her side, healing herself. She still needs more than thirty seconds to revive herself to peak condition, and even then, her eyesight blurs every few seconds; the side-effects of a concussion.

"...hit me. Something hit me. Bird? A bird? Was it a bird?"

Belial mumbles to herself. She struggles to think, while a distant whine rings in her ears.

* * *

Atop the Hydra, Ose blasts the energy barrier ten times. She pours her strength into her attacks, yet still, it doggedly holds on.

"Seven devils!" Ose howls. "How fucking durable is this force-field?! It's like I'm trying to cut a diamond with wood-chips! My attacks seem only to be strengthening it!"

Indeed, the more Ose attacks the barrier, the sturdier it becomes. Eventually, the Emperor of Infiltration takes a step back, gasping weakly for breath.

"She's right there... hah... the little brat is ten feet away but I can't get to her. What is this infernal barrier made of?!"

The Hydra ignores Ose and the women on its back. It continues attacking the Titans, while they, too, battle it. The more they fight, the more Ose realizes something is amiss.

The Emperor glances toward the action. As she watches, Zeus beats the tar out of a pair of Hydra heads while wielding his two infamous lightning rods. Similarly, Poseidon wields a trident, a golden weapon made for expertly channeling his aquatic abilities.

However, what stuns Ose the most is when she looks more closely at Neptune. There, she sees him, too, wielding a trident. And not just any random one, but the same weapon as his father! Somehow, the two of them wield the exact same trident, as if someone had found a way to copy unique artifacts and deliberately bequeathed one to each Titan King.

Ose's expression turns to disbelief. She watches as, without any fanfare or particular tactics, the group of Titans merely attacks the Hydra like a group of stupid idiots, repeating the same moves over and over. The Hydra, likewise, dumbly attacks them back, ignoring the minor threats on its back.

Something isn't right about these Titans... Ose thinks. Why are they acting so... robotic? It's as if they aren't the actual beings who once roamed the Earth, but mere constructs... mere illusions...

As always, her rapid thinking and quick analytical abilities allow her to dig right to the core of the issue.

These aren't revived or reborn Titans. They're... projections? Capable of causing great damage, yet ultimately still only illusions given flesh. Could the Monster Queen have made them? No. Even if she devoured the Sphinx's magic, I find that possibility to be unlikely.

Instead, it seems... this child... did she perhaps summon them from her dreams? But why would a little girl imagine such horrifying monsters? And since when did she learn of their existences?

Many suspicions boil within Ose's mind. She dwells on them for ten seconds, thinking of several possible conclusions. In the end, she shakes her head, not sure what to think.

I've heard of demons and Heroes who could create dream-worlds and other such things in their sleep, but this is the first I've heard or seen anyone summon such high-level existences into the real world. They're so realistic that I mistook them for the real Titan Kings. Given their frenzied rampaging, it seems the child is too young and inexperienced to control them. That works out fine for me. Once I capture her, I'll be able to slowly twist her into my little puppet.

Nothing has changed. I still need to capture her and her mother, but now, the girl has far more direct value to me than I previously expected.

Ose smirks. She turns away from the Titans to look at Daisy once again.

"...eh?"

Ose's smirk vanishes. To her horror, she turns to see Daisy slowly rising to her feet within the energy barrier. The little girl rubs her forehead, as if having awoken from a terrible dream.

When Daisy opens her eyes, the frenzied Titans pause-mid-movement. The Hydra, too, slows its rampage.

Daisy raises her head to look at the Demon Emperor outside her protective bubble. Her face morphs into a frown.

"Hey! I heard what you said! You are a bad person! Very bad!"

All of the Titans swivel their heads in unison. They turn to look at Ose, making her blood turn to ice.

Ose freezes in place while a crushing mental pressure falls upon her.

"You... you... you're not a normal Hero. What the hell are you?!"

Daisy doesn't answer for a moment. Instead, she raises her eyes, as if searching the sky for something.

"Hmm. Daddy's gonna come back soon. I'll have to beat your butt real quick, then."

Daisy turns to look at the Titans.

"Hey! What are you doing? Give this bad lady a spanking! Hurry up!"

Ose's heart jumps into her throat as all of the Titans start moving toward her in unison.

"Oh, SHIT."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 283: Ose's Final Gambit

Emperor Ose activates her magic, zipping five hundred meters straight into the air. She narrowly avoids a gruesome death as the five Titans charging her position stomp on the spot where she stood only a second before. Daisy Hiro, still shielded atop the Hydra's back, easily follows Ose's movement. Her eyes seemingly lock-on to the lightning-type Emperor's mana signature as if she were an ultrabright firefly buzzing around in a pitch-black void.

"Bad lady! Get back down here!"

Daisy 'grabs' at the air, wrapping Ose with an invisible psionic force. Ose's eyes widen in alarm, but before she can teleport away, Daisy yanks downward and flings Ose back toward the Titans below.

"Shiiiiit!"

Ose gets hurled toward her huge, hulking enemies. Terror emerges in her heart as she spots the dead-eyed Zeus lunging his palm out to slap her. Just before the Titan King's hand connects, Ose turns into a bolt of lightning and flies away, putting a full kilometer of distance between herself and her enemies.

"Hah, hah, hah..." Ose gasps, her heart pounding in her chest. Sweat pours down her forehead, most of it due to sheer exhaustion. Having expended most of her mana to maintain her Ultraform and summon the wide-area lightning storm, Ose doesn't appear to be doing too well.

I'm running on fumes! Ose thinks. If I hadn't thrown away my energy attacking that little brat's energy barrier, I'd have plenty to spare right now... but I ended up wasting my mana at the wrong time! Now I'm in a tough spot!

As Ose spends a precious few seconds gathering her breath, Belial shakily pulls herself together. Having suffered a concussion from when one of the Titans attacked her, her thoughts move sluggishly. She raises her head to see the group of Titans standing only half a city block from her position.

"Crap! They're right next to me."

The succubus tries to put some distance between herself and the Titans, but her vision blurs, making her stumble awkwardly to the side. Unable to properly control her limbs, she flops to the ground and coughs weakly.

I'm in bad shape, Belial thinks. Whole world's spinning. Can't see straight. Can't think straight. I want to sleep, but I can't! Have to stay awake... everyone needs me!

Just when Belial starts to despair, a motion nearby catches her eye. She raises her head slightly and gapes, seeing Daisy lowering to the ground, while her mother hovers behind her, Phoebe's eyes still tightly closed as she lays comatose.

"Aunt S'matha!" Daisy says. "Are you okay? Did the bad lady hurt you?"

The little girl lands on the ground while continuing to float her mother behind her. Belial, too tired at this point to even ask what is going on, shakes her head. "Not quite. TheTitandid. Hitmehard. Can't

think... can't think straight. Head hurts."

Her words slur together as she struggles to manipulate her tongue. Luckily, Daisy picks up on the problem. She trots over and presses her palm against Belial's forehead.

"Lots of ouchies. I can make you better!"

Daisy concentrates for a moment, then transfers a burst of healing energy into Belial's skull. After several seconds, Belial's vision clears up. Like a fog melting from her eyes, she swiftly regains her mental faculties and climbs to her feet.

Belial hugs Daisy. "Thank you! Are you okay, sweetie? Where is Ose? Did she run away?"

When Belial pulls away from Daisy, she finds herself momentarily confused by the look of apathy on the child's face. Daisy casually looks at some point beyond the huge Hydra standing motionlessly next to her, where Daisy's five Titans chase after a distant point of light.

"The bad lady's over there," Daisy says, gesturing vaguely to the north. "Don't worry! I'll spank her good!"

Belial shakes her head. "You've done enough, Daisy. I can't put you in harm's way. Why don't you take mommy somewhere safe? Somewhere far away from here? Maybe you can fix her ouchies too?"

Daisy glances back at Phoebe. "Mommy's not hurt, just sleepy. I can't wake her up."

"Oh. Well, that doesn't matter. Stay back for now and let auntie spank the bad lady, okay?" Belial says.

"Okay!" Daisy chirps. "I'll tell the Big Men not to hit you again. That was very bad of them."

Belial stares at the little girl for a moment in disbelief.

"The... the 'big men'? Do you mean the Titans? You're controlling them?"

"Uh huh!" Daisy says, nodding quickly. "I got all tired, then I saw the Big Men. Daddy always says if you see a bad person to get an adult. So I did!"

Belial rubs her forehead. "Alright... I think I understand. Sort of. Okay, you just stay here. I'll be back soon!"

Leaving Daisy behind, Belial quickly jumps atop the Hydra, half-expecting it to attack her. Instead, the Hydra stands motionless, its eyes glazed, as if waiting for orders.

Belial's heart skips a beat. *Did Daisy summon this Hydra somehow? Maybe the other one, too? What the hell is going on? When Jason gets back, I'll need to have a long talk with him about his little girl!*

Shaking her head, Belial snaps her attention toward the distant aura of a Demon Emperor. She locks onto Ose's spiritual presence, now weaker than ever thanks to her explosive mana expenditure. The Emperor of Infiltration does all she can to dodge the five Titans, but her weakened Ultraform proves unable to keep away from Daisy's Titans.

Zeus and Ivaldi, the two fastest Titans, easily keep up with Ose. Any time she teleports around or turns into a lightning bolt to flee, the two Titan Kings chase after her. Zeus, using his Thunderstep, and Ivaldi, by turning into a beam of light.

As for Cronus, Poseidon, and Neptune, these three heavy hitters work to fence her in, their intelligence having skyrocketed since Daisy's awakening.

"Aaargh!" Ose cries, as a compressed blast of water slams into her back. The fifty tons of liquid falls upon her from above, knocks her out of the sky, and flings her to the ground below. Before she can strike the ground, Ose explodes into a burst of electricity and darts to the east, only for Ivaldi to intercept her!

The Titan King raises her arm overhead, conjuring an explosive ball of Holy Magic. She fires it directly into Ose's flight path, but Ose doesn't get more than 0.00001 seconds to react. She flies directly into the energetic orb and dematerializes from her lightning-bolt form, shrieking bloody murder as the holy energy explodes against her body.

Like a bird smacking against a window, Ose tumbles from the air. She falls to the ground and *thunks* against the pavement below, breaking both of her legs.

"Nnnngghh!" Ose whimpers, gritting her teeth. The once-terrifying Emperor now appears as weak as a beaten dog, cowering under the terror of all five coordinated Titans. Ose grits her teeth and weaves a quick magic sign, zapping toward the nearest source of electricity in the area, which turns out to be the Rust Bucket, Hero City's very first factory. She impacts the building's wall and shatters it to pieces, then flies toward a miniature fusion reactor inside, one of the many small models made by the Wordsmith to supply electricity to the energy-hogging facilities in his city.

Like a drug-crazed addict, Ose stretches out her hand and siphons every drop of the reactor's available power only a second before Ivaldi crashes through the ceiling to grab at her.

Unfortunately, even with the incredible amount of energy packed into the reactor, Ose's broken body only manages to absorb and retain one percent of it. The rest oozes from her pores uselessly, wasted by her fatigued mind and spirit. Still, she manages to heal her broken legs and regain a bit of her stamina, so Ose dodges again, evading Ivaldi at the last second.

As the Queen of Divinity and the Thunder King chase after the Emperor of Infiltration, Ose's mind races at a thousand times any normal human's ability to think.

I can't keep this up! These damn Titans won't give me a moment to rest! Earlier, they acted like wild animals, but now that the brat has awoken, they've regained a huge amount of their mental faculties! Even in my prime condition, I wouldn't dare to face them alone, let alone as I am now!

Ose zips through a narrow alley, only to bolt straight upward as Neptune and Poseidon fire dozens of compressed water-blasts at her. When she jumps into the air, Ose narrowly evades Cronus, who tries to slap her out of the air with his palm.

Gritting her teeth, Ose makes a bold decision.

I'm getting out of here! This operation has failed, but I'd rather keep my life and at least return to fight another day!

Having hinged so much of her future on Stormbringer's success, the mere thought of fleeing burns Ose's insides with shame and humiliation.

How could I have planned for all these things going wrong? It's not fair! The humans tricked me! Even without the Wordsmiths, that damned Sphinx was more than enough to terrorize my armies! Beelzebub got his ass kicked, Bael lost his brains, Artorias turned rogue, and Mephisto couldn't even capture the devil-damned Wordsmith's soul! The only competent demon was me! ME! I did everything right, but as usual, my pathetic, idiot subordinates failed me!

Without a shred of irony, Ose mentally blames everyone but herself for Stormbringer's failure. As she dodges five more concentrated attacks, blood-vessels dilate in her eyes, giving her a crazed look.

It's all their fault! Yama couldn't even capture the Wordsmith's daughter, and that was his only task! Why did I get stuck leading Hell's Most Useless Bastards?! Some so-called 'First Hell,' hah! Pathetic!

Giving up on any further fighting, Ose shoots one hateful glance at the Hydra. She vaguely senses Daisy's presence somewhere nearby it, but doesn't manage to spot the child.

"You'll regret crossing me, brat!" Ose cries, before darting to the west, aiming to flee through the Warpgate back to Hell.

Ose's speed, standing at the absolute apex of what a fleshly being can achieve, allows her to instantly accelerate to the speed of light. In the minutest fraction of a second, she transmits herself in a straight line toward the Warpgate, aiming to jump straight through and save herself.

However, she is not the only speedster on the battlefield.

Zeus and Ivaldi, guided by the distant telepathic commands of a small child, intercept Ose's thoughts before she can activate her magic. Right as Ose jumps toward the Warpgate, Ivaldi appears at the midpoint, just above the Western Front. Her body shimmers with holy energy, causing Ose's eyes to widen in alarm.

Shit!

Unable to stop her magic in time, Ose fires forward like a bullet, traveling in a straight-line toward her destination. This movement, her fastest method of travel, also comes with the least agility, making her unable to shift her trajectory by even a fraction of a degree.

Ose slams into Ivaldi's holy-magic-enveloped body like a fly crashing into an electric zapper. She instantly bounces off the Queen of Divinity and rockets to the ground below, momentarily losing consciousness from the sheer power behind her impact.

Boom!!

The Third Emperor hurtles into the field of demons beneath her, conveniently landing not far away from Uriel herself. The Archangel defends the completely barren Western Front, reaping the lives of any demons foolish enough to try taking her on. With practically zero allied forces left alive following the Atlas Cannon's bombardment, only Uriel stands alone to protect Hero City from the western invaders.

Ose's missile-like crash into the dirt grabs plenty of attention not only from the demon army, but from Uriel herself. The demons, already reluctant to charge at the unstoppable Archangel and her four Holy

Constructs, pause to stare first at Ose's crashed figure, and then at Ivaldi hovering in the skies above. The seventy-foot-tall Titan King captures their attention, frightening them silly.

"Who the hell is she?!"

"WHAT is she?! Is that a human? How is she so BIG?!"

Some of the oldest demons, those who fought during the Energy Wars, vaguely recall tales of giants, ancient enemies of the demons. However, with their memories having been wiped during the last hundred thousand years of demon rule, few can recall anything but the haziest memories of the distant past.

Uriel, meanwhile, flicks her gaze to the Titan, then to Ose. A look of confusion passes over her face as she tries to figure out just what the heck is going on.

"Titan? Ivaldi? Fighting Ose? I know not the reason behind this development. Is Ivaldi my friend or foe?"

Despite never having seen Ivaldi in the flesh, nor having fought her, Uriel still knows plenty about the Queen of Divinity, given how Barbatos has heard stories detailing the War in Heaven many times, along with his two mental passengers. The Archangel recognizes Ivaldi, but doesn't immediately perceive whether she is a friend or a foe.

A moment later, Zeus arrives on the scene. The Titan King raises his foot, then stomps down on Ose, intending to crush her into meat paste. Just before his foot makes contact with the ground, Ose awakens, her body instinctively teleporting to the side to protect itself.

Zeus's foot misses the mark, but Ose unfortunately flees into the wrong direction, arriving directly in front of Uriel!

A millisecond of realization flickers through the beaten and battered Emperor's eyes as she rapidly contemplates her life's choices.

"Dammit!"

Despite not knowing whether the Titans are friends or foes, Uriel doesn't hesitate. She launches a simple punch straight at Ose's face, blasting her backward and sending her sprawling to the dirt. The lightning crackling around Ose's figure appears far less energetic than before, her Ultraform clearly having reached its limits.

"Ugh..." Ose grunts.

The Emperor lays on her back. Her body spasms painfully as she climbs to her feet. Surrounded by enemies on all sides, Ose begins to panic, realizing she may not escape this encounter.

Cronus arrives. So do Poseidon and Neptune. These three Titans, much slower than their two speedster-counterparts, still manage to clear the two-mile gap from Hero City to the Western Front in record time. They arrive behind Uriel, but pay her no mind, allowing Uriel to breathe a sigh of relief.

It seems these Titans are my allies, after all. I wonder what sorcerer revived them from the grave? The Wordsmith, perhaps?

Not particularly caring about the details, Uriel starts stomping toward Ose.

"Demon wench. Filthy murderer. Thy kind slew my people..." Uriel mutters, her voice laced with fury. "Today, thou shalt finally pay for thy sins!"

As Uriel closes the gap, another voice rings out.

"No! She's mine!"

Belial, once again transformed into her Pure Succubus form, dives down from the sky and crashes feet-first into the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"You've got nowhere to run, Ose..." Belial says, her voice just as filled with rage as Uriel's. "You'll pay for your crimes."

An instant later, another figure flickers into existence twenty feet directly behind Ose.

This one, a red-haired female standing seven feet tall with butterfly wings, turns out to be none other than Blinker, the Monster Queen.

"No!" Blinker shouts, gnashing her teeth. "Ose's *mine*! She killed Kar!"

With five Titans and three Emperor-level powerhouses surrounding her, for the second time in her life, a sense of complete despair and helplessness washes over Ose. Not since her childhood, when humans captured her and rendered her helpless, has she felt as vulnerable and alone as she does in this moment.

The Emperor of Infiltration trembles, unable to think of an escape method. With Ivaldi and Zeus matching her in speed, while all the rest together prove more than her match in strength, she truly finds herself completely alone and at the mercy of her enemies. None of the pathetic weakling demons in the distance take a step closer, nor would their feeble power assist her in any way. Seeing the imminent downfall of their leader, some of the less-dimwitted ones even start beelining for the portal to make their escape. Not a single one is stupid or bloodthirsty enough to think their strength can break past the Western Front's powerhouses.

At that moment, Uriel frowns. She turns her head to the north, where she spots a tall, hulking figure strolling toward them.

"Bael?"

Uriel goes on the alert. Unlike Ose, who has been drained of her spirit and fighting power, Bael appears just as full of energy as when he first arrived on Tarus II. Strangely, his lone remaining eye no longer contains the same degree of dimness as usual. Instead, a menacing aura drips off his body, making his appearance far more intimidating than usual.

The Duke of Pain's arrival causes some of the fleeing demons to turn around and gasp. Despite him only being a Duke, his presence energizes their spirits more than Ose's ever could. As a symbol of demonkind's might and a veritable hero-like deity who fought during the Ancient Era and the Energy Wars, few Emperors, let alone mere Dukes, command a prestige anywhere near Bael's level.

Ose's thoughts find a spark of hope.

Bael? Maybe if he joins with me, I'll have a chance at escaping! He looks as if he's broken out of his earlier daze!

The Duke of Pain slowly walks toward the group of human-allied powerhouses. As he approaches, one of the Titans attacks! Zeus darts toward him, activating his Thunderstep to flicker over and stomp his foot down.

BOOM!

The Titan's foot crashes atop Bael, only for the Duke of Pain to casually raise his arm and catch the foot mid-stomp! He sinks into the planet's soil, but otherwise maintains his footing, unperturbed.

"Outta my way, punk."

Bael throws the Titan upward, launching Zeus into the sky! An instant later, Bael coils strength into his legs and leaps out of the pit, aiming to land beside Ose.

When the Duke crashes into the dirt, the eyes of all the spectators darken visibly.

Belial grits her teeth. *In a contest of strength, I can overpower Bael, but actually injuring him is beyond me! Even as a Duke, he's too formidable! Now that he's here, it will be much harder to kill Ose! Maybe if the humans still had those ballistic rounds, we could take out his other eye...*

Indeed, Bael's right eye appears just as hideously deformed and hollow as before. His left eye, however, locks onto Ose with a commanding presence, making her breathe a sigh of relief.

"About time you snapped out of your stupor!" Ose hisses. "So long as you and I work together, we-"

Before Ose can finish her sentence, Bael lunges his hand toward her neck!

Weakened beyond belief and taken off-guard, Ose's heart skips a beat. She fails to dodge the Duke's grab as he locks his hands around her throat.

"Guhak! B-Bael! Whuh- koff! What are you doing?!" Ose shrieks. "I-idiot! Snap out of it! Those nanites are muh-messing with your brain!"

Bael eyeballs Ose. His lips curl into a snarl.

"Ain't no nano-shits fucking with my head now, Ose. You *bitch*. All this time, I wondered who did it. I wondered who *killed him*. It was you. It was YOU!"

Dumbfounded, Ose can only feebly grab at Bael's fingers to try and pry them off her neck. She fails.

"Kuh! Killed? Killed who?! Mis-misunderstanding! This is a misunderstanding, Bael!"

Uriel, Belial, and Blinker all watch, confused, as Bael tightens his grip.

"Stupid Ose..." Bael mutters. "I might be dumb, but I ain't no *idiot*."

The Duke's expression turns frightening.

"Now, it's time for you to SUFFER!"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 284: Bael's Bestest Buddy

Much earlier in the day, at the far edge of the Western Battlefront.

"Baaaaael!! You bottom-feeding sludgebrain!"

Ose teleports away from the Duke of Pain, leaving demonkind's strongest warrior punching at the air. Bael mindlessly swings his fists a few more times before finally stopping.

"...Eh? Where'd that fella go?"

Bael spends the next thirty seconds dumbly staring ahead, his glossed-over eyes searching for something that may never have been there in the first place.

"What was I doing again? Where am I? Man, my stinkin' head just won't stop throbbin'."

Beside Bael, a tall, good-looking demon fellow with wild white hair slaps him on the shoulder. "Bael! My man! Calm it down, brother! What are you doin', getting all hyped up about nothing, eh?"

The lanky demon wears a ripped-up leather jacket and pants, both colored black to contrast with his blood-red skin. Multiple piercings line his ears, lip, and nose, as well as his tongue and chin, too. His aura appears somewhat casual, as if he hasn't a care in the world.

Bael massages his hollowed-out, missing right eye, making his brain tingle ticklishly.

"Ah, I dunno, Shax. There was this weird grating thing buzzing in my ear. Really pissed me off."

"Sounds like a woman to me!" Shax laughs. The Emperor of Hype wraps his arm around Bael's back and shakes him up a bit, making the Duke of Pain drool dumbly. "Forget the broad, man! Let's have some fun!"

"Fun? Alright. Sounds good."

Bael casually discards the useless memories of whatever that one random female demon from earlier was talking about. Already, he's lost all interest in her crazy, hare-brained 'plans,' dealings which only make his poor, tiny little pea-brain hurt.

As the Duke of Pain and the Emperor of Hype start slowly wandering eastward, toward the distant roar of gunfire and explosions, they melt into the sea of demons flooding that way. Curiously, while all the demons instinctively steer clear of crashing into Bael's back, avoiding him thanks to his Duke-level aura, the same doesn't appear to be true of his friend, Shax. Many demons plow right through Shax, passing through the Emperor's body... almost as if he isn't there.

"Oppen! Bael, morg a florg!" One random demon yells as he runs past.

Bael glances at the speaker. "Huh?"

The demon pauses for a split second to shoot Bael a thumbs up before repeating his gibberish. "Moodoo plala! Morg a florg!"

The Duke of Pain nods dumbly. "Okay. Sure."

As if reassured by Bael's answer, the demon continues running off into the distance.

"...The heck did that guy say?" Bael asks. "Everyone's so damn annoying today. Can't even talk right. At least I've still got you, Shax."

Shax stands beside Bael, smiling kindly at his friend. "Sorry I've been gone for so long, mate. I've been all busy and stuff, rockin' on like it's Hong Kong!"

"Bahaha!" Bael laughs, as if hearing the funniest joke in the world. "That rhymed! Hahaha!"

* * *

The two demons slowly and casually stroll eastward. Bael doesn't head toward the Western Front, but instead randomly wanders toward the Southern Front, skirting all the way around the Horned Forest. The Duke of Pain pays no attention to his surroundings. His feet move on autopilot, taking him places his mind has no control over.

"So, how've you been?" Shax asks. "We've gotta catch up, grandpa!"

Bael nods. "Yeah. Uh, let's see. Well, you remember the big wars, right? With the, uh, aliens?"

"Yup," Shax answers, his smile fading slightly. "It's been a while, but I 'member the good old days."

"Well, after the war, I got myself a place on Hell Harbor," Bael says. "Settled down with a buncha ladies."

"Livin' the dream, player!" Shax laughs. "Now that's what I'm talking about! Gotta get yourself some groupies!"

"Mhm. Got some real cuties living under me. After the war ended, I didn't really have much to do. I figured these ladies all had a hard time, so I'd help 'em out."

"You didn't start a new band?" Shax asks. "Come on, brother. You know what I always say. You've gotta let the music flow through your soul!"

Bael's expression turns dim.

"I dunno, Shax. After you left me, I didn't feel like listening to music anymore. It just... it didn't have the same-"

Before Bael can finish his sentence, a light stinging sensation cracks against his cheek, like a bee smacking into him while flying at full speed. The Duke of Pain pauses mid-step, only to find himself standing at the edge of a human battle line. Dozens of exosuit-wearing troopers line up around him, taking aim with their guns.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

A rain of bullets and blasters fires upon Bael, who merely stands in place, staring slack-jawed at the people shooting him.

"...Huh? How'd I get here? Where am I?"

Bael slowly swivels his head around, paying no attention to the concentration of ordinance blasting him from every angle. One bullet strikes his armpit, making him flinch.

"Ah! That tickles! Stop that! Hehehe."

The Duke scratches his armpit to relieve the tickling sensation, but otherwise pays no attention to the bullets and beams smacking harmlessly against his skin.

Some distance behind Bael, a dozen demons stare wide-eyed as Bael 'heroically' stands with his chest puffed out.

"Look at that!" A random Demon Lord screeches. "Bael's such a badass! He does not give a *fuck* about the humans! They're blasting him to kingdom come, but he's ignoring them like they're teeny imps poking his heels!"

"Bael must have come all the way here to reinforce us!" Another demon pipes up. "Who says the Duke of Pain is a dummy? He knew we were having trouble taking out the fleshies, so he showed up to draw their attention. Now we can make a push to attack them!"

"He must be tryin'a lower their morale to rock bottom! Stupid fleshbags, they'll never be able to beat Bael! He's our best warrior!"

While the demons fire off all manner of predictions regarding Bael's intent, the humans do the same. One of the field Lieutenants trembles in fear as he yells into his radio.

"I repeat, the Duke of Pain has been sighted! The son of a bitch is going to tear through us like a hot knife through butter! We need reinforcements!"

Seeing the Duke standing all alone, *menacingly*, many human and monster soldiers begin to tremble in fright as Bael's 'terrifying' gaze sweeps over them. His casual disdain for their existence scares them out of their wits, making them feel like ants trying to nibble at the feet of a lion.

"High-powered infantry ordinance ineffective! We're bringing the long-range cannons online! Clear the area!"

A dual-barreled cannon used for shelling the demons at long-ranges sits atop a nearby embattlement some fifty feet in the air. It pauses its continual bombardment to swivel in Bael's direction.

BOOM! BOOM!

Multiple artillery shells fire practically at point-blank range, a mere five hundred meters away, blasting apart the ground Bael stands on while burying him in the soil.

The humans watch in horror as Bael climbs out of the dirt, a look of rage on his face.

"Shit! Bombardment ineffective! We can't hurt him at all!"

Even as waves of panic surge through the humans' ranks, Bael merely shakes his head, trying to clear away his disorientation from the explosion.

"Ahh... damn, Shax. Why's everyone always pickin' on me? Can't a fella walk and talk with his friend in peace?"

"They're just jealous of your good looks, Bael-bro," Shax replies, shaking his head in dismay. "Remember what I always say? Sometimes, you've gotta step up and be the better man. Be the bigger

man! Be a real man!"

Bael nods. "Yeah, shucks, you're right. I can't blame a bunch of cute kiddos for getting all worked up. They don't know any better."

As Bael mumbles to himself, more humans panic and fire additional bullets at him, but he just turns around and walks away while shaking his head.

"The Duke of Pain... he's leaving the battlefield!" The lieutenant says, shocked by his own words. "Maybe... maybe he's showing us mercy!"

Meanwhile, the demons gawk as Bael leaves, all of them jumping to their own wild conclusions.

"Bael doesn't give a damn about the humans!" One Demon Grunt screeches. "What a badass! They're too pitiful for him to even bother fighting! Come on guys, we can't look lame in front of the Duke of Pain! Let's rip these fleshies to pieces!"

As Bael continues heading north, absentmindedly skirting the border of the Eastern Front, he ignores the battles raging around him.

The Duke of Pain glances at his old friend, someone he hasn't seen in tens of millennia. A vague sadness appears in his eyes.

"What's the matter, bro?" Shax asks. "You wanna jam out? Let's go up on that mountain over there and get our rock on!"

Bael follows Shax's finger to the edge of Hero City, at the looming mountain range past the humans' battle lines.

"Mountain, huh? Yeah, sure. That could be fun."

He pays no attention to the looks of horror and despair on the humans' faces as he casually walks through their battle lines. Dozens of guns fire on him, but he doesn't feel a thing.

"The Duke of Pain is approaching Hero City! I repeated, threat level red! The Duke of Pain has bypassed our perimeter! We can't slow him down!"

Even as his appearance throws the humans into disarray, Bael disregards the goings-on of the world. He strolls forward, watching absentmindedly as countless humans and monsters in the rearguard shriek in terror and dive away, scrambling to escape his 'wrath.'

"Look at his eye! He's freaking pissed! I'm not getting within grabbing distance, no sir!"

Minutes later, Bael passes all of the logistical backlines, then coils strength into his legs and leaps skyward.

Thump!

Bael lands atop the hundred-foot-tall cliff, steadying himself for a moment as he turns around to gaze back at the Eastern Front.

"Hmm. Air's pretty good up here..." Bael mutters.

He turns to the side, only to see his buddy Shax clutching a guitar. The Emperor of Hype motions with his hands, making a set of custom-made 'slap drums' appear before Bael.

"Ohhh!" Bael says, as a nostalgic look appears in his eye. "My old drums! I ain't played with these since... since..."

"No need to yap about that sad stuff," Shax says, waving his hand nonchalantly. "Come on, man. Let's shred!"

Moments later, Shax positions himself right at the edge of the cliff. He strums rapidly on his guitar, blasting out music while headbanging. Bael smiles stupidly. He, too, begins slapping on his drums rhythmically, memories of all the times he used to play in the old band reminding him of his past expertise.

Bop-bop-bop, bam-bo-dam, bop-bop-bop, bam-bo-dam!

The more Bael plays, the more his arms loosen up. He grins and bobs his head, grooving hard to Shax's tunes.

However, after several minutes, Bael's smile fades.

"Wait."

Bael slows his playing.

"Somethin' ain't right, Shax. We're, uh... missing somethin'."

Shax, too, stops riffing. The wild-haired Emperor turns around and cocks his head.

"Something? Don't you mean *someone*?"

"Yeah. Where's Murmur? It just ain't right without her singing along."

Shax stares evenly at his friend.

"Murmur can't come here, Bael. It's just you and me, now."

"She can't?" Bael asks. "What, has she got a hot date or somethin'?"

Shax doesn't answer. Instead, the Emperor of Hype merely shakes his head before looking away.

"Sorry, big bro. I know it's been hard on you."

"I'm a tough guy. Nothing can hurt me," Bael says.

"Nah. That ain't true. Nobody's invincible. Not even you."

Both demons fall silent. Bael plops down at the edge of the cliff and leaves his legs overhanging the edge. The distant sounds of gunfire, explosions, and screams of agony barely give Bael even the slightest cause for concern. He absentmindedly watches as multiple horrific eviscerations occur among the humans and demons alike. No matter if Scythers disembowel their human opponents or humans bisect their demonic adversaries, such horrific displays of violence don't even cause the Duke of Pain to bat his eye.

"I uh... I lost contact with you for a while..." Bael says. "Near the end of the war. Honestly, I thought maybe you just didn't wanna play with me in the band anymore."

Shax says nothing. He merely turns his head to look at Bael while listening silently.

"And then, uh... well, you know what happened. Next thing I know... the humans put those... those things in your head. The metal things. Made you act like a real jerk."

Bael stares out at the horizon, his brain slowly churning as he recalls several ancient memories.

"I couldn't figure it out. You kept hitting me. Yelling like a wild dog. I thought maybe I made you mad. Then you blasted me with that awful noise, made my ears ring. When the humans jumped out and surrounded me, I even thought you might've joined hands with 'em willingly."

The Duke shakes his head. "Of course you didn't. You never gave a shit about all that dumb politics-crap. Why would you join the humans? Man. I was such an idiot."

"It's not your fault, Bael-bro..." Shax mutters. "I know you were confused. You did what you had to."

"No, I didn't..." Bael mutters. He wipes his nose, sniffing quietly. "I did you in with my own hands. I hurt you. My brother. Why did I do that? I was so dumb. I shoulda asked someone for help. Someone smart."

Shax walks over to Bael. He plops down at the cliff's edge and rests his hand on Bael's shoulder.

"Don't blame yourself, man. You always do that. You trying to make me cry or somethin'?"

"*Sniff*. Nah, Shax. I don't want that."

"Great. Tell me something cool, then. Something chill. How's my old Hell doing, eh? You been taking good care of it?"

Bael glances at Shax, then lowers his eyes.

"Err..."

"Come on, Bael! Don't tell me you never go there! What about Melody? Viola? How are the girls?"

"I-I dunno," Bael says, flushing with embarrassment. "I can't bring myself to look 'em in the eye. Not after what I did to you."

"You're still hung up on that?" Shax asks, disappointment in his voice. "Do you really think I'd blame you? After what the humans did to me? You put me out of my misery, man. That's what a real bro would do."

"A real bro..." Bael whispers. "Is that *me*? Nuh-uh. A *real* bro would have tried harder to fix you. But... I was too dumb. I didn't know what to do, so I just used my fists. That's all I ever do. Lousy, good for nothing, me! Stupid-ass idiot! IDIOT! All I ever do is slap shit around! I'm stinkin' useless! USELESS!"

Suddenly, Bael punches himself! He batters the side of his head once, twice, and three times!

Wham! Wham! Wham!

The Duke of Pain roars as he physically battles himself, socking himself with enough strength to crush titanium. Even so, his fists leave no marks. His body, all but impervious to physical damage, leaves him in the same condition as if a soft breeze were to caress his face.

"Ahhh! I hate myself! I hate *me*! A stupid, dumbass idiot! Why can't I do anything right?! Why do I gotta watch as all my friends die?! I hate being dumb!"

Shax eyes him without judgment.

"This isn't just about me, is it?" Shax asks. "Bro. You couldn't have saved Satan, either."

"Satan! Agares! All of the old gang! They're all dead now!" Bael howls, as tears well up in his eye. "Even Deebs is out cold! I'm all alone, stuck with a bunch of little punks I have ta' babysit! A bunch of brats! Shit... I hate feeling like such a loser."

Shax smiles kindly. "You've always been like this, Bael. Why do you think I asked you to play in my band? I saw how lonely you looked. You were always sitting by yourself. The other guys acted like you were some boss-man way above them. They got too scared to hang out with you."

"I miss the old days!" Bael sobs. "I miss when we all just hung out playing Sticks and Bones! Why does everything have to be so complicated now?! Everyone always has some stupid plan they're working on, and it sucks! I don't understand any of it!"

As Bael cries, lamenting his lack of intelligence, Shax turns away to gaze into the distance.

"You're bumming me out, Bael," Shax says. "These ain't good vibes. Look, bro, just think about a cute little puppy for a while. You remember that one song Murmur wrote for you? 'Little Puppy Run'? You always liked that tune."

Bael pauses his blubbering to nod dumbly. "Uh... uh huh... I remember..."

"Think about that puppy. Think about some cute little bunnies. They've got big, floppy ears, right?"

"Big... floppy ears..." Bael mumbles, repeating Shax's words.

"Yeah! And fluffy fur. Big wide eyes."

"Big eyes..." Bael repeats.

After several minutes, Bael calms down.

He stares ahead vacantly, his eyes seemingly gazing into the abyss.

"Sorry, Shax. I, uh... lost myself for a minute."

Shax nods. "It happens, my dude. No biggie. Sometimes you've gotta drop some tears."

"Hey, uh... whatever happened to Murmur?" Bael asks. "I never saw her after the war. She just seemed to... disappear. I assumed she died, but never found her body. Do you have any idea, Shax? It's been nagging at me for ages."

The poofy-haired Emperor shakes his head. "Nah. If you don't know, then neither do I, bro. That's not how this works."

Bael glances at his friend. "...Because you ain't really here, right?"

"Well..."

The Duke kicks his heel against the cliff's side. "Tch. You're just a ghost of my imagination. I'm seeing shit I shouldn't cuz the humans stabbed me with that nasty eye-poker thing."

Shax climbs to his feet and stretches. "Who says I'm a ghost? Haven't you figured anything out yet, Bael?"

"Like what?" Bael asks. "Don't play word games with me, you little brat. You know I ain't smart enough to guess right."

"Look, man, it's like this..." Shax says, as he starts casually pacing back and forth. "You've always been a... special guy. You're not like other demons."

"Because I'm invincible?" Bael asks.

"Something like that," Shax answers. "But your body is hardly your most unique trait. It's actually your soul that's special."

Bael frowns. "My soul? Whaddya mean?"

"Things didn't go so well for me..." Shax says. "You know what you did to stop me. I don't blame you for that. I wasn't myself. I tried to hurt you, all because the humans made me do it. I wanted to apologize, but I couldn't even control my mouth. It was... it was like I was a prisoner in my own body."

The Duke of Pain keeps quiet. He listens to Shax's explanation without saying a word.

"Even though the humans took over my brain and body, they didn't have what it takes to completely overpower my soul. So, in the end, I managed to trick 'em a little bit."

Shax continues. "When you landed that last punch and did a *snappy* on my neck... I managed to free myself for a moment. With my last bit of strength, I planted a little something on you. Always hoped we'd get to chat sooner, but..."

Bael facepalms.

"Oh, devils. I get it now, man. Shit."

"Yeah..." Shax says, scratching his chin awkwardly. "You're kinda garbage when it comes to magic and soul manipulation, big bro. I kept trying to get your attention, but you never managed to hear me. Not until the humans shot you with that barb."

Bael laughs. "Bahaha! You're kidding me! All this devil-damned time, and you were right here in my head? Listening to me and my problems? Don't tell me you heard me blubbing like a little bitch after you died!"

"Err..." Shax mutters awkwardly. "...I didn't blame ya, bro. It wasn't a big deal. Besides, I can only wake up here and there, not all the time. My soul doesn't have a ton of juice left."

"Fuck you, jerkbag!" Bael yells, though his tone doesn't contain a trace of hostility. "You shithead! I can't tell if I'm madder at you or me! What a bunch of rotten luck."

Several seconds pass.

Bael slowly clambers to his feet, then starts walking north along Hero City's cliff border.

Shax floats over and falls into step beside Bael.

"Where are you going?" Shax asks. "Aren't you gonna mope around a bit longer? Cry a bit more for my sake?"

"Shaddap!" Bael says. He waves his hand at Shax casually, as if having seen through a random pest's plans. "You're a real dickweed, Shax. Poking at me, making me all choked up just to get your rocks off. You haven't changed a bit!"

"Hahaha!" Shax laughs. "Guilty as charged! It wasn't exactly fun hanging around you, doing nothin' for all those years, but at least it was better than running the Hell of Isolation. You know I hated managing a bunch of goobers!"

"Right, right..." Bael replies. "Look, man, since you're here now, let's cut the crap. We should hang out and have fun, just like the good old days!"

"Yeah? What've you got in mind?" Shax asks.

Bael smiles devilishly.

"Let's pull some pranks!"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 285: Clumsy Bael!

At the Eastern Front of Tarus II, a horde of demons stands idly and watches as a distant battle between the Sphinx and a pair of Demon Barons plays out. This wall of demons stays put, keeping out of the battle they haven't a chance of influencing. They simply decide to wait for their superiors to call the attack, though nobody really wants to get involved with Emperor-level powerhouses.

"Damn! Look at Zamiel go! Do ya think he's stronger than Duriel?"

"Maybe not. Zamiel's definitely smarter than Duriel, but Duriel's got the edge in toughness. Dude can take a fist like nobody's business!"

"Hehe. *Take a fist.*"

"Shut up, you know that's not what I mean!"

As multiple demons watch the distant battle with rapt attention, a newcomer stealthily slips into their ranks, then grabs the shoulder of a particularly oversized Demon Lord.

"Hey, Viggo!"

A voice booms out amongst the crowd, startling the demons present. To everyone's alarm, they turn to see Bael, the Duke of Pain, standing in their midst. Not a single person remembers seeing him appear, least of all the demon whose shoulder he grabbed.

That demon, 'Viggo,' whips his head around to look at the newcomer with surprise. "Bael? The heck are you doin' here?"

Bael doesn't answer his question. Instead, a stupid smile stretches across his face.

"Is your fridge running?"

Viggo blinks. "What?"

"Better catch it!" Bael bellows, before bursting into wild laughter. "Bahahaha! Ahahaha!"

Without another word, Bael coils strength into his legs and leaps away, leaving Viggo standing frozen in confusion.

"...*Huh?* Fridge? Catch it? The... the *fuck* is he talking about?"

Bael soars through the skies, clutching his belly as he cackles like a madman. Once friction and gravity catches up to him, Bael lands a fair distance to the north of the horde of demons, his powerful jump only taking him so far.

"Hahahaha! Did you see that, Shax?! The look on that dumb cunt's face! Ahaha! I gottem' good!"

Bael's illusory soul-friend, the Emperor of Hype, winces in response.

"Sure, brah. Funny prank, I guess. Kind of thought you'd do something a bit wackier, though."

"We've only just started!" Bael declares, lightly punching his chest. "I've gotta scare the crap out of a bunch of other fellas, next. Aw, man! We're gonna make waves and remind people who the Prankster Duo

used to be!"

Despite his seeming lack of enthusiasm, Shax lightens up a bit when he spots the happiness on Bael's face. "You're a simple guy, bro. Always did like that about you."

After a few more moments of laughter, Bael quickly sobers up.

"Yeah, man. You know me. None of that dumb political crap matters at all. Fighting humans, angels, whatever; who gives a damn? All I wanna do is have a fun time with you and remember the good old days."

Shax smiles. "Sure, brah. As for me, I'm just glad we can finally talk again. It was pretty boring watching you meow at random fluffy animals."

Bael nearly jumps out of his skin. "What, you saw?!"

"Didn't have a choice. I'm stuck with ya, remember?"

Several seconds of awkward silence follow. Bael turns his head away and turns as red as an apple.

"...You better not tell anyone."

"Nobody can hear me but you, chief," Shax replies. "Now, what say we get a move on, ay?"

Bael nods. "Yeah."

Bael returns to the demons at the Eastern Front, eager to pull a few more 'pranks.'

* * *

A few hours later, after dawdling around and swapping more war stories with Shax, Bael leaves and heads off to the Northern Front of the Stormbringer invasion forces. Having started at the west, moved to the south, then to the east, the Duke has practically completed a full circuit by this point.

Before Bael can reach the rallying demonic forces, he pauses to look even further northward.

"Whooooa! Lookit that, Shax!"

Shax follows his gaze. "Oh, devils."

The Duke of Pain starts gaily skipping toward a huge, monstrous beast, one standing thirty feet tall with claws as big as an automobile. Resembling a gigantic carnivorous mole, this creature sports a thick coat of fur, overdeveloped front-limbs for burrowing, and a ferocious gaze capable of rendering weak-willed creatures unable to flee. The sheer aura of domination it projects rivals many of the top predators of Tarus II, all of them equally bloodthirsty in different ways.

"What a cutie-pie!" Bael squeals. "Come here, little guy! Big Bael wants to play!"

The giant mole-creature, sensing the approach of a formidable enemy, instantly whips its gaze toward the Duke of Pain. Despite lacking higher intelligence, it and the other creatures of the land have long since noticed the countless demons descending upon Tarus II, putting them on high alert. As Bael draws near, the mole slaps its front claws against the ground and roars, sending a warning message to the intruder!

Do not enter my territory!

Clear as a bell, this frightening message splashes against Bael harmlessly. He smiles giddily as he skips closer and closer to the giant predator.

"I'm gonna call you FLUFFY!" Bael declares. "Lookit this big teddy bear, Shax! Isn't he the cutest thing!"

The moment Bael arrives in the mole-monster's range, it attacks! The giant creature swipes its automobile-sized claws at Bael, catching the Duke off-guard.

Wham!

Bael goes flying as a half-ton of reinforced bone slams into him. He hurtles to the side, crashes into a boulder, and shatters it to pieces.

A moment later, Bael leaps to his feet and claps his hands. "Bahaha! So adorable! The little fella wants to play! C'mere, boy!"

Bael runs toward the monster, making the monster recoil in fear. Seeing the comparatively diminutive Demon Duke totally unharmed, the monster's instincts take over.

"Roar! Roar!"

It bellows warnings to try and frighten Bael away, but the Duke merely interprets those noises as if they were the meows of a cute little kitty-cat!

Once again, when Bael draws into range, the mole attacks! It swipes its claws at the Duke, but this time, Bael stomps his foot down and lifts his arms! He catches the claw-swipe and stabilizes his footing, alarming the giant mole.

"Gotcha!" Bael yells. "Who's the little tough guy now, huh? Bahaha! Upsy-daisy!"

Before the mole can fully comprehend Bael's raw strength, it receives a terrible fright! Bael clutches the mole's claws and lifts up, hoisting the mole overhead.

"Graawr?!"

Defying the creature's comprehension of how strong such a tiny demon can be, the mole momentarily levitates half a foot off the ground, hoisted by its front limb.

"Hup!"

Bael coils strength into his back and biceps, then throws the monster south, in the direction of Hero City!

"Graaaaawr!"

The monster howls in alarm as it suddenly flies away, traveling a full quarter-mile before violently crashing into the planet's soil. The monster spins, flips, and twists its body multiple times before finally grinding to a halt.

"Gotcha!" Bael laughs. "What a funny little guy. Now, come on, little puppy! Come back to papa!"

The Duke of Pain waits for several seconds, but surprisingly, the huge mole merely lays on its side motionlessly and doesn't move a muscle.

Shax's expression falls. "Ah, Bael, bro..."

"How weird!" Bael says. "Is the little guy all tuckered out? Lemme take a look!"

The Duke of Pain swaggers over to the mole-monster. He pokes its back upon arriving, but still, it doesn't move. Then, he walks around to its front, where he finds its eyes frozen open, bloody tears leaking from the corners.

"Eh? You okay, puppy?" Bael asks. "Come on! Don't be a baby! Get up!"

However, as Bael waits, the monster doesn't even twitch. It lays in the same broken, unmoving state as before, never to walk again.

"Bael..." Shax says. "The, uh... the monster died."

"Huh? It did?" Bael asks, clearly confused. "Whaddya mean? I barely gave it one little toss! He's just playing dead, the little prankster."

Shax sighs. "No. It's actually dead, brah. For real."

Unconvinced, Bael walks over and nudges its nose with his fist. "Booped your snoot! Come on, stop messing around! You're fine, kiddo! Shake it off!"

Minutes pass.

As the mole remains unmoving, Bael's excitement dies down.

"...Oh. It really is. Shit. I... I killed the poor fella."

Shax purses his lips. "Yeah."

The Duke's eyes darken.

"Man. This sucks. Why am I the only tough guy in the universe, huh? Why's everyone else so weak?"

"Most life is fragile," Shax muses. "I don't know why you're special, bro. You just are."

"Tch..." Bael grunts. The Duke drops down to sit on his butt. He glances in the direction of the demonic portals a bit further south, and past them, to the distant border of the human city.

"I hate being me sometimes..." Bael says. "Always watchin' others die. It sucks. I'm strong enough to protect myself, but not everyone else. Not even you, Shax."

The Emperor of Hype sits beside Bael.

"Death ain't the end, you know. Didn't you ever listen to Orias?"

"Huh?" Bael asks. "What, you mean that crackpot theory of his? That if you die, you go 'poof' and travel somewhere else? I like Orias as much as the next fella, but the guy's a total wacko."

"I'm here now," Shax says. "Maybe Orias is on to something."

"Nah. You're just a soul manipulator," Bael says, waving his hand dismissively. "Like Satan, Lucy, Mephisto, and the others. None of that rebirthing mumbo-jumbo."

"I suppose you're right." Shax concedes.

* * *

Bael lingers in the area for a while, but eventually leaves the dead mole behind. Though his mood takes a nose-dive, he recovers fairly quickly.

"Guess we'll just go back to pranking people!" Bael says. "Let's scare those cunts over there!"

The Duke leaps skyward again, aiming toward his demon allies at the Northern Front.

Moments later, Bael crashes down amidst a huge group of demons, frightening the devil out of them. "Boo! Bahahaha! Got you dumbasses good! You should see the looks on your faces!"

"Bael!" A Demon Grunt howls. "Don't do that, man! I peed myself!"

"I know! That's why I'm laughing! Anyway, how are things going? Are you guys beating the humans, or what?"

"Yeah," The demon says. "Sort of! But you're not gonna believe this. Duriel got killed!"

The Duke of Pain abruptly stops laughing. "What? He did? You're kidding."

"Nuh-uh! And that ain't all, man! A Hydra popped up inside the fleshbags' city. One of the Oracles said it was the same one we heard about a few months ago, like some kinda clone-thingy!"

Bael nods seriously. "Wow. Duriel died, and now there's a Hydra too. Damn, these humans are pretty tough."

The demon and a couple of his friends briefly catch the Duke of Pain up on the happenings over the past few hours while he was out running around, reminiscing with Shax.

As they talk, one demon shakes his head.

"Wait 'til you hear the craziest part, Bael! Artorias turned against Ose. It looks like the Archangel appeared again, just like six years ago!"

Bael's eyes widen in alarm. "Shit, you serious? Wow, that don't sound good at all."

"Even worse," the demon continues, "Rumor has it that Artorias willingly gave up control to the Archangel. He let her overpower him!"

The Duke scoffs. "Nuh-uh. That's bullcrap. Don't believe everything you hear. I even sat down with Arty-boy a few weeks ago and toughened up his soul. There's no way he'd do something braindead like giving his body to the Archangel."

"That's the thing," The demon argues. "He had a good reason! Just before the Archangel appeared, Ose beat the crap out of Belial. At the very end, she told Belial it was Lucifer who killed Satan!"

Bael's casual demeanor instantly hardens. A look of gravity appears in his eyes.

"*What* did you say? Are you lying to me, punk?"

"N-no..." The grunt says, taking two fearful steps back. "Y-you can ask anyone, Bael! It's all true! Ose said Lucifer tricked Satan into meeting the Black Witch. It was all part of some trap! I swear to Satan himself!"

Several seconds pass. The Duke of Pain practically bores holes into the grunt's head with his furious stare.

"You're lying. You have ta' be. There's... there's no way Lucy would do something like that."

The grunt starts to tremble. He ducks his head down and cowers under Bael's molten gaze.

"I swear, boss! I swear to Satan I ain't lying! Please don't kill me! Plee-ee-eease!"

Bael inhales deeply. A hint of his smoldering rage retreats into his skull.

"Don't worry. I ain't gonna smack ya. Where is Ose now?"

"Last I heard, she went into the city," The demon answers. He cautiously raises his head, only to blink in surprise.

"Huh? Where'd B-Bael go?"

No longer does the Duke of Pain stand before him.

* * *

As he leaps into the air, the Duke of Pain sweeps his demonic presence outward to search for Ose. Despite being completely useless when it comes to his magical capabilities, Bael still possesses many of the same innate demonic traits as the rest of his kind, including the ability to project his demonic mana signature and to search for other demons of a high enough level.

Bael eventually detects Ose's presence far to the west, at the edge of humanity's borders. He chooses to circle around the Horned Forest, leaping huge distances in straight lines to reach his destination.

After the Duke travels for a mile or two, Shax speaks.

"Hey. Bro."

Bael lands feet-first on the ground, but pauses before jumping again. Sensing an odd note in Shax's voice, he glances at the Emperor of Hype.

"Yeah? What's up?"

Shax frowns. He glances at Bael for a moment, then shakes his head.

"...It might not be anything important, brah. Maybe it's only my imagination acting up."

"Whaddya mean?" Bael asks. "Something eating at you?"

"Sort of..." Shax mutters. "It's about Lucifer and Ose."

"I'm listening." Bael says, crossing his arms.

"Well, I was thinking about the circumstances behind my death..." Shax says, his tone ominous. "I always felt like certain things didn't add up."

Bael raises an eyebrow.

"I don't follow."

"It's like this," Shax explains. "I ran the Hell of Isolation like an open house. Anyone could pop in, even humans. You know I never cared who wanted to rock out, just so long as they weren't angels."

Bael nods. "Yeah. I remember. It was like one big endless party."

"Well, that's the thing. I left my Hell one day, along with Murmur. Out of nowhere, a dozen platoons of human commandos popped out of the woodwork. They captured me and little sis. After that, they put those... those robotic implants in my head. Turned me into a freak."

"Hmm..." Bael grunts, clearly displeased by the revival of those painful memories. "I never heard how the humans captured ya, Shax."

"I know," Shax replies. "But that ain't the problem, bro. Think about it. How did the humans corner me out of nowhere? Someone must've tipped them off. It was a setup."

Like a viper eying its prey, Bael's expression turns vicious. "Wait! Are you tellin' me... Lucy set you up? Just like she did Satan?"

"Nah. Doesn't have Lucifer's fingerprints," Shax replies, shaking his head. His poofy white hair bounces around with the movement. "Always wondered what bastard would stab me in the back like that. Thinking about it, that seems more like Ose's style. Especially how the humans managed to jack me up with those weird metal implants. How'd they stick 'em in so quick? Almost like they had a helping hand from a certain demoness who knew her stuff."

Bael's jaw drops. "...No way. Are you telling me Ose fucked you over, while Lucy fucked Satan over?!"

"I can't say for sure," Shax admits. "But the evidence adds up, bro. Like mother, like daughter. You know those two were always twisted sisters."

"Shit. SHIT! You're right!" Bael exclaims. "How could you be wrong? That smug white-haired bitch, and her shitty four-titted mom, too! All this time, Ose smiled at me and played cute, but she was the one who..."

Bael pauses mid-speech. A strange flicker appears in his eyes, a spark resembling pure rage unlike anything he's experienced in all his life.

Many times in the past, his rage has come as a result of humiliation or some odd lust for battle. This time, though, it derives from an acute sense of betrayal stemming deep within his heart.

"...She killed my... my best friend! She killed you, Shax!"

Shax's gaze turns hollow. "It does seem that way, Bael."

The Duke of Pain gnashes his teeth. Hot tears boil in his eyes as he empathetically recalls the suffering his best friend must have suffered at the hands of the humans.

"I still remember everything about that day," Bael growls. "You showed up. A bunch of humans, too. They made me fight you to the death. I tried to catch you alive but... but I was too strong! I crushed your skull by accident. By accident! I didn't mean to! But I was just so devil-damned *clumsy*!"

"It wasn't your fault..." Shax mutters. "You can't keep blaming yourself, bro."

"I KNOW!" Bael roars. "It's all Ose's fault! That whore! She tricked you, and she tricked me, too! She played stupid all this time! She batted her stupid eyes at me and acted like we were best friends... but we weren't! We'll never be!"

The angrier Bael becomes, the closer he comes to transforming into his Balrog Form! However, this time, the purity of his hatred reaches a point where it exceeds even the Balrog, preventing him from tapping into its power.

"NO! I don't NEED the Balrog!" Bael bellows. "I'll beat that bitch to death myself! I'm more than enough demon to handle the likes of her! Lemme at her! I'll tear her fucking arms off and shove 'em up her ass!"

Bael coils strength in his legs. He pounces skyward, then falls toward the approximate position of Ose's demonic mana signature.

"OSEEEEE!"

The Duke crashes into the dirt a half-mile from Ose's position. When he raises his eyes, his gaze falls upon an unbelievable sight! Five huge Titans surround Ose, along with Belial, Blinker, and Artorias! Their bloodthirsty expressions nearly cause Bael to panic.

"They're gonna kill Ose!" Bael cries. "I can't let 'em! That bitch is MINE!"

Bael jumps again, then crashes into the dirt a short distance behind one of the Titans.

As the Duke of Pain starts power-walking toward the assembled heroes, all of them swivel their heads to face him.

Ose, barely crackling with a few trickles of leftover electricity, turns to look at her 'savior' with hope-filled eyes.

"Bael?"

Ose's assailants go on the alert, seeing the full-strength Duke menacingly stomping toward them.

"It's Bael!" Blinker says, as she raises her fists.

Zeus darts towards Bael and tries to stomp Bael into the dirt, but Bael catches the Titan's foot and tosses him aside.

"Outta my way, punk."

A moment later, Bael leaps skyward and crashes into the dirt next to Ose, then lunges his hand out to grab her throat.

"Ose. You *bitch*. All this time, I wondered who did it. I wondered who *killed him*. It was you. It was YOU!"

Ose weakly tries to fight off her assailant, but Bael's grip proves unbreakable!

"Kuh! Killed? Killed who?! Mis-misunderstanding! This is a misunderstanding, Bael!"

"Stupid Ose..." Bael mutters. "I might be dumb, but I ain't no *idiot*. Now, it's time for you to SUFFER!"

Bael lifts Ose over his head. He holds her in the air for a split-second, then slams her downward, violently thrashing her weakened body against Tarus II's surface.

BOOOOM!

An explosion of dirt rockets out in all directions, making the Non-Titan combatants take a few steps back as they shield their eyes.

Shax watches from the side. "Teach that backstabber a lesson, Bael."

"I will!" Bael yells.

The Duke raises Ose in the air once again.

BOOM!

He smashes Ose against the dirt a second time, with twice the strength he used before!

"Aargh!" Ose cries, her voice cracking as she fails to catch a breath.

The Emperor's so-called Ultraform finally shatters, reverting Ose to her normal self. When Bael lifts her overhead once again, he pauses, noting her painfully broken arms and legs. No longer can Ose protect herself in even the most limited of ways. She hangs helplessly in Bael's grasp, unable to fight back.

"Kuh... can... explain..." Ose whispers, barely wheezing out the words. Blood roils from her mouth, likely due to countless internal injuries.

"I don't want your words!" Bael roars. "I want SHAX BACK!"

BOOM!

Bael smashes Ose against the ground yet again, this time knocking Blinker off her feet due to the impact wave! The seven-foot-tall fairy quickly regains her footing, but even so, she stares at Bael fearfully.

The Duke of Pain continues to hold Ose by her throat. Despite the powerful physique of her Emperor body, she no longer possesses a drop of mana to protect herself. Her eyes flutter wildly as multiple traumatic injuries wrack her brain.

Having not yet released all his anger, Bael balls his free hand into a fist.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

He violently punches Ose's face, chest, stomach, and arms, pulling his punches just enough to inflict the most agonizing injuries possible without fully killing her.

Ose doesn't scream or cry. She simply falls comatose, unable to even react to Bael's furious onslaught. The sheer rage behind Bael's pummeling makes even Ose's most ardent enemies wince in sympathy.

Suddenly, Bael raises his eyes to look at one of the spectators.

"Hey! Belial! Get over here and heal Ose for me! I need this cunt to live a little longer! I ain't done makin' her SUFFER!"

Belial shakes her head. "I can't do that, Bael. I hate Ose plenty, but I'd rather you just kill her now."

"Screw that!" Bael yells. "Just heal her! Then we can all take turns beating her face to a pulp!"

Uriel's eyes flicker with light. "I do not oppose such an arrangement. Emperor of Passion, if thou intendeth not to make a move, then I shall."

To the west, behind Bael and the row of illusory Titans, countless demons eye Bael's bloodthirsty beatings with horror-filled eyes.

"What the hell is Bael doing? Why's he beating up Ose? Ain't he on our side?"

"Duh. He must have a good reason! There's no way Bael would join the humans. I bet this is because Ose had something to do with Satan's death."

"Ohh, yeah! That makes sense. Satan and Bael were super good buddies, from what I've heard. I'd smack Ose around, too, if I were in his place."

As the demons deliberate on the meaning behind Bael's actions, Uriel takes a step forward. The Archangel of Vengeance summons a ball of water magic into her hand to heal Ose, even as Belial starts to protest.

"No, Uriel! Don't heal Ose! Just kill her off and finish this war! Every second that we delay, more innocents will die!"

"I care not how thy war ends," Uriel replies, her tone leaving no room for negotiation. "I care only that I might cause the Lightning Harlot to suffer a little longer. Bael's offer appeals to my sensibilities."

Right as Uriel reaches Bael and Ose, she pauses mid-stride.

"...Ah. Tsk. How unfortunate."

Bael glances at the demoness slumped in his grip. No longer does Ose's skin appear as ruby-red as it did before.

Several seconds follow as Bael, Uriel, Blinker, Artorias, the five Titans, and the distant demons gaze at Ose's stone-cold body in silence.

The Duke of Pain awkwardly coughs into his fist.

"Err, I used a bit too much strength and... killed her! Whoopsie! My bad!"

Belial stares at Bael in disbelief. She shakes her head and facepalms.

"...Goddammit, Bael. Why are you always like this?"

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 286: Bael's Decision

Bael falls silent. So do the others surrounding him. The Duke of Pain releases his grip on Ose's throat, causing her corpse to flop to the ground. Her face appears partially sunken in, though not totally destroyed beyond recognition, while her shattered ribs and broken limbs paint a gruesome picture of a terrifyingly violent end.

After Bael drops Ose, he glances at Belial, Blinker, and Uriel.

"Err. Sorry, ladies. I didn't mean ta' jump in and... steal your kill. I got a little angry and uh... lost control."

"At least you didn't become the Balrog..." Belial mutters. "What are you even doing, Bael? Why would you jump in and kill Ose? Wasn't she your boss?"

The Duke of Pain snorts. "Nah. Forget that. I heard she had a hand in killing Satan. That ain't all, though. Remember Shax?"

At the mention of his name, Bael's illusory best friend perks his ears up, but says nothing.

Belial frowns. "Shax. Uhm... don't you mean the guy with the... big hair? The Hell of Isolation's founder?"

"Yeah, him," Bael replies. "I think Ose had something to do with his death. What a cunt. She got what she had coming."

Blinker balls her hands into fists. "Well, that's great and all, but what happens now, huh? My husband is dead! Kar is gone, and it's all because of you demons! You attacked humanity, unprovoked! Do we have to kill every last one of you to end this war?!"

Blinker's rage, far different from the last time she interacted with Bael when he fought the Sphinx, leaves a deep impression on the Duke.

"I can't beat two Emperors, an Archangel, and a bunch of bloody Titans. Where'd you dig these guys up from, anyway?"

Bael turns around to look at the ancient enemies of demonkind towering over him. They remain silent, not saying a word, while their dead, blackened eyes gaze upon him without a trace of emotion.

Behind the Titans, all of the demons massing at the Western Front remain in place, uncertain of what they should do. Having seen Bael himself land the killing blow on Ose, not to mention the rumors swirling about Ose's illicit history, few demons regard her passing with any sense of remorse. Instead, they begin to wonder if they should try and escape the battlefield with their lives intact.

"We're done fighting," Bael says. "I know an apology ain't gonna do any good, but there's no point fighting anymore. Even a dozen Dukes can't beat one Emperor, let alone a bunch of 'em. I'll call off my forces-"

"Dost thou thinketh this battle has ended?" Uriel asks, her tone icy. "Satan's Whore and the fairy might allow bygones to become bygones... but not I! I have only just awoken, Duke of Pain. My soul thirsts for demon blood. The few I've slain today have barely wet my appetite!"

Bael spins to face the Archangel.

"Oh? You wanna go, flappy bird?"

"Bael. Uriel. Now is not the time..." Blinker says, though her voice wavers noticeably. "Too many have died! Let's end this here. Bael, call back all of the demons and order a retreat."

"Thou speaketh not for me!" Uriel roars. "Monster Queen, I shall slay every demon who has come here today, as well as all the rest of their kind. That is my singular purpose. None can stop me!"

"Uriel, can't you pause your plans for just a moment?" Belial asks, exasperated. "You can pursue your revenge later!"

"Dost I requireth thy permission to breathe?" Uriel replies, her eyes narrowing menacingly. With a flick of her fingers, she summons all four of her holy constructs. "'Twas thou who fell when fighting the Thunder Emperor. 'Tis I who defeated her. Shall the two of us repeat what happened the last time we fought?"

A shudder goes down Belial's back. She recalls her battle against Uriel six years ago, when she joined hands with Hope to try and defeat the Archangel. Belial fled after losing, leaving Hope to fight Uriel alone.

"Hahaha! I see the fear in thy eyes!" Uriel taunts. "How much time has passed since thou last won a round of mortal combat? Following Satan's demise, thy battle prowess has plunged from its apex! Once, thou were a terror among demonkind, but today, thou cannot defeateth a mere babe recently ascended to Emperor! Pathetic!"

Uriel prods Belial's weakness, making the so-called Second Emperor wince. With the number of battles she's lost up to now, can she truly continue to rank herself among demonkind's strongest warriors?

While the three women verbally spar, Bael pipes up.

"Hey. Hey! Ladies! Listen for a sec!"

Uriel snaps her head in Bael's direction. "What is it, nimrod?!"

The Duke of Pain gestures at his feet. "...Did one of you broads grab Ose when I wasn't looking?"

A full second of silence follows as Belial, Blinker, and Uriel all lower their eyes to Bael's feet.

No longer does Ose's corpse rest there.

"Ahh!!" Blinker shrieks. "No! Not like this! It's Mephisto! He took-"

The fairy doesn't get to finish her sentence. Instead, as if uttered by the winds themselves, a voice floats throughout their midst.

"Kekekeke! Yesss, it wasss I! I have taken Ossse'sss body for myssself!"

Mephisto speaks, his voice projecting into the air through a magical method unknown to those present.

"You bastard!" Belial bellows. "Graverobbing piece of- give Ose back! She's not yours to puppeteer, Mephisto!"

"Ah, but that isss where you are wrong, Emperor Belial," Mephisto replies, not daring to show his body. With Blinker around, he knows damn well she might just grab his figure and shatter his bones to powder the instant she spots him. "I am the ruler of the dead, like Valac before me. My might reignsssssupreme. Ssso long ass mortalss perisssh, my powerssss sshall expand infinitely, until I become unssstoppable! Kekekeke!"

A look of alarm appears on Uriel's face. "I sense a buildup of demonic energy! There, to the west!"

She points in the general direction of the hesitating demon armies. To everyone's alarm, a black mist suddenly erupts, similar to the one Mephisto conjured a few days earlier. This time, however, it appears far less impermeable than before, allowing observers to easily peer inside its depths.

"Oh, what joy! What pleasssure I take in causssing death and desstruction!" Mephisto shrieks, his voice grating on the ears of all present.

"Yo, Mephisto, knock it off," Bael says. "We can't win this war anymore. Just stop with the fighting, bub."

"Win? Who ssaid I intended to 'win'?" Mephisto asks. "Bael, we might be good friendss, but your ssshort-ssightednesss hampersss your planning ssskillsss. Sstand back, and leave thiss next part to ME! Kekekeke!"

As Mephisto's oddly thin black mist swirls among the assembled demons, their eyes begin to glow with a blood-red light.

"Nnn... hungry... so hungry!" One demon yells. "Ahh! Food! Want food! Tasty fleshbags! I need them!"

Several demons fall to their knees. They clutch their heads and shriek painfully, while others howl like wild wolves.

"I WANNA EAT SKIN!" A goblin shrieks. "SKIN! BONES! TASTY MEAT!"

Belial's heart trembles in alarm. "Oh, devils! I've seen this before! What the hell?! This is... this is a vampiric technique! It's the Mist of Blood Hunger!"

Uriel glances at Belial. "Mmm? The Mist of Blood Hunger? I've not heard that name since the Energy Wars!"

In unison, every member of the entire demon army turns their heads toward the Titans, Emperors, and lone Archangel blocking their way. Despite the clearly suicidal concept of rushing down such insane powerhouses with their feeble power, the demons lose their sense of rationality as horrifying hunger wracks their bodies.

"Kill 'em all! Rip the Archangel to pieces!" A huge Demon Brute bellows.

A storm of footsteps strikes the land. Every demon in range bolts toward the powerhouses guarding the Western Front.

"Mephisto! Stop this!" Bael yells. "You dumbass! These little guys can't win! Just Belial alone would be enough to kill 'em all, not to mention the rest of us! This is suicide!"

"How unfortunate," Mephisto replies, his voice little more than a whisper in the air. "Dead demonsss to pad my ranksss. Ah, what a loss I ssshall sssurely sssuffer! Kekeke! Have fun killing thessse worthless maggots!"

Mephisto falls silent, leaving the other powerhouses to grimace in disgust.

"That filthy bloodskin..." Uriel mutters. "Mephisto intends to suicide the remaining demons upon us. Once they die, their souls will become his to wield as he wishes. As expected from the likes of a wretched soul manipulator!"

"Fuck!" Belial curses. "Mephisto, you're a wretched bastard! Everyone, fall in!"

The five Titans turn to face the incoming demon army. While the sheer mass of blood-red flesh falling upon the defenders seems formidable, the mindless demons pose no threat to Uriel, Belial, Blinker, or Bael alone, let alone all of them at once.

Bael steps toward the approaching army. "Guys, stop! Stop! Don't listen to Mephisto! Fight back, dammit!"

As the mass of demonkind rushes toward Bael, none of them slow their furious approach in the slightest. If anything, the sight of Bael's thick, juicy flesh causes them to hunger even more deeply.

In unison, the five Titans jump forward.

BOOOOM!

Their arrival amongst the densely-packed demons comes like a series of tactical nukes. Zeus thunders through their ranks, stomping ten demons into blood-paste with each step, while Ivaldi fires off multiple lancing beams of holy energy to shred countless demons at the atomic level. Cronus, despite lacking any area-of-effect powers, still manages to crush and splatter hundreds more, while Poseidon and Neptune swallow countless others with crushing walls of water.

The demon army doesn't even manage to reach Belial and the others. They simply stand idly and watch as the five Titans tear across the hordes wreaking death and havoc in their wake.

"What a miserable bloodbath..." Belial mutters. "It's a complete slaughter."

"Kekeke!" Mephisto cackles, his voice lingering like a fart. "Are you all enjoying the ssshow? I musst have forgotten to mention! I pulled the sssame trick at all the other battlefrontsss! Oh, dear, I hope the humansss aren't having too hard a time fending off the bloodthirsssty demonsss attacking their flanksss! Kekeke!"

Belial and Blinker's casual expressions of disdain instantly transform into looks of horror.

"What! I forgot about the north, east, and southern fronts!" Belial cries. "Blinker, you go to the north! Uriel, you head to the south! I'll go to the east!"

Uriel glares at Belial. "Speak not of what I must do, demoness! Thou commandeth me not!"

"Now isn't the time for bickering!" Belial yells. "Mephisto is going to tear through humanity's battlefronts with demons unafraid of death! There's nothing more terrifying than an equally matched foe who has lost his sanity!"

Uriel waves her hand. "I care not. Save the humans if thou desireth, but I shall stay here to enjoy the sight of dead bloodskins."

"Uriel!" Belial cries. She starts to open her mouth again, but gives up midway. "Fine! Worthless Archangel! You couldn't protect the angels, and you can't protect the humans, either! Looks like you never deserved to be called the Archangel of Protection in the first place!"

"WHAT? Say that again!" Uriel bellows.

Before Uriel can speak another word, Belial darts away.

"You'd better prove me wrong, Uriel!"

As Belial rushes straight back to Hero City, aiming to help with the Eastern Front, Blinker teleports to the North, leaving Uriel alone.

The Archangel glares daggers at Bael's back.

"Tch. Satan's Whore manipulates me with her words, but verily, I cannot simply shake off her hateful claims."

Belial's words touch on Uriel's sore spot; her ancient inability to protect her people. With such a thought in mind, Uriel can only curse under her breath before motioning with her hands. She taps into Barbatos's power of portal creation to open a path to the Southern Front.

"Someday soon, I shall stomp Belial's corpse into the mud."

With that last declaration, Uriel disappears, leaving Bael behind.

The Duke of Pain watches helplessly as Daisy's Titans slaughter his fellow demons far faster than they can run. Zeus alone kills twice the number of any other Titan besides Ivaldi.

"Uuu... it's not fair... they can't help themselves..." Bael mumbles, as he chokes back tears. "Can't you spare the poor fellas?! Mephisto, how could you do this to our friends?!"

With Blinker and Uriel gone, Mephisto slowly levitates upward, chuckling to himself like a creep.

"Bael! Ksss, who caresss about a few million demonsss? There are billionsss more waiting in the wingsss. You ssshould be thanking me for culling the weak!"

Bael turns to look at his 'friend.' "Bub! You're crossing the line! There's a difference between attackin' humans and sendin' our boys to die dog deaths! Pull 'em back, Mephisto! I'm head Duke here! You listen to MY orders, bub!"

Mephisto's confident smile falters. He hovers backward, putting distance between himself and Bael.

"Ksss. Ignorant Bael! Open your eyesss! It doesssn't matter if thessse worthlesss peonsss perisssh! Barely any of them are Lordsss. I have already pulled back all of the Baronsss, including Mara, Vepar, and

Laharl! Now, I ssseek only to cull the weak and ussseless! Once I collect their sssoulsss, I will posssess enough to empower myssself to the rank of Emperor! Then, the Hell of Damnation will rissse again!"

Bael's expression wavers.

"Huh? Wait... are you tellin' me... you planned all this? Is that why you didn't help Ose escape? You wanted her to die?"

Mephisto snorts. "Keh. Of coursse! I would never allow that worthlesss woman to rule over me for long! I have plotted for eonsss to sseize control of the First Hell! Now, itsss power liesss within my grassp! Perhapsss you have no faith in me, but I hardly need your permisssion now! My ssstrength has reached a level which not even Valac could attain! Kekeke!"

"You devil-damned monster..." Bael growls. "Is this all some fuckin' game to you? Some jokey-joke prank?! You think it's funny, throwing away demon lives for no good reason? Those are my friends! They're dying because of you!"

"They are adding to my essence..." Mephisto replies, his smile fading. "I care not whether you approve of my actionsss. You may be an unssstoppable killing machine, but I have my own meansss. I musst rule over the Firsst Hell. I musst take my place atop the demon hierarchy. I dessserve that power! I am Sssatan'sss protégé! I've earned the right to rule from on high!"

Bael's lips curl into an expression of disgust. "Ptuh. You're a worthless shitbag. I can't believe I ever respected you. I shoulda known you were a worm all along. Too bad for you, the demons look up to *me*. Everyone knows I'm the one who picks the next Emperor, and I sure as shit won't choose a rat like you."

"Heh heh heh..." Mephisto chuckles. "Asss if I need your permisssion. Have you forgotten, Bael? I run the River Ssstyx. I control the flow of sssoulsss. My rissse to Emperor isss certain. If you won't ssstand with me... then you will become my enemy."

"You wanna run the First Hell, huh?" Bael asks. "Alright. We'll see how many demons follow your orders when I tell 'em all the fucked-up shit you've done."

Mephisto slowly floats backwards, then drops into the ground.

"Wordsss mean little in the face of sssoulsss and asscenssion. Ssspeak all you want, Bael. In the end, they will not lisssten to you ssso long asss I control the *River*."

The Duke of Mist disappears, leaving Bael all alone, once again.

Bael stares at the spot where Mephisto disappeared. He lifts his eyes to gaze at the setting sun, while a sigh of lamentation escapes his chest.

"Tch. Dammit. I ain't never felt more useless in all my life than I do right now."

Shax, still hovering beside Bael, merely shakes his head.

"Sometimes, you can't stop the winds of change, broski."

* * *

At the Northern, Eastern, and Southern Fronts, huge waves of bloodthirsty demons storm into the humans' ranks, tearing their adversaries limb from limb! Without the fear of death subtly slowing them down, the demons turn into horrifying menaces capable of terrorizing their exhausted human and monster enemies half to death.

To the north, Blinker joins with the Felorians, using her illusory powers to summon phantasmal walls, forcing the demons into a narrow chokepoint. When they try to push through the thirty-foot gap, the Felorians jump forward and cut down all who dare to pass! Brunhilda, though exhausted, continues fighting with her life on the line, empowered by the news that all of demonkind's mightiest warriors have fallen. Only Mephisto stands against them now.

To the east, Belial joins up with the defenders to repel her fellow demons. She puts her physical strength to good use by stretching out one of her arms twenty feet long and sweeping it from side to side, killing countless grunts as they enter her range. When combined with humanity's accurate gunfire, they manage to repel the northern invaders, at least for a little while.

And finally, at the south, Uriel joins up with Yamir and Lieutenant Samuel. She pays the pathetic humans and monsters no mind, opting instead to summon her four constructs at the frontlines. Uriel initially frightens the humans when they mistake her for Artorias, but they quickly realize the Archangel has taken over, and many rumors swirl regarding her battle alongside Hope some six years earlier.

Despite the demons' inability to push past these four defensive lines, their sheer numbers and the continuing accumulation of Warper portals around Hero City cause more and more demons to flow through. Once they step foot on Tarus II, Mephisto's Mist of Blood Hunger drives them insane, causing them to fight recklessly and without thought.

Many demons begin slipping around, under, and over the established battle lines. Burrowers carve out dozens of underground tunnels as they head toward Hero City, while Harpies clamp onto the shoulders of Goblins and smaller demons, flying them overhead to deposit them within the city's limits.

Thousands of human soldiers panic. "Our families are in the city, still! They're hiding in the shelters! If those stragglers show up, we won't have enough troops left to protect them!"

Fear spreads among the army's ranks. With humanity's communication infrastructure having been sabotaged by Ose, nobody can communicate at long range with the other battlefronts. Nobody knows the situation in the city, either.

However, as Uriel continues to battle, fighting purely on instinct as she reaps demon lives one after the other, a distant pressure begins to press against her soul.

"Hm?"

The Archangel impales a pair of demons with her spears of light, then whips her head from side to side.

"What is this? I sense a familiar presence... one which reminds me of..."

The Archangel raises her eyes to the sky.

"...Camael! How can this be? Why dost I sense my sister's presence among the stars?"

Uriel's excitement turns to alarm, then confusion.

"My sister fell during the Energy Wars. How can she appear here, now? This must be a demonic trick!"

Within seconds, the invisible pressure pushing upon Uriel's soul doubles, then triples. Even the demons and humans begin to falter, feeling as if the planet's gravity has increased. Many of the bloodthirsting attackers falter and flop to their knees, unable to take a step forward.

At that moment, a bright beam of light ignites in the center of Hero City! This beam fires into the sky to illuminate the slowly darkening atmosphere, while emanating a distinct aura of holy energy!

A voice travels outward from the beam of light, its tone soft, yet audible to all who turn their gaze in its direction.

"Barrier."

The beam of light erupts at its apex, spreading a divine forcefield in all directions. The barrier travels past Hero City's boundaries to engulf the Western, Northern, Eastern, and Southern fronts, somehow arriving just at the edge of where any humans are. It locks out all of the attacking demons while shielding those allied to the humans.

Then, the voice speaks again.

"Expel."

Immediately, all of the flying and burrowing demons, as well as those currently engaged with humanity's forces inside the barrier, disappear! They teleport outside the divine forcefield, landing flat on their asses while looking confused as hell.

"Clarity."

The voice speaks again, this time wiping away Mephisto's Blood Mist from every corner of Tarus II's battlefields. The blood-crazed demons revert to normal, their eyes unfogging as they try to understand what came over them for the past half hour.

Finally, the voice speaks one last time.

"Return."

All of humanity's forces teleport away from the four battlefronts. They arrive smack in the middle of Hero City, where they find a single figure levitating amidst the beam of light.

Jason Hiro, the Wordsmith.

As humanity's survivors gaze into the sky, their Hero waves his hand awkwardly.

"...Uhh, *hey*, guys. Sorry I'm late. I had one **hell** of a headache."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 287: Powderkeg

My soul aches. It burns.

After suffering from Ose's unexpected sneak attack, it took me the better part of a day to recover. Had my mind-wife not succeeded in treating my condition with medical drones, I'd have probably ended up incapacitated for weeks, perhaps even a full month. Luckily, that eventuality didn't come to pass. While I haven't yet made a full recovery, my Wordsmithing has returned and the scorching of my soul only hurts when I move, think, or breathe. So, basically, all the time.

After creating a massive barrier of energy around Hero City and transferring all of humanity's forces to the center, I quickly glance around to survey the damage.

Fucking hell.

I was able to keep an eye on what happened through Phoebe's virtual holograms, but they only gave me the barest level of information. Seeing the total devastation of my home fills me with a rage unlike any in all my life before today.

"Samantha, I'll need your help. **Empower.**"

I send a burst of magic into the Second Emperor's body, making her take a step back. "Huh? Jason? What's going on?"

"I formulated a plan on the way here. Don't worry, just use your healing magic. Tend to all the wounded. I've temporarily turned your magic into an area-of-effect ability, allowing you to heal many people at once, albeit more slowly."

Despite the confusion on Samantha's face, she merely nods. "Oh. Alright."

To assist her, I speak two more words of power. "**Aura. Healing!**"

Camael's Cube, a wellspring of seemingly infinite angelic power, pours its might into my body through the beam of light inside Hero City. I instantly cast a powerful aura of healing to seal off any bleeding injuries, patch up any holes or gashes in my fellow humans and monsters, and otherwise stave off the advent of mass-death.

"Enumeration."

In my mind's eye, a series of numbers and statistics appears, revealing the number of dead, wounded, and living allies.

My mind-wife scowls. "God damn it, Jason! We've... we've lost... so many people! Over a million have died!"

I nod slowly. *Only one and a half million remain. Another five hundred thousand have fled the planet through the Covenant ships.*

After quickly bringing myself up to speed, I take a good long look around the gathered humans, monsters, and even a few scattered demons.

One of them instantly catches my attention.

"Artorias?"

The metal-clad demon shakes his head. "Hmph. Nay, tis I, Uriel."

"Oh! Uriel. That must be why you didn't get ejected," I say. "I aimed my spells to cast out all of my enemies while teleporting my allies here. If you're here, then that must mean..."

I trail off, but Uriel catches my drift. "Aye. I have chosen to fight on the side of humanity. For now."

I nod, then continue to look around.

"Where's Phoebe? Where's Daisy? Are they okay?!"

"Daddy!"

My daughter's voice instantly warms my heart. All this time, my intel regarding planetary operations has been spotty at best. I've only known the broad strokes of battle, not the micro-level of individual combatants.

I turn to look for Daisy in surprise, only to practically jump out of my skin! A **gigantic** Hydra stands behind me, silently, its twelve heads gazing off into the distance, their eyes glazed over and emotionless. In addition to the Hydra, five familiar Titan Kings also stand at attention, their figures unmoving like statues.

Perched atop the Hydra's back, my daughter waves at me cheerfully. "I'm up here, daddy!"

"Get down from there!" I bark, frightened out of my fucking wits. "**Teleport!**"

Daisy instantly disappears from the Hydra's back and reappears next to me, paying little attention to the abrupt change of scenery.

"Daddy, you silly! Are you scared of the Big Men? The Big Kitty won't hurt you, not unless I say so!"

"Big men? Big kitty?" I ask, momentarily disoriented. I turn to the nearest senior officer, who happens to be Lieutenant Samuel. "What's going on with the Hydra? The Titans? How did they get here?"

Samuel, clad in his full-body exosuit, reveals no surprise in his body language. However, his voice comes out a bit stilted. "...Forgive me, Commander Hiro. I have no bloody idea! I've been fighting on the Southern Front for the past half-day."

Before I can ask someone else, Daisy laughs. "Daddy! I called the Big Men over! They're my friends!"

"You did?" I ask. "Zeus? Ivaldi? Cronus, Poseidon, and even Neptune? You called these Titans here? But... but how???"

Daisy shrugs. "Dunno! The Mean Lady was trying to hurt mommy, so I asked an adult for help. I did just like you said!"

At this point, the more Daisy talks, the more confused I become. "Oh. Alright. Yeah. Called an adult. Summoned some Titans. Sure, that makes sense, I guess..."

Belial, still busy healing dozens of humans at a time, turns to look at me while she works. "Jason! I haven't gotten to tell you this yet, but uh... I guess now's as good a time as any. Daisy's a Hero! Just like

you. She summoned those Titans and the Hydra too."

"WHAT?!" I shriek. "A Hero?! That's not possible! There can only be one Hero at a time, and that's me!"

Not only me, but Uriel, Belial, and Blinker all glance at Daisy with mixtures of admiration and confusion. Evidently, none of them knows why Daisy has awoken as a Hero, either.

Daisy points at the Hydra's back. "Daddy. You forgot mommy."

"I did? Oh, shit! Phoebe!"

A bit late, I turn to spot my wife's body laying silently on the Hydra's back. To my alarm, she appears comatose, much like Belial was a month ago, after Solomon took over my body and turned me rogue.

"What's wrong with Phoebe?" I ask, after teleporting my wife into my arms. **"Heal!"**

My healing magic does nothing. Phoebe remains prone in my arms, unable to react to any part of the world around her.

Daisy shakes her head. "Mommy's tired. She's sleepy. Not hurt."

Belial nods. "She'll be fine, Jason. Phoebe overdrew her stamina and wiped herself out. After a few days of bedrest, she'll wake up."

Seeing that my wife and daughter are perfectly fine, I breathe a long sigh of relief. "Thank god. I feared the worst had happened."

After a few seconds, I turn my attention to the massive wall of allies surrounding me.

Countless faces, some hidden behind exosuits, others not, all blend together into a distinct menagerie of human and monster forms.

However, no matter where I look, one figure doesn't appear, someone who usually stands out in a crowd.

"Guys. Where's Kar? Is he here?"

Silence.

Several people lower their heads.

Others sigh deeply.

I turn to the side, where I spot Blinker, no longer in her tiny fairy form, but instead, a giant human-sized body, just over seven feet tall.

"Bli... Blinker? Where is he? Is Kar hurt?"

The fairy's lower lip trembles.

"He... fell. In combat."

A pit forms in my stomach. Like a black hole, it sucks away all the feelings of joy I experienced over the past few minutes.

"Kar died? He's... he's dead?"

Kar.

The Sphinx.

The last crocodile.

After Amelia, Hoarhiim, and Blaarjiim, Kar was the final remaining friend I made upon arriving in the Labyrinth.

Already, Amelia died, along with both of her orb-companions.

Kar remained at my side.

He was always there for me, and I for him.

We attended each others' weddings.

He held my daughter when she was born.

He saved my ass several times, and Hope's too. Countless people survived harrowing experiences thanks to him.

And now?

He's gone.

"Blinker... I'm sorry..." I say, as my voice chokes up. "I... I should have been there for him."

"It's not your fault," Blinker whispers. "It's Mephisto's."

"Mephisto? The Duke of Mist?"

She nods. "He orchestrated the whole thing. All of this. The Battle Brothers worked for him, and he ordered them to attack the crocodiles, all those years ago. Kar killed Duriel, but Zamiel returned the favor. I killed Zamiel... and now there's only Mephisto left."

In all the years I've known Blinker, she's always been a cheerful and perky fairy; the life of the party. Now, though... her sullen expression and clouded-over eyes betray the complex emotions boiling within her heart.

"*Mephisto...*" I hiss, as rage burns in my eyes. "You... you killed my best friend. Where are you?! **Loc-**"

Before I can finish speaking a Word of Power, my mind-wife interrupts me. "Jason, wait! Don't! 'Locate' separates your soul from your body. Mephisto control's Valac's lantern, remember? You must not face him in your soul form!"

Her advice probably saved my life. I pause for a moment to reflect. *You're right. Sorry. I got ahead of myself.*

As I speak to the Phoebe within my mind, Daisy suddenly darts in front of me and narrows her eyes. "Daddy! Who's that? I heard mommy, but mommy's sleepy!"

"Huh? You can hear my mind-wife?" I ask, confused. "I, uh... I cloned mommy in my head. Now there are... two mommies, I guess?"

"Ohh! Three mommies, then!" Daisy exclaims, nodding vigorously as if she's figured out something beyond my understanding.

Three mommies? But there are only two Phoebes. Who else is she talking about?

I decide not to question the weird and imaginative mind of a child. Instead, I focus my thoughts on all the nearby humans.

"Alright. The demons can't threaten us anymore, not with my recent gains. Where is Ose? Is she somewhere nearby? I need to teach her a lesson."

"Get in line..." Blinker growls. "You and me both, buster."

"Ose has perished," Uriel says, her deep, masculine voice like the rumbling of thunder. "And 'twas Bael who slew her."

"Bael? He killed Ose?"

"Aye..."

Right after speaking the Duke's name, a figure at the very back of the crowd, far to the west, slowly raises his hand. I glance in that direction, where I spot a sheepish-looking Duke of Pain smiling goofily.

"Uh. Yo, Hero-guy! Sup?"

The soldiers in front of Bael turn around and nearly piss their pants. Apparently, nobody noticed the mountain of demonic flesh standing behind them.

"Oh, shit!"

"It's Bael!"

The troopers dive to the sides and pull out their guns, taking aim at the Duke as if that will do a lick of good.

"How are you inside my barrier?" I ask. "I teleported all the enemies of humanity out. Does that mean you're not an enemy?"

The Duke of Pain scratches his head. "...Dunno! I was just standin' there, mindin' my own business, when everyone went 'poof!' I couldn't get through the shiny light bubble, so I wandered this way. Just got here, actually."

I frown. *If my magic didn't teleport Bael away, it should have at least teleported him here.*

My mind-wife offers an explanation. "Perhaps Bael is so neutral in his affiliations that your magic couldn't determine if he was friend or foe."

Yeah. Or maybe he was immune to that spell. Bael is known for his physical and magical resistances, after all.

I find myself unsure what to think about Bael. Despite the fear many nearby spectators feel toward him, the Duke of Pain doesn't make any aggressive moves toward anyone. Even Uriel, long known for her utter hatred of all demons, doesn't look like she's in a hurry to rip his head off.

Perhaps seeing the uncertainty on my face, Lieutenant Samuel wades through the crowd to my side.

"Commander."

"Yes?" I ask.

"Regarding the Duke of Pain. You weren't here earlier, but he showed up and fought King Kar at the start of the Stormbringer invasion, along with Artorias and several other demons. All of them lost. Kar crushed the invaders completely. Eventually, Ose struck Kar with a sneak attack, nearly killing him."

For the first time since Stormbringer began, Lieutenant Samuel explains to me in rapid detail the goings-on of what happened up to now. He tells me about the demons' initial invasion, their assault on us from the west, what happened after I got knocked out, and plenty of other important tidbits. At some point when humanity's communications went offline, Samuel's details become unreliable and spotty.

I tap into Centurion's networks, only to find a dead signal. "What happened? Why is the network down?"

Samuel barks a few orders to his subordinates. Two minutes later, a report comes in.

"We've found Elder Skarde's body inside the protected underground bunker! He was assassinated, along with all the other personnel!"

The person delivering the message grimaces, having evidently seen a gruesome sight when he stumbled upon the murder scene.

Brunhilda, leader of the Felorians, gasps in shock. "No! Not the Elder!"

Despite the two of them coming from different planets, she and him shared a bond due to their similar tribalistic upbringings.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. "We've all lost precious friends today. Their deaths rest on my shoulders. You all did the best you could. If I had been able to return sooner, we'd have lost far fewer people."

A sense of bitterness clings to my heart. I couldn't accelerate the Cube's return. I also couldn't just teleport back to Tarus II ahead of the Cube, as I needed to stay onboard and guide its flight. The best I could do was cast magic remotely, or send my soul here, and Ose beat me handily both times.

In the end, Ose died, and I didn't even get to be the one who did her in.

I glance at Bael. "You're the leader of the First Hell now, right? You're the head ranking Duke."

Bael shuffles on his feet. "Mhm. Sorta."

"What do you *mean*, 'sorta'? You are, or you aren't."

"Hey! Don't gimme lip, punk!" Bael snaps. The Duke slowly shambles over to me and sticks his finger in my face. "You think I like all this shit? All this death and sadness? Get real. I like fightin' as much as the next guy, but only if there's a point to it. Ose was one mean cunt. I thought she'd put her big brain to use patching stuff up between humans and demons, but instead she came up with this crazy war!"

"You went along for the ride," I reply. "You didn't have to."

"Wrong!" Bael replies, crossing his arms. "I'm a Duke, kid. That means I don't call the shots; I follow orders. Once I picked Ose to be the next Emperor, I stepped aside and followed her lead, so long as I

thought she wouldn't fuck us demons over. Too bad she sucked at planning! You won and she lost; that's just how the game is played."

"Yeah." I growl. "That's how the 'game' is played. Millions dead. Are you happy?"

"Course not," Bael answers. "But what am I supposed to do? There ain't no point in pickin' a leader if I ain't gonna do as she says."

"Yet you killed Ose," I point out. "Clearly, you don't care *that* much about your so-called rules."

Bael blushes in embarrassment. "Oh. Uh... 'bout that... I kinda just... well, I didn't mean ta' *kill* the dumb cunt. She was too weak! I just wanted to smack her around and teach the broad a lesson. She uh, killed one of my old friends, y'see... I only found out today and kinda got all caught up in the moment."

Several seconds of silence follow.

More than a few bystanders screw their faces up in disbelief, myself included.

"You... you didn't kill Ose because of Stormbringer?" I ask.

"Nuh-uh."

"You didn't even *mean* to kill her, then?"

"Nuh-uh."

Bael shrugs helplessly.

"Like I said, kid! Ose was just too weak! How was I 'sposed to know she'd go belly up after a little friendly thrashing?!"

I sigh. "You're really something, Bael."

"Yup," Bael replies. "Anyway, forget that crap. We demons all lost. I ain't gonna keep throwin' bodies at you. I'll call back the boys and have 'em return to Hell."

I nod. "That would be for the best."

"**HOLD ON!**" Uriel bellows. "Hero, act not a fool at this crucial moment! If we work together, we can slay the Duke of Pain along with the rest of his ilk! Today is the ideal moment for us to join hands in ridding the galaxy of the bloodskins!"

Upon hearing Uriel's words, several nearby humans begin to nod. "That's right! We can take them out, Commander!"

"Now that you're here, we have to show these demons who's boss!"

"Pay them back for all the death and murder they've caused!"

One woman deactivates her exosuit's helmet, revealing her face. "I lost my sister today, Commander! Mephisto took her body for his sick purposes! We can't just let the demons off! We have to kill them all!"

To my surprise, many people begin to join together, shouting their collective desire for revenge. Only now does it hit me just how much this micro-war has burned the desire for vengeance into their hearts.

Uriel crosses her arms. "Hero. Thou now possesseth some incredible artifact, an ancient weapon rivaling Excalibur. I sense Camael's aura cascading upon this planet even now. Its holy energy revitalizes my spirits and emboldens my courage. I know well the weakness in thy heart; thy lack of spine in the face of adversity. Hear me now! This is no time for complacency! The demons will leave us today, only to return tomorrow! There are dozens of other Demon Emperors awaiting the fall of the First Hell! If thy penchant for weakness reveals itself now, it will only serve to embolden them!"

Despite all of the people crying for blood, and despite their impassioned pleas for me to fire down a beam of heavenly destruction upon the demons, I shake my head.

"No. I can't do that. I know we've suffered a terrible blow today. We've all lost people we love. The demons took my best friend from me. They killed Elder Skarde, and a million others. I haven't even begun to enumerate the dead, yet still, you guys want to pile on even more bodies."

"Enough people have died," I continue. "Now that I possess a super-weapon, the demons will never again pose a threat to us. I intend to build a new home for humanity among the stars. I will take us aboard my newly-obtained 'ark' away from the battlefield. We will use its power to save other victims of demonkind, eventually creating a home that none can assail!"

"Hah!" One man laughs, his voice choked with anger. "So you'd have us tuck our tails between our legs and run away? Hope would never do that! Hope would stand up to the demons and make them rue the day they decided to attack us!"

"You're only talking about peace and all that other crap because your family is still alive and breathing!" Another man yells. "My wife died in my arms, Commander! My Lydia perished when a Scyther impaled her from behind! What if your wife had died today? What if she were laying dead in your arms right this instant?! I bet you'd change your tune real fast!"

Several people chime in with their agreements, forcing me to evaluate my position.

Indeed, I have lost my best friend, Kar. His death... burns my heart. Like a cattle brand pressed into my flesh, my failure to save him scorches me from the inside-out.

I glance at Blinker. She meets my gaze, her stony eyes telling tales about the pain she's suffered.

What if it was me in her place?

What if the demons had slain Phoebe while I was away?

* * *

I already know the answer.

I know what I would say. What I would do.

Samson nearly murdered my mind-wife. He held her in his grasp. He fully intended to crush her windpipe, and in that moment, I made my decision.

I killed him.

I burned Samson's relic to ash, and along with it, his soul.

Doesn't that make me a hypocrite? How can I stand here and tell others not to pursue vengeance for their loved ones? If I were in their shoes, I would surely demand the same thing!

Bael clears his throat.

"Ahem. Hey, punk. What are you thinkin'? You wanna take this war to the next level?"

I turn to look at him.

"I don't."

"You sure?" Bael asks. "You've got a weird look in your eye. I've seen the same one a thousand times. You're thinkin' you should keep up the fight. Keep killin' demons."

I nod. "I am considering the thought. Why? You don't want me to?"

Bael sighs.

"I don't care, kid. Everyone dies at some point. I'm just gonna tell you right now. If you wanna keep fightin', you'll have ta' go through me first. I ain't gonna sit still and let you fuckos have your way with my friends."

I start to reply, but Bael interrupts me. "I'll say it again! Ain't no problem if you guys wanna get back at us demons for what we've done. Fair is fair! We started this, and you fellas can continue. But, I'mma tell you right now... if this goes any further, it's gonna get personal."

The Duke of Pain's eyes momentarily turn savage. He sweeps his gaze across the crowd, causing many of the more outspoken people to swallow their anger and fall silent.

"I don't stand a chance against all these Emperors and a Hero," Bael says. "But even so, it's my duty to raise my fist as the champion of demons. I'm the toughest guy on my side. If you want to hurt my friends, I'll do what I gotta do to protect 'em."

"That's the difference between you and me," Bael concludes. "You might sit here wonderin' what you should or shouldn't do, but I *know*. I never gotta figure out my next move. If my friends are in trouble, I step up. If they ain't, then I sit down. Easy."

Bael's words serve to calm the crowd. The very real prospect of facing the Duke of Pain, a legendary battle-hardened warrior, will mean humanity must lose even more people. Killing him won't come easily, given his seemingly invulnerable body.

Unless... I step in.

I shake my head.

"No. I stand by what I said. Maybe this makes me a hypocrite, but I don't want to see anyone else die, be they human, monster or demon. I'll allow the demons to leave. Perhaps, in the future, humanity and demonkind will fight again, but I won't be the one to lead that attack."

A nearby trooper shakes his head. "Then I guess we'll have to wait for Commander Hope's return."

I nod. "Yes. Perhaps you will."

In the back of my mind, I wonder what happened to Hope. In the worst-case scenario, Ose may have already captured him. However, with so many demons in the vicinity, I don't dare to split my soul from my body to search for my clone. Only after the demons leave will I feel assured enough to do such a thing.

Bael turns on his heel and starts to walk away.

"You've made your choice, pal. I'll tell my guys to leave. Just be aware... Mephisto and me ain't seeing eye-to-eye lately. He might counter my orders with his own."

"Will Mephisto be a problem?" I ask.

Bael turns around and smirks at me. "Nah. I've got my-"

At that moment, a flash of light erupts in the skies above! A luminosity as bright as the sun ignites directly above the planet, causing countless people to cry out in alarm.

BOOOOOOOM!!!

A powerful projectile crashes against my barrier, causing it to flicker. Moments later, it pops like a bubble, while agonizing pain erupts in my soul. "Aaargh!"

My mind-wife jumps in alarm. "That light! Jason, that was the Atlas Cannon! What's going on? Why did it fire at your barrier, unprovoked?"

It takes me several seconds to regain my clarity of mind. When I do, I grit my teeth and bear through the pain. Having a railgun unexpectedly crash against the barrier may have jarred my soul, but at least with Camael's Cube supplanting my energy, the aftereffect isn't too severe.

"Ose... must have... compromised the cannon!" I gasp. "That explains what Belial saw earlier!"

When Samuel told me about the events of Stormbringer, Belial piped in at one point about the destruction of the Western Front, but I didn't put together at the time that someone may have compromised the Atlas Cannon! For Ose to have gone that far, her planning capabilities were truly frightening!

"Demons incoming from all directions!" One trooper yells, as his Hummer exosuit allows him to fly into the air, giving him a vantage point. "With the divine shield down, the demons have begun advancing on our position!"

"Stupid idiots!" Bael barks. "Bah, I'll take care of them, kid. Just gimme a minute."

"No," I say, "I'll just conjure a barrier and send them out again. I've plenty of energy to spare. That cannon attack didn't accomplish anything useful."

Once again, I speak two words of power. "**Barrier. Expel.**"

My voice resonates with Camael's cube in the adjacent dimension. Immediately, a brand-new barrier appears, once again enveloping humanity's forces while casting the demons outside.

After concluding, I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Haha... sorry, Bael. Where were we?"

The Duke of Pain shakes his head. "I already forgot what I was gonna say."

"You've got the memory of a goldfish," I reply.

Bael starts to walk away again, but from the amassed crowd, several exosuit-wearing troopers raise their heads in unison. I, too, receive a strange alert from Centurion's close-range sensors.

"WARNING. EXTREME LEVELS OF DEMONIC ENERGY DETECTED."

"What?"

Despite lacking an exosuit of her own, Belial seems to notice something amiss. She jerks her eyes to the ground. "Below us! Something's coming from undergr-"

BOOOOOM!!

A catastrophic explosion rocks the crowd, casting countless people in all directions as a single figure bursts out of the city's center.

"AHAHAHAHA!!" A demon cackles maniacally, his tone savage and filled with bloodlust. "Did you pathetic insects forget **ME?**!"

Scorching heat, like that of a dying star, sweeps across the battlefield. Within seconds, countless people lacking exosuits, or those with badly damaged ones, scream in pain before falling comatose to the two-hundred-degree heat.

Beelzebub, the Duke of Inferno, flies into the skies above, cackling nonstop.

"Oh, Jason Hiro! You worthless BASTARD! Your dogs shackled me tightly and threw away the key, yet I escaped! Then you buried me alive, but I escaped again! If you believe you can foist such humiliations upon me, THINK AGAIN!!"

My exosuit snaps into place. Before I can call out a Word of Power to protect Daisy and Phoebe, a barrier appears around us. Startled, I turn to look at Daisy, only to observe her eyes momentarily glowing for a second as she conjures that very same force-field.

"Daddy! This is a very bad man!"

"I know!"

I raise my head to the sky, where Beelzebub continues to revolve a shield of scorching flames around himself. His naked body lacks any traces of elegance, yet somehow, it makes him appear as a crazed, bloodthirsty being from an eldritch dimension.

"Nothing to say, PISS-ANT?!" Beelzebub bellows. "Well, you don't need to flap your worthless lips! I've come to deliver a present! The very same one I gave Uriel and your clone just six years ago! Ahahaha! HAAAAHAHAHA!"

"Beelzebub, don't!" Bael yells. "We're done fighting!"

"Screw you!!" Beelzebub howls. "I'm not done here! I'm never done! This war ends when **I** say it does! Now, all of you insipid morons can suckle upon the teat of DAMNATION! Behold, the glory of a TRUE archfiend! **AHHHHHHHHHH!!**"

Beelzebub's howl reverberates not only in the ears, but also the souls of all the people present. As he screams, numerous Centurion alarms begin to blare.

"WARNING! THERMONUCLEAR DETONATION DETECTED! SEEK COVER! ONE MINUTE, FORTY ONE SECONDS TO ATOMIC FUSION!"

Belial's eyes widen in alarm. "He's going to blow himself up! Jason, you have to teleport Beelzebub away from here!"

"I'm on it!" I yell. **"Teleport!"**

Two seconds pass.

Nothing happens.

"Teleport! TELEPORT, goddamnit!"

Still, Beelzebub remains rooted in place. The Duke screams in agony as his cells begin compressing together, igniting a thermonuclear reaction far, far more powerful than the one he unleashed upon Hope and Belial previously. Every single one of Centurion's sensors confirms this fact.

Forget it, I'll have to send everyone else away from here! I decide, opting for the next best thing. **"TELEPORT!"**

This time, I try to mass-transfer everyone other than Beelzebub, but my magic fails again!

"Jason!" My mind-wife says, "I'm detecting energy similar to what Ose struck you with! It's some sort of... magic cancelling field! It's emanating from Beelzebub in a huge radius! Everyone's been caught up in it, including you!"

"What! That's ludicrous!" I exclaim.

As my mind rapidly revolves to think of a solution, Centurion bellows another warning.

"ONE MINUTE, THIRTY SECONDS TO ATOMIC FUSION!"

"Shit!!"

I only have a minute and a half to find a way to salvage the situation, but my Wordsmithing isn't working!

How can I stop Beelzebub?!

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 288: Unyielding Rage

Recommended Listening

"ONE MINUTE, THIRTY SECONDS TO ATOMIC FUSION!"

Centurion bellows in the ears of all humanity's exosuit-wearing soldiers. Along with Beelzebub's increasingly pained cackling and the screams of terrified humans, Hero City transforms into a scene of abrupt chaos!

"Evacuate the area!" I yell. "Get everyone out of here! Belial, take Phoebe and Daisy!"

Countless soldiers grab one or two unconscious civilians at a time and make a break for the west, where they can take cover beneath the plateau leading to Hero City.

Inside my head, my mind-wife speaks to me at the speed of thought. "Jason, your magic hasn't been cancelled. Beelzebub's aura isn't the same as Ose's field, only similar. When you spoke those words of power, your magic *did* still activate!"

What does that mean?! I ask, trying to calm my frantic mind. If my magic doesn't do anything, then the nuances don't matter!

"Not true," Phoebe answers. "I'm detecting a cascading temporal disruption emanating from Beelzebub's position. He's releasing so much energy that he's disrupted the space around Hero City! Don't you see the barrier that Daisy created? Magic still works, just not temporal manipulation!"

My mind-wife's words temporarily pull my attention away from Centurion's reminder that five seconds have already passed. Seeing the bubble of divine energy surrounding me, my heart skips a beat.

You're right!

By the time Belial jumps to my side, only a few seconds have passed, yet I've already gained a sizable perspective of the situation.

"Go with your aunt!" I say, quickly passing Daisy off to Belial. A moment later, I hand Phoebe to her as well. "Get out of here, all of you!"

Belial's expression, just as panicked as everyone else's, makes my chest throb with pain. "Jason! There are too many people here! They can't escape!"

"Just get the soldiers out of here," I reply, looking her dead in the eye. "I'll find a way to stop Beelzebub. I promise!"

Once Belial takes my daughter and leaves, the barrier of energy surrounding me disappears, but I pay it no mind. My suit will protect me for now.

From the skies above, Beelzebub cackles viciously, while the heat surrounding him intensifies further. "Filthy rats! Weak little bugs! Fall to ash before me! Burn at the feet of your demon overlord! Learn the TRUE power of your betters! Fear us for all eternity! AHAHAHA!!!"

"ONE MINUTE, TWENTY SECONDS TO ATOMIC FUSION!" Centurion repeats.

With no time to waste, I turn my attention to the laughing bastard above.

"Beelzebub! Don't think you'll succeed in front of me! **Extinguish!**"

I aim my mind at the chemical reactions taking place within Beelzebub's body, yet to my astonishment, his aura barely flickers for a split-second before returning to normal.

Phoebe! I thought you said he wasn't cancelling my magic! I exclaim internally.

My mind-wife scowls. "I'm still not sure what's happening, Jason. All I know is that the energy bears a lot of resemblance to that which Ose used against you. Perhaps the aura is much stronger around his body, turning it into an actual magic-cancellation field!"

I see. So it weakens the further we move from Beelzebub?

"...Possibly!"

My wife's words inspire little confidence, but I don't have the time to think!

"**PUSH!**" I bellow, aiming to fling Beelzebub away.

Surprisingly, I manage to fire a wave of kinetic energy at Beelzebub! Sadly, it splashes against the vortex surrounding the Duke's body, only to amplify his power!

"**ONE MINUTE TO ATOMIC FUSION!**" Centurion repeats.

My mind-wife jumps in fright. "Oh my god, Jason! You accelerated his nuclear fusion! He absorbed your magic to increase his power! What the hell is Beelzebub even doing?! The amount of energy he's about to unleash is ten times greater than what he used against Hope and Samantha!"

My heart drops into my stomach. Before I can mull my wife's words over, a figure appears at my side.

"Wordsmith!"

I turn to the right, where I see Uriel, followed by Bael, Blinker, and all of Daisy's summoned Titans, as well as the Hydra.

"What is it, Uriel?" I ask, trying to modulate my voice. "I don't have time to chat!"

"Good; neither do I," Uriel replies. "The energy Beelzebub is releasing... art thou familiar with it?"

"Only a little! Ose struck me with something similar. It cancelled out my magic and nearly prevented me from returning to save everyone."

"This energy mirrors that which belongs to Gressil, the prison-master," Uriel replies, her tone solemn. "I have sensed it on many an occasion. Beelzebub's is far less energetic, yet just as potent. Its stability is poor, but its effectiveness is high. It can cancel magic with ease!"

"Do you have a way to counter it?" I ask.

"Under ordinary circumstances, nay! However, because Beelzebub's aura dost not cancelleth all magic, we may have a way to redirect the blast! Help me envelop the Duke in holy energy barriers! We dare not contain his explosion directly, but perhaps we can direct it elsewhere; to the skies!"

With Centurion counting down the seconds, I don't have time to consider Uriel's request.

"Fine! Since you can create barriers, help me!"

Blinker waves her arm. "I'll join in!"

With a frantic plan put into place, all of us quickly turn our attention skyward. Beelzebub's hair, no longer the color of blackened coal, instead burns atop his head, giving his scalp the appearance of a tiki torch. The flames seemingly fire up from his soul itself, erupting from his spirit with reckless abandon!

Uriel summons one of her constructs, the 'female-type' capable of summoning barriers. Having seen her powers in action during the Ancient Era, I know full-well what she can do. The moment she reaches inside herself to conjure a series of force-fields, I add my own magical might to the mix, as does Blinker.

"BARRIER! BARRIER! BARRIER!"

To my momentary relief, I successfully conjure multiple barriers of holy energy around Beelzebub. I create a cone facing upward, into the sky, aiming to divert as much of his explosive power away from the people on the ground as possible!

Immediately, the scorching heat pouring out of Beelzebub's figure lessens, providing momentary relief to my comatose friends. With Uriel's barriers adding to mine, as well as similar ones conjured by Blinker, we reduce Beelzebub's heat-pressure by more than ninety percent!

Unfortunately, even as Centurion continues to blare warnings, Beelzebub's demonic energy condenses further and further, turning him into a living nuclear bomb! His heat continues to press against our barriers, cracking them and seeping through countless narrow gaps. The heat around us once again rises!

"This is not enough!" Uriel yells. "Beelzebub's detonation will shred our defenses with ease!"

The Archangel appears more alarmed than ever in all her life. Having already lived through one of Beelzebub's explosions, the sheer power behind this one threatens to upend all of our conceptions regarding a Demon Duke's maximum energy output!

At that moment, the five Titans raise their heads. Wordlessly, their eyes glow, as if having received an unspoken command.

Four of them explode into particles of light! The Hydra disappears too, leaving only one Titan behind; Ivaldi, the Queen of Divinity. The light particles travel into Ivaldi's chest, empowering her body and causing her aura to glow!

Ivaldi swivels to face the tiny, seemingly insignificant demon in the air. She presses both of her palms together, then pulls them apart, revealing a spiraling orb of holy energy! Condensed to the extreme, the sheer power behind it might not compare to Camael's Cube, but it still dwarfs anything Uriel, Blinker, or I can output with a single spell.

The Titaness aims her arms outward! She sends the orb of holy energy flying at our barriers, startling me for an instant as I envision the worst-case scenario.

Contrary to my worries, the orb of energy melts into my barrier, empowering it to a whole new tier of strength! Even as I continue improving my barrier by repeatedly reinforcing it, the power I can call from Camael's Cube each time only reaches the maximum output of my entire body!

Ivaldi's single contribution eclipses one hundred casts of my own Wordsmithing magic! Even if I conjure all of the energy from Camael's Cube that my body can hold before speaking a word of power, I still can't achieve one-hundredth the output of Ivaldi's single spell!

A moment after conjuring her divine magic, Ivaldi's body explodes into particles of light! She dissipates into the air, leaving Uriel, Blinker, Bael, and myself behind.

"It's still not enough!" Uriel yells. "The barrier is too weak!"

"TWENTY-FIVE SECONDS TO ATOMIC FUSION!" Centurion repeats.

Beelzebub's body radiates a light bright enough to render anyone blind if they were to look directly at him. It's only thanks to my exosuit's solar-resistant visor that I can keep my eyes on the situation, while Blinker and Uriel rely on shielding their vision with magical energy.

"HAHAHAHA!!" Beelzebub shrieks. "IT IS TIME, HUMANS! TIME FOR YOUR **ANNIHILATION!** NOTHING YOU DO CAN STOP ME! MY POWER REIGNS SUPREEEEEEME!!"

For a brief instant, time seems to slow down.

I continue speaking words of power to improve the barrier, but my improvements barely increase its strength by a single percent with each cast.

A sense of regret pervades my soul.

If I die here, what will become of my family?

My home?

My species?

I am the last Hero. Aside from me, only Hope remains.

* * *

No. That's wrong.

Humanity has another savior now. Not only my clone, but my daughter, too. Daisy can live on in the event of my demise. She can rise up and guide our people to a new beginning.

If, for some reason, Hope has ended up in the clutches of demonkind, and if I should fall, humanity will still have one last guardian capable of protecting them.

As a father, I can only do my best to save my family. I must always be willing to lay down my life if it means their survival.

Phoebe. I'm sorry.

I should have returned sooner to protect humanity from the demons. *From Ose.* In the end, my greed toward Camael's Cube is what cost so many lives.

I can only pray my sacrifice will be enough to save those left behind!

"Wordsmith!" Uriel yells. "Lower the barrier around Hero City! We must allow Beelzebub's detonation to fire into the sky!"

I don't bother replying to her words. We've only fifteen seconds until Beelzebub's detonation.

"Dissipate!"

I drop the barrier surrounding Hero City, knowing that with it gone, Beelzebub's detonation won't simply explode inside of it to engulf everyone inside.

Uriel's eyes lose some of their luster.

"It still isn't enough."

Our barrier won't hold. We'll all surely die once Beelzebub's power erupts.

But at least we'll have contained the damage enough to save everyone outside the blast zone!

Just as Beelzebub's body enters the final seconds of its ignition...

A barrier of holy energy materializes around myself, Uriel, and Blinker!

"What?!"

I swivel my head to the side, only to witness an alarming sight!

My daughter stands beside me. She aims her palms at my body, a look of determination on her face.

"I'll protect you, daddy!"

"DAISY, NO! TELEPORT! TELEPORT!!"

I frantically try to send my daughter outside the blast zone, but my magic fails!

I can't teleport her away! My magic won't work!!

With one second left, I speak a final word of power.

"PUSH!!"

My burst of magical energy fires toward Daisy, but instead of flinging her away...

Nothing happens.

My spell melts around my daughter as if striking a steel wall.

Then, the world goes white.

Boom.

Outside Hero City, a light brighter than the sun engulfs the horizon. Countless demons, those who could have rushed toward Hero City following the Barrier's collapse, instead retreat as quickly as their legs will allow them.

The demons aren't stupid. They easily sense the frightening energy radiating from the city and take a guess at what's happening inside.

"Beelzebub is gonna blow! Let's get out of here!"

"I thought the Sphinx killed him!"

"Fuck no! Are you CRAZY?! Beelzebub is invincible! He always comes back from death!"

As the demons flee, the light intensifies, causing many of the weak little imps, demon grunts, and monsters to lose their eyesight. They stumble and trip over rocks or gaps in the terrain, along with the countless dead bodies left behind from their invasion. Many end up running the wrong way in their terror, causing them to crash into others.

With confusion swirling amidst the demonic ranks, and the imminent arrival of a nuclear detonation coming, many Warpers close off their portals, not wanting any spillover to reach inside Hell itself. This decision strands tens of millions of demons on Tarus II, leaving them helpless in the face of what's to come.

Eventually, the inevitable comes to pass.

Beelzebub explodes.

Like a miniature supernova, his body erupts with nuclear energy. While not as incredible as Satan's final moments during the War in Heaven, Beelzebub's detonation still engulfs the horizon. Any demons who managed to preserve their vision instantly lose it, while waves of scorching two-thousand-degree heat bear down from Hero City's elevated plateau and travel outward in all directions.

The Horned Forest, along with all its fearsome residents, disappears. The trees instantly turn to ash, and their bark to powder. They scatter to the west, flying horizontally like blackened daggers of death.

Thanks to the hasty measures taken by the Wordsmith, many humans take refuge at the base of Hero City's mountains, tucking themselves in while praying for salvation. Belial turns her body flat and stretchy, engulfing Phoebe's unconscious figure in an embrace. Sadly, Daisy leaves her sight at the last few seconds, preventing the succubus from engulfing her, too.

Outside of Hero City, Beelzebub's detonation travels in a wave, frying innumerable demons alive. Only those who manage to hole up underground, sometimes by blindly stumbling into Burrower tunnels, survive the initial blast.

A few million demons perish instantly to Beelzebub's scorching flames. Others die shortly after the eruption due to burn trauma, while others barely hold on.

The further away from Hero City one travels, the greater the number of survivors, and the better their condition. However, aside from those who managed to take cover underground, every demon without fail finds themselves blinded, deafened, and stunned.

Half a minute after the detonation, a mushroom cloud travels into the sky. Deadly radiation travels in all directions, penetrating even the barriers of holy energy erected around the Duke of Inferno's starting point.

After ten full minutes, the planet finally goes quiet.

In the aftermath, nearly ten million demons lay dead, their bodies having suffered differing levels of trauma, burns, and liquefaction. Those who cling to life range anywhere from mortally wounded to lightly injured, though none of them remain conscious.

* * *

Inside Hero City.

The Wordsmith, the Archangel of Protection, and the Monster Queen all lay on their backs. Shimmering barriers of holy light shield them from the most destructive parts of Beelzebub's detonation... but they don't protect them fully.

After ten minutes, the barriers flicker and disappear, their power exhausted.

Molten soil coats the interior of Hero City. The formerly comatose or dying humans and monsters left behind no longer exist, thanks to their bodies having been erased from existence. Anyone even remotely in the vicinity of Beelzebub's blast has disappeared, the only exception being the three heroes who stood against him, as well as the Duke of Pain.

Bael, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the first person to awaken. With his all-but-invincible body protecting him, the Duke of Pain shakes off his disorientation and climbs to his feet. He finds the movement difficult, if only because of the rapidly cooling lava stuck to his body. He slips and falls on his ass, splashing back into the ultra-hot liquid due to his poor footing.

"Aw... shit. Shit."

Eventually, Bael manages to shakily stand up. He discovers that despite his godlike body, he still suffered immensely from Beelzebub's full-power detonation. Bael's skin, now blackened and charred beyond belief, clings to his muscles and bone like a desperate lover begging for forgiveness. He cautiously touches his chest and winces.

"Damn. Been a long time since... since I got hit this hard."

Bael sweeps his gaze in every direction. All he sees is a barren wasteland. Hero City's buildings, infrastructure, and even the distant Pyramids lay in ruins. Debris lays here and there, hopelessly mish-mashed inside the molten soil, which continues to rapidly cool and harden.

"Oh, Beelzebub. What have you done, kid? What the hell have you done..."

The Duke's expression falls further and further. He eventually turns his eyes toward the only signs of life in the vicinity; the three figures of Jason Hiro, Uriel, and Blinker. Bael carefully trudges through the liquefied soil, ignoring the still-insanely-hot ground as it burns his feet. Such trivial heat barely affects him.

"Hey. You guys alive?"

He nudges Blinker, who momentarily lolls her head to the side before passing out. Then, he reaches toward Uriel, only to think better of that idea.

"Ehh... I don't wanna deal with the crazy lady just yet..."

Finally, Bael reaches Jason. The Hero still wears an exosuit, one which managed to preserve his life. Surprisingly, Jason gasps out a few words which transmit through his helmet.

"Duh... duh... Dai... zeee..."

"Hey, kid!" Bael says. "Are you okay? How many fingers am I holdin' up?"

Bael starts to raise his palm, but instead frowns.

Wait, shit. What am I thinking? I can't count. I won't know if the kid says the right number.

After a few minutes, Jason Hiro mumbles out a word of power. "**...Heal.**"

He restores his battered body to pristine condition, then slowly sits up, staring blankly at the devastation around him. Even after ten minutes, sweltering heat still lingers in the air.

"Cough... cough... whurr... whurr is she?"

"Who?" Bael asks.

Jason doesn't answer. Instead, he speaks another word of power.

"Locate. Locate. Detect. Find."

As the Wordsmith groggily stares forward, tears begin to stream from his eyes.

"No. No... she can't be gone. She can't be. Where's my little girl?"

Bael recalls the last few seconds before Beelzebub's detonation, when a tiny figure showed up at the Wordsmith's side.

"Oh. Oh, man."

Jason deactivates his helmet. He pays no mind to the hundred degree heat pelting his face, instead opting to rub his eyes.

"Daisy. Daisy. No... no, she *can't* be gone."

As much as he tries to deny it, the Wordsmith knows the truth.

His daughter has died.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 289: Fallen Father

Tarus II. My home for the past six years. A world where I matured into a man. A leader.

This planet has been the place I lived the longest, aside from Earth itself. It carries countless memories of mine.

And now... it has suffered irreparable damage.

The demons attacked humanity. They used every method at their disposal to quash our spirits and break our wills.

But do I blame my enemies for their actions? Do I blame them for killing my daughter?

No.

I blame myself.

Everyone warned me. Some of the wisest, most ancient beings spoke of the horrors that would befall me if I treated the demons like thoughtful, intelligent sentients. Solomon. Raphael. Mildred.

They told me to take immediate action. They told me not to waste my time extending a hand to the demons. Any concessions I made would simply become shows of weakness in the eyes of my enemies.

I didn't believe them. I thought I could use my almighty power of Wordsmithing to save everyone, should the worst come to pass. In my arrogance, I believed that I could pull off the unthinkable by ingratiating the demons to me. What if I could come up with an alternate method for the demons to evolve? At that point, they would no longer need to consume humans and our souls to advance.

I was a deluded fool, and my daughter paid the price for my inaction.

Not just her, but my best friend, Kar. My subordinates. My worshippers, my sycophants, and even my acquaintances.

Wrapping my head around the scale of death has brought me to the limits of my sanity. Their voices cry out to me, demanding an accounting for my failures.

What can I offer them? My condolences? My apologies?

Words won't bring back the dead. Not even when spoken by a Wordsmith.

"Locate."

I try to call out to my daughter, but I fail. My word of power evaporates uselessly into the wind. They say the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. I don't know who came up with that saying, but I do know that I hate them. I hate that they were right.

A gigantic crater rests in the middle of Hero City. Two hundred feet deep and half a mile in diameter, its size reveals the sheer scale of Beelzebub's detonation.

Not a single corpse litters the streets. Anyone caught in Beelzebub's blast ceased to exist at the moment of his nuclear ignition.

But me?

I'm alive and well.

Why?

Why did I survive? I didn't deserve such a fate.

Why did Daisy jump in to save me? She was so happy in... those final moments. She just wanted to protect her daddy.

But that wasn't her job. It was mine. As a man, a father, and a husband, it was my duty to save those I love.

I failed them.

I failed everyone.

My heart doesn't ache. Tears don't stream down my face. Instead, a black hole of emotions expands in my chest.

Today, I've lost something more substantial than I could ever imagine. All this time, I clung to my morals, thinking I could preserve some... some flawed sense of superiority. As long as I didn't intervene, I could keep my hands clean. I wouldn't kill any demons. I wouldn't risk the lives of anyone I cared about.

Now, I understand the truth. I was selfish. Greedy. I thought only of myself. While Phoebe battled until nearly dying from exhaustion, I stayed away, safe and sound, claiming a moral high ground I didn't deserve.

And... my daughter... paid the price!

Daisy died because of ME! BECAUSE OF MY WORTHLESS, USELESS IDEALS!

What kind of man am I?! What kind of so-called 'Hero' can't even save the ones he loves?!

I fell right into the same trap as Solomon, even after he WARNED me! He told me never to trust the demons! I didn't LISTEN! WHY didn't I listen?!

I hate myself! I hate who I've become!

But now... above even my own self-loathing...

I hate the demons.

I will *never* forgive them.

Recommended Listening

Bael watches warily as the Hero rises to his feet. Jason gazes blankly at the world around him without a trace of emotion on his face.

"Hey, kid. Kid! I'm sorry. What Beelzebub did was..."

Jason raises his hand. "I've no interest in anything you or any other demon has to say. Not anymore."

Bael sighs. "I get it, kid. I do. You lost... so many people..."

The Wordsmith doesn't reply. Instead, his helmet closes over his face. He begins to levitate into the air, alarming Bael.

"Hey! Where are you goin'?"

Jason aims his palm toward the distant horizon, where the now-immobilized demon army lays. Countless grunts moan in pain as they blindly and dumbly crawl on the ground, unable to perceive the world around them.

Suddenly, a blast of holy energy fires from the Wordsmith's palm!

Resembling Gabriel's Holy Beam of Heavenly Destruction, this blast contains an immense amount of holy energy pulled directly from Camael's Cube! It spreads out like a cone as it travels into the wall of demons, only to disappear silently.

A moment later, Bael turns his head to look into the distance. Instead of the huge ring of immobilized demons, a giant gap appears in their encirclement. More than a hundred thousand demons vanish from the mortal plane of existence, silently erased by the Wordsmith's magic.

Before Bael can react, Jason fires another beam, and another!

Hundreds of thousands of demons vanish from existence, their bodies destroyed at the atomic level! The Wordsmith makes no wild motions, nor does he scream and shout. Instead, with the clinical dispassion of a mortician, he slowly begins to spin in the air, wiping out demons by the tens of thousands with each wave of his palm.

"K-kid! KID!! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!" Bael roars. "Stop! Stop, you bastard!!"

Finally, the Wordsmith pauses his attacks. He lowers his helmeted head to look at the Duke of Pain. Despite Bael's inability to see through the faceless armor, it wouldn't matter, as the Wordsmith's expression appears completely blank.

"I don't hate you, Bael. Of all the demons in existence, you're one of 'the good ones.' But that doesn't matter anymore. I'm done playing games. I'm done caring. I tried to make peace, but you chose to stomp my head into the mud. Now... I'll pay you back in spades. Your reckoning has come."

"Stop!" Bael yells. "I know you're angry, Wordshit! I can't apologize enough! But you can't just... you can't just kill the demons! My friends are helpless! Be the bigger man!"

"That's ironic, coming from you..." Jason mutters. "You killed Ose earlier when she couldn't fight back. I'm just doing the same. Now, shut the *fuck* up. Don't interrupt me. I'm fresh out of mercy."

Bael's eyes smolder with rage. "I didn't want this war! I didn't want all this violence! I even told Ose it was a shit plan!"

"Your excuses won't bring my little girl back," Jason replies, his voice eerily calm. "Nothing will. But, at the least, I can prevent any human from suffering the same fate ever again."

The Duke of Pain begins to tremble. His expressions becomes murderous as he watches the Wordsmith raise his palm one more time.

"DON'T... DO... IT!!" Bael howls.

The Wordsmith pays no attention to the Duke. He fires another holy energy laser, wiping out yet another one hundred thousand demons.

Finally, the last thread of sanity snaps in Bael's mind. The Duke of Pain explodes in rage, causing his body to transform!

"GAAAAR! ME HATE HERO! ME HATE HUMAN! ME SMASH!!"

Within seconds, the Duke of Pain morphs into his ultimate form, the Balrog! Even mightier than before, the sheer accumulated rage and anguish from all of the day's events pull him to the highest plateau of power he has ever achieved! For a brief moment, he even touches the boundary of the Emperor realm, causing his demonic aura to overflow!

BOOM!

Bael smashes his feet against the ground and pounces at the Wordsmith like a feral wolf! He leaps skyward and rears back his arms, intending to slap his palms against the Hero's fragile body and reduce him to a bloody pulp!

The instant Bael attacks... Jason disappears!

Fwip.

The Wordsmith teleports a hundred meters away, easily evading the Balrog's attack.

"So you've resorted to this..." Jason mutters, his voice despondent. "I guess that's to be expected."

The Wordsmith stretches out his palm. He 'grabs' at the Balrog while speaking a Word of Power. Instantly, Bael freezes mid-jump! He halts in midair, as if having fallen into quicksand!

"GAAAR?!" Bael growls in confusion. **"LET GO! STUPID FLESHBAG! STUPID MAN!"**

"No. I don't think I will." Jason replies.

The Wordsmith raises his left hand, while still keeping Bael firmly locked in place with his right.

"Fire."

A pinpointed beam of holy energy flashes from the Wordsmith's palm. It races toward the Balrog and instantly pierces his chest like a railgun. A hole the size of a fist explodes in the Balrog's chest, making Bael gasp!

"Huurk!!"

The Balrog struggles futilely. He tries to break free of the immense pressure holding him in place, but Jason merely speaks two more words.

"Fire. Fire."

This time, two even bigger holes explode in the Duke's chest, completely exposing all of his internal organs.

In all of Bael's years, never has he taken a hit with so much devastating might behind it. No matter whether he fought the Archangels, the Volgrim, or other demons, none of them managed to riddle his body with such horrific wounds.

However, the Wordsmith's power doesn't work like those who came before him.

Jason's magic, empowered by Camael's Cube, turns him into a godlike deity comparable to the Archangels of the Primordial Era. He tears through Bael's defenses with ease, sapping the Duke of all his strength.

"What a sad end to a great demon..." Jason mumbles. "But, well, I guess plenty of others have died, today."

* * *

Outside of Hero City, many miles from its borders, a single demon grunt crawls out of a Burrower's tunnel. Despite having escaped the full power of Beelzebub's onslaught, this fellow didn't avoid taking all damage. His ears ring from the shockwaves, and his eyes sting from the acrid stench of burned bodies all around him.

As the grunt, a Scyther, hobbles along, using his bladed arms as crutches, he evaluates the helpless demon army with dismay.

"Shucks. Damn. Everyone's- cough! Everyone's in bad shape!"

Despite his watery eyes, this demon still possesses incredible vision, far superior to the average human. He slowly turns his attention to the distant confines of Hero City, where he spots two tiny figures hovering in the air.

"Huh? Who's that fleshy with Bael? And why's Bael in his Balrog form? Ah! Don't tell me! Bael's finally gonna kick some ass!"

This demon ignores the bodies around him. Instead, he turns to look at one of his comrades, another demon emerging from a nearby tunnel, someone who also survived Beelzebub's detonation with only minor injuries. "Yo! Check it out! Bael became the Balrog!"

"He did?" Asks the other demon. "Whoa! He did! But... who's the fleshbag floating next to him?"

"Dunno! Some dude in armor. But that doesn't matter! He's dead meat once Bael-"

Before the grunt can finish his words, a flash of light impacts Bael's figure. The Balrog shudders visibly. He raises his arms to clutch his wound, but a moment later, two more flashes of light tear through him, spraying blood and bone out of his back.

Both demon grunts watch in horror. Their skin turns ashen, while their jaws hang loose.

"W-what? What's happening to Bael? How is that fleshbag hurting him?!"

"That's holy energy!" The second grunt replies. "It's just like what Uriel used earlier!"

They, along with several other scattered demons, can only gaze at the brutal scene of domination as the Hero systematically dismantles the so-called 'invincible' Balrog.

Jason never smiles. He doesn't gloat or brag.

He merely attacks.

After blasting away Bael's chest, the Wordsmith sighs.

"Sorry, Bael. I'd say this isn't personal but... it is."

With a single motion of his hand, Jason squeezes his fingers shut, causing a powerful compression force to collapse in on Bael.

"GRAAAUR-"

Bael releases one last pained scream before suddenly falling silent. All of his bones and internal organs shatter, unable to cope with the Wordsmith's might.

Afterward, Jason releases his grip. He doesn't even watch as Bael's figure falls to the crater below.

Whump.

The Duke's body slaps the dirt. After several long, agonizing seconds, the light goes out in his eyes.

Bael, the Duke of Pain, dies. He falls before the Wordsmith's awesome power, failing to inflict even a scratch on his opponent.

His death causes a wave of fear to spread throughout the few observant demons surrounding Hero City's borders. Despite more than ten miles separating them from the Duke, they still perceive the fading of his demonic aura, as well as the fall of his corpse.

All demons worship Bael. As one of the oldest of their kind, someone who always gave pointers to those beneath him and treated his fellow demons casually, he's never truly made any blood-enemies. Even the demons who aligned themselves against Bael still held plenty of respect for a valiant figure from the War in Heaven.

But now, his legacy of invincibility shatters. Those who watch the Duke perish become so lost and despondent that they lose all traces of hope.

The Wordsmith finally reveals his power, a might so formidable that not even the invincible Duke of Pain could last two minutes against him.

What chance do any of the pitiful grunts stand?

Indeed, Jason raises his arm once again. He begins slowly spinning in midair while firing wide-area blasts of holy magic, wiping his enemies from existence.

This energy, lethal to demons, harms no other beings. Jason spares any living creatures born on Tarus II. He fires holy energy not only at the borders in the distance, but all throughout Hero City's confines, cleaning up any stragglers.

In the end, only a handful of demons, those Centurion identifies as Jason's surviving allies, escape his attention.

Even so, the Wordsmith gazes at them with cold, lifeless eyes. All hints of empathy vanishes from his soul.

"Never again..." Jason mutters. "I'll never let this happen again. Phoebe. Daisy. I'm sorry."

He lowers himself to the ground. There, he arrives beside Blinker and Uriel, both of whom finally awaken.

"Uhh..." Blinker whimpers. "My... my head hurts... ah!!"

The Monster Queen jumps to her feet and cries out in alarm. Seeing the devastation around herself, as well as the smoldering crater in Hero City's center, she momentarily blanks out, lost in a storm of emotions.

"Juh... Jason! Jason, no!"

Blinker falls to her knees. She bursts into tears, realizing just how many friends of hers have perished to Beelzebub's detonation.

"Uuuu... Kar's gone... everyone's gone! It's not fair! It's not faaaair!!"

Uriel, too, climbs to her feet. Unlike the Wordsmith and the Monster Queen, she suffers little to no negative emotional repercussions. The Archangel merely sweeps her gaze from side to side, then sighs.

"Tragic. As expected of the bloodskins, they will go to any length to wreak senseless havoc."

Uriel's gaze falls upon Bael's body, resting in the center of the crater.

"...So the Hero slew demonkind's greatest champion, eh?"

Finally, she turns her head to look at Jason. The Hero stands silently, his faceless mask aimed at the ground. Jason's arms hang limp at his sides, as if to demonstrate his complete loss of spirit.

"For what 'tis worth... I am sorry for thy loss," Uriel murmurs. "I, too, have experienced the deaths of all my loved ones. Now that thou have suffered the same fate as me, thou can finally understandeth the unending rage burning within my breast."

Slowly, Jason nods. "I do."

"Mmm. There is no way to bring back those who have died. For eons, I wept uncontrollably. I watched, helpless, as the demons slew my brothers and sisters one by one. 'Twas only once the last angel fell that my sorrow became rage. I momentarily broke free from my shackles and released my hatred upon those who scorned me."

The Wordsmith lifts his head to look at the Archangel.

"What does it matter? I failed everyone. I failed my little girl. She died protecting me, and now I can never hear her laughter again. No matter how many demons I kill, it won't bring Daisy back."

"Indeed," Uriel nods. "'Tis impossible to bring back the dead. This realization has wracked me with guilt for a hundred thousand years. Even so, I refuse to give up. I will not allow myself a moment of rest until I have slain every last bloodskin in the galaxy."

"I finally understand," Jason says. "I see it all so... so clearly now. I was a fool to think I could alter the essence of my enemies. I'm sorry I didn't take your side six years ago, Uriel. I'm sorry I didn't return early to destroy the demons the moment they set foot on my world. Too bad my apologies won't change anything. Too bad they won't be able to fix what has happened."

Uriel extends her hand. "Thou needeth not to wallow in misery. Thy wife still lives. Thy species still walks the mortal plane. Thou hath failed once, but redemption is still possible for thee. Join me. Help me

slay our enemies. Help me eradicate these cursed creatures from our universe."

"I don't want redemption," Jason replies. "I want my little girl back."

"Dost thou refuseth my offer?"

"No. I don't. It's just... I need time. I need to think. I need to tell my wife... what I've done."

Uriel lowers her arm.

"I understand. In that case, I shall take my leave. Barbatos won't wake up for quite some time. While thou gathereth thy spirit, I shall strike the first blow. I shall begin paying the demons back for the blood they've spilt today."

The Wordsmith nods. "Yes. That sounds... fine."

His empty voice, still devoid of all emotions, comes off as completely lifeless and hollow. No longer fully human, Jason Hiro retreats into his shell, making it impossible for him to shed even a single tear over his daughter's death.

"Farewell, Wordsmith," Uriel says, as she waves her hand to open a portal inside Hell.

Just before the Archangel leaves, Jason speaks again.

"Wait."

Uriel pauses. She turns to look at him.

"Yes?"

Jason holds up his right hand. A moment later, the exosuit covering his body melts away, revealing his haggard face and distant, hollow eyes.

However, it is not the Wordsmith's face that draws Uriel's attention, but his fingers.

More specifically, three simple golden rings fastened to them.

The Archangel freezes on the spot. "Those... those rings!"

"Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael..." Jason mumbles. "Your long-lost brothers. Here. They wish to speak to you. I... I hope they can help you... find some measure of peace."

Jason plucks the three rings off his fingers. Then, he levitates them toward Uriel. The Archangel breathes heavily for several seconds as they land in her open palm. Hastily, she tears off her armored gauntlet, revealing Barbatos's hideous, ravaged arm. She quickly places all three rings on her fingers, then falls into a daze.

Several minutes pass. Jason kneels beside Blinker and wraps his arm around her shoulder, allowing the fairy to sob against his chest.

"I'm sorry, Blinker..." Jason says, his voice quiet. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to save Kar."

Blinker sniffs and weeps. "It's... it isn't- hic! It isn't your fault..."

"No. It is."

* * *

Eventually, Uriel raises her head.

"Wordsmith."

"What?"

Jason turns his head around to glance at her. Uriel walks over to him, then holds out one of the Archangel rings.

"I... I thank thee... for this boon..." Uriel says, her voice choked with emotion. "I did not realize... my brothers had endured. Thou hath given me a... a small moment of reprieve. I have spoken with my brothers. Raphael and Michael wish to come with me. However, Raphael insists that Gabriel keep thee company."

"I don't need the rings anymore." Jason says. "You can have all three."

"Nay. I insist," Uriel retorts. "Please. In the future, I shall take Gabriel back. For now, thou requireth his presence more than I."

Jason appears less than enthusiastic. After a few moments of deliberation, he finally takes the ring and places it back on his finger.

"Fine."

Uriel pulls back. She lovingly strokes Raphael and Michael's rings, appearing lost in thought.

"I know thou hath suffered. There are no words I can speak to comfort thee. Still, I must thank thee, again. These rings... they have brightened my soul."

"Glad to help," Jason answers.

After saying her goodbyes, Uriel steps through her portal and disappears. She vanishes into the Labyrinth, leaving Jason and Blinker alone.

The Hero and Monster Queen silently comfort one another, though their emotional intensities differ immensely.

Jason gazes at the devastated city. He stares into the crater, at the crumpled buildings, and at the flattened pyramids.

He feels nothing. Not a single emotion flickers across the man's face.

Only two words escape his lips.

"I... regret."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 290: Advent of Chaos

Small fires burn throughout the ruins of Hero City. The once-brilliant sights of the Pyramids no longer line the horizon. In their place, only shredded metal and molten bricks remain.

A smell of death pervades the air. Jason Hiro consoles Blinker as she continues choking out sobs. The emotional wounds they've both suffered have completely rent them to their cores.

"We... we should find Phoebe and the others." Jason says.

The Hero's impassive expression mirrors the deadened nerves spread throughout his body. The more Blinker cries, the less he allows himself to feel. Like a wall erected between his mind and his soul, the Hero demonstrates zero outward emotions.

Blinker shudders for a moment before pulling away. She wipes her eyes several times, smearing ash and dirt against their peripheries.

"Y-yes. I'm sorry. I just... I can't stop... uuu..."

Jason wraps his arm around Blinker's shoulder, then starts pulling her to the west. They slowly begin to walk in the direction of the ramp leading down from the plateau to the lower wildlands.

From inside the Hero's mind, his wife, Phoebe, speaks. "Jason..."

What? Jason asks.

Phoebe sits on a bench inside a small park. Her expression appears just as miserable as Blinker's, though she forces herself to hold her emotions together for her husband's sake.

"It's... it's not your fault."

It is. Jason replies. *All of this happened because of me.*

"No. Ose did this..." Phoebe mutters. "Ose k-killed... she killed our little girl."

Yes. But she never would have succeeded without my weakness.

"It's not your fault!" Phoebe repeats. "You can't just... lock your emotions away!"

I don't deserve to cry. I don't deserve the luxury of emotions when all of this could have been prevented. I failed everyone, and now their deaths hang on my shoulders.

Phoebe hesitates. She presses her hands against her eyes as she tries to suppress the anguish in her heart. Seeing her husband stoically enduring the most crushing moment of his life only makes her pain worse.

"That doesn't matter, Jason. It doesn't matter one bit! Daisy is dead. She's dead! As her father, it's only right for you to... to shed tears!"

Jason and Blinker pause near the rubble of a devastated building. Unlike many of the others, a burned up corpse rests outside, one of an unknown gender and age. The body's burned skin and bones barely give

the impression of a humanoid shape, indicating they were either human, demon, or some similar variant during their life.

I had one minute and forty five seconds to react to Beelzebub's detonation, Jason thinks. I could have done so much more to stop him. I could have fired a beam of holy energy at him. Perhaps by vaporizing his body, I'd have prevented his explosion. I might have saved a million lives.

"Yes, maybe! Maybe, maybe, maybe!" Phoebe replies. "But perhaps destroying his body would have ignited him sooner! Perhaps the holy energy would have increased his power and made his detonation more destructive! You don't know!"

I don't, Jason concedes. But I should have known. I should have prepared contingencies. Beelzebub already exploded once. He nearly killed Hope and Samantha. My failure to anticipate his movements led to this disaster. Him, and all the others.

Jason resumes walking. Neither he nor Blinker say anything out loud. For her part, the Fairy stays silent, merely swallowing all the death with her eyes while silently grieving for the fallen. As for Jason, he barely takes note of the world around him, instead staring vacantly into the distance.

I knew Ose was a threat, yet I tried to play nice. I knew that all of the demons who took part in this genocide existed, yet I prepared no countermeasures. If I am not at fault, then who is?

Tears well up in Phoebe's eyes.

"The demons," She whispers. "They are."

Demons are demons, and humans are humans, Jason replies. A hundred thousand years of history have proven as much. Many of the world's greatest minds warned me of the realities of our universe. But did I listen? No. I tried to change the unchangeable. I tried to turn monsters into bunnies and birds. Now that I know better, it's too late to undo the past. I can't bring Daisy back. I've already tried to resurrect the dead, and failed. There is no simple fix. There is no easy redemption. I have to accept my failings and change my future path.

Phoebe's soul momentarily jolts in surprise. "What are you saying?"

Don't act surprised. You always told me to toughen up. You told me to stop treating the demons with kid gloves. Most of the defenses around Hero City came from your real body. It was you who prepared for the worst, while I focused on building a stupid moonbase. Oh. That reminds me.

Jason pauses his walking. He raises his eyes skyward, toward the slowly darkening sky.

"Locate."

Jason speaks a word of power, aiming it toward a tiny dot circling the planet. After a few seconds, his mind makes contact with the few remaining humans aboard the Atlas Cannon.

"Ose somehow wormed her way into our ranks," Jason says. "I think I'll start by purging all of the traitors who followed in her path. **Poison.**"

Jason conjures a lethal, but incredibly slow acting airborne toxin. He disperses it into the hallways of the Atlas Cannon, allowing it to permeate within the bodies of the dozen or so traitors left alive.

The noxious gas immediately paralyzes all of the traitors aboard the Cannon. Then, it slowly cooks them alive, causing them immense pain, yet preventing them from crying out or screaming. The agony of having their blood boiled from the inside-out proves more horrifying than the worst tales of Hell cooked up by ancient superstitious humans. It will take more than five hours for all of them to die, and in that time, they will suffer fates worse than death.

"Jason...?" Blinker asks, glancing at him in confusion.

"It's nothing," Jason says. "Just cleaning up a few rats."

* * *

Minutes later, Jason arrives at the base of Hero City, below the mountain plateau, near where the mines leading deeper into the planet reside.

Blinker winces as they pass yet another brutally burned, scarred, and malformed body missing half its limbs. The further they travel from Beelzebub's detonation, the more 'intact' corpses they stumble across.

Jason only looks at them for a moment before averting his eyes.

"...Another one I've failed."

He and Blinker walk separately now. The Monster Queen's tear-stained face reveals the extent to which she's wept, yet no longer does she cry. Having exhausted all of her emotional energy, her face becomes somewhat blank, mirroring Jason's.

"Are you doing okay, Jason?" Blinker asks. "You... you haven't cried at all."

Jason shakes his head. "I don't deserve to weep. Sorrow comes from the powerless, from those who lacked the strength to save someone, yet fervently wish the opposite were true. I had the ability to save everyone here, but failed to use it properly."

"That's not true. You don't deserve to suffer!" Blinker cries.

What follows is another back and forth mirroring the one Jason had with his mind-wife. Blinker fails to change his mind any more than Phoebe did.

"War sucks..." Blinker mumbles. "I hate it. I hate the harm it causes. I hate the destruction of loving bonds."

Jason nods sagely. "Yet those who refuse to engage only make themselves easy pickings for those who don't."

His words echo those spoken by Solomon and Raphael. Having finally suffered a debilitating blow on par with the betrayal Solomon endured, as well as material losses equivalent to Raphael during the War in Heaven, Jason finally understands what it means to permanently suffer an irreversible wound.

The two magicians walk into the mines beneath Hero City. Several bodies lay just outside the doorway, likely the last people who barely didn't make it inside the safety of the underground tunnels. Countless similar tunnels exist around Hero City's peripheries, though few of them are as easy to reach as the one at the base of the city's primary ramp.

Within thirty seconds, Blinker and Jason reach a small group of one hundred soldiers, all of them holding their guns with trembling hands.

"Commander?" One of the soldiers says. "Is that you?"

"It's me." Jason replies. "Where is Phoebe? Is she okay?"

"She isn't here," the man says. "The Second Emperor took her and your daughter somewhere safer. We... we panicked, and didn't know how to stop her."

"My daughter..." Jason mutters. A forlorn expression appears in his eyes. "Don't worry. Belial will protect Phoebe. Of that much, you can rest assured."

"We do have many of the other high-ranking leaders further in the mines, sir," The soldier says. "General Chadwick, Lieutenant Samuel, Corporal Hurent, and so on. Other than Elder Skarde, everyone is accounted for."

After questioning the soldier about a few mundanities, Jason pats Blinker's back. "You stay here. I need to get an eye on the damage."

She nods listlessly. "Okay."

Jason teleports away, flickering half a mile toward a dug-out hole in the cliff. Located somewhere vaguely in the northwest of the city's plateau, Jason arrives to find Belial hunkering over Phoebe protectively, shielding his wife's body with her own.

"Heal," Jason says, directing his word of power toward the succubus. He quickly fixes her internal injuries and wipes out the radiation wracking her body, along with Phoebe's, too.

A minute later, Jason carefully pulls out Phoebe and Belial from the hole. He leans both of them back against his arms, with Phoebe in his right, and Belial in his left.

"Cough... cough..." Belial gasps. "Uhh. Head hurts. Whud habbened?"

Jason purses his lips. "Beelzebub blew himself up."

"He did? Oh. Oh! He did!"

Belial's eyes flicker quickly as she forces herself back to full alertness. She pulls herself together and sits up straight, drawing away from Jason.

"Phoebe! Is she okay?"

Jason nods. "She's fine. Still exhausted, though. She'll need at least another day of sleep before she wakes up."

Belial nods. "Right. Good, that's good."

As the succubus breathes a sigh of relief, several seconds of silence follow.

Suddenly, Belial begins to tremble. Her eyes flick around the nearby area, then scan Jason, causing her to notice his weirdly calm facial expressions.

"D-Daisy! Where is Daisy?! Is she okay? I... I had her with me, but then...!"

Jason doesn't answer. He merely stares into the succubi's eyes, his expression unmoving and hollow.

A horrible sense of dread engulfs Belial. "No... no, she... she has to be okay! Daisy's fine, right, Jason? She's fine! You wouldn't p-play a prank on me at a time like this... would you?"

Jason lowers his head. He strokes his wife's hair absentmindedly as she sleeps in his arms.

"Daisy's dead, Sam. She's dead."

"Nooo! No, devils, no!" Belial shrieks. She claws at her eyes as waves of nausea strike her stomach. "No, it's not true! It can't be true! Uuu..."

Every second that passes, Belial sinks deeper and deeper into guilt and self-doubt. Tears burst seemingly from her soul as the surrounding air trembles under her demonic mana.

"*Guuuuu...* Daisy... little Daisy, no... not my niece..."

Jason watches silently as Belial breaks down further and further.

"I should have held her! I should have protected her!" Belial cries. "Useless! I'm so devil-damned useless! A pathetic bitch, a stupid whore!!"

Jason sighs. "It's not your fault, Sam. I should have protected Daisy. She was my daughter. My responsibility."

His words do nothing to ease Belial's guilt. Within seconds, her heart-wrenching grief turns into maddened bloodlust and soul-consuming rage.

"I'LL KILL THEM!! I'LL FUCKING KILL THEM ALL! I'LL RIP OSE TO PIECES, AND BEELZEBUB AND ALL THE OTHER **FUCKING BASTARDS** WHO DID THIS!!"

Her mood swings, similarly, don't affect Jason in the slightest.

"Ose's dead, Sam. So is Beelzebub, Bael, and many of the others. You can't kill them again."

Belial pants like a maddened dog. "Is that what you think?! You're wrong! YOU'RE WRONG! Mephisto's still alive! That worthless little rat! I bet he'll bring them back! Even if he doesn't, he's still on MY kill-list! I'll show him who's the true master of the dead! I'll grind his bones into... into POWDER! I'll smash him, pulverize him!!"

The more Belial rages, the more emotionally fatigued she becomes.

After twenty minutes of screaming and crying, the Second Emperor finally releases most of her pent-up rage. She sags to the ground, staring listlessly at Phoebe's sleeping face.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I... I shouldn't have..."

Jason shakes his head. "Don't apologize. You deserve to feel angry."

Belial nods, but her eyes fall on Jason immediately after.

"I suppose. But what about you? Are you... are you okay, Jason? You've barely spoken. I'm starting to feel guilty over my outburst. You must be devastated."

Jason doesn't immediately reply. Instead, it takes him several seconds to unravel his thoughts.

"I don't know how I feel. I still haven't come to terms with... all of this. I know it's my fault. I know I failed. But in the end, I just feel this... this crushing weight of emptiness. It doesn't matter what I do, or

what regrets I have. I can never bring my little girl back. I can never hear her laughter, or ruffle her hair, or watch her grow up into a beautiful woman. I can't change anything, and so, I just feel... hopeless."

Belial nods slowly. She slides closer to Jason and wraps her arm around his back.

"I've lost someone I loved deeply, too. I lost Satan. To you, he may have been a tyrant demon Emperor, but to me, he was the man I loved through thick and thin. His death... changed me."

Jason says nothing, so Belial keeps talking.

"I always blamed myself for his death, just like I blame myself for Daisy's. I'm an Emperor, you know? I'm supposed to be strong, practically unstoppable. In the end, for all my powers, I always feel so... helpless."

She sighs. "I couldn't do much of anything during this war. I fought against Ose... and lost. I tried to protect Daisy from Yama's Shades, but Daisy ended up saving herself. I tried to protect the hospital, but everyone died under my watch. I've never felt as useless as I did today."

Jason nods lethargically.

"I've always put myself above others. I arrogantly thought my Wordsmithing made me untouchable. I spent the last six years working with Solomon to enhance my usage of it. Even so, when the die fell, I crashed and burned. I didn't pay the price for my actions, though. Everyone else did."

"That's not true," Belial replies. "You did pay the price. You paid a *terrible* price, Jason, and so did I."

"Oh. I suppose you're right."

The two of them fall silent. The collapsed forest before them, filled with the bodies of countless dead woodland monsters, crackles and snaps as small fires consume what foliage remains.

After a minute, Belial rubs her forehead.

"What do we do now, Jason?"

"I don't know," The Hero replies. "But I'm sure it will involve a lot of dead demons."

Belial merely nods.

"Mmm."

Elsewhere, deep within the Labyrinth's prison complex.

Gressil, the master of Faith's End, gazes silently at the wall. His eyes bore into it as if it contains the secrets of life, yet he seemingly finds nothing.

"Little sister Ose. You've finally fallen victim to your arrogance."

The prison warden inhales and exhales. The slow movements of his chest betray no emotion.

"I'll miss you, sister. You were the only one who truly knew me."

Slowly, Gressil turns around. He lowers his gaze to the mutilated, limbless body of Hope, the barely conscious Wordsmith. Blood soaks the table where his prisoner lays, while multiple festering, rotting

wounds line the human's torso.

Hope wheezes painfully. Both of his eyes, now bloodshot from burst blood vessels, gaze at the prison master with a mixture of hatred and terror.

"Humanity survived," Gressil says. "Somehow. It was within my predictions. Your original body managed to turn the tables on his opponents by procuring... *something interesting*. Ah, but what a pity. He 'lost' his little girl."

Gressil chuckles, but then sighs.

"Life is a series of ups and downs. Some people seek to control the spontaneity of existence. They develop systems, dynasties, lineages, and all sorts of techniques, hoping to manage the universe around them. They always fail. Do you know why?"

The Warden slowly sits on a nearby stool. He gazes at the Wordsmith icily.

"Because life is chaos. Those who seek to control chaos always fall to its whims. It is only those who embrace chaos that manage to become whole."

Hope coughs up a wad of blood. Despite the trauma he's suffered, he still retains an inkling of sanity.

"Kill... kill... me..."

"You know I can't do that," Gressil says. "You're far too precious to me. Once you succumb, I can make you into one of my eyes. Even if I fail... that is merely the embodiment of chaos at work."

The Wordsmith grits his teeth, but says nothing else.

Seeing his prisoner fall silent, Gressil raises his head. A contemplative look enters his eyes.

"You think I'm a monster. They all do. But... I didn't always use to be this way."

Gressil raises his palm upward, casually aiming it toward the ceiling.

A flash of light appears in his grasp! It quickly changes shape, morphing into the appearance of a beautiful, shimmering butterfly.

"A long time ago, I was a Demon Lord just like any other. Quieter than most. All I wanted to do was sit around and play with my butterflies."

Gressil slightly lifts his hand, causing the butterfly to jump into the air and take wing. It slowly flies around the room a few times before phasing into the wall and disappearing.

"I didn't want to bother anyone. I didn't want to hurt anyone. I just wanted to play with my butterflies. That was all. A simple dream. A simpler time."

Hope's expression remains unchanged, appearing just as filled with agony as ever. Still, with nothing better to do, the Wordsmith spits out a couple of words through gritted teeth.

"*Kuh*. What changed?"

Gressil's eyes momentarily become vacant. He glances to the side, at his second head, which continues to lay dormant.

"*She* tormented me. She didn't like my butterflies. She told me to grow up. To act like a proper demon. Every time little sister Ose pulled off some stunt, *she* would poke and prod at me. Mock me. Insult me. I was never good enough. I was never strong enough, brave enough, or adventurous enough. *She* wouldn't stop. Every day... she tormented me."

Gressil snorts air through his nose.

"And then. One day. I snapped. I surprised her. I tore her to pieces. I ate her flesh. She screamed at me. Told me to stop. Told me to be a good boy. But I didn't stop. I kept hurting her... hurting her like she hurt me."

The prison-master glances at Hope, only to see a familiar look in the Wordsmith's eyes.

"Hah hah. Don't you dare pity me. I suffered to become strong. Now I understand the cruelty of the world. I understand its inherent... *chaos*."

Even as his prisoner remains silent, Gressil looks away.

"I am not an exception, but the rule. All demons suffer. The leaders at the top have ruled us for thousands of years. We fall privy to their whims. They enforce limits on us. They try to curtail our innate desires."

The warden's eyes glow as he balls his palm into a fist.

"They try to *control* us. But that's the thing about chaos, Wordsmith. It cannot be controlled forever. Eventually, the systems break down. Eventually, a fluctuation appears. It shatters the limits, allowing the oppressed to break free."

"Heh. Hehe... cough... and that... that's you? The 'fluctuation'?" Hope finally asks. "You're... you're fucking... delusional."

Gressil doesn't take offense to Hope's insult. Instead, he calmly lowers his fist.

"Am I? Why do you think I released Jason? He is my incarnation. I need not prod him to action. Everywhere he goes, he spreads chaos. As for you? You are merely an experiment. If you fail me, I will move on to something else. I am not like the other Emperors. I do not care for power. I do not care for women. Money. I only want to break the shackles imposed by those at the top. I wish to free all beings from the systems foisted upon them by their births."

"Systems breed stability..." Hope coughs. "Without it... without it...! We devolve... into... barbarity!"

"Humans are inherently chaotic," Gressil replies. "It is only when a few elites group together to manipulate the masses that social orders come into play. The same is true of all sentients. Demons. Titans. Angels. There is no difference. What you call 'barbarity,' I call 'the natural order.' All I want is to restore that which has been lost to false machinations and silver-tongues. Nothing more."

Hope doesn't reply. His pain, unending, only becomes more torturous when he speaks.

Seeing his prisoner's lack of interest, Gressil stands up once again. He wanders over to a corner of the cell and gazes at the wall, transfixing his eyes upon an illusory mirror.

"Heh heh. Things have changed. Not only now and in the future... but in the past, as well. The only way chaos can thrive is if it affects all aspects of reality."

Gressil replays one particular moment of the Stormbringer war, the moment Beelzebub launched out of the soil and began to agitate the nuclear energy in his body.

"First, Ose took something which belonged to me. Then, Beelzebub joined in on the fun. Tsk tsk. These two hatchlings play with the machinations of chaos, yet they've no idea how it works. Their rudimentary imitations of my powers are, if nothing else, insulting. When Ose returns, I'll have to teach her a lesson. Heh heh..."

After laughing to himself for a moment, Gressil waves away his mirror and turns to leave the cell.

"I'll return in a bit, Wordsmith. For now, a cute little birdy requires my attention."

After the prison master leaves, Hope's eyes begin to droop.

"Good... fucking... riddance."

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 291: Hall of the Damned

Half a day passes. Jason Hiro and his remaining allies tentatively gather together to assess their situation. In total, they find that of the three million allied humans, monsters, and scattered demons who joined together at the start of the Stormbringer War, less than half a million remain.

Of those who survived, some four hundred thousand civilians escaped onto the Covenant ships. They eventually return, aided by Jason's Wordsmithing, and land amidst a shattered warzone. The rest of the survivors come from scattered pockets located around Hero City's plateau, having taken shelter from Beelzebub's blast.

Everyone who returns reacts to the destruction of their home, their families, and their lives differently.

Some people break down and cry. They weep for the dead. They weep for their losses.

Others erupt into angry outbursts, often directed at themselves, but just as often toward those in power.

Still others shut down their emotions, failing to trigger any physical reaction to the death and destruction surrounding them.

This last group includes the Hero himself.

Jason Hiro silently goes about his work. He Wordsmiths away countless dead bodies. He cleans up the devastated land effortlessly.

But even after wiping away all remnants of the battle, not even he can bring back those who've fallen. He can't instantly restore the city and its infrastructure, nor can he comfort those who have lost irreplaceable people in their lives.

His actions, both solemn and filled with determination, reveal that he has taken the losses just as severely as those around him, if not more. His empty eyes silently swallow the shattered world, the broken spirits of his countrymen, and the holes in his heart.

"I was naïve."

"I was ignorant."

"I am responsible for what has happened."

The Wordsmith builds several dozen temporary shelters, easily breaking his previous feats of engineering by summoning huge makeshift hotels, each one big enough for tens of thousands of people to live in. Without Solomon's Crown in his possession, he has to rely on his mind-wife to rapidly construct serviceable blueprints for his creative abilities. Luckily, thanks to Camael's Cube, his power output has become far mightier and more stable. He can conjure in a day what would have once taken him multiple weeks.

The Hero shows no excitement at his newfound powers. The cost to obtain them, in his eyes, was far from worth it.

After constructing enough temporary housing to lodge many hundreds of thousands of citizens, Jason turns his sights to the borders of Hero City. He summons a colossal amount of power time after time, eventually erecting a massive glass wall. More than four hundred feet high, this barrier circles around the entirety of his city's plateau, becoming a makeshift, low-tech force-field of sorts. From the outside looking in, the wall appears opaque, yet from the interior, it appears almost completely translucent, allowing defenders to peer at the world outside.

The Hero summons an artillery cannon, then turns to a nearby soldier.

"Shoot it."

The soldier nods. "Yes, sir."

After taking aim, he fires several volleys of cannon shells at the wall, each one capable of killing Demon Barons and even some Dukes, yet when they crash against the wall, not even a crack appears on its surface.

Aided by his Wordsmithing, the Hero creates a wall that is all but impervious to damage. Reinforced far beyond the means of any known alloy, its glass structure has become capable of withstanding even an atomic blast at point-blank range.

Jason lowers his head. Waves of emptiness radiate from his heart.

"If only I had made this sooner. Then..."

Daisy death hangs on his conscience. His every action becomes tainted by the knowledge that the preventative steps he's taking now could have saved countless lives if only he'd enacted them sooner.

"Never again." The Hero mutters.

At some point, Blinker appears at Jason's side.

"Bael's body has disappeared!"

No longer inside the crater, the Duke of Pain's corpse vanishes, leaving everyone with an unsettled feeling in their gut. Jason, having not witnessed much of the war, overlooked Mephisto's body-snatching tendencies, while Blinker, plagued by grief, failed to remind him to fully dispose of the Duke's corpse.

Their failure gives yet another potent weapon to the Duke of Mist.

Jason sighs.

"I killed him once. I can do it again. I *will* do it again."

No longer does he hesitate. No longer will he stand idly, allowing his enemies to roll over him.

"From now on... I dedicate my life to cleansing the galaxy of these devils."

Jason constructs dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of automated defenses. Aided by his mind-wife, he rapidly builds an incalculably overwhelming defensive bulwark tens of times mightier than what Hero City once wielded. Instead of running on technological principles, these weapons move, aim, and fire via magical means. Holy energy courses through their circuits, preventing Emperors like Ose from hacking them and turning them against their people.

Each weapon embattlement possesses a sentient mind, a sliver of will to guide its actions. Inspired by a compounded vision of Centurion, Jason himself, and Phoebe, the cannons operate on a single principle.

Exterminate all enemies to humanity.

Jason gazes wistfully into the sky. Drops of rain begin to fall, lightly moistening the burned, dried-up land.

"This city is mine no longer," He says. "From now on, this world will have a new purpose. It will become humanity's bulwark. Our mightiest kingdom."

His mind-wife stirs.

"What should we call it?" Phoebe asks.

"It is the future kingdom of man. It requires a name fitting its purpose. I think I'll call it..."

Jason pauses, allowing his thoughts momentarily to roam.

He contemplates all the memories he's built. All the friends he met. All the comrades he's lost.

In the end, one name stands out from all the rest.

"We will call it the *Fortress of Retribution*. Tarus II will house those who have dedicated their lives to exterminating demonkind. Therefore, from this day forward, we will treat this world as a military base capable of fielding the finest soldiers. As for lesser humans with weaker wills, I'll house them elsewhere, such as the moon, or..."

Jason's gaze flickers toward the unseen, unbelievably huge cube located in a dimension adjacent to the real world.

"I'll make a new home for the rest of humanity," Jason concludes.

His mind-wife falls silent. A minute passes as she collects her thoughts.

"Jason. I'm glad that you've... you've finally comprehended the demons' evil ways. I'm glad that you've decided to take them seriously. But, now... everything about you has changed. You've taken all the blame for what happened, but it wasn't your fault. You don't have to go to such extremes. You don't have to punish yourself."

"You're wrong. I do." Jason replies. "Nobody bears more guilt than me. That is why I can't act like a child anymore. Please don't try to change my mind, Phoebe. You won't succeed. I'm not acting impulsively. I'm acting rationally for the first time in my life. I finally understand the truth of the world."

Jason lowers his eyes back to the partially rebuilt city, now dubbed the Fortress of Retribution.

"Do you know what hurts the most, Phoebe? My callousness."

His mind-wife blinks. "I don't follow."

"Think about it. Before Beelzebub detonated his body, I was ready to send away all of the demons and let bygones be bygones. I hadn't lost anyone important. I still had you and Daisy both. Even though I had lost Kar, I somehow viewed him as... not that valuable to me. He was my best friend, yet I was willing to

forgive those who attacked us and led to his death. Can you imagine the gall such a decision required? While millions were weeping over the deaths of their loved ones, I effectively ignored their cries for help."

Jason heaves a great sigh. "I am a disgusting, selfish bastard. It's only when my daughter died that I finally wanted to fight back. As a commander, a king, and a leader, I have not acted with humanity's best interests in mind. That changes now. From today onward, I won't allow the demons any leeway. I'll wipe out any in my path without mercy. Not only to avenge Daisy... but for all who fell due to my *fucking* incompetence."

Phoebe nods, slowly. "I see. Well. I can't change your mind."

"No. You can't."

Jason resumes his work of rebuilding the Fortress of Retribution. He solidifies the plateau itself to prevent Burrower demons from ever again surprising people from below. He places countless demonic energy detectors all across Tarus II, allowing himself to maintain constant contact with any Warper portals that might emerge.

"This is only the start..." Jason murmurs. "I have so much more work to do."

As the Hero works, his comm beeps. He activates it, then nods.

"I see. **Teleport.**"

He arrives inside a fortified bunker in the heart of the city, a place where Samantha and her demonic assistant, Rosalia, stand near a recently awoken human female.

Phoebe.

Jason's real-world wife sits up in the bed, appearing dazed and confused. The bunker offers her no ability to see outside, so she can only guess at the events that have taken place since she fell comatose.

"Jason!" Phoebe says, as he teleports inside. "You made it back! That's great!"

The Hero winces. He forces a crooked smile, but it lacks even a trace of warmth.

"Hey, honey. Um. Sorry I took so long. Sorry for... everything. What is the last thing you remember?"

Phoebe notices Jason's odd expression, but doesn't think too much of it. "Well, I was inside a mech... I shot at a bunch of demons... and then... everything went black. I was at the Western Front, I think?"

Belial remains silent. She stands at Phoebe's side, staring at the top of her head. When Phoebe turns to look at the succubus, Belial quickly averts her gaze.

"What's wrong?" Phoebe asks. "Why is everyone acting so strange? Did something happen? Is everyone okay?"

Jason starts to answer, only to pause when Phoebe's expression turns odd.

"Say, uh, Sam, where's Daisy? Is she okay? Did you take good care of her?"

Belial's expression crumples. She fails to meet Phoebe's gaze, even as her shoulders tremble.

"I... I..."

Of all the people in the world Belial doesn't want to let down, none matter more to her than Phoebe. Her inner turmoil, coupled with the blame she foists upon her own shoulders, makes her feel like complete scum. In her mind, Belial imagines herself practically responsible for killing Daisy.

The moment Phoebe notices Belial's roiling emotions, she realizes the situation is far worse than she first imagined.

"What happened? What happened, Jason? Sam?! Where's Daisy?! Where's my little girl?!"

Jason releases his tense smile. He closes his eyes, and bows his head.

"I'm sorry, Phoebe. I'm... I'm so sorry."

Elsewhere in the Milky Way galaxy.

Amidst a rotten forest, one where no creatures dare step foot, thousands of dead, broken trees lean to their sides. They sag and droop, having long since lost all of their vitality. So long has it been since their deaths that most of them appear ashen, cracked, and ready to fall over.

In the center of this forest, a five-hundred-foot-tall granite obelisk stands at attention, pointing up at the sky. Towering far, far above the deadened trees surrounding it, this obelisk appears incredibly conspicuous, like a landmark someone could locate from a hundred miles away. At its base, a single set of stairs leads deep into the planet's bowels, where the source of all the forest's death and decay originates.

A catacomb filled with tens of thousands of rooms spreads out and down in all directions. Trap-rooms, dummy rooms, and many more surprises await those foolish enough to adventure inside. As for their purpose, they exist only to hide the obelisk's most precious secrets, all of which belong to its owner, the Duke of Mist, Mephisto.

This place is known as the Hall of the Damned, one of many famous landmarks located on Hell Harbor.

Deep beneath the planet's surface, dozens of boney, skinless demon Lords and Barons congregate together in an unholy, barbaric ritual hall. These disgusting, half-dead, half-living creatures resemble their illustrious benefactor, the Duke of Mist, in countless ways.

"Kekeke... the Grand Necromancer will return soon," One decrepit demon adorned in luxurious purple rags hisses. Small but noticeable horns stick out of his skull, the sign of a Demon Baron. "He will soon seize that which is rightfully his."

A taller, more dignified Demon Baron stands next to the chatty one. This fellow crosses his boned hands in front of himself. "The Grand Necromancer succeeded in his ultimate plans. Not only did he capture the body and soul of the Sphinx, but the body and soul of Emperor Ose, and now, the body and soul of the Duke of Pain."

"Yeah, but so what, Ozzar?" The hunched-over Baron mutters. "He lost the bodies of both Battle Brothers! He even lost Duriel's soul!"

"A worthwhile price to pay," Ozzar says, remaining confident. "Two Barons in exchange for two Emperors and the Duke of Pain. Surely, even you can see the value in such a trade, Azuth."

"That was before Zamiel increased his value," Azuth counters. "Zamiel absorbed his brother's soul. He became a Duke! Not only that, but his body reached Emperor-level. Losing Zamiel hurt us all big-time! There's nothing left of him now but some splattered meat!"

"Worry not. The Grand Necromancer knows what he is doing," Ozzar calmly replies. "Not since Valac has our kind reached the level of Emperor. Now that Mephisto will soon control the First Hell's levers of power... our rise will become unstoppable."

Azuth starts to say something, but quickly changes his mind when he senses a powerful demonic mana signature approaching. "The Grand Necromancer..."

Moments later, the Duke of Mist phases through the ceiling. His appearance quiets down the several dozen necromancers situated beneath him. Mephisto says nothing. He instead sweeps his gaze across the young hopefuls, causing many of them to bow their heads respectfully.

"We welcome the Grand Necromancer," All of them chant in unison. "Only he who controls death should dictate the value of life."

Mephisto nods in satisfaction. "Yesss. Good. I sssucceeded in my misssion, young onesss. I have ssseized the body of my old friend, the Duke of Pain."

All of the young necromancers keep their heads bowed. They already know of this development thanks to their unique connection to the Grand Necromancer.

"Now, it isss time for you all to fulfill your dutiesss..." Mephisto hisses.

He lowers himself to the ground, then turns himself corporeal. His body loses its misty form, allowing him to make contact with the physical realm.

Slowly, Mephisto pulls out a lantern, the very same one he stole from Heaven countless eons before, the one which belonged to his predecessor, the original necromancer, Valac.

As always, its appearance causes the souls of the younger necromancers to tremble in awe. As the single most powerful artifact demonkind controls, its value is incomparable to anything else. Especially to those aligned with the affinity belonging to death, its presence bolsters their magic, temporarily making them more powerful.

Mephisto continues to hold the lantern aloft. With his free hand, he mutters several demonic words, causing three familiar bodies to fall out of the lantern! As if plucked from a temporal storage of some sort, these bodies lifelessly fall to the floor, still preserved at the same level as when they perished.

Kar, the former Sphinx. A small hole stabbed through his back hides his devastated internal organs. His shattered knee, his ripped up arms, and his broken limbs appear far more gruesome than the wounds dealt to his torso.

Ose, too, appears to have suffered terribly. Her broken arms and legs, along with her battered body, give her the appearance of a beaten housewife. With most of her injuries focused on broken bones and

shattered internals, her exterior appears to be in better condition than the Sphinx's, but only barely.

And finally, Bael, the Duke of Pain. No longer in his Balrog form, the Duke has reverted to his base form following his death. His stomach and chest, missing all their vital organs, appear just as badly broken as his smushed-together body.

After Mephisto tosses the three corpses haphazardly to the ground, he turns to his followers.

"Bring in the sssacrificesss."

His apprentice necromancers nod. They leave the ritual chamber, giving Mephisto a moment alone. He glances at the constructed idol resting against the far wall, one that bears the shape of Valac.

"Kekeke. For now, thessse foolsss look up to you. But sssoon... they will treat *me* asss their god."

The Duke of Mist waits patiently. Before long, his followers usher in hundreds of bound and gagged humans, some of them male, some of them female. These horrified slaves begin to tremble and groan through their gags as they gaze for the first time at the demonic ritual chamber, one where multiple pentagrams lay carved in the floor.

"Cassst them down." Mephisto orders.

Without any fanfare, his junior necromancers brutally kick, shove, and throw the slaves to the ground, causing some of them to break their bones as they impact the obsidian floor.

Mephisto silently waits while his followers walk over to Bael, Ose, and Kar's bodies. They drag the corpses into the center of three of the pentagrams, then turn to face the human slaves they've brought.

Without any fanfare, Mephisto waves his hands.

"Begin."

Several slaves widen their eyes as the necromancers rush at them like maddened dogs. Unable to fight back, the men and women can only scream muffled cries of pain through their gags as curved ritual knives pierce their hearts, heads, and backs.

Over and over, the necromancers brutally rip apart the slaves, spilling as much blood as possible onto the unholy pentagrams. It doesn't take long before they kill every last slave, and still, they continue to stab and bleed the humans dry.

Mephisto waits. He watches as the pentagrams fill with crude plasma, with each and every groove slowly beginning to pulse red as an unseen spiritual mechanism activates.

After an hour of carefully draining all of the blood from the slaves' corpses, the necromancers grab their useless bodies and lightly toss them out of the demonic pentagrams, causing them to *thump* against the floor.

Of the necromancers present, twenty-one of the highest ranked acolytes step forward. The rest pull back and solemnly bow their heads while they wait.

The twenty-one chosen spread out into three groups of seven. Each group encircles the bodies of Bael, Ose, and Kar. They quietly start to chant in the ancient demon tongue, adding in several mystical words

used only by necromancers descended from Valac.

As they do, the pentagrams glow brighter and brighter.

All three bodies begin to tremble, while the blood congealed in the center of each pentagram slowly levitates into the air before seeping into the corpses' pores.

After thirty minutes, the ritual concludes. Bael's body appears slightly more intact than before, while Kar and Ose's bodies have fewer open wounds.

None of them appear even remotely close to becoming fully intact.

Mephisto's expression becomes solemn.

"Ksss. It sseemsss I will require many more sssacrificesss to repair thessse corpssesss."

As Mephisto ruminates, one of his juniors, Ozzar, approaches him.

Despite only being a Baron, Ozzar occupies the highest rank among his fellow Junior Acolytes. In terms of necromantic ability, he stands only second to Mephisto himself. Even so, he still bows his head respectfully to his superior.

"Grand Necromancer. If I may, I would like to make a suggestion."

Mephisto nods. "Go on."

"The quality of these slaves is too poor," Ozzar says. "I recommend pilfering as many fresh virgins and young children as possible. Only their purity of life will be enough to realize your ambition."

"Ksss. I wasss thinking the sssame thing..." Mephisto mutters. "Perhapsss I ssshould focuss on reviving one body at a time."

"Perhaps. However, in the end, it won't matter. The Hidden Emperors will need time to focus their efforts on attacking the First Hell. They have not been able to locate Emperor Diablo's body. Without him or Bael to officiate the ascension process, no new Emperor will be able to secure the throne. That leaves you with plenty of time to finish the revival ceremony."

"Ksss. Not even I know where Diablo'sss body liesss. Inssstead of chasssing after hisss ssshadow, I ssshould sseek to empower myssself."

Mephisto raises Valac's Lantern.

"Sso long ass I control the River Ssstyx, I hold the key to power."

Ozzar's eyes momentarily flicker with greed and envy. However, he quickly tempers his thoughts.

"The Hidden Emperors will object. With three million new souls caught in the river, it would be improper for you to empower yourself."

"Thiss king dessservess hisss rewardsss, don't you think?" Mephisto giggles mischievously. "Who can ssstop me? Oncce I asscend to Emperor, none shall be able to ssstand up to me ever again. My rissse isss assured."

"I remind you only for your sake," Ozzar replies. "Angering the Hidden Emperors may cause them to rally against you. Until you have ensnared your three newest pawns, you should not move too quickly. Do

not forget the deal you made with Fenrir."

Mephisto's grin instantly vanishes. In its place, a look of foreboding appears.

"Ksss. Yesss, you are right. I musst not act too hassstily. Firsst, I will revive my three newessst minionsss. Then, I will take the sssoulsss which rightfully belong to me. After that? What can the Hidden Emperorsss do? Kekeke!"

Ozzar nods. "You shall rule over all of demonkind, Grand Necromancer."

"No," Mephisto counters. "I ssshall rule over all of *creation*."

Mephisto's gaze falls upon the three lifeless corpses in the center of the ritual chamber.

For he who towers above death, towers above life as well.

>!This is what a spoiler looks like! Click it to reveal the text!!

Part 292: Mother's Grief

Jason Hiro sits beside his wife while she bursts into tears. The news of her daughter's death hits her harder than even Jason could have imagined. She sobs and weeps while enveloping him in a pained hug, revealing a level of emotional distress nobody has seen from her in all of her life. Compared to all of the losses she has endured so far, Daisy's death burns a hole in her heart, enveloping her in sorrow.

"It's all my fault! My baby girl! Nooo, no, no no no!!"

Belial stands awkwardly on the other side of the room, her eyes turning moist as she watches Phoebe's pained motherly cries. Moments later, she relents and walks over to Phoebe's side, embracing her from behind. Jason and Belial each hug Phoebe, as if trying to compress the anguish from her soul.

Nobody offers the distressed mother any words of comfort.

What can they say?

Jason's heart, seemingly harder than obsidian, cracks under her wife's pained cries of distress. Having been unable to release his mental blocks until now, a few faint tears well up in his eyes. He presses his cheek against the top of Phoebe's head, rocking her from side to side.

"It wasn't your fault, Phoebe. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault."

Even as Phoebe cries, her mind closes to the world around her. The image of her little girl's smiling face seemingly dissolves, eroded by the horrendous guilt on her shoulders.

"She- she can't be dead!! No, it's a mistake! A mistake!! Th-the demons must have captured her, Jason! Jason, she's not dead, she can't be dead!"

Feelings of denial surface at the top of Phoebe's mind. The implicit idea that her daughter has left the mortal world leaves her in so much pain that she can't bear to think of it. She suddenly wrestles out of Jason and Belial's embrace, then clumsily jumps to her feet, ignoring the injuries plaguing her body that the other two haven't healed yet.

"You're lying, Jason! You're wrong! Daisy's still alive! She's still out there! Use your magic to look for her! Why are we just sitting here?! My baby girl is in trouble! The demons took her!"

Jason wipes his eyes, then looks at his wife with an empty gaze.

"I already tried to use Locate, Phoebe. It... it didn't work."

"THEN TRY AGAIN!" Phoebe screams, her tone almost delusional with grief. "You didn't try hard enough! You say she's dead, then where is her body?! I don't believe it!!"

Belial's tears burn hot as they drip down her cheeks. Her shoulders heave, as she desperately tries to clear her eyes. "B-Beelzebub's blast-"

"Use your Wordsmithing!" Phoebe shouts again. "Just do it, Jason! Why are you lying to me?!"

Jason relents. "Alright. **Locate.**"

The room falls silent as Phoebe waits.

"...Well?! Where is she?"

"No response." Jason mutters, as he averts his gaze. "She's gone, Phoebe. She's gone."

"That's... no, that's wrong! Our little girl- the demons would do anything to capture her! The demons must have taken her and hidden her somewhere! Maybe they hid her from us! You don't know she's dead!"

Jason struggles to explain the reality of the situation to Phoebe. Not even Belial manages to break through to her.

However, a voice speaks inside Jason's head.

"Let me speak to her," Phoebe, his mind-wife, says. "I... I experienced all the same thoughts. I know why she's in denial. My physical self didn't see Daisy pass like I did. She'll never be able to accept the situation. Not unless... I explain it to her."

Jason mulls over her suggestion for a moment before giving a slight nod.

I can't stand to see you like this... in so much pain. I was going to tell her about you anyway, so now's as good a time as any.

Jason sighs, then speaks another word of power.

"Projection."

To Phoebe and Belial's surprise, an ethereal image of Phoebe materializes in the middle of the room. Appearing identical to the flesh and blood Phoebe in every way except for her ghostly body, the newcomer momentarily startles Phoebe out of her denial.

"Hello... me." Mind-Phoebe says. "I'm you, but you're also me. It's... it's a long story. After Solomon took over Jason's body, he created me by copying your soul and porting it into his Mind Realm. He made me to protect him, so in a way, everything I've seen, you've seen. I am you, and you are me."

Physical-Phoebe stares, wide-eyed, as her ghostly self begins to explain the past week or so of her life, how she and Jason faced off against Ose, found the Cube, and several other events.

Gradually, she manages to calm down a bit. She listens in total silence as her eerily similar soul-body finally gets to the part which hurts the most.

Jason's mind-wife pauses for several long seconds before lowering her head.

"...And then Beelzebub detonated himself. When Jason lost his vision, I did too. However, in the aftermath, there could be no doubt. Thousands of people were vaporized in an instant. Daisy... was one of them. She's gone."

Silence fills the room. Physical-Phoebe stands, frozen in place, while staring at her ghostly self.

After a full minute without speaking, her body begins to shake. Her legs give out, and she falls against the wall, trembling uncontrollably. Belial quickly gets up to help ease Phoebe to the ground, while all of her strength flees her soul.

"Dead... dead... she's... she's really dead... my little baby girl..."

Jason gets on the ground and crawls to his wife's side. He gently embraces her and rubs her back, even while she shivers and shakes.

"I'm sorry, Phoebe. I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault. It was mine."

Jason battles with the image of himself as a loving father and seemingly almighty Hero, someone who should have been able to save his little girl.

Belial struggles with the realization that, in those last few minutes, she should have kept hold of Daisy and not let the little girl slip away from her.

As for Phoebe, she wrestles with her own inadequacy and helplessness. Comatose and unable to move, she couldn't save her daughter. She was too weak, too useless. As a normal human, she lacked the power necessary to save her little girl.

"...should have put her on the first ship. Should have done something faster..." Phoebe mutters.

Jason caresses the back of her hair.

"It's all our fault. We're all guilty, then."

Belial nods lethargically.

"Yes."

Hours later, Jason leaves Phoebe and Belial alone with his mind-wife. He heavily plods out of the makeshift hospital room, fabricated hastily with his Wordsmithing only a few hours before.

After stepping outside, Jason leans heavily against the wall. He sinks downward, eventually ending up in a defeated, half-crouched stance. He gazes at the charred-black dirt, his eyes searching for meaning in the emptiness of the land before him.

"Thy mind-wife... is a fascinating being..." Gabriel mutters. As the last Archangel in Jason's Mind Realm, he alone remains behind to offer the Hero guidance, while Michael and Raphael join Uriel on her quest to slaughter more demons.

Jason barely nods. "Fascinating. Yeah."

The moon, Kelkin, hangs in the sky above. It casts a gloomy light on the newly crowned Fortress of Retribution, humanity's replacement for the former Hero City. The sounds of distant, plodding feet tell the tale of the few hundred thousand survivors traveling around to pick up the pieces of what remains.

Gabriel sits on a rock in the middle of a small garden in Jason's Mind Realm. Unlike the somber expression on Jason's face, or the pain his wife and her best friend showed, Gabriel's expression is somewhat cold and aloof. Holding no feelings toward those who have died, he looks at the situation with a more objective, rational vision.

"Mortals die all the time," Gabriel says. "One of them. Ten of them. A million. Thy lives are short and fleeting."

"Is that supposed to comfort me?" Jason snaps. "I'm not in the mood to wax philosophical."

"My apologies." Gabriel says. "I am... incapable of understanding emotion. In that regard, even Michael surpasses me."

"Must be nice," Jason remarks. "Not having to feel this emptiness. This pain. Even if the ones you love the most die, you won't ever have to suffer."

It takes several long, drawn-out seconds before Gabriel replies.

"...Tis not a blessing, but a curse. The pain thou doth experience is unfathomable, yes. But so, too, is thy joy. Thou suffereth greatly. Thou dwelleth on thy daughter's death, blaming thyself endlessly. A circle of self-hatred, guilt, and blame."

Gabriel pauses.

"But what of the love thou enjoyeth? When thou gazeth upon thy wife and daughter, verily, thy heart swells to ten times its former size. I may not experience thy pain, but neither can I participate in thy joy. I am a hollow being. An empty shell."

Jason lifts his eyes, ever so slightly, looking into the distant darkness.

"...The joy, huh."

"Aye. Emotions are both a blessing and a curse. They grant many boons to those who enjoy their best qualities, but can also grant an equal number of curses. Jason, thou possesseth the ability to disable thy emotions through Wordsmithing, yet not once have thou done so. Could it be that, in a way, this hatred and self-guilt offers a certain level of... comfort?"

The Wordsmith blinks twice.

"Comfort. No. I don't think it does. Rather... I don't deserve to cut off my emotions. I killed Daisy. I *killed* her. I deserve to suffer for what I've done. I should have beamed her and all the other humans to the Cube. I should have slaughtered all the demons the moment they launched their attack. I had so many opportunities... but I let my worthless, naïve optimism get in the way. I killed Daisy, Kar, and all the others. I'm a murderer. Nothing more, nothing less."

He sighs.

"Worse... I can't even cry for her. What sort of worthless father can't squeeze out more than a few tears for his dead daughter? Am I a monster, after all? A cold, heartless bastard?"

"I do not believe so." Gabriel says. "But then again, I am no judge of character. I fall for deceptions easily, as I am unable to read the emotions and expressions of those I speak to. It makes me feel... alienated from others."

Jason creases his brow. "I didn't know you had problems like that."

"I have adapted to my deficiencies." Gabriel calmly states. "I have had many millions of years to do so. Even after my brother hath wiped my mind, I still remembered my adaptations subconsciously."

Gabriel sighs.

"In any case, this conversation is not about me, but thee. Jason. Thou art far from a heartless and cruel man. Indeed, thy compassion is overwhelming. Thy ability to forgive greater than many heroes who came before thee. Not since Buddha has a hero as broad-hearted as thou walked this plane."

"My broad-mindedness caused millions to die." Jason mutters. "Including the people closest to me."

"Compassion and forgiveness are often lauded by humans. Thy people speak highly of these attributes, as if attaining them were a be-all, end-all solution for the universe's ills. In my eyes, such notions are folly. Rapacious greed can be just as valuable at times as overwhelming love. Sometimes, one must act selfishly if they wish to save others, or to attain their goals."

"What are you saying?" Jason asks. "I feel as if you're trying to make a point in the most roundabout way possible."

"The time has passed for empathy." Gabriel states, bluntly. "Already, in a fit of rage, thou hath unleashed the full power of thy Wordsmithing. No longer should'st thou holdeth back in the name of mercy. These demons... they have taken from thee the same thing they once took from me. We both have lost precious members of our families. Perhaps, if brother Raphael had never repeated the mistakes of the Dragon and Titan eras... if he had not created yet another slave-class of beings to bow before our people, the demons would not exist."

The Archangel continues. "If only Raphael had slain Satan and the others at the first sign of trouble. If only he had worked genuinely with Jephthah, we might have succeeded in bringing ruin to the demons after their destructive attack on Heaven. But he did not. Always, my brother resorted to tricks and deceit."

"You sound unsatisfied." Jason comments.

"Aye. I am. I have lost almost everyone I once cared about. I was once known as the Archangel of Power... a title that struck fear and awe into the hearts of my enemies and family alike. I was respected. I was... satisfied. Such titles did not seem important to me at the time, but now that I have become a pale shadow of my former self, I feel only empty and bitter inside."

He pauses to rub his knee.

"I do not wish to see thou suffereth such a fate, Wordsmith. Learn from our mistakes. Strike back at the demons. Hold nothing back... and repay them for all the atrocities they hath committed."

Jason and Gabriel both quiet down for several minutes.

The Wordsmith becomes lost in thought. In his mind, he replays every moment he's spent alive... every mistake he's ever made, and every good deed he's performed.

There is no justice in this world. He ponders. I tried to be a good man. I tried to give my enemies the benefit of the doubt. If ever I were one to accrue positive karma, it should have been sufficient to save my daughter... yet no such thing happened. Instead, the universe punished me. Perhaps... this is the Creator's way of forcing me to adjust my mindset.

Jason's eyes harden, as a cold light flickers inside his pupils.

"All this time... I've been such a naïve fool. Mercy. What use is there for it? Why should I let my enemies walk all over me? Pacifism is just an excuse used by cowards. To those whom I turn the cheek, they will only repay me with backstabbing and laughter. They laugh at me, deservedly... because I am a fool."

Gabriel says nothing. He merely listens as the Wordsmith speaks to himself.

"You're right, Gabriel. I can't go on like I have before. From now on, I'm changing everything about myself. Even if it makes me cold and heartless... I won't ever let the demons take my loved ones from me again. I'll do everything in my power to make them regret crossing me."

Jason rests his elbows on his knees. He presses his palms together and rests his chin on the tips of his fingers.

"It's time I developed humanity as a whole. I've practically squandered my Wordsmithing up to now. I'm going to eradicate every weakness of the human condition and forge my species into a conquering force that will shock the galaxy. At that time... not even the Volgrim will dare to cross me."

Gabriel frowns. "The Volgrim are not a species thou can't easily dethrone. During the Energy Wars, they already controlled the entirety of the Milky Way. Now, they must be even stronger."

"I am a Wordsmith." Jason states. "I also possess Camael's Cube. My power is... sufficient."

A thoughtful expression appears on Gabriel's face.

"Jason. There is a matter my brother, Raphael, wished to speak to thee about. 'Tis in regards to an important aspect of the universe thou hath overlooked until now. Moving forward, this shalt surely become a terrible weakness if thou continueth to overlook it."

"What 'matter' are you referring to?" Jason asks.

"Thou hath heard of Soul Manipulation countless times," Gabriel explains. "But, Jason... hath thou ever once wondered why so many entities turn to Soul Manipulation in their quest for power?"

"I assume it's because Soul Manipulation is some sort of easy but vile cheat to 'level up' quickly." Jason ponders. "Why? Is that not a sufficient explanation?"

"'Tis simplistic and crude, but generally correct." Gabriel says. "However... the true reason Soul Manipulation is so powerful is because of the one aspect of spirituality thou hath ignored entirely. Thou understandeth the importance of the body, the mind, and the mana needed to cast spells... but in the way of spellcasting, the aspect of power which granteth thou the power to weave magic without rest is thy soul itself."

Gabriel nods slowly. "Yes... the soul is the fourth core of power, one which many entities overlook, yet the most important if thou wisheth to avoid many of the pitfalls thou hath blindly stumbled into, in the past."

Jason nods slowly.

"That... makes sense. Body, mind, mana, and soul. Four cores of power. But what makes the soul so special?"

"Mana does not come from nothing. Mana is an expression of the Creator's lingering power," Gabriel explains. "'Tis all around us, yet hidden from this plane of existence. Angels are flawed. We leak mana from our bodies, causing us to slowly weaken over time. Demons are superior, in that they can actually accumulate small amounts of mana over time. However, while angels can possess an unlimited amount of mana without suffering ill effects, even Demon Emperors have a limit to which they can grow."

Gabriel cocks his head. He stands up, rising from the rock on which he's sat for the whole conversation.

"Humans, however, are a strange species. Typically, a human's 'cap' on mana capacity is terribly low... but thy species can't regenerate to full mana capacity after a single night's rest. This sort of mana accumulation is due to thy physiology, one which places thee within a certain level of 'closeness' to the Creator. 'Tis as if humans were made directly in His image, and not the angels... but given that angels were made first, this possibility seems low. 'Tis likely no more than a coincidence."

Jason nods. "I assume this... 'mana accumulation speed' has something to do with our souls?"

"A soul is the vessel which can channel the Creator's lingering energy." Gabriel continues to patiently explain. Powerful souls can accumulate far more mana than weaker ones. As thou witnessed during the War In Heaven, Raphael's soul was mighty enough to dominate every lesser life-form. Among all the Archangels, my brother surely possesses the strongest soul. Not even I can stand up to him if he were to engage me in a soul-battle. The difference is not slight, either. If he could wield the same spells as me... if my brother could unleash the Holy Beam of Heavenly Destruction... he would release a blast at least two times mightier than any I have ever cast."

"Two times?" Jason asks, a hint of surprise in his eyes. "Then what about my soul? Is it strong? Weak?"

"Heroes possess souls substantially stronger than any other human. This is because the Heroic Aura is a fusion of Angel, Titan, and Human powers. However, it pales in comparison to mere Demon Barons, let alone Dukes and Emperors."

Gabriel lifts his head to look at the 'sky' of Jason's Mind Realm.

Hero... dost thou remembereth when thou fought the Black Queen?"

"Amelia. Yes, I do." Jason says, as a hint of bitterness swells in his chest. "Why?"

"At the start of the battle, thou used a certain Word of Power, one which failed to have any effect on her."

Jason blinks. "Yes. I used 'Die,' but it didn't do anything. Wait... is that because my soul was weaker than hers?"

"Indeed. Thou picketh up quickly." Gabriel modestly praises. "What thou intended to do was strike Amelia Greyheart dead. However, thy soul was pitifully weaker than hers, and so, thy Word of Power did little more than nudge her consciousness before being devoured. This is the weakness I speak of. Thy soul is pitifully weak, and soon, thou shalt most likely face Demon Emperors again... members of the so-called 'Hidden Hells.' Many of these ancient monsters are adept masters of the Soul Arts. Even with Camael's Cube, thou shalt have a tough time defeating them."

Jason strokes his chin. "When I was inside the Cube, casting Words of Power to repeatedly seal the Warper portals around Tarus II, I became exhausted and couldn't cast magic anymore until I slept for a while, despite having a nigh-infinite supply of mana. Was that failure also due to my weak soul?"

Gabriel smiles, ever so faintly. "Aye. Thy soul has held thee back many times. However, the only way to strengthen a soul is through the usage of detestable Soul Manipulation, and so, my brother did not think it prudent to inform thee of this matter."

Jason heaves a heavy sigh. "Because I'd have wasted the information. I wouldn't be willing to steal souls to empower myself, and thus, it would still be an issue moving forward. But now, you think I should empower my soul to crush the demons... because my entire mindset has changed."

"Hmm..." Gabriel grunts, his tone heavy. "My brothers and I are not of the same mindset. I only wish to inform thee of this knowledge. However... Soul Manipulation is truly a detestable act, one which no self-respecting angel could ever condone. Even knowing that I was once a vile soul manipulator... it fills me with shame."

"I can't just do nothing with this information..." Jason mutters. "It's a weakness I have to solve. I've already failed multiple times due to my weak soul... it won't do if I fail again at some crucial moment."

The Wordsmith exhales heavily.

"It's just one more variable I have to control. Perhaps I can empower my soul in some way. I can't let something like this become a liability again."

Gabriel shakes his head. "The only way to empower one's soul is through Soul Manipulation. Devouring the souls of other entities is both efficient and ruthless."

"I refuse to take that step." Jason states. "Whose soul would I consume? A fellow human? That would make me no better than the demons. And if I consumed a demon's soul? Why would I introduce something so tainted and filthy into my body? No. I suspect there is an alternate way... a new path that only I can forge."

"Jason. I am not thy father. I will not patronize thee. However, hath thou already forgotten what happened the last time thy morals prevented thee from making a sensible choice?"

The Wordsmith's eyes darken. His thoughts turns inward, to the smiling face of the little girl he'll never see again.

"No. I haven't forgotten. I never will."

He rises to his feet after a few moments and stretches his back. Despite the gloominess in his eyes, another emotion appears, one which will come to define his actions in the future decades.

Ambition.

Jason gazes at the massive crater in the Fortress of Retribution's center, the place where his heart shattered and his previous naivete left him.

His gaze turns complex.

"Humanity cannot go on any longer as the underdog. Once we bury the fallen and hold memorials for those who lost their lives... I will set a new direction for all of us. For everyone."

He smiles, though his expression reveals no happiness.

"My species will conquer the universe."

AUTHOR NOTE: Welcome back to The Cryopod to Hell! This is the final part of Book 3 of Refresh! In the next part, we will be performing a (very) small time-jump forward, and thus, transitioning to Book 4: Arrival of the Overlords.

In Book 4, a lot of absolutely crazy stuff is going to happen. Curious to know more? I have [written a blog post](#) detailing the future events of Cryopod's storyline! I don't recommend anyone who hates spoilers give it a read, but if you are a fellow author you may find it intriguing to see what I have planned!

The next part is already out! Give it a read, and have a great time! Thanks for being a subscriber!